

Gravlax

Serves: 8 as a starter or 16 as canapés

Preparation time: 15 mins + 4 days

Ingredients:



For the gravlax:

2 large, thick centre-cut fillets fresh, wild salmon, weighing 1.5 – 2 lbs in total

2 cups white granulated sugar

1 cup table salt (or 2 cups kosher salt)

3 heaped tsps freshly crushed/ground black pepper

c.4 tsps good Scotch whisky or (lemon) vodka

1 rounded tsp freshly crushed/ground allspice (if using whisky)

1 large bunch dill, washed & dried but not chopped

For the sweet mustard sauce (courtesy of Robert Wolke):*

4 tsps spicy brown mustard (or any smooth, prepared mustard)

1 tsp dry mustard powder

3 tsps sugar

2 tsps red wine vinegar

5 tsps vegetable oil

3 tsps finely chopped dill

To serve:

Rye bread or crispbread (rye crackers) and butter

Dill, capers and/or lemon slices to garnish

Method:

1. Wash or wipe clean the fish and dry with kitchen paper. Do not skin the fillets. Remove any bones with tweezers.
2. Mix the sugar, salt, pepper and allspice (if using) in a bowl.
3. Lay one of the fillets skin-side down on a large sheet of cling-film in a baking tray. Use a baking tray or other container which has sides at least 1" tall. Cover the fish with half of the sugar-salt mixture and gently rub in. Then lay on the whole dill fronds. It should be totally covered in dill.

Sprinkle over the whisky or vodka, then pour over the remaining sugar-salt mixture. Place the other salmon fillet on top, skin-side up, so as to make a sandwich. Wrap the cling-film tightly round to make a parcel and then wrap with at least one more sheet of cling-film so that the parcel is sealed.

4. Place the tray in the fridge and leave for at least 4 days. Turn the salmon parcel over every 12 hours. An unpleasant sticky liquid will ooze out into the tray. Don't worry – this is to be expected. Many recipes call for the parcel to be weighted by placing another tray on top, weighted with some cans of soup/tomatoes. However, I have tried it both ways and it cures perfectly well without the weight. It also comes out less squashed and therefore easier to slice. If you do weight it, only use one can.
5. Make the sauce by combining the mustards, sugar and vinegar and then whisking in the oil in a steady stream, slowly at first so that it emulsifies. It should reach the consistency of thin mayonnaise. Stir in the finely chopped dill and refrigerate. The sauce tastes better if used at least a few hours after making, so that the flavours have infused and mellowed, and keeps well in the fridge for at least a week.
6. After the salmon has been curing for at least 4 days unwrap it and discard the dill. Rinse off the remaining salt-sugar mixture (quickly so it doesn't get too wet) and wipe clean and dry with kitchen paper. Use a very sharp, long, thin slicing knife to cut the gravlax into as large and as thin slices as you can. Cut against the grain and at an angle for best results.
7. To serve, arrange the gravlax slices on buttered rye bread and drizzle with the sweet mustard sauce. Or substitute sour cream or cream cheese for the butter, and crisp bread for the rye bread, as you prefer. Garnish with dill and/or capers and/or lemon slices if you wish.

Gravlax facts:

- 'Gravlax' (Swedish), also known as 'gravad laks' (Danish), 'gravlaks' (Norwegian), 'graavilohi' (Finnish), and 'grafx' (Icelandic) means 'buried salmon'. In the Middle Ages Scandinavian fishermen used to salt and bury their catch in the ground to ferment.
- Both the salt and the sugar cure the fish. They draw out water by osmosis. This kills the bacteria in the fish, or at least stops them reproducing. Meats have been preserved by salting for thousands of years.
- You don't have to be too precise about the quantities of salt and sugar. Different people like different proportions. The Americans tend to like it more sugary, and the Europeans more salty. You could experiment with different proportions until you find the one you like best. I tried it 50:50 and found it too salty, so tried again this way, and liked it better.
- Different salts have very different levels of 'saltiness'. If using kosher salt you should increase the quantity (volume). This is because kosher salt crystals are bigger and more irregularly shaped, which means they don't pack down as densely. A teaspoon of kosher salt will have approximately half the sodium chloride in it as a teaspoon of regular table salt.

- Kosher salt is so called because it is used to kosher meats – ie to draw the blood out of them. Being larger, the crystals do not dissolve so easily on the meat and therefore stay on the surface longer, drawing out more liquid.
- For the best gravlax buy some really good quality, fresh, wild, dark pink salmon. Most Pacific salmon is wild-caught, whereas most Atlantic salmon is farmed. Wild salmon is pink because the salmon eat krill and other little shellfish (which is also why flamingos are pink), whereas farmed salmon may well have had its pinkness injected.
- You can also experiment with flavourings. My favourite (so far...) is with allspice and whisky. Let me know what you try...



* Sauce recipe is directly from '*What Einstein told his cook*' by Robert Wolke, 2002 – a great book if you're interested in the science of cooking.