

Smoke That Salmon

Turn your fresh catch into a tasty treat BY AMY SCHNEIDER

It's hard calling to mind the mouth-watering taste of smoked salmon when staring at a scaly, pungent, eyeballs-and-everything fish. But don't be intimidated — with the help of a smoker, some brine and a little insider information, you can transform your fishy friend into a Northwest delicacy.

Home salmon smoker Mike McHorse says the first step is to filet the fish, which basically means cleaning the fish and using a knife to cut strips of meat from the body, excluding the head. Make sure to remove all bones at this point and keep the skin on. McHorse filets fish in small pieces to make the brining and smoking process easier.



FISH BEING FILETED

PHOTO BY CAMILLA MORTENSEN

Next comes the brine: McHorse didn't share his family recipe, which he says he "got from an old guy who gave it to me in a moment of drunken stupidity," but Wild Duck Café owner Jason Boyer says he uses a brine of equal parts freshly ground black pepper, dark brown sugar and kosher salt. Boyer says for a little extra spice, add curry or cayenne pepper flakes.

Rub the brine all over the salmon filets and stick them in the refrigerator overnight or, at most, 24 hours. Boyer recommends washing the remaining brine off the filets with cold water after they've been cured. Finally, it's time to smoke that salmon.

Boyer uses an industrial heat-assist smoker with a timed electric heat element, but most home smokers like McHorse use a standard Weber kettle grill. For fancier gear, check out stovetop smokers or the Bradley digital smoker, which helps control inside temperatures, an important element of smoking. McHorse has a remote thermometer that tells him the temperature inside the grill, allowing him to monitor and adjust accordingly.

McHorse says he uses chunks of alder wood to cultivate a smoky taste. The temperature needs to stay around 145 to 160 degrees Fahrenheit to keep the moisture in the salmon, and the process can take two to four hours, depending on the size of the filets. The end result should be tender and moist, a delicious, candy-like morsel.

McHorse says he generally eats his smoked salmon as is, since it gets eaten up quickly, but Boyer suggests taking it a step further with the following recipe, a favorite of his. Either way, you're in for a treat!

SMOKED SALMON MOUSSE

- ½ cup butter
- 3 tbsp finely chopped shallots
- 1 tbsp finely chopped fresh dill
- 3 lbs smoked salmon
- 1 cup sour cream

Sauté shallots in butter, let cool and add dill. Blend sour cream and butter mixture in a food processor, then add smoked salmon. Blend until smooth, with the consistency of hummus. Place in serving dish and refrigerate. Serve cold with sweet potato chips or rye crackers.

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