Just as we all need a set of *go to* dishes for speed, like a well-marbled dry aged prime Charolais New York Strip Steak with a Memphis rub, we all need a set of *never fail* dishes. Company does come, sometimes scary chef company. My *go to* dish for culinary challenges is smoked salmon.

The preparation is simple but time consuming, so I make sure I have at least four hours for the advanced preparation plus about another hour for the actual smoking. I start with the best piece of salmon I can find, usually a whole side of wild Tasmanian salmon. The wild Tasmanian has a firmer texture, a greater concentration of salmon’s already rich fatty oils, and a wonderful color. I have the skin removed but I save it for separate grilling. And I really like the taste of smoked sweet potatoes and the color complementarities between smoked salmon and smoked sweet potatoes, so they usually get thrown in with the salmon.

The first step in preparing the salmon is to pour two or three ounces of inexpensive cognac over the fish and let it sit for about an hour. (Good Barbencourt rum works as well as cognac. Scotch works but seems to please no one but me.) I usually pour the cognac over the fish with it cut side up (side that had the skin down) and let it sit about forty minutes, then turn it over and let it sit for another twenty minutes. Then I drain the fish, rinse it quickly rather than carefully, and coat both sides with a mixture of coarse salt and turbinado sugar. I usually use two parts sugar to one part salt, but I’m not sure why ... much of the sugar remains unabsorbed after the process. You can play with the ratio as you wish. I let the fish sit for three hours in the refrigerator; there is no need to turn the fish. If I have the skin, I drape it over the top of the salted fish. I also usually have a small amount of fresh ground white pepper in the salt sugar mix. I then rinse the fish so that there is no gritty salt or sugar feeling remaining and dry it carefully. For whatever reason, drying the fish appears to increase the flavor from the wood smoke.
Sweet potatoes are really easy ... microwave them for about 20 minutes so that they’re cooked and soft (remember to prick the skins first or they will explode in the microwave oven!), then apply a little canola oil and some salt and pepper and smoke them for flavor when you smoke the salmon. I usually smoke the skin when I smoke the salmon, but it never really quite gets crispy enough. For that I either throw it on a very hot griddle for a couple of minutes or throw in on a hot grill. It crisps up like salmon-flavored potato chips.

Desert? Cut some peaches in half, throw a little brown sugar and good cinnamon where the pit used to be, and smoke for as long as the peaches. The combination of flavors from the peach, the cinnamon, and the wood smoke really is quite remarkable. It’s elegant and it’s easy. To make it even more elegant, but no more difficult, serve with a small amount of your favorite vanilla ice cream.

Of course, pears work just as well as peaches.

The stacking of the smoker doesn’t matter much, but I always put the fruit above the meat or the fish so that it does not pick up unwanted flavoring from drippings. It doesn’t matter much where the sweet potatoes go, but I sometimes put them at the bottom so their drippings don’t stain a light colored meat.

And the smoke really does impart a significant flavor. I prefer either apple wood smoke or pecan wood smoke.