

Diane's Blog
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What Do Chefs Know When It Comes To Salmon?

The next time you are in a restaurant with an open kitchen and a counter with a bird's eye view into the kitchen, take a seat and watch the chef. That's what I do.

Here you will see high-level kitchen drama and cooking lessons, all in one. Get out your spiral notebook and jot away, or use your iPhone and record the event. I prefer to doodle, draw detailed pictures, and write pithy comments. It's better than food TV because you get to watch AND eat.

For the most part, restaurant chefs cook differently than home cooks. Just think: they have prep cooks assembling the basics, experienced cooks making core sauces, and everything is ready for the flash in the pan. This is how I learned about pan roasting and translated it to searing and cooking salmon. It's a brilliant technique and one every interested home cook should know.

What it requires is a heavy-bottomed skillet, preferably cast iron, with a heatproof handle that can go from stovetop to hot oven. In addition, it takes a good fan for ventilation and a pair of thick oven mitts. Beyond that, all you need is a little confidence and sense of adventure.

A cast-iron pan is relatively cheap and a once-in-a-lifetime investment if you care for the pan and keep it well seasoned and dry. I happen to have a set of my grandmother's cast-iron pans that must date to the early 1920's. The largest pan, a 12-inch skillet is perfect for four portions of salmon. With the oven set at a blazing 450 degrees and the fan over the range set on high, I slick the pan with a thin layer of olive oil, wait for the oil to shimmer, and arrange the seasoned fillets skin side down in the pan. At this point, I don't budge the fillets or even sneak a peak until I am sure the skin is browned and crisp, and that takes about 4 minutes. With a wide fish spatula I carefully flip the fillets and transfer the pan to the oven. The drama is over and the salmon roasts to perfection. An instant-read thermometer confirms moist, flaky doneness at about 125 degrees.

While we are aiming for salmon perfection, here is another cooking lesson. I learned about this technique for achieving crisp-skinned salmon several years ago from an article by Thomas Keller (owner of the famed French Laundry and Per Se restaurants) in the *Los Angeles Times* food section. He writes, "The skin of many fish is exquisite, never more so than when it's crisped to a delicate wafer-thin crunch accompanying the sweet, soft flesh. Crisp fish skin should taste clean and fresh, with the concentrated flavor of the fish itself. Its colors and design are vivid on the plate. The fork clicks on its surface. It cracks brittlely beneath a knife."

The critical technique is to remove as much water as possible from the skin of the fish before cooking it. Keller writes: "Remove some of that water mechanically, by drawing a knife blade firmly back and forth over the fish, the way a wiper blade moves across a windshield. The pressure compresses the skin and squeezes the water to the surface, and the knife blade carries it away. Repeat this until no more water rises to the surface." Periodically wipe the knife blade clean with a paper towel to remove what looks like grayish scum.

It's salmon season, so celebrate – the fish is bountiful, the cooking techniques are accessible, and the eating is delicious, nutritious, and divine.