Smoked/Air Dried Salmon Recipe

By Paul Kuriscak
Alaska Department of Fish and Game

This recipe makes delicious strips of salmon jerky or whole fillets of prepared salmon. It can be used with any species of salmon, whitefish (Prosopium and Coregonus), and Dolly Varden/Bull Trout. The fillets are easier to cut while semi-frozen. If the salmon is freshly caught, I semi-freeze it. Also, if I didn’t have time to smoke the fish immediately after it was caught, frozen fish can be used. If you prefer to freeze and smoke your fish at a later date, you’ll need to vacuum-pack it; otherwise the flesh will get freezer burn within a week or two.

Ingredients

- Salmon fillets or cut strips from one or two salmon
- 2 cups brown sugar (approximately 375 grams)
- ½ cup fine salt (approximately 120 grams)
- 1 small container for mixing sugar and salt
- 1 large water-proof container (tote) for brining salmon
- cold smokehouse

Preparation

- For strips: cut fillets lengthwise into 5/8-inch (1.5 cm) wide strips.
- For full fillets: lay the fillet flesh-side up on a flat surface, such as a cutting board. With a fillet knife begin cutting diagonal serrations across the fillet at an angle of 45° spaced 2-1/4 inches (~5.5 cm) apart. Cuts start at the top of the flesh. Angle the knife slightly and cut down to the skin of the fillet. Full fillets are best done when the tail of the fish is attached to both fillets of the fish. This aids in hanging the fish for air drying and smoking.
- Combine the brown sugar and fine salt in the smaller container and mix well. Quantity varies depending on amount of fish you are curing.

- Sprinkle the bottom of the large container or tote with the dry brine mix, then put in a layer of strips, and sprinkle the top of the first layer with the dry brine. Put down another layer of strips and repeat with a layer of dry brine. Continue layering and dry brining until all your strips are in the tote with dry brine. Do the same with full fillets, but sprinkle a bit of the dry brine between each diagonal cut.
- Let the dry brine make its own liquid by drawing out water from the fish flesh. Once the dry brine has made a liquid mix, turn fish over every 15 minutes for an hour to an hour and 40 minutes at the most. No refrigeration is needed for this step.
- Hang strips on a small piece of line with slip knots on each end of the line, then do a quick rinse of the fish with cold water (dip both pieces on the line in a 5 gallon (~20 liter) bucket filled with cold water). For the full fillets, quickly rinse in the bucket.
- Hang each set of strips or the full fillets over a 2 x 2 inch (~5 x 5 cm) beam and let air dry for approximately 1-2 days in the wind, preferably in sunny weather. If it is raining, you may need to do this step in your garage or shed with old newspaper placed below the hanging fish to collect the water and oils from the wet fish. You may have to use a fan to keep bugs off. Set up the fan a distance away from the drying fish to prevent it from drying too fast. The time required for air drying varies depending on the relative humidity.
Paul Kuriscak has worked as a fisheries biologist at the Gene Conservation Laboratory of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game since 2008, where he is the primary genotyper, supervising lead for DNA extractions, and field project leader. He holds a B.S. in Environmental Sciences from Wayland Baptist University and has worked for the department since 1983 in both the wildlife and commercial fisheries divisions, including nearly 20 years on Kodiak Island. He is a dedicated hunter and fisherman.

**Cold Smoking**

- I use cottonwood or alder, the preferred smoking wood of historical/ancestral peoples in Alaska.
- I build a slow smoldering fire in a modified 5 gallon (~20 liter) can on the dirt floor of the smokehouse. The can is modified by cutting down the sides to 8 inches (~20 cm) high and is partially buried in the ground with vent holes punched into the sides of the can to draw air. Then, I use an old cookie sheet to cover the top of the can and use the positioning of the cookie sheet to regulate the fire to smolder.
- Cold smoke the fish off and on for 2-3 days.
- If the fish needs more air drying, cease the smoke. Let the fish continue to air dry, and smoke again after inspecting the fish. There is a specific fish texture that you are seeking in this recipe. The texture should be not too hard and not too soft. A little bit stiff like leather, but not tough like leather. If the fish is too soft, it is not totally cured. If the fish is too hard or dry, it can be eaten but will be a bit tough to chew.
- Be sure not to get too much smoke on the fish, otherwise the taste will not be appealing; you’ll taste it for hours after consumption and it’s not too healthy to have too much wood tar resins in your diet.
- The best method of storage is to cut the strips into smaller pieces, vacuum pack them, and store in the freezer. The full fillets with the diagonal cuts can be difficult to vacuum pack, so I wrap them first in plastic wrap and then in freezer/butcher paper before freezing.
- It’s best to consume the jerky within a year from the initial process of smoking because the oil remaining in the fish will tend to get a bit rancid after a long storage period.

- Be sure not to get too much smoke on the fish, otherwise the taste will not be appealing; you’ll taste it for hours after consumption and it’s not too healthy to have too much wood tar resins in your diet.
- The best method of storage is to cut the strips into smaller pieces, vacuum pack them, and store in the freezer. The full fillets with the diagonal cuts can be difficult to vacuum pack, so I wrap them first in plastic wrap and then in freezer/butcher paper before freezing.
- It’s best to consume the jerky within a year from the initial process of smoking because the oil remaining in the fish will tend to get a bit rancid after a long storage period.

- Be sure not to get too much smoke on the fish, otherwise the taste will not be appealing; you’ll taste it for hours after consumption and it’s not too healthy to have too much wood tar resins in your diet.
- The best method of storage is to cut the strips into smaller pieces, vacuum pack them, and store in the freezer. The full fillets with the diagonal cuts can be difficult to vacuum pack, so I wrap them first in plastic wrap and then in freezer/butcher paper before freezing.
- It’s best to consume the jerky within a year from the initial process of smoking because the oil remaining in the fish will tend to get a bit rancid after a long storage period.

- Be sure not to get too much smoke on the fish, otherwise the taste will not be appealing; you’ll taste it for hours after consumption and it’s not too healthy to have too much wood tar resins in your diet.
- The best method of storage is to cut the strips into smaller pieces, vacuum pack them, and store in the freezer. The full fillets with the diagonal cuts can be difficult to vacuum pack, so I wrap them first in plastic wrap and then in freezer/butcher paper before freezing.
- It’s best to consume the jerky within a year from the initial process of smoking because the oil remaining in the fish will tend to get a bit rancid after a long storage period.