

Salmon

Salmon is the most honored traditional food in Salish Sea Country. For thousands of years the Chinook, Dog, Sockeye, Coho and Pink have held their rightful place as cultural keystone pillars of Northwest Coastal Natives. Archeologists date the use of Salmon back 10,000 years, but tribes affirm organizing our existence around the Salmon since time began. This is reaffirmed in creation stories, which note Salmon as the first food to be given to the people.



A Brief Description of Northwest Salmon Species:

Chinook (King, Springer, *oncorhynchus tshawytscha*)

Season: March, April & August

Description: Largest of all the salmon species, our local Kings can weigh up to 40 pounds. The rich red flesh, high oil content and firm texture make them the most valuable and prized for their rich flavor. Their spawning activity draws them hundreds of miles inland up large rivers and tributaries – and this vigorous act requires a strong fish with a large amount of fat reserves. While their fat content depends on location, time of year and the health of the habitat for the Kings food supply- they are generally the fattest of wild salmon. Steaks and fillets of the Kings are ideal for grilling and dry heat cooking methods. They are delicious when poached, steamed or baked.

Sockeye (Red, Blueback, *oncorhynchus nerka*)

Season: June

Description: Rarely topping six pounds, Sockeye are among the smaller varieties of the salmon family, but they pack a lot of flavor. They feast on zooplankton, crab larvae, shellfish and krill, which impart a distinguishing wild flavor and vivid flesh color. Some refer to them as “Blueback” as they are blue and silver in color while they journey the ocean waters. However, they are also called “Red Salmon” because of the crimson hue brought out in their skin during spawning, as well as the orange-red color of the meat. As juveniles, Sockeye thrive in freshwater until they are ready to migrate out in to the ocean where they travel nearly 1,000 miles before they return to their birthplace to spawn and nourish. They make great steaks and fillets.

Coho (Silver, *oncorhynchus kisutch*)

Season: July, August, September

Description: Baring dark blue backs and silver underbellies, “Sivers” or Coho are similar to the King in size and flavor, so much so that it can be used as an alternative in recipes calling for King salmon. However, they differ from Kings as they mainly spawn in shorter coastal rivers. As juveniles, Coho spend up to two years in freshwater streams before they journey to ocean waters for up to three years. Some males will return to their nursery waters in just two years to spawn, baring the notable “hooked” nose of Coho. These are called “jacks.” It is important to note that these species of salmon suffer from the loss of critical spawning habitat and are listed as a “species of concern” in Washington’s Puget Sound. They are on the endangered species list in Oregon and California.

Chum (Dog, Keta- *oncorhynchus keta*)

Season: November to January

Description: The name “Chum” comes from the Chinook Jargon meaning “spotted” or “marked.” They are the salmon species holding the largest range of all salmon, traveling nearly 2000 miles in ocean currents and typically spawning in small streams and intertidal zones.

Chums are the last salmon run of the year, returning in the early winter season. Similar in size to Coho, they are the leanest of the salmon species, as their travel is longer and more rigorous than the others. Chums are on the endangered species list in the Hood Canal and Lower Columbia River.

Pink (Humpback, *oncorhynchus gorbuscha*)

Season: June to October

Description: The smallest yet most abundant of all salmon species, Pinks or “Humpies” return every other year. Spawning grounds of Pinks include longer rivers, intertidal zones and coastal streams where freshwater is also found. They are relatively low in fat content and do not always pack the same delicious flavor as their close cousins. However, they do take on seasonings well and are best sautéed, steamed or baked.

Eating Salmon: Salmon has remained one of the most important staple foods to Salish People. Available fresh in spring through fall, it can be prepared with many cooking techniques and is easily preserved by drying and smoking. It is delicious both hot and cold, and can be eaten alone, or combined with other ingredients in endless possibilities of soups, sautés, casseroles, pies, dips, etc.

Narrowing down the method depends on the species as well as the materials the landscape provides.

- **Boiling salmon** involved a cooking box or a waterproof basket set close to a fire where carefully chosen rocks are heated. When rocks are heated thoroughly, tongs are used to transfer them from the fire to the cooking receptacle filled with water. Adding rocks one by one eventually brings the water to a boil, at which time the fish and other ingredients like wild onion or seaweeds can be added. A lid is then placed on top for up to an hour until the soup is heated completely.
- **Roasting** is best used for fresh caught salmon. King or Sockeye make the best salmon steak for this method. A bed of smokeless coals produced from an alder fire and cooking sticks made with ironwood (*holodiscus discolor*) or another hard wood are required in order to prepare fish in this manner. Rows of cooking sticks are leaned towards the fire and carefully watched, then turned as needed. While this cooking process requires a lot of preparation, the juicy flavorful salmon steaks are well worth the wait.
- **Steam pits and rock ovens** are also employed for steaming or baking salmon fillets. Fatty fish are best prepared in this way, as the process preserves the healthy Omega 3's – considerably the biggest nutritional value of salmon. These earthen ovens bared their own benefits, as they did not have to be as closely watched as some of the other techniques described.

Cleaning and Filleting: Once fish is caught, it needs to be processed right away or it will quickly develop a fishy odor and rot. Many people prefer to clean salmon on site. If you choose to take it home, keep it chilled in a cooler. Fish cutting knives were originally made from sharpened mussel shells or thin sheets of slate that were ground sharp on one side. A sharp fillet knife makes the job a lot easier. Slit the belly from the anal area up, then spread the sides open and remove the innards. Be sure to scrape the blood out of the backbone. Cut the head off or just cut the gills out. Many people enjoy making fish head soup, which is delicious and extremely nutritious. Once your fish is cleaned, you can store it in the fridge, but cook it within a day. You can also freeze fish in a plastic freezer bag for about one year. Many people like to add a little water to the freezer bag and remove any air for optimal freshness.

Filleting fish is an art that becomes natural only after practice. Using a sharp knife, cut through the fish along the backbone from the tail to the head. Hold the blade almost flat and parallel with the body of the fish and cut away from the backbone to the tail, allowing the knife to run over the rib bones. Use a clean even stroke, being careful not to cut into the flesh. Lift the fillet off in one piece, turn the fish over and remove the other fillet.



As Suquamish Tribal Member Rob Purser says, “Suquamish ancestors utilized every part of the fish.” The fish heads can be made into fish head soup and you can make a delicious bone broth out of bones and remaining meat. It is traditional to return the carcasses to the water or bury them in the forest so they return nutrients to the land.

My uncle used to say that the thickness of the fish was very important. It had to be consistent so the fish would smoke evenly. He taught us to use sword ferns under the salmon while cutting them so they wouldn't slip. We were told to return the bones and carcasses back to the water. –Tleena Ives

Preserving Salmon: While there are many different art forms in cooking various species of salmon, so are the preserving methods, which differ depending on the fish, the season, the climate and the area of origination. Every process displays the same results: dried fish that could be stored for a long time. Carefully constructed areas where the wind funnels through canyons and the sun hits racks of fish just right are necessary for “wind dried” salmon. Cedar smokehouse structures were built with technology that ensured proper air circulation considering where the smoke and heat hit the fish. A popular modern preservation technique involves canning fish, which began in large metal pots on an outdoor fire, and now utilizes the conventional stove top method. This process preserves the fats and makes a salmon meal easy for travel!

Salmon Medicine: Cold-water fish, such as salmon, are valued for their high levels of Omega 3 fatty acids, or “healthy fats.” Our body utilizes these particular fats to feed our large brains and nervous systems. Just four ounces of salmon can contain up to 2 grams of Omega 3’s, more than the average North American diet offers over the course of several days. Researchers have found salmon to be very beneficial in preventing diseases such as heart disease, Alzheimer’s and many forms of cancer. Salmon also contains special proteins that help support the strength of cartilage in our joints as well as our body’s ability to utilize insulin in order to balance our blood sugar. Salmon is an excellent source of vitamin B12, vitamin D and selenium- all of these nutrients are involved in promoting both physical and mental energy in the body. Many tribal folks share testimony of feeling “fish hungry” and upon eating freshly cooked salmon off of an alder smoked fire, report having “fed their Indian,” which is perhaps the most important medicine of all.

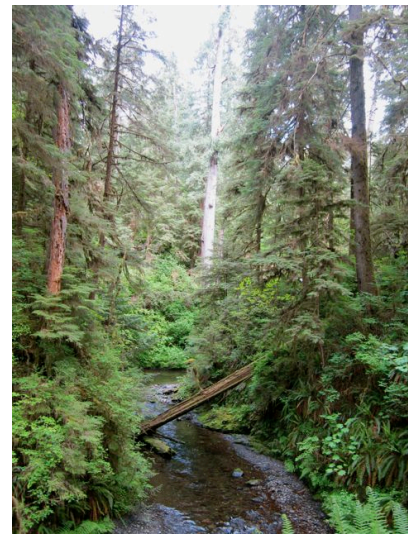
Fishing Technology: Years of accumulated knowledge and experience is necessary in order to understand the subtle nuances, ebbs and flows of salmon fisheries. This is apparent in the rich traditional technology of catching, processing, preserving and cooking fish. Traps, weirs, spears, harpoons, nets and perfected skill are integral to fishing the vast water system of the Salish Sea. The technique one might employ depends on the location of your village, the plant materials available to you. Perhaps the most important component to successful fisheries is your social connections.

Ecological Knowledge: Salmon play a central role in feeding our entire food ecosystem. They are born in rivers and then journey to the open waters of the Pacific where they feast on zooplankton and tiny fish for two to four years. When they are strong and mature, they navigate their way back to their ancestral waters, sometimes swimming four to five miles per day and eluding predators from orcas to seals to fishermen. Unfortunately, various forms of human-made water diversions disrupt salmon from laying eggs in their ancestral rivers, which threatens the entire lineage.

Without salmon’s ceremonious return to the rivers, our environment would suffer. These precious fish nourish the land, animals, plants and people who dwell here. In witnessing the spawning salmon committing such a charitable act, we are reminded of the important the teaching of generosity in Salish culture. In order to honor the salmon for being such a powerful teacher, ceremonies such as the “first salmon ceremony” are conducted with reverence annually.

You need salmon to support everything else –the forest and the streams. They provide much more than just food, they provide nutrients to the forest. Without it, everything else falls apart.

–Rob Purser, Suquamish Tribal Member



Salmon Consumption Rate

“Revising our state’s fish consumption standard is not just a tribal issue. It’s a public health issue that affects everyone who lives here.”
-Billy Frank Jr.

When it comes to Northwest Coastal Native Traditional Diets- salmon is the best example of defining a culturally appropriate diet for communities. It is the inherent right for tribal communities to define their own diets and therefore shape their own food systems. That is what we call “Food Sovereignty.” An important aspect in our traditional diets is the health of our environment. For more than twenty years, tribes have worked with the Northwest Indian Fish Commission (NWIFC) to ensure that our waters and fish habitat are not polluted based on the current amount of fish tribal communities consume. This is called the “fish consumption rate.” NWIFC states that, “Washington uses one of the lowest fish consumption rates in the nation to set water pollution limits, but has some of the highest fish-consuming populations in the nation.” They go on to report that the consumption rate is the basis for environmental cleanup and pollution prevention standards. It is an important tool for making sure fish is safe to eat. You can stay up to date on this issue and make a public comment by taking opportunities provided to speak out to the Washington State Department of Ecology at www.ecy.wa.gov/tox-ics/fish.html. (<http://keepseafoodclean.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/FCR-4-page-2012.pdf>)



In early August, fishing Elliot Bay for Kings, this was always our favorite time because when you get out on the water you can smell the salmon. It is a spiritually uplifting moment, and God I just love it. The smell always reminds us to give thanks for the salmon, and for that, we always had a good season. It doesn’t stink; it is just a special smell due to the oil of the fish. They are so oily and this is why they are the most beautiful to cook on a stick – just getting to watch the fat drop off of their beautiful meat.”

-Georgiana “Peachie” Ungaro, Suquamish Ceremonial Fisherwoman.

Additional Resources:

Books:

Hunt, Gather, Cook by Hank Shaw
Indian Fishing by Hillary Stuart
Pacific Feast by Jennifer Hahn
The People of Cascadia by Heidi Bohan
Renewing Salmon Nation's Food Traditions by Gary Paul Nabhan
Salish Country Cookbook by Rudolph Ryser (available as ebook)

Online Resources:

“Canning the Fish Catch” www.uaf.edu
“Smoking Fish at Home” www.uaf.edu
“Pickling Fish and Other Aquatic Foods for Home Use.” <http://cru.cahe.wsu.edu>
Guide to Eating Fish Safely for Alaska Women and Children” www.epi.hss.state.ak.us

Videos:

Smoking Salmon with Gilbert KingGeorge
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILxPOmmLVNs>
Store Outside Your Door <https://www.youtube.com/user/ANTHCStoreOutside>
Salmon caviar https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jY2SCXl_Kgw
Boiled salmon soup <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vcDp9WR3svI>
Salmon curry <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XAzD50nwIn0>
Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission <http://nwifc.org/publications/video/>
Salmon: More than Just a Food. <https://vimeo.com/94704117>

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Quick Salmon Chowder

This chowder is sure to be a crowd pleaser and can be made quickly with canned or smoked salmon.

3 slices of bacon, diced
½ medium yellow onion, diced
1 clove garlic, diced
3 green onions, chopped
3 red potatoes, diced
3-4 cups low sodium chicken stock
12-ounce jar canned sockeye salmon (can also use smoked salmon)
1 cob of corn, shucked (or substitute 1 cup frozen corn)

In a large soup pot, sauté bacon until just crisp, about three minutes. Add onions, garlic and green onions and continue cooking until onions turn translucent in color. Add in potatoes and chicken stock; bring to a boil for a few minutes. Lower the heat, keeping soup at a simmer for 10 minutes. Add salmon and corn and cook an additional 8-10 minutes. Serve hot.

Cooking time: 30 minutes. Serves 6

Contributed by Louie Ungaro, Muckleshoot Tribe

Northwest Summer Salad

This flavorful salad features important Salish traditional foods. It offers a satisfying and nutritious blend of protein, good quality fats and anti-oxidant-rich berries.

½ cup hazelnuts, roasted and cut in half
1 head lettuce – butter, green leaf or romaine
½ cup wood sorrel leaves (if available)
½ cup violet or pansy flower and leaf (if available)
½ cup smoked salmon (torn into small pieces, bones removed)
½ cup sliced strawberries

Dressing – Huckleberry Balsamic vinaigrette

½ cup fresh or frozen and thawed huckleberries or blueberries
¼ cup extra virgin olive oil or walnut oil
2 tablespoons Balsamic vinegar
1 teaspoons honey
pinch of salt and pepper

Place hazelnuts on a cookie sheet and roast in the oven at 300 degrees until they smell fragrant and begin to brown, about 15 minutes. Set aside to cool. Wash and drain lettuce, wood sorrel and violets. Tear salmon into bite sized pieces, making sure to remove bones. Slice strawberries. Cut hazelnuts in half. In a blender add all dressing ingredients and blend until smooth. Tear lettuce into bite sized pieces and place in a salad bowl. Place all other salad ingredients on top and dress with huckleberry dressing.

Salmon Huckleberry Dip

This tasty spread can be enjoyed on crackers, bread or veggies. It is packed with nutrients that promote physical strength and clear thinking.

4-6 cups of smoked salmon (or canned salmon)

1 cup of cream cheese

1 large onion or spring onions

3-4 stalks of celery

1 cup of yogurt

1-2 cups fresh berries (huckleberry, blueberry, raspberry, strawberry or blackberry)

Directions: In a food processor, mix onions, celery, cream cheese and $\frac{3}{4}$ of the salmon, then mix. Add yogurt and mix again. By hand, gently fold in the rest of the salmon and the berries. Place dip in a serving bowl and enjoy with crackers, bread or veggies.

If you are hand blending the dip, add $\frac{3}{4}$ of the salmon in a large bowl and break down and mash it with a fork. Add chopped onions, celery and cream cheese then mix well. Mix in yogurt then gently fold in huckleberries and remaining salmon.

Preparation time: 20 minutes. Serves 8-10.

Recipe from Pamela James