

Smoking Seafood

Sometime after humans started to cook their food over fire, a great discovery in food preservation was made -- smoking of meats. It was one of the earliest methods to prevent food from spoiling. In fact, until the invention of refrigeration, smoking was one of the primary means for keeping meat from spoiling, allowing people to store meat for the winter and to transport it over great distances. This method of preservation is still widely practiced in lesser developed countries, but today smoking is mostly done to impart meat with flavor.

Smoking Fish in Asheville, NC

In theory, any type of fish can be smoked, but oily and fatty fish are preferred as they absorb more of the smoke flavor and take better to the smoking process.

The cool mountain climate and prevalence of outdoor space in Asheville, NC provide a perfect environment for smoking. George Baxevanis, and his son Alex, have taken to smoking trout which is prevalent in the streams and rivers surrounding Asheville in Western North Carolina. George is the owner of *Fisherman's Quarters II* -- a popular family-style seafood restaurant in Asheville. His son, Alex, grew up in the restaurant industry and is now running a catering business -- *ABC catering*.

George and Alex shared that they have found a new love for smoking.

"We've been experimenting with various methods and recipes. Alex is working to master smoking so he can offer smoked trout and salmon to his clients.

"Currently, I'm working on a recipe for smoked trout fish dip," Alex says.

Hot Smoking and Cold Smoking

Smoking methods vary and the smoking of fish is an art form. Whatever the method, there are some commonalities. First, the fish is treated with salt or "brined." Usually, this is done by soaking the fish in brine which is salt water that may or may not have seasonings in it or by coating the fish with salt. This cures the fish, drawing out moisture. Some of the salt will soak into the fish and the combination of the salt absorbing and the moisture being removed prevents bacteria growth that will cause the meat to spoil. The curing time varies, depending on the size and density of the fish.

A second curing process often is used to enhance flavor. Sugar, herbs, spices and sometimes liquor are used and the recipes used in the second curing create much of the variety that is available in smoked fish.

Then the fish is smoked in an enclosed chamber. The smoking time and temperature vary. Depending on the time and temperature, fish can be hot or cold smoked.

In cold smoking, the fish is smoked slowly at a low temperature between 60-110 degrees F. Cold smoking does not cook the fish; it just dries it a bit and gives it flavor. This keeps the fish moist. Properly cold smoked fish will keep for months. The most popular type of cold smoked fish is cold smoke variation of salmon known as lox.

Hot smoking happens at a higher temperature that sometimes starts lower but usually reaches a temperature of between 150-180 degrees F for a few hours. In this process, the fish is at least partially cooked and will keep for a few days in a refrigerator. Hot smoked fish is firmer and flakier than cold smoked.

Temperature control is crucial as too much heat will dry the fish out before it is properly smoked. Salmon is the most popular hot smoked fish, but trout, tuna, mackerel, bluefish and sablefish (often sold as black cod) are also common.

Hot smoked fish will not cut like lox and will crumble or flake if cut too thin. Hot smoke fish is best cut into chunks or cubes or flaked apart along the natural seams of the muscles.

Wood Choices for Smoking

Hardwoods are preferred to soft. Native Americans of the Pacific Northwest traditionally smoked salmon over alder. Oak, maple and hickory are other popular choices. Some people like to mix a hard wood with that of a fruit tree like apple or cherry. You'll want to use small chunks or chips of wood.

"Experiment with different combinations to create your own signature smoke flavor," adds Alex.

To check out Fisherman's Quarters II, visit: www.FishermansQuarters.info.