

Smoking food to flavour and preserve it by Gareth, G4XAT

Although not certain, the preservation of food by the process of “*smoking*” almost certainly happened by accident back in ‘cave man’ days.

The preservative properties of curing (using salt or sugar or both) is probably a latter development.

These days both processes are largely used to improve the flavour of what we eat rather than extend it’s keeping qualities although knowledge of how and why is no bad thing!

So, what happens.....

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.....*when you SMOKE something?*

The process needs splitting at this point into:

HOT SMOKING.....

and

COLD SMOKING.

Hot smoking is simply *cooking* the meat, fish or vegetables in a small sealed oven in a dense atmosphere of wood smoke. An amount of 'wood' is placed at the bottom of the 'oven' with the food on racks above, the whole object is then heated using an external flame – usually gas - until such time as the food is cooked. It may be eaten directly, but even mild wood smoke is a bit harsh tasting straight out of the oven! Time taken ~1/2 hour.

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Cold Smoking involves subjecting the food to **COLD SMOKE**.

The process can take from 2 hours up to 2 days!

Because of the requirement for COOL SMOKE a much larger 'container' is used, e.g. a coat locker or sometimes even a shed!

In cold smoking the food is often cured before smoking.

Either dry salt or brine (sometimes with sugars and/or herbs/spices, e.g. honey or molasses) is used for curing. This process helps remove much of the water from the meat, so inhibiting the growth of bacteria and making the meat 'keep'.

The cured meat is then hung in the cool smoke for the required time. Temperature control is vital otherwise the food cooks! (been there, done that etc!!)

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Different woods inevitably produce different flavours.

Oak is a nice mild taste but different from....

Cherry which is different again.....

from Apple.

Beech on the other hand is a particularly **STRONG** flavour and not for the faint hearted (used to flavour Frankfurters!)

Resinous softwoods are not suitable unless you like 'piney' flavoured food!

Oh, and don't use anything poisonous – such as laurel??

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What's on the plates???

Cheese can be greatly enhanced by some cold smoking. The sample is a medium cheddar subjected to an evenings smoke from oak and apple.

The salmon was cured using dry sea salt and smoked at the same time as the cheese!

The sausage pieces were hot smoked using oak about 36 hours ago.

Almost anything can be smoked, either hot or cold. Hot smoking is my preferred process for everything except cheese, as it is a quick process. Cold smoking needs cold weather, a good supply of wood and patience. Smoked salmon is now so cheap and freely available it's not often worth the effort.