

Gravlax

Sweden's cured salmon makes ideal party fare

BY CHRISTER LARSSON



Easy curing method yields tender, delicately flavored salmon. Dill sprigs are placed between two salmon fillets after the fish is rubbed with salt, sugar, and spices (left). The salmon cures for 48 hours, leaving it shiny, translucent, and 10% to 15% smaller (above). The salmon will lose a good deal of water, but don't throw out the salty liquid; brush just a little on the sliced gravlax to add extra flavor.

Swedes are renowned hosts. Fittingly, the Swedish dish gravlax is perfect for parties. Translated literally, *gravlax* means “salmon from the grave.” The “grave” refers to the curing method in which the fish is “buried” (marinated, actually) in salt, pepper, sugar, and dill for 48 hours. The curing process leaves the fish with a subtle flavor that recalls the ocean, and although it isn't smoked, gravlax has a texture as tender as that of the best smoked salmon. Yet for all these sensual rewards, gravlax is easy to prepare.

Making gravlax is little more than a matter of assembling and waiting. The salmon fillets are lightly coated with spices, and then herbs or spices are strewn between two fillets. This fish “sandwich” is laid in a dish, covered with plastic wrap, and refrigerated. That's the extent of your work. A few

Photos: Robert Marsala

days later, you're impressing your friends with home-made gravlax.

MAKING GRAVLAX

Gravlax really lets the salmon's flavor shine through, so it's important to use top-quality, super-fresh fish. Two pounds of salmon fillets should feed about four people as an entrée, six or more as an appetizer. You can make gravlax with fillets of any size. In any case, ask your fishmonger to fillet the fish for you.

Preparing the salmon. After you've bought your salmon fillet, the next step is to remove the tiny pin bones that run along the fish's spine. An average whole fillet contains about 30 pin bones. Heavy-duty tweezers or needle-nose pliers are ideal tools. No matter which instrument you choose, sterilize it with hot, soapy water before and after use. Run your fingertips lightly over the fish to feel the gentle prick of the bones. When you locate a bone, grasp its tip with the tweezers and tug it in the same direction as the grain of the fish. The bones run in a wavy line, and removing them should take no more than a couple of minutes.

Cut the boned fillet in half to create two pieces of equal size. The halves will form the "bread" of the gravlax "sandwich." You may need to trim the pieces a little to make them nearly even.

The curing ingredients. The "sandwich filling" is the herbs that flavor the gravlax. Dill is the most common gravlax seasoning, but there are other options. Cilantro and chiles create a spicy southwestern flavor; fresh thyme can add a deeper herbal note. Avoid strong seasonings like rosemary and garlic because they become overwhelming in the curing process. Only fresh ingredients are appropriate for gravlax. Dill and other herbs need only a gentle rinse, but no chopping. Chiles should be chopped for better distribution.

The "rub"—a mixture of sugar, salt, pepper, and allspice that is patted on the fillets—cures the fish. The rub uses exactly twice as much sugar as salt, but a



Coat all sides of the salmon fillets with the spice rub. A thin layer of spices should also coat the bottom of the dish that holds the gravlax while it cures.

properly prepared gravlax is neither salty nor sweet. Using the right kind of salt is important. I strongly recommend high-quality coarse sea salt, which has no chemical aftertaste. The spices should be of a fairly coarse grind. To create the correct texture, put the spices on a cutting board, circle them with a towel to prevent them from scattering, and crush them with the bottom of a heavy pan or with the flat of a large knife. Don't use a spice mill; the grind will be too fine.

Assembling the gravlax. Rub the spices on all sides of the salmon fillets. Lay one fillet, skin side down, in a ceramic, glass, or nonaluminum metal dish. Spread the dill on top of the fillet. Put the other fillet, skin side up, on top of the dill. Tightly cover the dish in plastic wrap and refrigerate it. After 24 hours, unwrap the gravlax and flip it over. Then rewrap the dish and return it to the refrigerator for 24 to 30 hours. At the end of the curing, the gravlax will be firm but pliable and slightly translucent. Expect to see the gravlax lose a good deal of liquid, which will accumulate in the dish; the fish should shrink by 10% to 15%.

SERVING GRAVLAX

The only last-minute preparation gravlax requires is slicing and arranging on a platter. Traditionally, gravlax is served with a mustard-dill sauce (see recipe on p. 54) and toasted white bread. In any case, it's best to enjoy gravlax within 48 to 72 hours of making it.

When you slice gravlax, it's very important to use a thin, sharp knife that has a scalloped, but not serrated, edge. Start at the tail end of the fillet, hold your knife at a 10° angle to the surface of the fish, and begin making horizontal slices. The slices should be thin enough for you to see the knife moving through the flesh.

As you slice, you'll see an increasingly broad, red-brown region centered at the base of each slice. This



Use tweezers to remove the slender pin bones. If you run your fingers gently down the center of the salmon fillet, you'll feel the prick of the bones. Pin bones should be pulled out in the same direction as the grain of the fish.



Slice gravlax paper-thin with a real slicing knife. The long, thin knife with a slightly scalloped edge is held at a 10° angle to the gravlax. You should be able to see the outline of the knife as you make the cut.

Gravlax was made for appetizers and party platters. Slices of gravlax lend themselves to easy and colorful presentation, and they're perfect for serving on crackers or toasted rounds of bread. Iced aquavit is a traditional—and bracing—accompaniment.

area, the “bloodline,” is harmless but unattractive. Fold each slice in half and use a small, sharp, straight-edged knife to cut out the bloodline triangle.

To complete the gravlax presentation, brush a little of the curing juices directly on the gravlax. This provides a nice sheen and a little extra flavor. Don't use too much, however; a heavy hand with the intense liquid could mean undue saltiness.

GRAVLAX

Serve gravlax at a party and devour morning-after leftovers with cream cheese and bagels. *Serves six or more as an appetizer.*

2 lb. fresh fillet of salmon, skin on
1 bunch fresh dill, with stems
2 Tbs. coarse sea salt
1 tsp. black peppercorns, cracked
¼ cup sugar
½ tsp. whole allspice, cracked

Gently run your fingertips over the cut side of the fish to locate the prick of pin bones. When you feel a bone, grasp its tip with heavy-duty tweezers or needle-nose pliers and tug it toward the fish's head end.



Wash and shake dry the bunch of dill. Trim the dill to the same length as the fillet. Combine the salt, pepper, sugar, and allspice and rub this mixture on both sides of the salmon fillets. Put one fillet, skin side down, in a nonaluminum baking dish that's just large enough to hold the salmon. Cover the fillet with the dill; the herb should be thick and well distributed. Lay the other fillet on top, skin side up. Cover the dish tightly with plastic wrap and refrigerate it. After 24 hours, unwrap the dish, flip the “sandwich” upside down. Rewrap the dish and return it to the refrigerator for another 24 to 30 hours. At the end of the curing period, liquid released by the gravlax will cover the bottom of the dish. Unwrap the dish, separate the fillets, and scrape away the herbs and spices. Reserve some of the curing liquid.

To slice the gravlax, use a thin, sharp knife with a scalloped (but not serrated) edge. Hold the knife at a 10° angle and, starting from the tail end, begin slicing the gravlax into pieces no thicker than 1/16 in. The slices should be so

Choosing salmon for gravlax

Fresh salmon may contain parasites, which can be destroyed by cooking or freezing. The gravlax curing process may kill some parasites, but it doesn't guarantee that all of them will be destroyed. Wild salmon is more prone to parasites than farmed Atlantic salmon. I've developed excellent relationships with seafood suppliers, who ensure I receive farmed salmon that's both fresh and free of parasites. If you're not certain about the fresh fish available to you, make gravlax with commercially frozen salmon. While parasites also die in a home freezer, freezing fresh fish at home isn't advisable. Commercial freezing does two things: it ensures your fish is parasite-free (no parasite can live in a 0°F deep-freeze for a week), and it freezes the fish almost instantly. This means few ice crystals form and your fish will maintain a near-fresh texture when it thaws. Home freezing is much slower, which means that the fish must remain in the freezer longer to ensure that all parasites are dead, and it offers ample opportunity for ice-crystal formation. When you thaw the fish and the ice melts, the fish's cell membranes begin to break down. The result is a mushy fish, and one that's far from ideal for making gravlax.—C.L.

thin that you can see through the flesh and watch the knife's movement. After you've sliced all the gravlax, remove the bloodline. To do this, fold each slice in half; the bloodline will form a triangle. Use a small, sharp, straight-edged knife to remove the triangle with one slice.

Arrange the gravlax slices on a platter and lightly brush with the reserved curing liquid. Serve with thin slices of toasted bread and mustard-dill sauce.

MUSTARD-DILL SAUCE

Steady whisking while slowly pouring the oil ensures a smooth, emulsified sauce. *Yields 1 cup.*

3 Tbs. Dijon mustard
2 Tbs. red-wine vinegar
2 tsp. sugar
¾ cup corn, canola, or other mild oil
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
½ cup chopped fresh dill

In a stainless-steel bowl, combine the mustard, vinegar, and sugar. Pour in the oil, using a very slow and steady trickle, whisking constantly. When all the oil is incorporated, it should have the texture and appearance of mayonnaise. Season to taste with a pinch of salt, some pepper, and the fresh dill.

Christer Larsson is the chef/owner of Christer's, a Scandinavian-inspired restaurant in New York City. ♦