

Smoked Fish

Courtesy of Tom Meyers

The original recipe was reportedly developed by Frank Lawlor, Marine Agent for Palm Beach County, Florida and published in the November 1992 issue of *Southern Living Magazine*. My father-in-law Vaughn Carmichael shared it with me with his modifications and suggestions. Vaughn was an avid recreational fisherman and hailed from Eastpoint, Florida (on State Road 98 after passing though Lanark Village, Sopchoppy or Panacea on State Road 98 from Tallahassee). Also across the bay from Apalachicola which claims to be the Oyster Capitol of the World.



I added my own adjustments based on trial and error (mostly the failures). Of course, “smoking” means different things to different people and everyone has their own way of doing it. I have a simple Brinkman charcoal smoker with wood charcoal in the bottom pan, a water pan above that, and a few layers of racks right under the lid above the water pan.

Ingredients

- ¾ cup kosher salt (NOT iodized or ice cream salt)
- 1 quart water
- 2 ½ Tbs sugar
- 1 ½ tsp onion powder
- 1 tsp garlic powder
- ½ tsp seafood seasoning
- 2 Tbs lemon juice
- 5 pounds or so of mackerel or other oily fish. Keep the skin on. For mackerel: Gut, cut off the heads and tail, then cut along one side of backbone from head to tail so you can spread it out flat, skin down. I also run these under the tap to wash out and scrape off the black stuff with dull knife and fingers.
- 3 or 4 handfuls of wood chips (hickory, apple, whatever is your favorite)
- Vegetable cooking spray
- GOPPS Seasoning Mix (Recipe was included in the original, but frankly, we don’t use it anymore. I included it if you want to try it.)

Directions

- Dissolve salt in the water. Stir in sugar and next four ingredients. Submerge fish in salt solution for two hours. (Gets too salty for us if leave it in much longer, but you can experiment).
- Soak wood chips in water at least 30 minutes.
- Prepare charcoal fire to be ready when fish are. We’ve evolved from plain old Kingsford charcoal briquettes (which are adequate) to 100% natural wood lump “Cowboy” charcoal.
- Put in the water pan and fill about ½ full of water.



- Remove fish from brine after two hours and pat dry with paper towels. Spray the racks with cooking spray and place fish skin down on racks. Sprinkle with GOPPS if you want to use it (again, we don't).
- Once coals are hot, add a handful or two of wood chips. Place fish in the smoker and cover with the lid. Cook two hours or until fish easily flakes with a fork, AND...

...this is where familiarity with your own smoker and trial and error comes in. The smoking time is critical and subject to all the variables of the process. Outdoor air temperature, wind, type of smoker you are using, temperature inside the smoker, number and SIZE of fish you are smoking, and every other thing that makes this so much fun. Fish that are larger or thicker than mackerel will likely take longer...as it will if there are many layers of racks. For example, two racks of bluefish took 2 ½ hours. Four racks of mackerel took almost three hours. But you have to mind the store. I check my smoker every ½ hour and based on the temperature inside the smoker, often need to add a few more lumps of charcoal AND always add a handful of soaked wood chips each time. I also check the water to make sure there's some in the pan - it might be boiling and this is ok.

GOPPS Seasoning Mix

- 1 tablespoon Garlic powder
- 1 tablespoon Onion powder
- 1 tablespoon Paprika
- 1 tablespoon Pepper
- 1 tablespoon brown Sugar

Good Luck. It's great fun to experiment and the fish are delicious as appetizers - either just pick off the pieces in chunks or make a spread for crackers. Here's a bonus recipe:

Smoked Fish Dip

Vaughn would smoke mullet and his wife Evelyn (my mother-in-law) would mix up a traditional Florida fish dip to spread on saltines - sometimes with a dab of hot sauce on top:

- ¼ pound smoked fish flaked in pieces with bones removed. (¼ to ½ inch pieces or a little bigger. For best flavor we like to use the lightly charred pieces as well as softer ones.)
- 1 package (8 oz.) softened cream cheese
- ½ cup chopped green onions
- 2 tablespoons sour cream
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- ½ teaspoon black pepper

Combine all the ingredients EXCEPT the fish in a mixing bowl. After this is well mixed, gently add the fish trying to keep it in nice pieces. Shape into a ball and put in an appropriate sized dish. Refrigerate for several hours (if you can wait) to let the flavors blend together. Take out of the fridge about an hour before eating to let it soften up a bit. Enjoy on the cracker of choice. You might like a dab of hot sauce on top.