

Episode 5 Alaskan Chef

Hi this is Michael your Cultural Alaskan Chef. Today's episode is about my experiences fishing in rural Alaskan villages.

First of all not every village community will welcome a person fishing near by or on their land. It is always best to get the feel of the community and remember once you got the okay that elders who aren't mobile appreciate a fish honoring and respecting them. I always tried to give the elder my best female fish. Villagers prepare the eggs and eat them in different dishes.

I found that families also contributed to their elders and brought them enough fish to dry and prepare on their outside drying/smoking racks. It was fascinating watching and having the aromas wafting towards teacher housing.

My first experience fishing was in the village of Stebbins. I've described Stebbins in earlier broadcasts. The village allowed the school to obtain a subsistence license for netting fish. After all the teachers were settled in we managed to string a long net during low tide. It had some weights on the bottom and small buoys on the top to hold it upright in the water. We anchored it with an old tire rim and used a large float with pulleys top and bottom to make future sets and haul in our catch. We usually left the net to soak for a whole day or bring it in before the next major low tide.

We also had some refrigerators set up for holding some of our fish in a brine for smoking and we had vacuum sealers as well for sealing and freezing our fish for future use. We always gave our salmon eggs harvested to the villagers.

We also had a large smoker that resembled an outhouse. We had dug a pit in the bottom of it and lined it with rocks from the levee. It was about 6 feet tall and lined with racks to move fish around that we were smoking. This was one of my expertises since I had my own little chief smoker and had learned to be an experienced smoker myself. I also added my own touches to our brines that gave them excellent results. I will share some of this recipe and technique at the end of this episode.

During the season all the teachers that like salmon had full freezers to last through the winter. We had all kinds of recipes for King, Silver, Pink, and

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Sockeye. We gave the Chum to the local villagers for their dogs and dog teams.

Some of the recipes included baked salmon with ritz crackers on top. Others baked with traditional dill lemon and butter. The smoked salmon was used straight on crackers and made into dips, some was jerked and just eaten whole.

My second experience fishing was during the winter in Stebbins. One day Pam, my wife and I trekked out onto the ice and found some villagers fishing through holes in the ice. We watched as they dragged in what they called tom cod (a small white fish). I looked at their rigs and noticed they had a short willow stick and a white string attached. At the end of the string they had tied on about a one inch hot dog that had been cut crosswise (no hooks!). I watched them as they put the line in the water and began bobbing the pole up and down. Soon a fish was attached to the line and they began slowly bringing the fish up. As the fishes mouth broke the icy cold water I noticed the bait had frozen to the mouth of the fish. They hoisted the fish up unto to ice and then used a stick to beat the fishes mouth area until the bait released.

I asked them if I could try once and they gave me the pole with the bait on it. I achieve the same success and gave the fish to them. We were all smiles as my wife got to pull in a fish too!

My next village experience came the following year as Pam and I transferred to St. Michael. The village was much more relaxed and I was able to do my running exercises and on one of these runs I found an excellent place to fish. The next day after school I took my fishing pole and lures to this place. I had the area to myself and made some casts that brought little in results.

The next day was Saturday and I had the whole day to fish. I went out to my spot and tried some different lures until I had success. I brought in a 6 pound pink female salmon. I stopped fishing immediately and began walking towards my friend and elders Albert and Lucy. I gave the fish to Lucy and she began preparing the fish while Albert and I enjoyed a cup of tea together. I invited Albert to tea and scones at my house. He and I became best friends over the three years we spent in St. Michael. He Lucy and I have stayed in touch over the years on my wife's Facebook.

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My next fishing trip was with Albert and his grandsons Eric and Alvin. Albert took me to the mouth of the Yukon on his boat. It was about an hour and a half ride. It was the end of the season so there were a lot of spawned out fish. I had to choose an area where I could see some fish that were getting ready to spawn. I managed to catch a good number of late silvers and reds. I hooked into some pink as well. After spending a few hours there we were ready to head back. We put the fish on ice and began our way back to the village.

Albert had something special in mind as we headed back to the village. On the way back we started seeing seals. This was a cue to Albert that there were white fish in the area so we stopped and began fishing with lures. My preferred lure is a cast master with a blue stripe. I managed to catch one or two and gave them both to Albert. I planned on smoking the salmon and sharing them with Albert and did so when he came over for scones.

Here are some of the ways I like to prepare salmon and I will share some of these techniques with you and times. I will add at least one or two recipes for you to follow. Much of these techniques I found by the seat of my pants or from my father-in law in Stockton California.

Techniques of Smoking

Salmon is much different from halibut or cod and yet I have smoked both types with salmon. One just has to be where of the times and temperatures. I use two thermometers. One I place through the top of the smoker and the other is a digital that I stick into the fish to check that its done.

In the village my choices for smoking chips were limited. Once in a while we had some bags of hickory chips which I laid on top of the wood in the outhouse looking smoker. I always soaked my chips mixed with birch and alder harvested from the sea over night. I started my outhouse smoker with dried driftwood and then once it was hot I put the fish of racks at the middle of the smoker. I then added my wet wood and chips to the fire. We smoked the whole day and kept checking for doneness by sight and touch.

Smoking in a Little Chief is a little different. I have the type that allows access from the side of the smoker. This style makes smoking much easier.

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First I take the racks out and coat them with non-stick spray or you can use butter or crisco to coat them. After putting in the heat coil and hooking it up to power I allow the smoker to heat at least half an hour. I get the fish out of the brine and dry it with paper towels before putting it on the grill racks. Drying it off helps it keep from sticking. Next I put the racks in the smoker putting the thin fillets on the top and the thicker near the bottom. This helps with the times and temperatures. I smoke from a minimum of 6 to 8 hours checking the top racks first. You may choose to have a moister fish or dry it like jerky. My minimum temperature is 150 degrees f* for moister fish, and 170 or until dry to my liking for jerky. Some people like their fish smoked to 125-130 degrees f*. I find this a little too moist for me. I usually shrink wrap all my fish with a date and type to freeze. This allows for fish all winter long.

Here is a quick brine for the fish. I use a large pot that will fit in my refrigerator. First I add 1/2 cup of white sugar. I don't like my fish too sweet. Next I put in a quart of low sodium soy sauce. Next a cup of lemon juice and stir until incorporated. I like brown sugar so I add a cup of that to the mixture and stir in. Next I add water to a level that I taste until satisfied. Spices are next: crushed garlic cloves to taste, onion powder, grated ginger to taste and ground pepper. Bye the way!

***Leave enough room for the fish!!

Place the fillets or whole fish in the brine and brine overnight in the refrigerator. Take out the pot of brine and transfer to the racks after drying the fish off with paper towels on foil or parchment paper. Load the racks strategically with the small thin on top and thicker below. Use the smoker technique mentioned above. You should wind up with great tasting smoked fish!

Thanks for listening.

This is Michael your Cultural Alaskan Chef

Recipe

1. 1 large pot that fits in the refrigerator
2. 1/2 cup white sugar
3. 1 quart low sodium soy sauce

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4. 1 cup lemon juice
5. 1 cup brown sugar
6. Add enough water to taste
7. Crushed cloves of garlic to taste
8. Onion powder to taste
9. Grated ginger to taste
10. Grated pepper to taste

Refrigerate overnight and follow techniques provided