Chef’s Log 28 September 2009
Lox or Gravelax — Not Exactly Barbecue!

Gravelax, or lox, is another form of comfort food. It’s easy to eat, even easier to prepare. Time consuming, as in days and days of waiting, but you don’t actually have to do anything.

My preferred recipe is, in fact, to simple to call a recipe, simply a sequence of steps. Start with the head end of a large salmon fillet, as large as possible and as fresh as possible, with the skin on. First, let it sit in a couple of ounces of cheap French Cognac or good California brandy for four hours, turning occasionally. Second, drain it and then take a mixture of coarse sea salt or kosher salt and raw (turbinado) sugar, place a thin layer of the mixture at the bottom of a glass tray about 9 by 13 inches, put the salmon in the tray skin side down, and then cover the salmon with more of the salt and sugar mixture. Loosely cover and place in the refrigerator and wait and wait and wait. Every day or so examine the salmon and if clear spots appear, where all of the salt and sugar are dissolved, apply more. And then, again, wait and wait. I usually do this for five or even six days. Eventually the salmon will lose so much water, due to osmotic pressure, that the fish becomes firm enough to slice easily into paper thin-slices. It’s not cooked, but it does not feel raw. As importantly, it’s hard to imagine anything nasty living in anything this salty!

Recipes vary. If you want something approaching Jewish lox use two parts salt to one part sugar. If you want something easier to share with your cardiologist, use two parts sugar to one part salt. It is entirely permissible to add some flavoring, ranging from juniper berries to spruce needles, though I do not. The last step is to wash off all remaining gritty salt and sugar. It is also permissible to let the salmon sit in clean water for half an hour or so to slightly soften and rehydrate the fish; that descision should be based on the feel of the fish after brining and the desired firmness.
Anything this salty screams out for a good beer. I’m also rather partial to some Philadelphia cream cheese, on a toasted bagel, with several thin slices of the salmon.

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