

BONING UP ON FISH SMOKING

■ A discerning 5-year-old reminds a veteran fish-smoker that even one bone can ruin the experience

You are never too old to learn. I thought I knew everything about smoking fish until a tiny girl with big blue eyes and soft curls in her auburn hair spit out a mouthful of mushed-up salmon in my hand. It was family day at a regional sportsman show. Parents holding infants in their arms, pushing strollers, and with small children in hand wandered by the outdoor writer's booth I fronted.

Loudspeaker blare interrupted the hubbub of good cheer to announce the next special event. The odor of hot popcorn lingered in the air. Only six more hours to go, I told myself.

A couple with two young girls, ages 3 and 5, paused to peer at a 2-gallon jar that held a foot-long white sturgeon floating in formaldehyde solution. I often display fish specimens when I attend trade shows, hoping their presence will lead to gainful conversation with the curious.

"Is it alive?" the older girl asked, pointing to the sturgeon.

"It is preserved. Just like a pickle," I replied.

She was not impressed by my sleight of word. "What are those baby fish?" she said, pointing to a smaller jar.

"I'll give you a hint. They have three spines or stickles on their back."

"Stickly fish?"

"Close. They are "threespine stickleback."

The exchange led to a satisfied smile from her.

Hoping to gain equal attention, the 3-year old moved forward and blurted out, "I don't like fish."

"She doesn't even like to eat fish," older sister explained.

"Not even a tuna fish sandwich?" I asked.

"Nope," the youngster replied with an impish smile, before she retreated to the shelter of her dad's legs.

"Ah, the family rebel," I said.

The 5-year old moved back to center stage, "I like fish. Also shrimp, lobster, and oysters."



Our 12-year old corgi is deaf, but the scent of salmon smoking and the hope of a scrap on the ground keeps her vigilant.



THE NATURAL WORLD

DENNIS DAUBLE

That's when I pointed to a small plate of smoked chinook salmon set out for people to try. A compliment generally follows each taste.

"Ever eaten smoked salmon?" I asked.

The little girl rested her chin on the tabletop and stared at the plate of fish as if it were exotic fare.

"Would you like to try a bite?" I said, spearing a small piece with a toothpick.

When I held the toothpick out, she moved close and opened her mouth like a baby robin. I sensed her trust in me had been breached, however, when after no more than two chews, she muttered, "Uh-uh. bone ..." and spit the chewed up meat into my outstretched hand.

"I hope the experience won't scar her for life," I said to her embarrassed parents as the family retreated into a milling crowd.

For me, the best time to smoke fish is when fall chinook salmon

are on the spawn, sandhill cranes chortle their way south, and the lawnmower has been put to rest. I favor my Little Chief smoker for a light smoke. The process requires up to two bags of wood chips and 6 or more hours of tending for a load of fish, depending on outside air temperature. The electric smoker has designated use for small-bodied fish that include kokanee, whitefish, and trout.

Kept at our family cabin is a water-cooled, charcoal-based cooker/smoker for processing larger swatches of fish meat, for example a limit of salmon. A rich, sugary glaze is imparted in 3 to 4 hours. An automatic-feed wood pellet grill, such as a Traeger, with built-in temperature control will make your life easier, but expect to spend \$600 or more.

Brining is a personal preference that involves careful experimentation. One wet brine recipe involves soaking a pound of fish overnight in a one-gallon solution to which ½ cup kosher salt and ½ cup brown sugar has been added. Some recipes call for more sugar and salt (but usually the same ratio). Adding soy sauce to the solution will impart an "umami" taste.



A load of fall chinook salmon "swatches" fills the top rack of the smoker/cooker grill I keep at our cabin.



Flesh color from a late-run fall chinook salmon can range from blonde to light orange. Many retain enough protein and fat reserves to qualify for smoking.

My favorite dry brine recipe involves a 4-to-1 ratio of brown sugar to salt spread evenly over swatches of fish. I layer swatches in a Tupperware container, refrigerate, and let the mixture soak and ooze overnight. Excess ooze is removed with a paper towel before I rack the brined meat in my smoker. A quick "dry" recipe involves coating fillets with paprika and ground black pepper before smoking.

I once put out plates of smoked sucker and smoked mountain whitefish, and asked friends what they liked best. Most pointed to the plate of sucker I labeled "whitefish" and remarked, "I like the whitefish best." Only then did I admit I had switched labels to confuse their culinary preference. This

experience and others suggest that abundant libation around holiday time encourages folks to eat most anything placed on a festive plate.

I now carefully remove visible bones before I offer smoked fish for public consumption. Family members who expect me to supply smoked fish for holiday gatherings are welcome to pick out stray bones for themselves. But, as I have learned the hard way, little girls are more discriminating.

Dennis Dauble is author of the award-winning natural history guidebook, "Fishes of the Columbia Basin," in addition to three short-story collections about the fishing experience. Learn more at DennisDaubleBooks.com.

Searching for the Singing Rock

We went searching for the Singing Rock on the sort of October day when both the cloying heat of summer and the nostril-clenching chill of winter seem more fantasy than recent or looming reality.

The sky was blemished by just a scrim of benign cirrus.

When we parked at the Granite Creek trailhead on the morning of Oct. 17 the temperature was 45 and the air had the bracing, but benevolent, tinge exclusive to autumn.

As we hiked along the old mining road beside the creek, one of two routes down its canyon to the confluence with the North Fork John Day River, it was just cool enough to justify a light jacket. But

in, say, January.

The road meets the trail about a mile and a half from the trailhead. From there the route, through the North Fork John Day Wilderness, is all by trail, another 2.3 miles to the wilderness area's namesake river.

It's a fine trail, well-maintained and never straying too far from the fetching riffles and crystalline pools of Granite Creek.

Our hike was brightened not only by the autumn sunshine but also by the tamaracks, scattered among the firs and pines and spruces and all but beaming, with their yellow-orange needles, against the

comparatively dour green backdrop of their coniferous cousins.

Tamaracks, known more formally as the western larch, are conifers, but of the rare deciduous type. Rather than holding their green needles all year, tamaracks, in the manner of maples and willows, drop theirs each fall. But before the needles flutter down they turn that inimitable color. It is to my eyes ones of the signature shades of the Blue Mountains, joining the winter trio of blue sky, white snow and the red-tan bark of a mature ponderosa pine.

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The yellow-orange of tamarack trees brightens the scene along Granite Creek.





ON THE TRAIL

JAYSON JACOBY

whenever we came out of the trees the shafts of sunlight carried a discernible warmth that would be absent

Lisa Britton/For EO Media Group