



A sweet, shiny glaze created in minutes. Serve this Japanese-style salmon with wilted spinach tossed with a little soy sauce and toasted sesame oil.

Cooking Salmon Simply for Full, Rich Flavor

Easy to find and quick to prepare, salmon tastes great baked, braised, or sautéed

BY JAMES PETERSON

Photos: Philippe Houze

Salmon is an easy fish to love. When cooked, it has a delicate pink color, a tender texture, and a rich flavor with just a hint of sea breezes. It's also relatively inexpensive (about \$2 to \$3 less per pound than tuna or swordfish), it's easy to handle, and it can be prepared just about any way with the possible exception of deep-frying. While wild salmon is for most of us a rare treat, farmed salmon, also called Atlantic salmon, is always available and almost always extremely fresh.

STEAKS AND FILLETS—THE EASY WAY TO HANDLE SALMON

Versatile salmon comes in a variety of forms. You can buy a whole fish—worth the trouble if you're cooking for a large crowd—or a whole side of salmon. Most often, however, you'll find fillets (pieces cut from the side) and steaks (horseshoe-shaped pieces cut crosswise to include the backbone). Steaks and fillets cook in almost the same way, so you can often use them interchangeably.

Buying the best fillet. For the freshest fish, ask for one large piece (about 1½ pounds for four servings) cut from a whole side of salmon, and then cut that piece into individual servings yourself. You'll likely get fresher fillets this way, not ones that were cut days before. Also, try to get a piece from the center of the side. Fillets from the tail end are thinner, while those from the head end are thicker and sometimes awkward to handle.

WHAT ABOUT THE BONES?

A salmon has a central backbone, ribs, and small pin bones, which are embedded in a row down its sides. Even if

you buy a salmon fillet, chances are you'll still come across pin bones.

A quick tug is all you need to remove pin bones. To find the pin bones on a fillet, run your finger along the middle of the flesh; you'll easily feel the bones. Use tweezers, small pliers, or your thumbnail and forefinger to pinch the bones one at a time and give them a yank. They should slide right out. In a steak, the pin bones are still attached to the backbone so you'll have to pull harder to remove them.

For pretty steaks, make boneless medallions. The large bones in salmon steaks are easy to eat around, so you don't have to remove them. But I find steaks unwieldy, so I bone them and shape them into medallions (see photos on p. 46), which only takes a few extra minutes.

QUICK METHODS TO COOK SALMON

A whole poached salmon is perfect for a summertime party. And with its moderate to high fat content, salmon is great on the grill. But in winter, I usually stick to the oven and stove, which means baking, braising, or sautéing the fish.

Baking is the simplest way to go. Just arrange the salmon in an oiled baking dish and bake until done. I like to spread a thin layer of garlic, herbs, and breadcrumbs on top to make a fragrant crust. Steaks and fillets both bake well.

Braising salmon makes an easy base for a sauce. Cooking the fish in a little liquid with aromatic herbs and vegetables has the advantage of supplying you with a sauce base that's rich with the salmon's flavor. The liquid can be served as a light broth surrounding the fish, or cooked down to the consistency of a



Jim Peterson cuts a salmon steak to make a boneless medallion. See his method on the next page.

more traditional sauce. Fillets are fine to braise, but I think steak medallions look more dramatic served this way. Steaks are also generally thicker, so the longer cooking time lets the flavors in the braising liquid mingle and develop.

Swift sautéing brings out flavor. Sautéing salmon means cooking it on the stove in a little fat, such as butter or olive oil. You can sauté salmon steaks with good results, but I prefer sautéing fillets. Usually thinner, fillets cook quickly, and if they still have their skin on, they yield the extra benefit of delicious, crisp skin. I often dress up my sautéed fillets with a shiny sweet-and-savory soy glaze.

KEEP SALMON FROM STICKING

Like most fish, salmon loves to stick to the sauté pan. Using a nonstick pan helps, but sometimes salmon will even stick to that. Here are a few tips to prevent sticking:

- ◆ **Start with perfectly dry fish.** Pat it with paper towels before it goes in the pan.
- ◆ **Make sure the fat is hot.** Test it by dribbling a drop of water or two in the pan; it should sizzle.
- ◆ **Shake the pan when adding the fish.** While putting the salmon in the pan, shake the pan back and forth so that the fish moves over the pan's surface for the first 5 or 10 seconds of cooking.
- ◆ **Turn the fish only once.** This won't necessarily keep it from sticking, but it lessens the chance of the fish falling apart



A quick tug gets rid of the pin bones. Use pincers, pliers, or tweezers to pull these easy-to-find bones.



For the freshest fish, buy a large section of salmon side. Then cut it to size yourself.

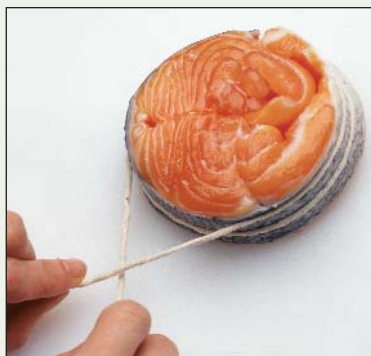
Turn a salmon steak into a compact, boneless medallion



Cut out the backbone and any ribs with a small, sharp knife. Slide the knife just under the bones that adhere to the inside of the stomach flaps and cut along the backbone almost all the way to the skin. Cut out the backbone but don't cut through the skin.



Keep the skin on the outside of the medallion by cutting a 1½-inch section of skin from one of the flaps. Roll this flap in toward the center of the steak.



Overlap the other flap to make a round medallion and tie it with kitchen twine. The twine and skin come off easily after cooking.

if it does stick. Begin with the best-looking side facing down in the pan. If the fillets have their skin, start with that side down. If they're skinless, cook the bone side first; the skinned side may have some harmless but unsightly discoloration.

DETERMINING DONENESS

Salmon generally needs about nine minutes of cooking per inch of thickness. Actual cooking times depend on the shape and size of the steak or fillet, on the cooking temperature, and on how you like your fish cooked.

The foolproof way: cut into the fish.

The trick is to do this discreetly by cutting into the underside of the fish. Properly cooked salmon should be just starting to turn pale and opaque, but you want to see a lightly translucent trace of bright orange toward the middle of the fish. Salmon that's completely opaque and pale orange throughout is overcooked.

The advanced method: touch.

A more subtle, less intrusive way to determine doneness is by feeling the fish. Touch the salmon or squeeze it gently. Raw or undercooked salmon feels fleshy. As salmon cooks, it becomes firmer. The idea is to stop cooking the instant the salmon begins to feel firm. This method takes some practice, but you can train yourself by feeling the salmon each time you cut into it—you'll soon get the knack.

Soy-Glazed Sautéed Salmon

Mirin, a very sweet sake, is sold in most supermarkets, as is Japanese dark soy sauce. If you can't find mirin, a little sugar dissolved in water works fine—or use bottled teriyaki sauce for the glaze. *Serves four.*

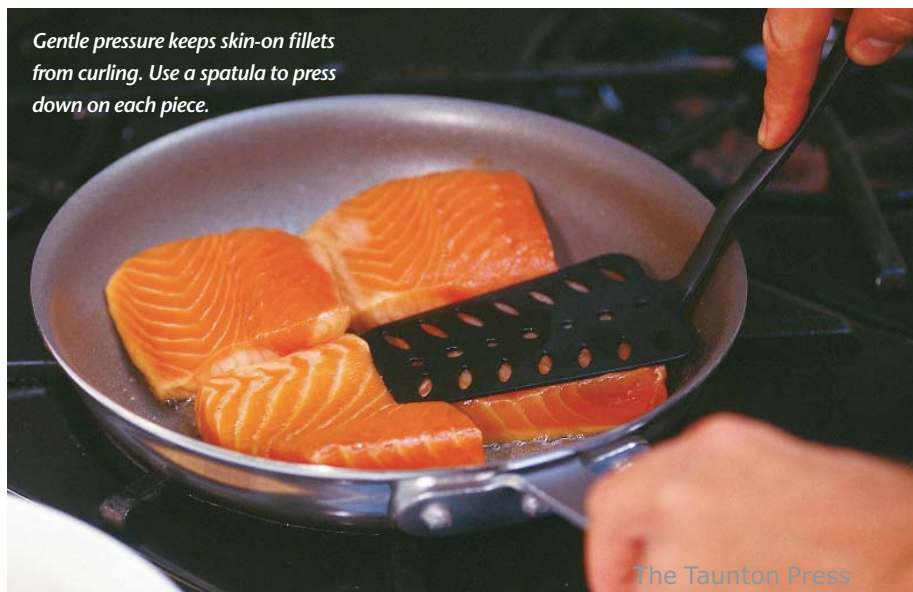


An easy sauce created from the braising liquid surrounds the salmon steak medallion.

*1½ lb. salmon fillet, skin on, pin bones removed
3 Tbs. mirin (or 1 Tbs. sugar dissolved in 2 Tbs. hot water)
3 Tbs. Japanese dark soy sauce
1 Tbs. vegetable oil*

Cut the salmon in half lengthwise and then crosswise into four rectangles. In a shallow dish large enough to hold the salmon, mix the mirin and soy sauce. Marinate the salmon in this mixture for 15 min. to 1 hour, turning it to coat both sides. Remove the salmon and pat it dry with paper towels. Reserve the marinade.

In a nonstick frying pan just large enough to accommodate the fish, heat the oil over high heat until it just begins to smoke. Put the salmon, skin side down, in the pan and immediately give the pan a shake to keep the salmon from sticking. With the back of a spatula, gently press down on each piece, moving from one to the other to keep the fil-



Gentle pressure keeps skin-on fillets from curling. Use a spatula to press down on each piece.



A garlic-herb crust adds color and flavor to salmon fillets. These pieces were cut crosswise from the side of salmon. The thinner end of each strip was folded under for even cooking.

lets from curling. Cook the salmon over high heat until the skin side browns, about 3 min.

Carefully flip the fillets and cook the flesh side until it browns, about 2 min. Take the salmon out of the pan and put it (skin side down) on paper towels to remove some of the oil. Remove the pan from the heat, wipe it with a paper towel, and return it to the heat. Pour in the reserved marinade and boil it for about 20 seconds. Reduce the heat to a simmer. Return the salmon to the pan, skin side down. Cook until the marinade glazes the salmon skin, about 3 min. Don't burn the glaze. If you smell caramel as you cook the fish, add 1 Tbs. water to the pan. Turn the salmon over to glaze the flesh side and cook until done, 2 to 3 min. Serve the salmon skin side up.

Braised Salmon Steaks with Cilantro

Use this as a master recipe and experiment with your own herb and vegetable combinations, such as thyme and fennel. *Serves four.*

- 4 salmon steaks (about ½ lb. each)
- 2 Tbs. olive oil
- 1 onion, thinly sliced
- 3 medium carrots, peeled and sliced into thin rounds
- 2 cloves garlic, very finely chopped
- ¾ cup dry white wine
- ¾ cup water
- 2 Tbs. chopped cilantro
- 1 Tbs. finely chopped flat-leaf parsley
- 1 Tbs. butter
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Remove the pin bones from the steaks. If you want, shape the steaks into medallions (see photos opposite). In a large nonstick frying pan, heat the oil over medium-high heat.

Cook the steaks until just browned on one side, flip them, and brown the other side.

Remove the salmon from the pan; drain off the fat. In the same pan, cook the onion, carrots, and garlic over medium-high heat until soft and slightly golden, about 7 min. Add the wine and water to the pan to deglaze it. Put the salmon back in the pan, cover, and cook until done, another 10 to 12 min.

Remove the salmon from the pan, leaving the liquid and vegetables in the pan. If using medallions, remove the string and the skin. Taste the sauce and, if necessary, boil for a few minutes to reduce it to intensify its flavor. Add the cilantro and parsley to the sauce. Swirl in the butter. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Arrange the vegetables over the salmon and spoon the sauce over all.

Baked Salmon with Garlic & Herb Crust

An herb crust adds flavor with none of the last-minute preparation that a sauce would entail. *Serves four.*

- 1 large clove garlic, finely chopped
- 2 Tbs. finely chopped fresh marjoram or 1 Tbs. dried
- 4 Tbs. finely chopped flat-leaf parsley

- 3 Tbs. fresh breadcrumbs
- 4 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil; more for the pan
- ½ tsp. salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 1½ lb. salmon fillet, skin and pin bones removed

Heat the oven to 400°F. With the side of a chef's knife or in a mortar and pestle, crush the garlic to a paste. In a small mixing bowl, combine the crushed garlic with the marjoram, parsley, breadcrumbs, olive oil, and salt. Grind in a little black pepper and stir the mixture until you have a stiff paste.

Cut the fillet crosswise into four pieces. If necessary, tuck the thin end of each piece under so that the two ends of each fillet are of even thickness.

Lightly grease a baking pan with about 2 tsp. olive oil. Arrange the fillets on the pan with at least an inch of space around each. Bake the salmon for about 5 min. Remove the pan from the oven. With your fingers, spread the garlic-herb mixture on top of the fish. Finish baking the salmon, another 5 to 10 min.

James Peterson, a contributing editor for Fine Cooking, teaches cooking across the country. His latest book is Fish & Shellfish (William Morrow, 1996.) ♦



Wine Choices

Choose white or sherry for salmon's light, fresh flavors

With the clean flavors in these recipes, white wines work best. For the salmon with a garlic-herb crust, I'd want a mildly herbal Sauvignon Blanc like Columbia Crest from Washington, or a crisp Oregon Pinot Gris such as Adelsheim or Elk Cove.

With the braised salmon steaks, Chardonnay will pro-

vide a bit more body. Rosemount from Australia is buttery and smooth, and its Semillon-Chardonnay blend has complex fruit flavors.

With the teriyaki, try a chilled fino sherry from Spain. Why sherry? Its dry, nutty flavor plays off the toasty, slightly sweet teriyaki. Lustau and Hartley & Gibson

make good fino sherries at a fair price. Or try Shaoxing rice wine from China, or a Japanese sake, both served warm. All three are a bit higher in alcohol, so beware the wallop.

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