



## 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 impeccable 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

TIM MATSUJI/WPPI



## THE FIVE MAIN PACIFIC SALMON

And how they taste

**S**almon is valued by its fat content, which always corresponds with richness in the mouth (though not invariably with best flavor). Here are the five major Pacific salmon varieties, listed in order of richness:

**King (chinook).** The lushest fresh salmon, king is the highest in fat and usually the most expensive, prized for its silken, melting texture, which is almost like smoked salmon.

**Sockeye (red).** With a deep, natural color, sockeye is lower in fat but still high overall, allowing the flavor to better come through. Many salmon lovers, including me, consider this the best salmon-eating experience.

**Coho (silver).** A comer, according to Bill Webber and Thea Thomas, independent Cordovan fishermen. It's already prized by sport fishermen for its fight, and soon, the Cordovans hope, by diners for its mild but distinctive flavor. The most widely available autumn fresh salmon.

**Pink (humpback).** So delicate and pale that Thomas compares it to sole—which she does not mean as a compliment. She recalls a tasting for food writers at which many rated pink the highest. “How could they?” she asks. The likely answer: “A lot of these people had never had salmon in their life.”

**Chum (dog).** Like pink, chum is fished in high numbers and is lower in fat than other varieties; when it spawns in intertidal waters, it doesn't need to build up energy to swim upstream. Its roe, however, is the most valued of the five varieties, because of its size and flavor. After being strained and separated, the eggs make particularly good *ikura*—the fat, bright-orange pearls familiar in sushi rolls.

restaurant. Amon made the donated fish go a long way, serving it in three-ounce portions, which were in fact ample, given its richness: outside of smoked salmon or salmon packed in oil, king salmon is the lushest salmon experience a diner can have. Brash and fun-loving characters, Amon and Hale come to the benefit almost every year, happy to donate their services; they love Cordova and its salmon. Drinking from the jeroboam of WesMar Olivet Lane pinot noir they had taken by hand on the plane from Anchorage, they clearly appreciated the fisherwomen swishing down the aisles wearing padded silver fish costumes, attracting bids for the art and books and such at the science center's benefit auction. I, meanwhile, gobbled all the leftover pieces of salmon I could snatch while pretending to help clean up.

Like many beautiful, remote places, Cordova is full of characters, many of them erudite eccentrics and most of them united by a passion for fishing and the environment. They speak eloquently about their fishing boats and about which netting and processing method is best—everyone of every age seems to know a lot about fishing. People come for a summer, work at a fish-processing plant or on a fishing boat or volunteer at the science center, and decide to stay. (Winter, of course, is the challenge, and many of the fishermen without families spend a few months each year in, for instance, Mexico.) There's a thriving independent bookstore/café/art gallery run by the former mayor and his wife; a small museum where you can learn about the town's mining past and see photos of the first Iceworm Festival, in 1961; and excellent general and hardware stores.

Unless you go to Copper River Nouveau, or the Wild! Salmon Festival, in July, however, finding fresh salmon in Cordova is tough. Almost all of it gets shipped to market, like coffee beans in coffee-producing countries. You might be able to order some at the restaurant of the Reluctant Fisherman Inn, a former motel now being remodeled by a retired crab fisherman and his wife. But in a local market the closest you'll come to fresh salmon are the superb and generous chunks of lightly smoked sockeye—which I prefer to king for its meatier

texture and more authoritative, if slightly less rich, flavor—or coho, another good-flavored species, canned at plants in town and sold at nearly every Alaskan souvenir shop. (You can buy jars of a particularly good one—cold smoked over alder wood by William Bailey III, a fisherman and now an owner of a fish-processing plant—at [www.copperriverseafood.com](http://www.copperriverseafood.com).) Locals who don't fish but want salmon make informal or barter arrangements with their fishing neighbors.

Cordova needs salmon to survive, and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game works to manage the wild stocks carefully. The science center, which conducts research on salmon populations, benefited from an influx of funding in the wake of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, in 1989 (the center administers the Oil Spill Recovery Institute). The spill changed the life of the city, as it did the whole of Prince William Sound. Salmon stocks came back after the spill, though other previously important fishing stocks, including herring—smaller than the familiar Atlantic kind, and valuable in the Asian market for its roe—did not, or not in numbers to sustain commercial fishing. Today salmon fishing is permitted only during strictly regulated periods, or “openers,” which are announced by the local Department of Fish and Game office only after it determines that enough salmon have begun the trip up the Copper River to keep populations stable. The office counts almost every fish using sonar equipment placed near the mouth of the river. The fishermen pay thousands of dollars for their permits, and rely on the money they make during fishing season—unusually long on the Copper River, from roughly mid-May until October—to last through the year. A friend who is in the industry told me that in an extremely good season a successful fisherman can make \$125,000, but more like \$50,000 in an average one, and even less in a bad one, when stocks are low and openers few.

Copper River got a head start on other areas in the state that also have very fine salmon, including Sitka and Bristol Bay. The promotional effort—instigated by Jon Rowley, a Seattle-based bon vivant, fish expert, and marketing wizard—began in 1983, before the oil spill and before the cataclysmic rise of farmed

Atlantic salmon. Rowley told fishermen and processors: Make people understand the connection between where fish is caught and how it tastes, and make sure the fish is as good as it can be, by improving the ways it is caught, handled, stored, and shipped.

Rowley and others apply the idea of *terroir*—that you can taste geography in wine—to wild-caught fish, an appealing notion. But for diners what matters more than the geographic origin is the species (see box, “The Five Main Pacific Salmon”) and the fact that Pacific salmon is a wild animal that naturally builds muscle and forages for its food. It is not, in other words, confinement-raised “veal”—as Glenn Hollowell, a former fisherman and now a biologist at the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, calls farmed Atlantic salmon. All salmon farming is outlawed in Alaska (FRIENDS DON’T LET FRIENDS EAT FARMED FISH, goes one T-shirt slogan).

Hatcheries may seem a lot like fish farms, but Hollowell and others I spoke with drew a very large distinction between the two. For several months, Alaskan hatcheries feed fry, which are bred from wild stocks near their natural spawning grounds. The fish are then set free to forage like their counterparts in the open seas. The release of hatchery fish into the ocean, Hollowell told me, has helped Alaskan salmon fishing to survive as an industry, by reducing pressure on wild stocks.

Do hatchery salmon taste different? Although the department is able to tell which are hatchery fish (a changing of the water temperature at the hatchery in the first month of their lives creates an identifiable mark on their earbones), buyers and diners can’t. Hollowell, and a number of fishermen, insisted to me that hatchery fish are indistinguishable from completely wild ones in terms of both appearance and eating quality. Hatchery fish, Hollowell said, gain 99.9 percent of their weight while feeding in the ocean, and “thus are essentially wild salmon.”

The other important distinction for diners is the care with which salmon is caught and processed from the moment its snout hits a net. As part of his original marketing strategy, Jon Rowley

advocated then-avant-garde methods that have now become almost standard: pulling up nets frequently, so fish don’t die in the net or bleed internally, which damages flavor; bleeding, eviscerating, and chilling them immediately, rather than hours or even days later; shipping them directly to customers or delivering them to the processing plant rather than to tenders hired by the plants, thus reducing the time salmon waits before being “H and G’d,” or “headed and gutted.” Bringing ice on board was itself a novelty for many fishermen, and so was immediate bleeding and eviscerating. Both are part of keeping fish in the condition that chefs talk about with gusto, “pre-rigor,” so that they can be cooked soon after going through rigor mortis, ensuring the finest texture and freshest flavor.

Some fishermen in Cordova are now shipping their catches directly to chefs. I watched Bill Webber, a boatbuilder in winter and high-tech fisherman in season, execute the “princess cut”—trimming off the head in a graceful curve—at cutting stations onboard his boat, which he has also outfitted with a special tube to transport fish to a holding tank with circulating fresh seawater, so they don’t get bruised. Webber, a third-generation Cordova fisherman, has taken fishing to entrepreneurial heights: from his boat he e-mails pictures of fish he has caught to chefs to ask which ones they want; he uses insulated bubble-wrap liners for shipping boxes, at a cost of \$4.50 each, to extend the frozen life of his ice packs; and he drives the boxes to the airport for Alaska Airlines and FedEx’s “Gold Rush Service,” so that the fish can arrive at restaurants within forty-eight hours of being taken out of the water.

Other fishermen are also improving their processing methods in order to maintain a market in a world of farmed fish. Some processing plants pay a premium for fish iced on the boat; they transport salmon from boats to plants through vacuum tubes rather than with the one-tined pitchforks on display in the Cordova museum.

But the cost of the freshness ensured by expensive box liners and rush service is high (even aside from the cost per fish of sparkling specimens, and the \$35 and up restaurants charge diners per

portion). Farmed salmon may be unpalatable, prone to disease, bad for the seabeds their waste pollutes, and dangerous for wild stocks. Already, escaped farmed Atlantic salmon have extensively interbred with the few remaining wild stocks in the North Atlantic, and might even be penetrating Pacific populations. British Columbia, adjacent to Alaska, does allow fish farming, and farms both Atlantic and Pacific salmon; Atlantic salmon have frequently been reported to be swimming in Alaskan waters.

But farmed fish must be taken into serious consideration by any ecologically and economically conscious cook. Wild stocks of any fish cannot be taken for granted, as Charles Clover writes in *The End of the Line: How Overfishing Is Changing the World and What We Eat* (in a very brief appendix on choosing fish, similar to the guides issued by the Monterey Bay Aquarium, at [www.mbayaq.org](http://www.mbayaq.org), Clover puts Pacific salmon on his list of “Fish to Eat With a Clear Conscience”), and fish farms offer a way of providing affordable protein to the world’s population.

Are any wild salmon allowed to be harvested in the winter? Yes, I learned: chinook salmon caught in the open sea by troller boats while the fish are still feeding and not fully grown. But the method is painstaking, and the boats small and, in the winter, few; last year just 1 percent of the Alaska catch was troll caught, whereas “wild salmon” is now on restaurant menus year-round. Chances are very good that anything you order from now until next June will have been farmed or frozen, unless the chef knows what “troll caught” means and the entrée is expensive. This winter I plan to quiz chefs and their vendors about species and catching methods, to gauge whether fraud to chefs is as common as fraud to shoppers—and then wait till May to eat salmon. I left Cordova convinced not only that I should avoid farmed salmon but also that I should look for salmon that’s Alaskan, in the summer and early fall. Yes, it’s a short season for such a great food I could be happy eating every day. But at least it’s longer than tomato season. ❧

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