

Smoked Salmon Dry Brine Recipe



Brined fish drying on the racks in my garage

This is my favorite smoker recipe for large salmon. It is not too salty, and has a deep rich flavor. For thinner landlocked salmon or trout, I prefer a wet brine, as the dry brine seems to over-cure pieces that are too thin.

It is also fairly cheap, as sugar and salt can be purchased in bulk at Costco.

Ingredients

Fish

- ✓ 1 salmon (18 pound fish before cleaning)

Brine

- ✓ 12 cups dark brown sugar (three 32 ounce bags)
- ✓ 3 cups non-iodized salt
- ✓ 6 tablespoons crushed garlic (wet from a jar - not dried, or about 3 whole fresh garlics)

Other

- ✓ Smoker (preferably electric)
- ✓ Alder wood chips
- ✓ Coarse-ground black pepper

Fish Cleaning

1. Fillet the salmon, leaving the skin on the fillets.
2. Go back and trim off any remaining meat, wasting nothing. Thin scraps will become jerky!
3. Cut on either side of the pin bones and separate this section to be picked out after smoking.
4. Slice the salmon into $\frac{3}{4}$ inch thick sections that are about 10 inches in length.
5. Be sure to keep the bellies (harasu in sushi talk). This is the best, oiliest part for smoking!

Brining

1. In a non-metallic container, mix the brine ingredients (recommended: use rubber gloves).
2. Rub the brine all over the salmon, and layer in a non-metallic container, making sure all of the salmon is covered in brine.
3. Cover and place in the refrigerator for a few hours.
4. After a few hours, the mixture will turn into syrupy liquid. Stir well, and return to the refrigerator for at least six more hours, up to 24 hours.

Drying

1. Coat the smoking racks in olive oil.
2. Rinse the brine from the fillets and pat dry with lots of paper towels to speed up the process.
3. Arrange on the racks and run a fan on the fish for about one hour (see image on first page). It will form a shiny glaze called a pellicle to help the smoke stick. Alternatively, you can stack the racks in the refrigerator for one to four hours or more to achieve the same thing.
4. Pre-heat the smoker to 100 degrees.

Smoking

1. After drying, coat the fish with coarse-ground pepper if desired. I like to pepper the thin slices for jerky, and about half of the remaining slices.
2. Smoke in a low-temperature smoker for about 4 hours total. I like to use about two pans of alder chips.
 - a. First, smoke at 100-120 degrees for about 2 hours to remove the moisture. (Warning: if you increase the heat too fast you will get an unwanted 'curd' layer at the top of the fillets.)
 - b. Increase the temperature to about 150 degrees until the fish is done to your liking (usually about 2 more hours).
3. Next, sanitize the fish at 245 degrees for one hour to kill off any bacteria or parasites. You can do this stage in the smoker, or do as I do and finish it off in the oven. The internal temperature of the thickest piece needs to reach 160 degrees for at least 20 minutes to make the fish safe to eat! Check the thickest piece with an instant-read thermometer at the end to make sure.
4. Allow the fish to rest at room temperature for about 20 minutes.
5. Pick the bones out of the sections that still have bones.

Storing

- Short-term: Wrap the fish in paper towels and keep it in the refrigerator when it's not being enjoyed. It will keep this way for about 14 days.
- Long-term: Vacuum seal and freeze the fish immediately after it cools. Fish stored this way will last at least four months.

Tips

- I brine the night before and get the racks set up so I can get it smoking the next morning.
- I brine my fish in a large ceramic-coated roasting pan.
- My smoker has four racks, which can handle about an 18-pound salmon.
- Smoking time will vary greatly depending on what kind of smoker you own and the outside temperature at the time. It will be your own preference as to when you remove the fish from the smoker. The sooner you take it out, the more moisture it will retain.
- For dark river salmon or fish that has been in the freezer for a while, I will use more pepper and smoke. With fresh fish, I smoke it for less time to get more of a moist, flaky product.
- To keep thin pieces from falling through the racks, put down a small area of parchment paper on the rack.
- Bring toothpicks or floss if enjoying away from home, as this stuff stick in your teeth big time!