Chef’s Log 28 November 2009
Thanksgiving Smoked Salmon

Smoked salmon is my go-to dependable holiday first course. Preparation is simple and more or less fool proof. I did manage to find a variant of this recipe that tastes pretty much like eating the seats of a car after the engine has caught fire, but I will tell you how to avoid that.

First, start with a fresh side of salmon, either with the skin removed or skin on one side. Let it sit for four hours in a couple of ounces cheap French Cognac or good California brandy; you don’t need enough to cover as long as you turn the fish. Then drain, blot dry, and pack in a mixture of coarse sea salt or kosher salt and raw turbinado sugar.

I use as much as 3 parts salt to 1 part sugar, depending on the flavor I want. To make lox I use almost all salt. For this I use closer to a 50-50 mix ... maybe a little heavier on the salt. Put a layer under the salmon. (If you did not use skinless salmon, place the salmon skin down on the mix.) Then spread more of the mixture very thickly over the top side. Every 12 hours check, and if there are bare spots on the salmon apply a little more of the mixture. The bare spots tend to appear only on the thicker parts of the salmon. You can work out the P-chem for this.

After 1 ½ to 2 ½ days you are almost done; use the shorter time until you get a sense of how you like your salmon, sweet, salty, or both. Now add water to cover and let the salmon sit for about half an hour. This slightly rehydrates the salmon so that it is not rock hard.

Finally, smoke for slowly for about an hour at maybe 150 degrees. I use pecan or apple wood; recently I prefer pecan. The fish will still be rare but it will have picked up a great deal of smoke taste and a deep mahogany color. If you want it more well done, then raise the heat to about 175 degrees for no more than 10 minutes. Don’t over cook; smoked salmon should still be moist, more like raw salmon than kippered salmon.

Obviously the salting steps require refrigeration. Obviously the final step does not.
While more is often better, this is not always the case. As an experiment I smoked the next salmon over very cold pecan smoke for almost two hours before raising the heat to begin cooking. The extra two hours of smoking was not an improvement. The final product of all this salting and smoking tasted like some vaguely organic material that had survived an engine fire, with the texture of salmon jerky. Never again.

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