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Salt Crust Creates Perfect Cocoon for Cooking Fish

By Susie Iventosch



Southwest salt-crusted salmon with cilantro-lime-jalapeno vinaigrette Photo Susie Iventosch

A few years ago on a trip to Europe, my husband and I ordered a whole fish, baked in a salt crust. It was such a fun dinner, because the presentation was really exciting as the waiter brought this salt mound with fish head and tail sticking out, to present and serve to us. The level of anticipation was high, and we were not disappointed. The fish was delicious and so moist and flaky. It was perfect, and not salty at all.

Cooking in salt is certainly not new, as cultures as far back as ancient Greece used salt as a preservative, and often cooked the meat on an open fire while it was still covered in the salt preservative. Even my own parents had a favorite party menu back in the '70s that featured a London broil, smothered in French's mustard and then covered in salt. My dad then barbecued the meat directly on the burning coals, no rack required!

The salt paste creates a hermetic seal, a kiln of sorts that allows the fish to cook, while trapping the moisture inside, leaving the fish tender, flaky and very moist. For quite some time, I had been thinking of trying this method at home. Most of the people I talked to at the fish markets told me to use a whole rock fish, which is sort of a generic term for a small white fish, but we decided we would try making this dish, Southwest salt-crusted salmon, for a dinner party. We used a variety of thinly sliced fresh peppers, lemons and limes, and cilantro for flavoring, and served it up with cilantro-lime-jalapeno vinaigrette drizzled over the top. It was really fun, and we will most definitely do this delicious recipe again and again.

It can be difficult to find a small enough whole salmon, so you can order a portion of the salmon, but be sure to get a whole cross section of the fish with skin intact. The one I ordered turned out to be 16 pounds, so we took only a portion of that big fish. I was a little worried it wouldn't work without the entire salmon, but it turned out just fine. Have the fish market gut the fish and remove the gills, and if you don't want to deal with the head and tail, go ahead and ask the fish market to remove the head and tail for you in advance. Actually, we did this, and it was quite nice not having to deal with the head.

Salmon

(Serves 6)

INGREDIENTS

One 5-6 pound whole salmon, (or 3-4 pounds mid-section without head or tail)

3 pounds kosher salt

1 cup tap water (more or less)

- 1 large bunch cilantro, cleaned and shaken, with the very bottom of the stems trimmed
- 2 poblano peppers, seeds and stems removed, and cut into thin rings
- 2 Ortega chilies, seeds and stems removed and cut into thin rings
- 1 jalapeno pepper, seeds and stems removed and cut into thin rings
- 2 lemons, sliced into thin rings
- 2 limes, sliced into thin rings
- Garnish-sprigs of cilantro, lime and lemon wedges

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 425F. Line a large baking sheet with parchment paper.

Rinse fish inside and out, and set aside on a platter. Fish should be gutted and gills removed.

In a large mixing bowl, place 3 pounds of Kosher salt. Add water, a little at a time, to make a paste that will hold a clump when pressed together in your fist. I had a little extra salt on the side, just in case my paste became too watery, which actually did happen. You want the salt paste moist enough so that it will form a crust, and if it is too dry (i.e. not enough water) it will just crumble and fall apart, but you also need it stiff enough that it will hold its shape when you pat it in place over the fish.

Spread about one-third of the salt on top of the parchment paper in a size and shape similar to your fish. Lay one-third of the cilantro sprigs on top, and then layer one-third of the lemons, limes and each kind of pepper on top of that. Lay fish down on top of peppers.

Next, stuff the center of the fish with one-third of the same ingredients: cilantro, peppers and citrus.

Place the final third of these ingredients on top of the fish. Pack remaining two-thirds of the salt mixture all around the fish top and sides, leaving just head and tail slightly exposed. Because we used the mid-section, I placed a small piece of foil right next to the open end of the fish, where the flesh was exposed, just to prevent salt from penetrating there. Cover foil with salt, if possible.

Bake in preheated oven for about 35-40 minutes. Test by inserting a knife into the fish, and if it comes out warm, the fish should be done. If you crack the salt, and find that the fish is not quite done in the center, put it back in the oven for just few more minutes, as it will cook quickly once you crack the salt crust.

Remove salt crust and remove fish filets from skin using a fish spatula or a knife. Serve with Cilantro-lime-jalapeno vinaigrette (recipe below) and garnish with lemon and lime wedges and a sprig of cilantro.

Cilantro-lime-jalapeno Vinaigrette

1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil

1/4 cup rice vinegar

Juice of one lime

1/2 teaspoon lime zest

1 small clove garlic, minced

1/2 jalapeno, very finely diced

1/4 cup finely chopped cilantro

Salt and pepper to taste

Blend all in a food processor or shake in a jar with a tight-fitting lid until well mixed. Refrigerate until ready to use.

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