

Smoking fish at home — safely

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Three common ingredients in all fish-smoking recipes are salt, smoke, and heat. This bulletin points out that only salt and heat are important for safety, and it explains the basic techniques for preparing delicious—and safe—smoked fish. It also recommends refrigerated storage for all smoked fish.

Smoked fish are good—but . . . !

Fish smoked without proper salting and cooking can cause food poisoning—it can even be lethal. Most food-poisoning bacteria can and will grow under the conditions normally found in the preparation and storage of smoked fish. Botulism is, of course, the most harmful of these bacteria.

There are three requirements for the smoking of fish so that it will store safely without refrigeration:

- You must heat your fish to 180° F (82° C) *internal* temperature.
- You must maintain this temperature for 30 minutes.
- When smoked, your fish must have 3½% WPS.

(The phrase “3½% WPS”—for “water phase salt”—means that the salt content is 3½% of the moisture left after smoking.)

Strict attention to each of these requirements is essential, for two reasons:

- It is difficult to predict in advance exactly how much salt a given piece of fish will absorb.
- It is difficult to determine after smoking whether the internal temperature did indeed remain at 180° F (82° C) for the full 30 minutes.

(Measuring the WPS after smoking requires equipment unavailable to the average home smoker.)



High-oil-content fish is usually the best for smoking. It absorbs smoke faster and has better texture. On the West Coast, some of these species are shad, sturgeon, smelt, herring, steelhead, salmon, mackerel, sablefish, and tuna. You can smoke any fish, however, without fear of food poisoning if you observe some basic principles. You will find these principles in the fundamental steps of all fish-smoking recipes: preparation, salting, smoking and cooking, and storage.

Preparation

Different species of fish require different preparation techniques. Salmon are usually prepared by removing the backbone and splitting. Bottom fish are filleted. Herring are headed and gutted. Columbia River smelt are smoked whole.

In general, however, certain principles apply in all cases. First, use good quality fish. Smoking will *not* improve fish quality; it may, in fact, cover up certain conditions that could create food-safety problems later.

Clean all fish thoroughly to remove blood, slime, and harmful bacteria. Keep fish as cool as possible at all times, but do not freeze. When you cut fish for smoking, remember that uniformly-sized pieces will help achieve more uniform salt absorption without risk of oversalting. Do not let fish sit for extended periods after cleaning and before smoking.

Salting

Salt is what preserves smoked fish. Products with high-moisture content require more salt than “dry” products. The minimum salt required for proper preservation is 3½% WPS.

Without chemical analysis, it is impossible to be certain that 3½% WPS *has* been achieved in your final product. That is why proper cooking and storage are essential for absolute safety. However, some rules of thumb are useful.

Salt the fish before smoking in a strong salt solution (brine); salting in a brine that is 1 part table salt to 7 parts water—by volume, not by weight—for 1 hour will do in most cases. (This proportion is approximately 60° SAL, as measured on the salometer scale; see *Preparation of Salt Brines for the Fishing Industry* under “For further information.”)



Oregon State University
Extension Marine Advisory Program
A Land Grant / Sea Grant Cooperative
SG 66 October 1980

About 30 minutes should do for a gutted herring. However, large or oily fish will require more time. Two hours for large chunks of a 30-pound salmon is a good starting place for experimenting.

Decrease the time for nonfat fish and for skinned fish. A final product that has a definite, but not unpleasant, salt flavor probably has achieved a 3½% WPS.

Dry salting techniques are acceptable, and the same general rules apply. However, brining should give more uniform salting than dry salting.

Many recipes call for lower salt brine concentrations than the 1 part table salt to 7 parts water formula given above—but for extended periods, 18 to 24 hours. These recipes may be sufficient, but they tend to offer more opportunity for bacterial growth and possible spoilage later. In addition, these procedures prolong the entire process and increase the mess you must clean up later.

Rinse and air dry all fish before smoking. This not only gives smoke a chance to deposit evenly but also helps to prevent surface spoilage during smoking. Smoke will not deposit easily on a wet surface.

If proper drying conditions are not available (cool, dry air), try placing the fish in the smokehouse with low heat, no smoke, and doors open. With a wood heat source, use a low, clean flame.

Smoking and cooking

Cook the fish at 180° F (82° C) internal temperature for at least 30 minutes at some time during the smoking "cycle." This is probably the most important part of any fish-smoking recipe—and one that is often forgotten in home smoking.

Because you cannot determine the final salt content (without chemical analysis), proper cooking is *the only way* you can insure a product safe from botulism without adequate refrigeration.

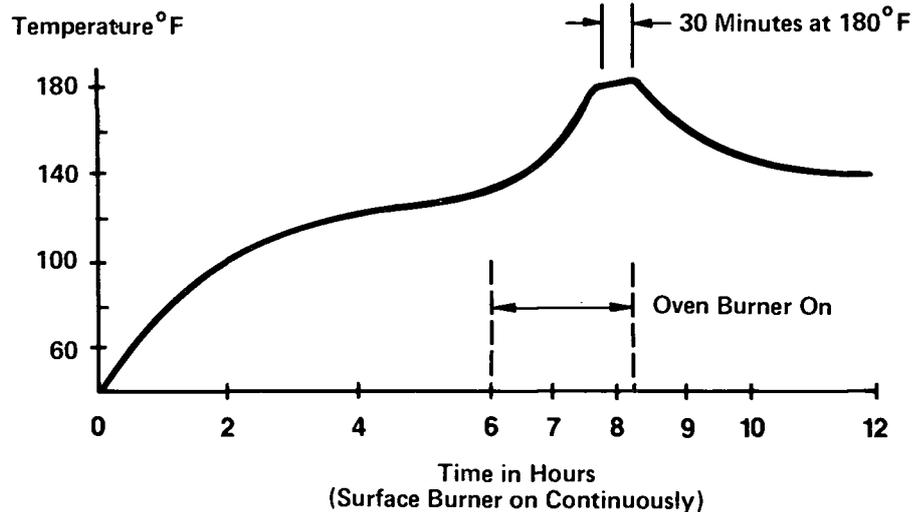


Figure 1.—Typical internal fish temperature during smoking cycle.

A typical fish-smoking cycle (see figure 1) will bring the fish to a 180° F (82° C) internal temperature within 6 to 8 hours (*internal*—not oven—temperature). A shorter span means the fish will usually remain below 120° F (48° C) because of the cooling effect of water evaporation.

If your smokehouse cannot provide 200° to 225° F (93° to 107° C) oven temperatures, you will have to cook the final product in your kitchen oven. Waiting longer than 6 to 8 hours for that vital 30 minutes at 180° F (82° C) presents a danger of spoilage caused by bacteria growing under ideal conditions (120° to 130° F, 48° to 54° C).

Remember: Smoke itself is *not* an effective preservative under most smokehouse conditions.

A standard meat thermometer will work for checking the internal temperature of the largest piece in the smokehouse. This should insure that all the fish has reached 180° F (82° C). (Some smokehouses may have cool spots.) A long-stemmed dial thermometer inserted into the fish through a hole in the smokehouse wall may be desirable; it allows temperature monitoring without opening the door.

It is best to wait 3 to 5 hours before elevating the fish to the 180° F (82° C) internal temperature. This is easier to do after most of the moisture is gone, and there will be less tendency for a baked fish flavor. In addition, there will be less "curd" formation caused by juices boiling out of the fish.

Further smoking and drying can be done after the 30 minutes at 180° F (82° C). Keep the fish temperature above 140° F (60° C) to prevent growth of harmful bacteria. However, some oily fish (such as sablefish) may never dry out the way salmon or tuna does.

Figure 2 illustrates the basic components of a good smokehouse.

A common question asked about fish smoking relates to the small metal smokers readily available in most hardware or sporting goods stores. This equipment may be adequate, but it has difficulty achieving temperatures high enough to obtain proper cooking. So if you do use one of these small devices, you will need to use your kitchen oven to achieve the 30 minutes at 180° F (82° C) internal temperature.

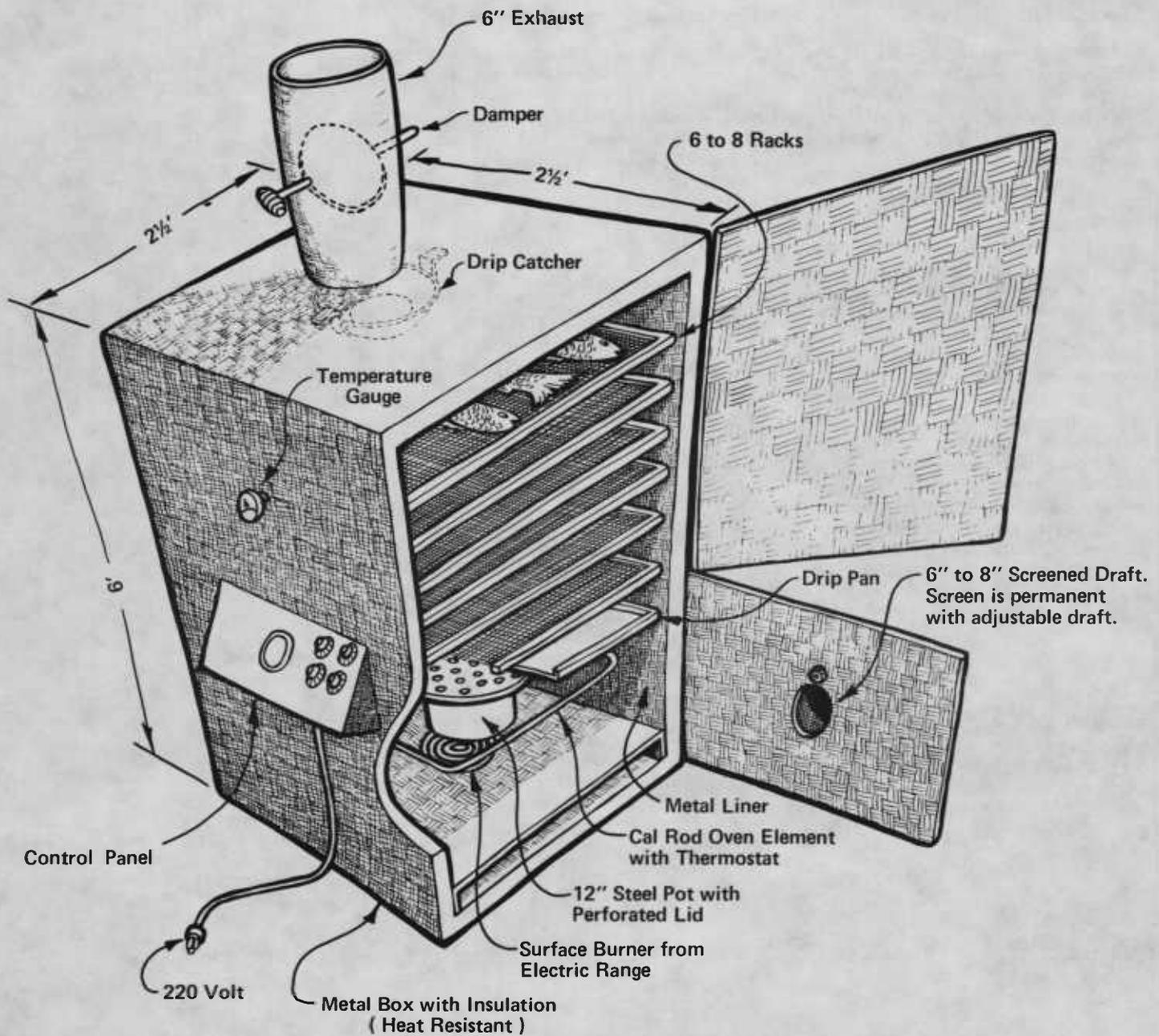


Figure 2.—Basic components of a smokehouse. This drawing is not intended, nor should it be used, as a blueprint for building a smokehouse. It shows the features to look for in a smokehouse and their general arrangement. The key features are: (1) an independent source of heat for the pot of wood chips or logs; (2) a controllable vent, or flue, at the top; (3) a controllable draft at the bottom; (4) some thermostatic control over the oven temperature connected to (5) another heat source to raise temperature in the smokehouse to 200° to 225° F (93° to 107° C).

Storage

Refrigerate your smoked fish (below 40° F, 4° C) if you do not plan to consume it in 1 or 2 days. *This is essential:* The salt content is unknown, and there may be doubt about the time and temperature achieved in the smoking cycle.

You can retard mold growth on your smoked fish if you package it in a porous material such as cloth or paper toweling. This prevents "sweating," a process where moisture moves from the fish to the inside of the bag, causing a wet spot where mold can grow. This is especially severe if you place warm, plastic-wrapped fish in a refrigerator.

For extended storage (longer than 1 or 2 weeks), tightly wrap and freeze smoked fish. Little quality is lost in frozen smoked fish because of its low moisture content. (For instructions on correct packaging for freezing, see *Home Freezing of Seafood* under "For further information.")

For further information

Most bookstores and sporting goods stores carry a variety of books on "smoke cooking." Most have delicious recipes and clear instructions. These, plus the use of common sense in following the principles outlined in this publication, will insure safe, pleasing home-smoked fish.

Here are some suggestions for further reading:

Dudley, Shearon, J. T. Graikoski, H. L. Seagran, and Paul M. Earl, *Sportsman's Guide to Handling, Smoking, and Preserving Coho Salmon*, National Marine Fisheries Service, Fishery Facts-5 (Seattle, 1973). Available in some libraries. Reprint copies available (30¢ each) from: Extension Marine Education Specialist, OSU Marine Science Center, Newport, OR 97365.

Hilderbrand, Kenneth S., Jr., *Home Freezing of Seafood*, Oregon State University Extension Service, Sea Grant Marine Advisory Program Publication SG 7 (Corvallis, revised 1976).

Hilderbrand, Kenneth S., Jr., *Preparation of Salt Brines for the Fishing Industry*, Oregon State University Extension Service, Sea Grant Marine Advisory Program Publication SG 22 (Corvallis, reprinted 1979).

Extension Service, Oregon State University, Corvallis, Henry A. Wadsworth, director. This publication was produced and distributed in furtherance of the Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914. Extension work is a cooperative program of Oregon State University, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Oregon counties.

Extension's Marine Advisory Program is supported in part by the Sea Grant Program, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce.

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