

Hardwood-Smoked Trout

Prep Time: 1 to 2 hours | Cook Time: 1 to 2 hours

Last year a neighbor invited me to use his electric smoker. Though I had never before tried smoking meat or fish, it was far easier than I imagined. I've since smoked pheasants, goose breasts, and venison with great success.

The best results have been with brown-sugar-brined trout. One day while returning from my neighbor's house with a plateful of freshly smoked rainbow trout fillets, the aroma became irresistible. I sampled one piece, then another. By the time I got home (just one block away), the entire plate was empty.

I've experimented with several ways to prepare and smoke trout. The best method comes from 3men.com, an award-winning meat smoking and barbecue website maintained by three friends who share a passion for well-cooked meat. They use various electric smokers; a standard Weber kettle grill can work too (see 3men.com, virtual weberbullet.com, or other barbecue websites for details).

I mainly smoke trout over 19 inches long. These are large enough to fillet so I can produce boneless smoked fish. The method described here also works for smaller whole trout and other species. Whatever the size, be sure to use fresh fish.

I learned how to fillet a trout and remove its pin bones by watching instructional YouTube videos. If I can do it, anyone can. Don't worry if, after filleting, you end up with several small pieces; they'll smoke up fine.

—Tom Dickson



PHOTOS: ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

BRINING

Brining is the process of soaking meat or fish in a saltwater solution to add moisture and flavor. It's essential when smoking fish, which otherwise become too dry and jerkylike.

Not even food scientists are entirely sure how brining works. It has something to do with salt entering the fish's flesh and changing the structure of cells and proteins to retain moisture during cooking. Brining makes the fish slightly salty, but not overly so. Additional flavors such as sugar are often added to enhance the taste.

BRINING INGREDIENTS

For up to 2 lbs. of fish or fillets

- ½ gallon water (preferably bottled), room temperature
- 1 C. salt (preferably Kosher)
- ½ C. brown sugar
- 3 T. lemon juice
- 1 t. onion powder
- 1 t. allspice
- 1 t. ground pepper

Mix ingredients in a glass or ceramic container until thoroughly dissolved.

Place fish in brine, ensuring all pieces are completely submerged. Put dinner plates on top of fish or fillets to keep them underwater.

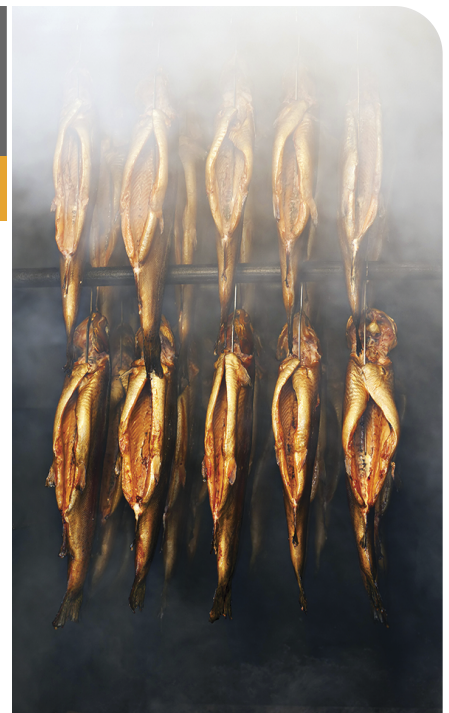
Refrigerate for the following time:

Weight of each* piece of fish or fillet	Time**
¼ lb. to ½ lb.	45 min.
½ lb. to 1 lb.	1 hour
1 lb. to 2 lbs.	2 hours

* Total weight is irrelevant
** For skin-on fish, increase time by 25%

Remove fish from brine, lightly rinse in cold water, and pat dry.

Place fish on lightly oiled bakers racks. Elevate racks in front of a fan. Dry for one hour to produce a thin glaze, called a pellicle, on the fillet. This makes the smoked fish tastier, firmer, and more attractive.



SMOKING

Check the Internet for details on the type of smoker you plan to use. If you lack a smoker, ask friends or coworkers if they have one you can borrow. (I offer part of my smoked fish in exchange.)

Hardwoods such as alder, apple, oak, and cherry—all sold commercially as chips—work well for smoking fish. Remember that a little wood goes a long way. Too much smoke will make the fish taste bitter.

Smoke at 190 degrees:

Weight of each* piece of fish or fillet	Time**
¼ lb. to ½ lb.	1.25 hours
½ lb. to 1 lb.	1.5 to 2 hours
1 lb. to 2 lbs.	2 to 2.5 hours

* Total weight is irrelevant
** For skin-on fish, increase time by 25%

Fish are done when they flake easily with a fork or when the internal temperature reaches 140 degrees.

Remove and elevate racks so fish can cool for 30 minutes. Wrap in foil and place in a ziplock-type bag to refrigerate or freeze.

Serve flaked as an appetizer. Or mix 8 oz. smoked trout with 5 T. sour cream, Greek yogurt, or crème fraîche, along with 3 T. chopped chives. Spoon onto thin-sliced baguettes or into an omelet. 🐾