

Smoked Salmon — Kupcuunaq, Palik, Paal'kaa

KUPCUUNAMEK MINARNGA. – GIVE ME SOME SMOKED SALMON.



Photo: Bob Ignatin and Nick Lukovitch, Old Harbor, 1946-1949. Fred and Marie Bailey collection, courtesy of Wilmer Andrewvitch

There are many ways to cook salmon, but smoked fish is always a favorite. It takes several weeks and lots of hard work to create this delicacy, but it is a popular way to preserve the wealth of summer salmon. Every family has its own smoking method. Most start by cleaning the fish, creating two fillets joined at the tail. Others cut the meat into strips. Next the fish is dry salted and washed, or dipped in brine. Sugar and spices can be added for flavor. After a day or two of air-drying, people take their fish to the smoker, where slow-burning fires impart a distinct smoky taste. People in the Chignik region prefer the flavor created by alder, while Kodiak residents often choose cottonwood. The smoking process takes from a few days to several weeks. Some families smoke their fish for three days and then allow it to finish drying naturally. Others may smoke over a very low fire for up to three weeks.

It is not clear whether Alutiiq people smoked salmon in the prehistoric era. Russian accounts, historic photos, and oral histories indicate that people dried huge quantities of fish, but less is known about smoking. At an ancient salmon fishing camp on the Buskin River, archaeologists uncovered large charcoal-filled pits inside tent-like structures. Were these smokehouses? Fires may have been lit to create a hot, bug-free environment for drying fish, or they may have been

used to create flavorful smoke.