



TAKE UP SMOKING

First catch your trout or salmon, says **JOHN MAITLAND**, and then transform it into food fit for the gods

FOR OVER 20 years I have cold-smoked salmon and big trout, a fairly simple process once one has assembled the actual smoking apparatus and sorted out the procedure.

Undoubtedly the better the quality of the raw material, the better the final product. The best smoked salmon I ever produced was a 13-pounder caught in June from the Borgie. Salmon near spawning should never be killed and, anyway, having used up most of their fat and goodness, they are tasteless and flabby even when smoked. Grilse over 6 lb are fine and I find the sea-iced fish from the North Esk in September as good as springers. Trout under 4 lb are not worth the trouble as only the bigger fish have the thicker flesh that remains moist after smoking.

Trout should be gutted, their gills removed as soon as possible, and kept cool. Salmon, whose digestive tract is atrophied, are usually frozen un-gutted, but I learned in Norway the advantage of bleeding a salmon immediately it is killed; the flesh stiffens quickly and there are no

blood veins to disfigure the sides. Cut a gill arch and hang the fish head down: the blood will pour out in a few minutes.

I do my smoking between November and March, to avoid the curse of bluebottles, so my fish will all have been frozen, but this doesn't seem to detract from the final result.

Get the fish out of the freezer so

“The best smoked salmon I ever produced was a 13-pounder from the Borgie”

that they will be just thawed when you are ready to start; with a batch of differing sizes the largest must come out first. Since salmon need to be gutted before filleting, I do this when the fish is only part defrosted. The still-frozen guts come out easily and the blood kidney along the spine can be scraped out with a spoon. Opening the stomach cavity

speeds the thawing of the thickest part of the fish. Leave the head on to have something to hold on to when filleting.

Next comes the filleting. Good knives are a must. The thin-bladed Finnish filleting knife is ideal for smaller fish, and tricky jobs on salmon, but a longer carving knife is best for the long sweep down the spine of bigger fish. Both must be razor sharp.

I start with the smaller knife, loosening the anal fin at the rear of the stomach cavity which otherwise trips the knife later on. I then start the main cut so that the gill bone will remain attached to the fillet. Leaving this gill bone is absolutely essential.

Once the cut is established with the blade flat on the backbone and cutting through the ribs, switch to the big knife and sweep steadily right to the tail. Lift off the fillet, turn over the fish and repeat with the other side. Using the smaller, more flexible knife, and with each fillet flesh-side up, carefully cut away the ribs, leaving as little flesh as possible. I am nothing like as skilled as the stall-holders I have



watched in Helsinki fish-market, but with a little care it is possible to produce pretty neat fillets.

The next stage is salting, which can be done with dry salt or brine. I use the latter, making up an 80 per cent solution of ordinary supermarket cooking salt the day before. Four pounds of salt are put in a big plastic bucket and 1½ gallons of hot water added, stirred until all the salt is dissolved and left to go cold.

This brine helps preserve the fish and also extracts some moisture from it by osmosis.

A fat, well-conditioned fish takes up salt more slowly than one of lesser quality, but whatever the condition of the fish it is better to err on the side of under-salting. For a brining container I use a plastic plant trough, obtainable from any garden centre, without, of course, punching out the drainage holes.

The brining completed, rig the fillets with a wooden spreader and suspension hook. The spreader, which can be from a split bamboo plant support, is sharpened at both ends and passed through a hole punched at each corner by the gill bone.

The suspension hooks are fashioned from strong wire. A coat-hanger is ideal. One hook should be bigger than the other and the two hooks set at right-angles.

A hole is punched through the middle of the gill bone and the larger hook passed through this and round the spreader stick. The fillets are then hung up to dry. A warm place is best but I do it in the garage, where a layer of newspaper catches the drips. The fillets can be left overnight, or for up to 24 hours, and should be just dry to the touch on the skin side while the salt and protein form a gloss on the flesh side. In cold, damp weather, a fan-heater helps this process.

I now pull out all the pin bones. This can be done earlier but is easier at this stage, when the flesh has sunk so that the ends of the bones project and can be easily felt with finger tips and gripped with pliers. The fish prepared, now to the smoking, a process that involves suspending the fillets in hardwood smoke which must never get near a cooking temperature, say never much above 80 deg F.

Always use European hardwood: oak, sweet chestnut, beech and apple are all excellent; never use softwood such as pine or fir or

How to smoke a trout or salmon



1 The tools for the job — knives, pliers, bamboo stakes and metal hooks.



2 Loosening the anal fin at the rear of the stomach cavity.



3 Using the big knife, a cut is made hard against the backbone.



7 Immersing the prepared fillets in the brine solution.



8 The sharpened spreader sticks are inserted close to the gill bones.



9 Hanging the brined fillets to dry.



TAKE UP SMOKING

Continued

► tropical hardwoods, all of which will ruin the flavour. I use both billets of hardwood, preferably oak, and sawdust, which I collect when I see a tree being felled and leave to season for at least two years in hessian sacks. Other sources are rural sawmills, log suppliers or wood workshops — but do ensure that only acceptable timbers are being processed.

The actual smoking apparatus can take many forms. The broad requirements are a unit to house the smouldering fire and generate the smoke, a separation space to let the smoke cool, and a chamber in which the fillets can be hung or laid on wire shelves.

My own smoker was built years ago of scrap items picked up here and there. The fire is contained in a metal dustbin and I got hold of

several feet of three-inch alloy pipe (borehole liner, I think) and secured a foot of it into a hole just below the upper rim of the bin. Pop rivets and fire cement have held it in place for years. The outer end of this short pipe has four longitudinal cuts so that it can be slightly squeezed and inserted into four or five feet of the same pipe when assembling the rig.

If the fire is lit actually in the bottom of the bin the water resulting from combustion will condense and run back into the fire. Solve the problem by scrounging a smaller container — my present one came from a skip — which will just fit inside the dustbin. Drill small airholes round its base and also make some low down in the dustbin. To keep my fire smouldering as long as possible, I put a firebrick radially in the firebox and light my fire in one of the corners against the brick using finely split hardwood kindling (a gas blowlamp helps) and lay a trail of overlapping hardwood billets from this around the firebox.

Once the kindling is burning well and the first billets are alight I cover them — level with the top of the

brick — with sawdust, leaving only the kindling area, where a sprinkle of sawdust turns flame to smoke.

The dustbin lid is now put on and the gaps round it plugged with sheets of newspaper rolled and dipped in a bucket of water. Incidentally, when earlier assembling the whole apparatus, the joint between the short fixed pipe and the longer pipe is sealed with a whole newspaper, also dipped in water then wrapped around and secured with string.

The one remaining part of the smoker is the smoke chamber which, of course, is assembled well before the fire is lit. To get an upwards gradient for the smoke, the chamber must be raised above the fire box; I have done this on an old crate and a Workmate but now use a simple wooden platform. The smoke chamber can be a wood or metal box, a 44-gallon drum or whatever. Mine is a plastic drum scrounged off a building site waste tip; I think it was a drain collecting chamber.

With a hole made near the bottom to take the smoke pipe, eight holes are drilled below the top rim in opposing pairs through



4 A final sweep of the big knife and the first fillet can be separated from the backbone.



5 Removing the rib cage from the fillet.



6 The prepared fillets ready for brining.



10 Plucking out the pin bones with pliers.



11 The hardwood billets ready for lighting.



12 All your own work, from catching the fish to slicing it ready for the table.

which four heavy wires are threaded on which the fillets hang. These are put in once the smoke flow settles down and then a loose-fitting lid is put on. This rig will take up to 16 fillets and I have processed salmon up to 18 lb.

Once the smoker is running, it is just a matter of checking occasionally that there's a trickle of smoke and that the pipe near the smoke chamber is warm to the touch but not hot.

My smoker burns for seven or eight hours on a filling and it doesn't matter much if it goes out. Take the lid off the smoke generator, tip ashes from the firebox and restart the fire as already described. How long one smokes fish for is, like brining, a matter of taste, but I find a lightly smoked product more acceptable than something that looks and tastes as if painted with tar. The skin side will be no more than lightly golden.

For rainbows and small salmon up to say, 7 lb, I find two fills (16 hours) is smoky enough. This increases to three full fills (24 hours) for salmon of 10 lb-12 lb while big fish

of 15 lb-plus might go to four fills.

When the smoking is complete I don't bother with weight-loss as my system is not sufficiently controllable, but the fillets may be more or less damp depending on the outside humidity and temperature. So they go back to the garage and hang in the warm air from a fan-heater until the skin side is dry; this can take a few hours or may not be needed at all.

Finally, remove the spreader and hook and trim off the gill bone. Fish which have been frozen can be refrozen after smoking. If one is freezing fillets of large trout or salmon, it is best to cut them into suitable sized portions before bagging and freezing unsliced. I rub olive oil into both skin and flesh sides to reduce freezer burn before sealing in freezer bags. Mark each bag with the date.

Frozen smoked fish will be perfect for three months, good for six but deteriorates progressively from then on although it will still make very acceptable pâté. Whether freshly smoked or from the freezer, slice thinly towards the tail with a very sharp knife and serve in any way you like.

I find it hard to beat a squeeze of lemon juice and a grind of black pepper with brown bread and butter.

Brining details

Use 80 per cent brine which is 4 lb of salt in 4 1/2 gallons (7 litres) water.

Weight of gutted fish	Brine time (mins)
4 lb-5 lb	35-45
7 lb-8 lb	60
10 lb-12 lb	90
15 lb-plus	120

For intermediate weights use intermediate times.



Factfile

My own first efforts were aided by Keith Erlandson's book *Home Smoking and Curing*. It is still available in paperback and Coch-y-Bondu Books have it in stock. Tel: 01654 702836 for details.