

Flavorful Poached Salmon

Poaching rarely lives up to its promise to produce silken, delicately flavored fish. We set out to eliminate chalky, tasteless poached salmon for good.

≧ BY J. KENJI ALT ≦

Poached salmon seems like the ideal stovetop recipe: It's fast, it requires just one pot, and there's no splattering oil to burn yourself on or strong odors to permeate the house. And, when done right, the fish has an irresistibly supple, velvety texture delicately accented by the flavors of the poaching liquid. Add a simple sauce and the dish is even more flavorful. But when done wrong, which seems to be the usual case, the fish has a dry, chalky texture and washed-out taste that not even the richest sauce can redeem.

The classic method for poaching salmon is to gently simmer an entire side of fish in a highly flavored broth called a *court-bouillon*. The salmon is cooled and served cold, often as part of a buffet. But I wasn't looking for a make-ahead method for cold salmon to serve a crowd. I wanted to produce perfectly cooked, individual portions of hot salmon and a sauce to go with them—all in under half an hour.

Finessing Flavor

My first objective was to achieve great texture and flavor in the salmon itself; after that I'd focus on the sauce. First consideration: the cooking liquid. A classic court-bouillon is made by filling a pot with water, wine, herbs, vegetables, and aromatics, then boiling it all very briefly (court-bouillon is French for "short-boiled stock"). After straining the solids, you're left with an intensely flavored liquid in which to poach your fish. The broth's strong flavors are absorbed by the fish, which helps

Benefits of Belly Fat

A center-cut salmon fillet typically tapers down on one side to the fattier belly of the fish. The belly's fattiness helps keep this section of the fish moist, despite its thinner profile. The belly area is sometimes covered with a chewy white membrane, which should be trimmed away before cooking. We also like to neaten up any ragged edges that can dry out and fray during cooking.



Lemon slices insulate the fish from direct heat, ensuring moistness.

compensate for all the salmon flavor that leaches out into the liquid.

This method certainly did produce flavorful results. However, there was just one annoying little problem: To cook dinner for four, I'd just prepped a slew of ingredients (onions, carrots, celery, leeks, parsley) and bought still others (bay leaves, tomato paste, peppercorns, and white wine), only to dump them and the stock down the drain at the end. This waste isn't bothersome when you're preparing a side of fish to feed a group, but it's hardly worth it for a simple Tuesday night supper at home.

What if I used less liquid? At the very least, this would mean I'd have to buy and prep (and waste) fewer ingredients, plus using less liquid would likely mean less flavor leaching out of the salmon. I poached the salmon in just enough liquid to come half an inch up the side of the fillets. Flavor-wise, this was my most successful attempt yet. In fact, the salmon retained so much of its own natural flavor that I wondered if I could cut back even more on the quantity of vegetables and aromatics I

was using in the liquid. A couple of shallots, a few herbs, and some wine proved to be all I needed. But nailing the flavor issue brought another problem into sharp relief—dry texture.

Seeking Supple Texture

Like all animal flesh, salmon has a certain temperature range at which it is ideal to eat. The proteins in salmon begin coagulating at around 120 degrees, transforming it from translucent to opaque. At around 135 degrees, the flesh is completely firm and will start to force moisture out from between its protein fibers. Any higher, and the salmon becomes dry as cardboard (like a well-done steak). I had been using an instant-read thermometer to ensure that the centers of my salmon fillets were exactly 125 degrees (medium) before removing them from the poaching liquid. But testing the temperature of various parts of the fillet showed that by the time the center was 125 degrees, most of the other thinner sections registered higher temperatures. I was concerned that the texture of these thinner areas would be dry, but found their higher fat content kept them moist (see "Benefits of Belly Fat," left).

With high cooking temperatures, the exterior of a piece of meat will cook much faster than the interior. This is great when pan-searing the skin of a salmon fillet or a beef steak, when you want a browned exterior and rare interior, but it's no good for poaching, where the goal is to have an evenly cooked piece all the way through. The most obvious solution was to lower the cooking temperature. For the next batch, I placed the salmon in the cold pan with poaching liquid and brought the liquid barely up to a simmer, then reduced the heat to its lowest possible setting and covered the pan until the salmon cooked through. Then I realized a new problem that I'd unwittingly introduced when I reduced the amount of cooking liquid: Since the salmon wasn't totally submerged in liquid, it relied on steam to deliver heat and flavor. At such a low temperature, even with a lid on, not enough steam was being created to efficiently cook the parts of the fish sticking out above the liquid. Was there a way to create more steam without increasing the temperature?

Thinking back to high school chemistry, I remembered that adding alcohol to water lowers its boiling temperature: The higher the concentration of alcohol, the more vapor will be produced as the liquid is heated. More vapor, in turn, means better

heat transfer, which leads to faster cooking, even at temperatures below a simmer. I also knew that alcohol could increase the rate at which proteins denature. Therefore, if I used more alcohol in the cooking liquid, it would theoretically be able to cook the fish faster and at a lower temperature. I increased the ratio of wine to water, going from a few tablespoons of wine to ½ cup. Acid also helps fish protein denature (in addition to improving flavor), so I squeezed a little lemon juice into the liquid before adding the salmon. My hopes were high as I opened the lid to a burst of steam and salmon that appeared perfectly cooked. Everything was fine until my fork got to the bottom of the fillet. Even though the top, sides, and center were now just right, the bottom, which had been in direct contact with the pan, was still overcooked.

I knew I wasn't the first person to ever have this problem—in fact, a solution already exists: a fish poacher. This specialized pan comes with a perforated insert that elevates the fish, allowing it to cook evenly on all sides. But I wasn't about to go out and buy an expensive new pan for a technique that I'd only use a few times a year. Then I realized that I had the solution literally in my hand. Instead of squeezing lemon juice into the poaching liquid, I sliced the fruit into thin disks and lined the pan with them. By resting the salmon fillets on top of the lemon slices, I was able to insulate the fish from the pan bottom while simultaneously flavoring it. This time the salmon came out evenly cooked all the way through.

Settling the Sauce

It was time to focus on the sauce. Ticking off the list of ingredients in my super-concentrated poaching liquid, I realized I had the foundation of a *beurre blanc*, so I didn't have to make a separate sauce. This classic French sauce is made by reducing wine flavored with vinegar, shallots, and herbs and then finishing it with butter. I would need only to reduce my poaching liquid and whisk in the butter. But since a few tablespoons of butter per serving would push this dish out of the “everyday” category, I developed a vinaigrette-style variation in which I used olive oil instead of butter; tasters liked the oil version as much as the original.

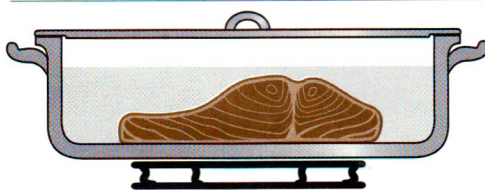
This salmon-poaching method guarantees moist and delicately flavored fish and produces just the right amount of poaching liquid for a great-tasting sauce—all without boiling away any flavor or pouring ingredients down the drain.

POACHED SALMON WITH HERB AND CAPER VINAIGRETTE

SERVES 4

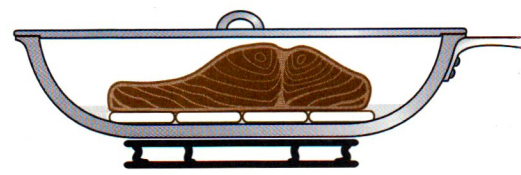
To ensure even-sized pieces of fish, we prefer to buy a whole center-cut fillet and cut it into four pieces. If a skinless whole fillet is unavailable, follow the recipe as directed with a skin-on fillet, adding 3 to 4 minutes to the cooking time in step 2. Remove

TECHNIQUE | A FISH (ALMOST) OUT OF WATER



STANDARD POACH

The classic poaching method calls for submerging salmon completely in liquid in a deep pan, which causes flavor to leach out and leads to dry, flavorless fish.



SHALLOW POACH

In our method, small amounts of liquid allow the salmon to cook at a lower temperature, preserving flavor. Lemon slices under the fillets keep their bottoms from overcooking.

the skin after cooking (see “Removing Skin from Salmon,” at right). This recipe will yield salmon fillets cooked to medium. If you prefer rare salmon (translucent in the center), reduce the cooking time by 2 minutes, or until the salmon registers 110 degrees in the thickest part. For our free recipe for Poached Salmon with Bourbon and Maple, go to www.cooksillustrated.com/freeissue.

- 2 lemons
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley leaves, stems reserved
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh tarragon leaves, stems reserved
- 2 small shallots, minced (about 4 tablespoons)
- ½ cup dry white wine
- ½ cup water
- 1 skinless salmon fillet (1¾ to 2 pounds), about 1½ inches at thickest part, white membrane removed, fillet cut crosswise into 4 equal pieces (see note)
- 2 tablespoons capers, rinsed and roughly chopped
- 1 tablespoon honey
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- Table salt and ground black pepper

1. Cut top and bottom off 1 lemon; cut into 8 to ten ¼-inch-thick slices. Cut remaining lemon into 8 wedges and set aside. Arrange lemon slices in single layer across bottom of 12-inch skillet. Scatter herb stems and 2 tablespoons minced shallots evenly over lemon slices. Add wine and water.

2. Place salmon fillets in skillet, skinned-side down, on top of lemon slices. Set pan over high heat and bring liquid to simmer. Reduce heat to low, cover, and cook until sides are opaque but center of thickest part is still translucent (or until instant-read thermometer inserted in thickest part registers 125 degrees), 11 to 16 minutes. Remove pan from heat and, using spatula, carefully transfer salmon and lemon slices to paper towel-lined plate and tent loosely with foil.

3. Return pan to high heat and simmer cooking liquid until slightly thickened and reduced to 2 tablespoons, 4 to 5 minutes. Meanwhile, combine remaining 2 tablespoons shallots, chopped herbs, capers, honey, and olive oil in medium bowl. Strain reduced cooking liquid through fine-mesh

strainer into bowl with herb-caper mixture, pressing on solids to extract as much liquid as possible. Whisk to combine; season with salt and pepper to taste.

4. Season salmon lightly with salt and pepper. Using spatula, carefully lift and tilt salmon fillets to remove lemon slices. Place salmon on serving platter or individual plates and spoon vinaigrette over top. Serve, passing reserved lemon wedges separately.

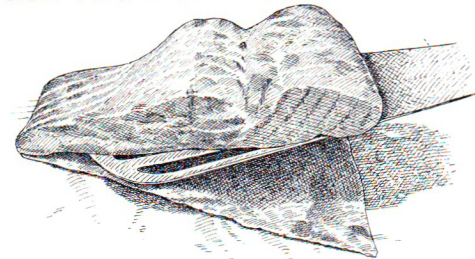
POACHED SALMON WITH DILL AND SOUR CREAM SAUCE

SERVES 4

Follow recipe for Poached Salmon with Herb and Caper Vinaigrette through step 2, substituting 8–12 dill stems for parsley and tarragon stems and omitting capers, honey, and olive oil. Strain cooking liquid through fine-mesh strainer into medium bowl; discard solids. Return strained liquid to skillet; whisk in 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard and remaining 2 tablespoons shallot. Simmer over high heat until slightly thickened and reduced to 2 tablespoons, 4 to 5 minutes. Whisk in 2 tablespoons sour cream and juice from 1 reserved lemon wedge; simmer 1 minute. Remove from heat; whisk in 2 tablespoons unsalted butter and 2 tablespoons minced fresh dill fronds. Season with salt and pepper. Continue with recipe from step 4, spooning sauce over salmon before serving.

TECHNIQUE | REMOVING

SKIN FROM SALMON



Our recipe specifies skinless salmon fillets. But if you can only find skin-on fillets, removing the skin is simple. Transfer the cooked fillet to a paper towel-lined plate and allow it to cool slightly. Gently slide a thin, wide spatula between the flesh and skin and use the fingers of your free hand to help separate the skin. It should peel off easily and in one piece.