

SPRING 2010



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FROM THE KITCHEN—*Dwayne Nelson*



CEDAR PLANKED SALMON

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DWAYNE NELSON

Walk your mind back and northwesterly and you find yourself hiking a game trail engraved in the earth by hundreds of years of deer, elk and bear as they went about making their living along a pristine stream long before moccasins or boots made their imprint. This swift flowing tumbling stream is born from melting snow off the mountain peaks barely visible through tall cedars in front of you and it tumbles and twists from its origins in the alpine valleys to where it disappears into the Pacific Ocean behind you. The trail takes shortcuts across oxbows and jogs around large downfalls covered with moss and ferns. In places it is barely discernable due to the continual incursion of the fast growing lush flora that flourishes in the moisture laden air. The pungent earthy aroma is evident in the damp air even before you spot clusters of morels poking up through decades of rotted cedar and alder debris. Wild asparagus grows in rich moist soil waiting for the next bear to thin them out. The trail breaks into a small clearing on the very edge of the stream and you stop on the bank overhang to watch salmon as they relentlessly fight their way upstream through turbulent whitewater rapids. An eagle makes a slow recon flight upstream looking to make an easy meal of one that does not have the strength to continue. These rapids are one of thousands of daunting obstacles that will insure that only the strongest fish will pass on their genes. After eventually reaching the same spawning beds where they were born their life cycle will come full circle by willing their flesh to the eagles and bears and the smaller fish and birds that anxiously wait for this rite every year. A few steps further you pause and to avoid sharp thorns carefully guide your hand through cane tangles to pick wild blackberries that profusely grow in patches where the tall cedars are standing as sentries permitting sunlight to reach the forest floor on their terms. The blackberries leave a taste like the sun and the mist that made them.

After thousands of years of exclusive rights, eventually nature's wild inhabitants had to share their bounty of blackberries, salmonberries, mushrooms, wild asparagus, edible roots and the salmon with the first peoples. The Natives worshiped the salmon as having supernatural powers and the annual return of the salmon represents the transfer of their traditional values from one generation to the other and assured the renewal and continuation of life.

The stately cedar tree was called the tree of life by the indigenous populations that lived along what are now

the coastal areas of the northwest United States, western Canada and southeast Alaska. The Natives cooked wild game, seal meat and salmon skewered on cedar saplings over alder fires but it is not clear how common it was for them to actually cook salmon on a flat cedar plank. At any rate, the concept of preparing salmon on cedar planks is rapidly catching on as a way to enjoy this truly amazing fish.

CHOOSING YOUR SALMON

Here in Montana the very first task in preparing any salmon dinner is selecting good quality salmon. Quality is a function of the species of salmon and the freshness which in some cases depends upon the time of year. "Pink", "silver bright" or "keta" are marketing buzzwords developed to sell inferior salmon species. The species to look for are coho, also called silver; chinook, also called king salmon; and, sockeye. During a certain period in the spring, stores and restaurants will herald the availability of Copper River salmon. Actually, these can be silvers, kings or sockeye which are all called Copper River salmon if they are born and return to spawn in

A significant part of the pleasure of eating is in one's accurate consciousness of the lives and the world from which the food comes. —WENDELL BERRY

the Copper River system in southeast Alaska. The claim is that because the Copper River spawning effort is so arduous, nature has given the surviving fish an extra supply of omega 3 fatty acid to withstand the trip. I'll leave the science for somebody else but I can tell you the flesh of the Copper River salmon is a little finer in texture, vibrant in color and the flavor a little more intense.

Farm raised salmon are raised in large floating pens normally situated in ocean coves or small bays and fed a commercially produced food. Atlantic salmon is a species unto itself and has been nearly depleted by over-fishing. As a result, when you see Atlantic salmon at the store in all likelihood it has been raised in a salmon feedlot, usually in Chile, Argentina or British Columbia.

It's not often in our area that you can find previously unfrozen (fresh) salmon of the quality befitting your planking experience but there is nothing wrong with frozen wild salmon if handled appropriately from catching to cooking.



PREPARATION

Remove the skin by laying the fish flat, skin side down, guiding a knife between the skin and the flesh until separation is complete. If you purchase frozen fish try to avoid ones that still have the skin intact. Remove frozen salmon from any vacuum packed wrapper prior to thawing so the fish doesn't sit in its own juices as it thaws. Thaw in the refrigerator on paper towels or some absorbent material with a piece of foil or wax paper over the top.

Use commercially available cedar planks that are untreated. Soak the planks in water for 30 minutes or more. While the plank is soaking, rinse the salmon, pat dry and season.

RECOMMENDED SEASONINGS:

1-Tablespoon Salish alder smoked sea salt
(www.saltworks.com)

If you use regular salt cut to 1-teaspoon

1-Tablespoon maple sugar

1 -Teaspoon dried lemon powder

1-Tablespoon coarse cracked black pepper

½ -Teaspoon onion powder

1-Teaspoon dried dill weed or one tablespoon
fresh chopped dill weed

As you become a seasoned “plankmaster” you will make adjustments to the proportions and the ingredients to suit your own tastes. After seasoning the salmon to your liking, wrap the seasoned pieces in foil and place in the refrigerator while the planks are soaking. This allows the flesh to absorb the flavors of the seasoning. About five minutes prior to cooking take the salmon out of the refrigerator, open the foil and bring the salmon to room temperature. Preheat the plank so that it is very hot to the touch and oil lightly with neutral cooking oil. Do not use olive oil as this will add an unnatural flavor to the salmon.

COOKING

Whether you are using a charcoal, gas or electric barbeque device, your oven or a wood fired cooker, it is important to situate your planked salmon and the main heat source so that the heat is not directly under the plank but circulates around the plank which will also bring heat down on the top of the salmon. Cooking with the lid closed facilitates this circulation. Ideally, you want the plank to smolder some as this is important for imparting a slight cedar smoke-tinged essence to your salmon. This is precisely the reason to cook on a plank and not in a pan or wrapped in foil. With your particular cooking device and heat control you will soon perfect this to your liking.

Just prior to cooking I always toss a little more of the seasoning on mostly just for visual effect. Cooking time will depend upon the heat circulation pattern, temperature and the thickness of your salmon. To check for the correct doneness take a fork and slightly separate the flesh at the thickest part. Ideally, you want to maintain a little translucent pink in the center of the salmon. In other words, don't overcook or it will be dry and lose some of the real salmon flavor.

Just remember, wood is combustible so never leave your cooking unattended and keep a water spray bottle close by.

ACCOMPANIMENTS

One normally can't go wrong pairing ingredients that are indigenous partners so let the trail along the stream be your guide. Morels and asparagus and blackberries grew up with the salmon.

Fresh morels are available for only a short period of time in early summer. Chances are you will be buying dried morels to reconstitute. Follow the directions on the package and be sure to save and refrigerate the "liquor" you have left and next time you are making gravy or mashed potatoes add a splash for a great flavor.

Normally a coulis is mechanically blended and strained leaving a syrupy-like product. But since I'm looking for a coarse

texture we will blend this with a fork and call it a blackberry "mash" instead of a coulis. Add the following ingredients to a bowl and mash vigorously with a fork.

- 1 Cup blackberries
- 1-Oz blackberry brandy
- 1-Tablespoon maple syrup
- 1-Tablespoon lemon juice

The asparagus season coincides with the spring salmon run and will plank well alongside the salmon especially if you like your asparagus a little on the al dente side. **AM**

Pizazz at 403 Central Avenue in Great Falls, carries the untreated cedar planks.

Wine Pairing, see Page 58



~Dwayne Nelson lives in Augusta with his wife Diane. His hobbies are gardening, cooking and photography.



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PLANKS
ARE CREATED
EQUAL**

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L'ECOLE No. 41

L'Ecole No. 41 Winery in Walla Walla, Washington has been reinvigorating the fresh and quaffable Semillon grape since 1983. This unheralded grape is considered merely a blending grape to its partner Sauvignon Blanc, however, when produced on its own, Semillon can be rich, fresh, and fruit-driven. L'Ecole No 41 winery's 2008 Columbia Valley Semillon is just that. It displays notes of lemon, honeysuckle and a touch of grassiness on the nose. The palette is full of citrus, pear and peach. The wine finishes with a crispness that is perfect for spring and summer sipping. With its note of grassiness and citrus, L'Ecole's Semillon pairs beautifully with cedar planked salmon. *AM*



~Kevin Hamlin is a Certified Sommelier and Certified Wine Specialist who works as a fine wine and beer sales representative for George's Distributing in Helena, Montana.

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