



FOOD

Salmon Time

Our correspondent ventures to Alaska to learn when to eat wild salmon—and how to find it even when it's not in season

BY CORBY KUMMER

This month is the tail end of the season for most fresh-caught wild salmon. Summertime wild salmon is prized because it is at its peak of physical development. Its muscle is toned and its fat content is at its lifetime high, after a few years of foraging in the open seas to build strength for the arduous trek upriver, at the end of which the fish will spawn exactly where it was born. Its color is at its brightest and rosiest. Caught sooner, in the sea while it is still feeding, the salmon's texture will be softer. Caught later, during its voyage upstream, the fish's color will be off and the fat stores depleted.

Generations of diners have feasted on this seasonal bounty, but dams and other habitat degradation have made vast stocks of Pacific Northwest salmon, and all wild Northeast Atlantic salmon, virtually extinct. So freshly caught wild salmon is available legally for only a brief time each year. Chefs set their calendars to the appearance of the first wild salmon with the kind of excitement once

generated by the arrival of Beaujolais nouveau when French wines were still in vogue. If anything, chefs are more impatient than ever for wild-salmon season to start, and more reluctant to see it end, and for good reason: farmed Atlantic salmon, which in just twenty-five years has overtaken the world market, is almost always mushy, bland, flabby—criminally dull. I gave up ordering it several years ago, when I decided that no amount of pineapple salsa could render it acceptable, let alone enjoyable.

Yet two winters ago I began noting a curious phenomenon in the Northeast, where Maine is known for its salmon farms and the commercial harvesting of wild Atlantic salmon has been illegal for years: wild salmon turning up on menus in December, February, April—completely outside the usual season. Chefs scoffed at my suggestion that the fish had been frozen, insisting that their irreproachable vendors knew the fish to be both wild and shipped without ever having seen a freezer. (Not that frozen is neces-

sarily a bad thing, as I learned years ago when first looking into the subject: if frozen quickly and properly, fish can taste fresher than bruised, badly chilled fish that waits days to reach a processor.) But clear frauds—farmed salmon passed off as wild in supermarkets, as discovered in stings by *The New York Times* and others—made me skeptical. Those frauds, and my own curiosity about when wild salmon was really available, made me wonder what “wild salmon” really means now. What is the best way to catch and keep it, and when is the best time to eat it?

In June I went to Alaska, home of the world's largest wild-salmon industry, to find out what the fish looks like up close and taste some of it before it boarded a plane. I attended Copper River Nouveau, an annual benefit for the Prince William Sound Science Center, in Cordova, a former mining depot and now fishing capital accessible only by boat or plane. At the Saturday-night dinner, thirty pounds of donated king salmon fillets, the most valuable kind (last year these fillets were selling at a retail price of \$25 a pound), were the main attraction, complemented by a lobster-saffron sauce. The simple but elegant meal was cooked and served by Jack Amon and Van Hale, chef and manager respectively of Marx Bros. Cafe, in Anchorage, often called Alaska's best

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