

The question about this easy recipe from the 1760s is: how do you eat pickled salmon? It's good, but it is quite pickled. Was it a light supper with cheese, onions, and beer? Was it eaten with a lot of cornmeal mush or rough bread? Pickled salmon recipes still are used in Northern England and Scotland. How is it eaten there?

Pickled Salmon, 1763-9

This recipe is from the manuscript cookbook of Anne Gibbons Gardiner (1712-1771), published privately in 1938, and in 1982 as Mrs. Gardiner's Family Receipts from 1763. The "infamous" Bernard was British governor of Massachusetts and Maine from 1760-1769, and was strongly disliked by the pro-Independence Americans for his efforts to enforce taxes and reduce smuggling, notably the Stamp Act of 1765. The Gardiners were loyalists, and the family left for England in 1776. Mrs. Gardiner's husband was a physician and importer of druggists supplies, and owned land in Maine. Her son-in-law was the customs collector at the time of the Stamp Act. His house was attacked by protesters in 1765, and he was injured in a fight over inspecting a ship of John Hancock's in 1768. Thus Mrs. Gardiner would have traded recipes with Bernard, and both families would have had access to large seasonal hauls of salmon and owned clocks (notice the direction to poach the salmon for 23 minutes!)

(I have since found in the online version of Benjamin Franklin's papers posted by Yale University, several letters between the Philadelphia printer and the Governor of Massachusetts about trying to get this recipe.)

In any case, the recipe was a good way to preserve a large catch of salmon back before refrigeration, and still tastes good. I have reduced the quantities to one-fourth and adjusted for today's stronger vinegar. Wild salmon is leaner than today's farmed salmon, but this doesn't affect the recipe. You can use ground spices (Mrs. Gardiner doesn't specify), but then you should eat the salmon after a day or two.

"To Pickle Salmon the Newcastle Way, according to a Receipt procured from England, as is said by the infamous Governour, Sir Francis Bernard"

"Scale your salmon, split it down the back, and take out the back bone; then, with a Cloth, wipe off all the Blood, and then cut it into Junks [chunks] of about four or five inches thick. Put on your Pot of Water, making it sharp with Salt, and when it boils put in your junks of Salmon, and let them boil for twenty three Minutes. Then take it off the Fire and let it cool. Make a Pickle with two ounces of Allspice, two ounces of black Pepper and one Gallon of Vinegar, which boil, and into which, when cold, put an handfull of Salt. Place the Salmon in a Keg, and, when the salt is dissolved, pour the Pickle upon the Salmon. After it has stood one night in this manner, strain off the Oyl that may have arisen to the Top, to prevent its acquiring a strong taste, then head up the Keg."

<Y>Yield: serves four

Note: This recipe takes one or more days

2 boneless, skin-on salmon steaks
3/4 cup kosher salt

1/2 ounce allspice berries (1-1/2 tablespoons)
1/2 ounce black peppercorns (4 teaspoons)
1 quart red wine vinegar

<EQUIP>Equipment: Two-quart pottery or plastic bowl, Stainless steel or enamel kettle skimmer.

1. Mix 1/2 cup of salt with two quarts of water. (This amount should have a fresh egg floating with a spot the diameter of a 25-cent coin above the water.) Bring salt water to a boil.
2. Lower in salmon steaks with the skimmer so that they are covered. Reduce heat to simmer 12-13 minutes for a 1-1/2 inch steaks. (The idea is to firm up the salmon but not overcook it so it starts to fall apart. Ten minutes per inch of the thickest part is a useful rule.)
3. Remove from heat and let cool.
4. Add 2 cups water to the vinegar and bring to a boil with the spices.
5. When vinegar and salmon are cool, lay out salmon steaks in a deep, non-reactive pottery or plastic bowl.
6. Pour on vinegar. You may need a smaller bowl to weight salmon steaks under the surface of the brine.
7. Leave out overnight.
8. The next day, skim of bubbles of oil from surface of brine.
9. Cover and refrigerate for at least another day.

<DIR>Serve the second day for a mild flavor like pickled herring; as it ages it gets sharper.