

# FEBRUARY

# VOGUE

## super nova

Smoked salmon may be ubiquitous and cheap, but it's rarely the delicious delicacy it should be. Jeffrey Steingarten goes fishing for the secrets of the few who still know how to make the very best. Photographed by Irving Penn.

**S**till in the throes of holiday exhaustion and gluttony, I went out and bought a pile of books: *Smoking Salmon & Trout*; *Build a Smokehouse*; *A Guide to Canning, Freezing, Curing and Smoking Meat, Fish and Game*; *The Smoked-Foods Cookbook*; *Home Book of Smoke Cooking Meat, Fish & Game*; *Cold-Smoking & Salt-Curing Meat, Fish, & Game*. From Thanksgiving onward, I had been treated to a dizzying variety of smoked salmons that ranged in taste and texture from delightful to dreadful. Once a rare delicacy, smoked salmon has now become a super-market commodity while somehow remaining an ethnic (i.e., Jewish) specialty and an elegant (i.e., Anglophilic) entremets. I realized how little I had kept up with developments in the world of smoked salmon. I sorely felt the need to come to a new sense of mutual understanding between smoked salmon and me.

You would think that my enviable ethnic makeup had given me a leg up on the subject, the way Memphians have spiritually melded with their pulled pork and Episcopalians have become one with their cucumber sandwiches on crustless white bread. When I was young, there were two or three types of smoked salmon. One of them wasn't even always smoked—the very tra-

ditional lox, which is heavily salt-cured salmon that can remain in its brine for up to a year; before lox is sold to the public, it must be "soaked out" to remove much of the salt. *Lox* is from the Yiddish *laks*, and ultimately from the German *Lachs*, which means, simply, "salmon." Lox itself is, even for some habitués, not a pleasant food—it is strong-tasting and very salty, begging to be diluted by cream cheese. That's why the two were often served together on bagels, which in those days were heavy, dense, lacking taste, and nearly too chewy for a child's little mouth—compared with which today's ubiquitous light and flavored bagels are like a delicate pastry. (We also learned about gravlax, the herby, lightly cured, unsmoked Scandinavian treat you prepare at home.)

Then there was Nova Scotia smoked salmon, years later known simply as "Nova"—luscious, wild Atlantic salmon from eastern Canada, mildly cured by a brief soaking in a light brine of salt, brown sugar, and lots of water, then mildly smoked "over" smoldering chips of an aromatic wood—oak, beech, or a mixture of apple and cherry. At some point, a similar type of smoked salmon known as "Gaspé" appeared—made just like Nova with salmon fished from the Gaspé peninsula in far eastern Canada.

One soon became aware of another, more exotic delicacy—salmon that had been caught, dry-cured, and smoked in Scotland. It was firmer and smokier than Nova and Gaspé. At first it took some getting used to, but it soon became the ideal.

With Nova Scotia, Gaspé, and Scottish

#### MIRACLE CURE

A deftly sliced sliver of smoked Scottish salmon with traditional garnishes—red onion, dill, crème fraîche, lemon, capers, and a pinch of black pepper. Sitings Editor: Phyllis Posnick.

smoked salmon, the idea of perfection was clear. Six months or a year after a wild salmon has hatched in a crystalline river and grown several inches long, it floats downstream to the sea, where it is physically transformed into a saltwater creature. (Fish that know how to do this are called “anadromous.”) As it eats insects and krill, its flesh becomes salmon-colored, and over the next few years it grows to six pounds or 40 pounds, depending on its species. At last it heads back to the river and tributary and stream and rivulet of its birth, its flesh packed full of healthful omega-3 fatty acids, fuel for its long, arduous, upstream struggle, from which it will never return. Once it leaves salt water, it stops eating; the male’s body transforms again, this time grotesquely, with an unsightly hooked jaw and, in some species, a humped back.

Just in the nick of time, before this awful metamorphosis, a fisherman pulls our plump, succulent, and heart-happy salmon from the water, at the end of a hook and line, carefully bleeds and eviscerates it, and carries it to a nearby smokehouse, where artisans cut its long, muscular sides from its skeleton, rub them with salt and sugar, perhaps spices and herbs, let them cure for a few days or weeks, then immerse them in the fresh, cool, aromatic smoke of a smoldering wood fire. Four years after the creature’s birth, a two- or ten-pound side of shimmering smoked salmon arrives from Ireland or Scotland or closer by, ready for me to slice deftly into diaphanous sheets of gustatory pleasure.

Where can one buy such a side of salmon? Does one have to become a salmon fisherman and, even worse, a salmon smoker? And what about the deftness part?

Like so many thousands before me, I launched my voyage of rediscovery on Houston Street in New York City, near the corner of Orchard, at a famous old shop called Russ & Daughters, founded 88 years ago by one Joel Russ as what was then known as an “appetizing store” specializing in preserved fish—salted, smoked, dried, and pickled. And Russ & Daughters is still, as it were, the Mecca for lovers of preserved fish—especially salmon.

The historical record is surprisingly vague, considering the momentousness of the issues at hand. Although Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe (my paternal pedigree) were specialists in eating and preparing dried, cured, and smoked fish, they did not encounter ample supplies of affordable salmon until they arrived, in the years around 1900, in the East End of London and the Lower East Side of New York City, where they soon developed and dominated the salmon-smoking business. Judging from French and American banquet and hotel menus from the mid-nineteenth century, smoked salmon was served as an hors d’oeuvre, but it does not seem to have been vastly popular. The slicing instructions in old recipes tell you that this was cold-smoked salmon, the smooth, glistening kind that people eat today on brown bread or bagels and as first courses in posh restaurants. (Cold-smoked salmon is cured, dried, and smoked at temperatures below 80 degrees F., at which the salmon would otherwise start to cook—to soften, flake, and become opaque.)

Russ & Daughters is now headed by Mark Russ Federman, 57, a lawyer for nine years whose mother is one of Joel Russ’s three daughters. In Mark’s crowded office, we had a little salmon tasting, prepared by Herman Vargas, 41, beatified by Calvin Trillin as “the artistic slicer.” Herman is much more than a slicer. Born in the Dominican Republic, Herman is unaccountably the only person in the entire shop who speaks Yiddish. We nibbled on wild Pacific “Nova,” wild Pacific salt-cured lox, Scottish (farmed and smoked in Scotland), “Norwegian” (farmed in Nor-

way but smoked in upstate New York), a “Scottish-style” smoked salmon called Shetland (farmed in Scotland, dry-cured and smoked upstate), and Gaspé (large fillets farmed in Norway and smoked in Brooklyn). Maybe it was more than a nibble, and maybe it was I who did all the nibbling. Maybe we had some her- ring, too, and a slice of sable (cold-smoked black cod), and what they call “baked salmon,” which is really kippered salmon—hot-smoked wild albino king salmon.

You can see that today the geographical identification of most smoked salmon—Scottish, Nova Scotia, Gaspé—is hopelessly imprecise. Wild Atlantic salmon—the original source of the most delicate Nova Scotia and Gaspé smoked salmon—is pretty much extinct. For several decades now, the world center of fish smoking has been Brooklyn, and the largest single smokehouse in the country is the Acme Smoked Fish Corporation on Gem Street in Greenpoint. (My assistant, Elizabeth, who lives in Greenpoint, tells me that Greenpoint is in Brooklyn.) Russ & Daughters gets 60 percent of its smoked salmon (and much of its other smoked fish) from Acme.

**a**riving home with the deliciously assertive tastes of Russ & Daughters’ fish in my mouth and decades of smoked-salmon memories in my heart, I drew up a list of the qualities we appreciate in fine, cold-smoked salmon. The list is pretty long:

1. It should be firm as you bite into it, melt in your mouth as you chew on it, and never become mealy or pasty.
2. It should taste pleasantly rich, even fatty, but should not unpleasantly coat the inside of your mouth.
3. It should taste and smell pleasantly of both wood smoke and of a burning wood fire, which is softer and more aromatic and rarer than smokiness; and the wood smoke should in no way taste or smell acrid or like rubber or pine-scented bathroom cleanser.
4. It should taste pleasantly salty and slightly sweet, with an assertive taste of fish—fresh, raw salmon.
5. It should glisten, but there should be no droplets of fat on its surface.
6. The flesh should be moist and translucent, not opaque, and somewhere between pink and orange, not gray or tan, though color does not affect taste.

Incidentally, the word *pleasantly* is not an evasion of my responsibility. The ideal is an exquisite balance among salty, sweet, smoky, woody, rich, and salmony; many combinations of these six flavors can be fine.

It all boils down to this. Salmon are native only to the Northern Hemisphere. Salmon are either farmed or wild. All wild salmon caught commercially in the United States is from the North Pacific, most of it from Alaska, where the fishery is well managed and sustainable. There are wild salmon in the Sacramento River and its tributaries, in northern California, though

many varieties are endangered or threatened and may not be fished. There is one species of Atlantic salmon and five species of Pacific salmon (in size order): king (also known as chinook), sockeye (also, red), chum, coho, and pink. Wild salmon are generally caught in June and July, before they make their final run upstream; they must be frozen to be available for smoking the year round.

Most cold-smoked salmon is made with Atlantic salmon, which is nearly always farmed—in Canada, Norway, and Chile, and on the Pacific Ocean, to which Atlantic salmon have been transplanted because they do better in confinement than Pacific salmon. Some Irish and Scottish smoked salmon is still made with true, wild Atlantic salmon, smoked on a small scale and imported into this country, but most imports from the British Isles are produced by large companies using farmed Atlantic salmon from Scotland or Norway.

Salmon were abundant and cheap in the Middle Ages in parts of northern Europe (you read that the lower orders of society objected to being fed wild salmon more than three times a week), but the fish became a scarce and expensive delicacy with the coming of industry, pollution, and dams. Now salmon are common again and cheap in the form of the ubiquitous farmed salmon. I will admit to a bias against farmed fish in general and especially against farmed salmon, which I have not eaten in the past ten years, at home or in a restaurant. Salmon farms—really screened-in pens set in salt water relatively near the shore—generate enormous volumes of waste (plus dead fish and antibiotics) that mound up on the ocean floor. And as an object of gastronomy, farmed salmon tends to be soft and tasteless when you cook it, and soft, tasteless, and brimming with excess fat when you cold-smoke it. At least that's been my experience. Farmed salmon lead inactive, relatively brief lives. Studies have found that farmed Atlantic salmon contain considerably smaller amounts of life-extending omega-3 fatty acids than wild salmon do. The food pellets fed to farmed salmon lack the little organisms that turn their flesh the famous pinkish-orange. The pellets are dyed to keep the salmon's flesh from looking gray. Hoffmann-La Roche, which manufactures the dyes, makes SalmoFan, a set of paint chips from which you can choose the color that you, a salmon farmer, would like your fish to become.

Wild Pacific salmon is firmer and leaner but can become tough and dry when it is smoked. Even within any one species, there are wide differences in the amount of delicious, stored fat an individual salmon needs to stockpile. This depends on how far the salmon must swim upstream to its birthplace and how difficult the trip will be. Members of the same species can enter a river at different times of the year to spawn in different places—some of them much more arduous to get to than others. Biologists refer to wild salmon stocks by their species, their run (time of return to their natal stream), and their race (river of origin)—as in Sacra-

mento River winter chinook—each one being described as a “distinct population segment” and “evolutionarily significant unit.”

At last I had it. Perfect smoked salmon can be made only from perfect salmon, I figured. I needed salmon from the finest, fattest, bravest, most powerful “distinct population segment” and “evolutionarily significant unit.” And I would have to do the curing and smoking myself.

That's when I went out and bought all those books about smoking my own salmon. Cold-smoking is extremely tricky because, while you need continuously refreshed wood smoke for twelve or 24 hours, you must burn the wood in a way that creates no heat, which is, of course, impossible. The salmon's temperature should not exceed 78 degrees F., a warmish room

temperature. It's hard enough to keep the temperature of a Southern barbecue pit below 200 degrees F. while producing ample smoke; you often have a separate metal box on the side where the wood smolders, with enough distance from there to the meat to allow the smoke to cool down. Bringing wood smoke to room temperature before it surrounds the salmon seemed at first beyond my technological ca-

pabilities, and that's where I'm afraid it remained.

Hot-smoking is easy. I have performed hot-smoking several times over the years—usually with heat between 145 degrees F. and 180 degrees F.—which cooks the fish while you smoke it. You begin with a wok or a large pan, put something in the bottom that will burn aromatically, such as wood chips or sawdust or tea, set a rack over the smoke, put some raw food on the rack, cover, and let 'er rip.

But now I needed instructions for cold-smoking. You can buy a nice little \$425 smoker, the Smokette, from the Cookshack company. It looks to be the size of an electric dishwasher, but its minimum temperature is about 100 degrees F. Another company makes one with an offset smokebox; it is large and expensive. Both require outdoor venting. You need circulating smoke. If you simplify things and produce just a little wood smoke in a sealed box of some sort and leave a side or two of salmon in there for an hour at a time, the smoke becomes stale, even rancid, and as it mixes with moisture in the air it can settle as a tarry substance on the surface of the fish. That doesn't taste good.

Of all the books I had bought, only two gave detailed instructions for constructing a cold-smoker. The smallest device was the size of a refrigerator and the largest was the size of a barn. I became discouraged. The nearest I got was an adaptation of the water pipe. I remember reading years and years ago that in the sixties and early seventies, some youngsters were fond of inhaling various sorts of smoke and, in order to cool it down before drawing it deep into their lungs, sometimes would first bubble the smoke through cool water. I advertised on eBay for a large antique water pipe, then walked to a nearby shop in my Manhattan neighborhood whose huge yellow sign has long advertised PUMPS. Sadly, they lacked both *(continued on page 301)*

Once a rare delicacy,  
smoked salmon has become  
a supermarket commodity  
while somehow remaining  
an ethnic (i.e., Jewish)  
specialty and an elegant  
(i.e., Anglophilic) entremets

at Cap d'Antibes. "The Red Hot Chili Peppers all swam over from the Hotel du Cap to the house where we were staying and climbed over the wall looking for Ione. You know, people love her and find her," says David.

There have, of course, been moments when their two worlds have merged less successfully. When David took Ione to the opera, "she really was very bored." She got her own back by taking him to the Raleigh Hotel in Miami. "If you're really serious about being off-tempo in your choice of hotels, then that's where you go," says David. After one night, he announced that "we were going to the Delano, like everybody else, and that was just how it was going to be."

A few weeks later, the couple are back in New York. Ione has just finished acting in an Off-Broadway play, and there are parties and events to attend. To add to her growing collection of jewels (many of which have been passed down from his late mother), David has given Ione a thirties diamond pendant for her birthday, which she is wearing with faded jeans. The new parents tiptoe into baby Kate's New York bedroom. Fast asleep, she is blissfully unaware that she has a Hollywood bedroom, too. She is covered in a cot-size sable throw that David had made from one of his mother's old fur coats. "See, the baby's actually going to have the life that I always wanted, which is in two places," whispers David. "She'll never be bored." □

## SUPER NOVA

*(continued from page 281)*

the hardware for connecting one of their little babies to an antique water pipe and the spirit of adventure and downright fun required by the project.

Meanwhile, I was making regular trips down to Houston Street, talking and tasting. Given the high renown of Russ & Daughters and my vast ignorance concerning the smoked-salmon business, I had assumed that Mark has each side of salmon that he sells cured and smoked to his family's ancient specifications. But it soon became clear to me that with a few exceptions, Mark buys a variety of the best smoked salmon he can find, and he chooses the best according to his careful, genetically formed taste. What he doesn't buy from the Acme Smoked Fish Corporation he gets from much smaller operations in Brooklyn and upstate New York. He also buys smoked salmon imported from Scotland and Norway.

And so it was now time to visit Brooklyn. Mark drove. With us were Elizabeth, our autochthonous neighborhood representative, and Niki, Mark's daughter and, consequently, Joel Russ's great-granddaughter. Niki is a 1999 graduate of Amherst who stud-

ied in Paris at the Institut d'Études Politiques, a grand école, and worked for two years at SFMOMA. Like her father (and Al Pacino in *Godfather III*), she has somehow been pulled back into the business.

Acme occupies a large, low building in a light-industrial neighborhood, and it is run by Buzz Billik, who has been in the business for 24 years and knows a fantastic amount about smoked salmon. Acme produces more than five million pounds of smoked and cured fish a year, of which about four million is smoked salmon—and what seems to be every combination of farmed and wild fish, of wet or dry cure. (Wet-cured salmon are submerged in a mild brine; dry-cured salmon are rubbed with salt and brown sugar and emerge firmer and with a more assertive taste.) Nearly all the salmon entering the building is farmed Atlantic—about half from Chile and half from Norway—and most of it has been frozen. Only a tiny proportion is wild—chinook salmon from southeast Alaska, where it is caught at sea and frozen in Sitka for use throughout the year. Much of the wild salmon goes to Russ & Daughters, largely because of Mark's preference for it; even so, 65 percent of Russ & Daughters' salmon is farmed.

Later, Buzz reminisced about the old days, the decade of the eighties, which he considers the heyday of the smoked-salmon connoisseur. Wild Atlantic salmon had not disappeared and was delivered fresh to Acme twice a week by a truck driven from Canada. Scottish salmon was nearly always made from wild Atlantic fish. And wild Pacific salmon were gill-netted in rivers known for their fat, delicious fish—the Yukon and the early Copper River run. Shouldn't this sort of discrimination and gourmandism be easier to accomplish today? Not necessarily. Everybody seems to want New York Nova-style farmed salmon—fatty, tender, completely uniform, mildly wet-cured, and lightly smoked—for which the Russes and the Zabars seem to have been largely responsible.

Buzz remains skeptical, but he did suggest that when the Copper River run begins in the late spring, I return to Greenpoint, which is in Brooklyn, and we carry out some scrumptious experiments.

OK. I wasn't not going to enter the cold-smoking business, at least for a while. I would try to do what Mark Russ Federman does every day—taste every fish in sight and, with my racially advantaged palate, choose the best. So I bought, or caused to be bought, 40 or 50 sides or packages of smoked salmon. We started with every available variety sold at three of the most famous places in New York City. Then, turning to the Internet, I

searched out West Coast smokehouses using wild salmon caught by Bruce Gore's operation in the North Pacific—Gore is a pioneer in freezing line-caught salmon at sea—plus any other cold-smoked salmon from the West Coast that sounded especially good, including something caught in the Copper River. Then I turned to Europe—Ireland and Scotland, collecting salmon from four smokehouses that had done especially well in tastings conducted in England and Ireland by people I know. Plus salmon from the famous H. Forman & Son, the last remaining smokehouse in London's East End.

There is no reason to believe that I have selected the best cold-smoked salmon in the world. But everything on the little list that follows should make you very happy.

■ Dean & DeLuca, (212) 431-1691, [www.deanandeluca.com](http://www.deanandeluca.com).

Norwegian, farmed. \$28/lb. Firm but melting. Doesn't coat the mouth with fat. Nice and smoky, and pretty salmony.

Daniel Boulud. \$34/lb. Firm, full of flavor. Distinct taste of wood fire in addition to wood smoke. May be slightly too salty and dry, and a little acid (instead of sweet).

■ Hederman Smoked Salmon, Ireland, 011-353-21-422-2208.

Wild Irish. 48.50 euros\*/kg, plus 31.70 euros shipping for the first kilogram. Possibly the best. Sweet and very smoky, but pleasantly so and without any acridness. Sweeter as you cut farther into the fillet. Strong taste of fish, but not fishy. Their organic farmed smoked salmon (about 16 euros for a 500g pack) is also good—smoky but with less fish taste than the wild.

■ Kinvara Smoked Salmon Ltd., Ireland, 011-353-91-637-489, [www.kinvarasmokedsalmon.com](http://www.kinvarasmokedsalmon.com).

Wild Irish. Delicious. Strong taste of fish and smoke. A beautiful piece of fish, firm and glistening. Their organic smoked salmon is better than the usual farmed, with a richer smoke and salmon flavor.

■ Russ & Daughters, (212) 475-4880, [www.russanddaughters.com](http://www.russanddaughters.com).

Western (Wild Pacific Nova-style). \$32/lb. Smoky, fishy, melts in the mouth.

Wild Pacific Albino King. \$32/lb. Moist, firm, full of fish and smoke tastes. Covered with an orangy pellicle, but pale pinkish-white underneath. One of the best we had.

Scottish. \$28/lb. Farmed, but firm and delicious. Almost lemony.

■ Zabar's, (212) 787-2000, [www.zabars.com](http://www.zabars.com).

Nova. \$24/lb. Very good, the classic New York City lush, farmed salmon—rich, but very softly smoked and cured. □

\*The euro varies in value but has been running at about \$1.