

Uncle Dave's Smoked Fish

Preparing the brine

Smoking fish is not difficult, and it takes far less time than smoking meats such as pork or venison. Once you have large pieces of your fish -- salmon is an excellent smoking fish, as is trout or sturgeon. I also have smoked bluegills, and they are great. For bluegills you can scale them (or not), cut the head off and gut them and wash them very well.

For smoking you must leave the skin on.

-- You will need to prepare brine.

A basic fish brine is:

1 gallon water

1 cup kosher salt (non-iodized)

1 cup brown sugar (or white sugar)

Mix together all the brine ingredients and place your fish in a non-reactive container (plastic or glass), cover and put in the refrigerator.

Curing the Fish

The fish will need to cure for several hours. This curing process eliminates some of the moisture from the inside of the fish while at the same time infusing it with salt, which will help preserve the fish.

How long will you need to cure it? At least 8 hours, even for thin fillets. I do at least a day for a thick fillet such as salmon. If I had sturgeon steaks or something even thicker, I might go two days.

Can you overdo it? You bet. Your fish is essentially being pickled and brined in this solution, so the longer you keep it submerged in the brine, the saltier it will get. Under no circumstances should you brine for more than 3 days, and even that will leave you with some seriously salty fish.

Air Drying the Fish

This is one step many beginning smokers fail to do, but drying your cured, brined fish in a cool, breezy place is vital to properly smoking it. Why? You need to form what is called a pellicle, which is a thin, lacquer-like layer on top of the fish that seals it and offers a sticky surface for the smoke to adhere to.

You achieve this by resting the brined fish on a rack and putting it in a cool -- less than 65 degrees -- place that has good air circulation. If you'd like, run a fan over the fish at low speed.

Let the fish dry this way for at least 2 hours, and up to three. Don't worry! The salt in the brine will protect your fish.

Smoking the Fish

Now you are ready to smoke your fish. Keep in mind we are "hot" smoking fish here, not cold-smoking. Cold smoking is the kind of fish you get in packages from Scotland; it takes very special equipment and at least 2 days of smoking to do this. Our hot-smoked fish will be preserved better than a fresh fish, but it will still spoil faster than a cold-smoked fish.

That said, you still do not want high temperatures. Spray the smoker racks with a vegetable spray to prevent sticking. Place the fish skin side down on the racks. I smoke my fish at around 140 degrees at the most, although the smoker rarely spends more than 30 minutes at that temperature -- it rises throughout the smoking process.

What wood is the right wood? This is a very contentious subject. Everyone has a favorite. I happen to like apple wood. Almost anything goes, except for treated wood and pine; pine contains resins that will make your fish taste bitter. Here are a few common woods for fish:

- Alder
- Hickory
- Apple
- Oak
- Any other fruit or nut wood

How long? Again, depends on temperature and the bulk of your fish. About 1 to 2 hours for thin fillets, as much as 4 to 5 hours for big slabs of sturgeon or tuna belly.

You will get a sense of when it's done once you do this a few times. Until that happens, however, look for an internal temperature of 140 degrees -- or when the meat flakes easily.

Once the fish is smoked, you can keep it wrapped up in the fridge for 10 days, or freeze it for up to 6 months. Vacuum seal the fish if you have one.