



PHOTO BY ALUN CALLENDER

UP IN SMOKE

Salmon smoking is an ancient Nordic practice that allowed Vikings to preserve and flavor their food. Learn more about its history, and meet the craftsman who is keeping the tradition alive today.

BY TAYLOR HUGO



le-Martin Hansen's days begin at 4 a.m., when he rises to meet the salmon that have been transported

first by ferry, then by truck, to England from the Faroe Islands, a tiny slip of land between Norway and Iceland. Time is limited. The fish have been out of water for less than 16 hours, and since Hansen insists that they never arrive frozen or vacuum packed, he has under 48 hours to apply his craft to maintain the sweet seafood's freshness.

Hansen is a salmon smoker. Born in Norway, he came to London to study sound art at Central Saint Martins. While struggling to make it as an artist, Hansen was looking for another stream of revenue. "I wanted to do something self-sustainable that would help me fund future projects, but that still had tradition," he tells London's Port Magazine. Using his great-grandfather's smoked salmon recipe from 1923, Hansen revived the family business that had been dormant since the 1980s, opening Hansen & Lydersen in London in 2009.

Although Hansen has practiced his craft for nearly a decade, the Scandinavian tradition of salmon smoking long predates him.

Going back to the Viking era, Nordic warriors relied on smoking to preserve meat and fish for periods when fresh food would not be available to them. According to Savolax Royal Smoked, a smokery in Sweden, excavations of Viking settlements in Norway have revealed "smoking plants," complete with furnaces and smoking chambers connected by underground channels. Traveling through the earth, the smoke from the wood-burning furnace would remain cold and clean before filling the chamber, which was full of perishable meat. This "cold-smoked" method both



enhanced the food's taste and increased its longevity.

Today, smoking is no longer needed to preserve food; rather the technique is used purely to infuse the apricot-hued fish with a smoky flavor. And while some technological advances have improved the process—by way of using an iPad to control the pipe's temperature leading to the smoking chamber, in Hansen's case—the simple system for smoking salmon has largely remained the same over the centuries.

"I must have been 3 or 4 years old," Hansen tells chef Michel Roux Jr. while filming an episode for the YouTube series "The Craftsmen's Dinner,"

recalling his first memory of eating thick strips of smoked salmon laid across his mother's freshly baked bread. "You sit and you watch the midnight sun, and you put this piece of bread in your mouth and it just melts."

Since opening the doors to Hansen & Lydersen, Hansen has tried to recreate that food experience for his patrons, using a recipe and process that honor his Norwegian heritage.

From his production workshop in Gloucester, roughly two hours west of London by train, Hansen begins by filleting the fish, then coating it in salt—but regular table salt won't do. Instead, the fishmonger uses Fleur de Sel de



WHAT'S IT LIKE TO BE A SALMON SMOKER?

Check out a short film on Ole-Martin Hansen, owner of Hansen & Lydersen, at nowness.com/story/salmon-smoker.



PHOTO BY ALUN CALLENDER

PHOTOS BY JEFF GILBERT / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Guérande from northwest France, the same region Vikings used to acquire the crucial seasoning to cure their cod.

Once the fillets have had a chance to soak in the salt for 12 hours, they're rinsed and brought to the smoking chamber, which Hansen built himself, inspired by his family's original design. "I never saw my grandfather's smoking chamber, and my mother only vaguely remembers it, so I'll always wonder if I got it right," he tells Wallpaper magazine.

Just as his ancestors did, Hansen generates a fire in a small wood-burning furnace. Using his family's recipe of beech wood from Denmark and juniper

from his brother's farm in Norway, a sweet, aromatic smoke is produced and carried through a series of pipes to the chamber. This air flow sends the salmon gently swaying in smoke for another 12 hours, a crucial step in the process for Hansen, whose grandfather believed the movement gave the fish energy and life.

The chamber, constructed from reclaimed pine, is a work of art. A large glass window gives you an up-close look at the salmon, arranged for maximum visual impact, while a mosaic mural crafted by a friend of Hansen features a colorful mountain and cabin scene. "If you're going to pay respect to the salmon, then you have to

WHERE TO BUY



PHOTO BY OLSKANNIKIAN

HANSEN & LYDERSEN

If you're in London and lucky enough to have an opportunity to try Hansen & Lydersen's smoked salmon, don't pass it up. The shop currently offers limited productions of its delicacy around holidays like Christmas and Easter. You need to secure an invite code from the shop, and shipping and delivery options are not always available. hansen-lydersen.com

HOUSE OF SVERRE

Run by Swedish-Norwegian fashion designer Gunnar Lieungh, this luxury smokehouse in London takes its name from a founding father of Norway's salt-fish heritage: King Sverre, of whom Lieungh is a descendant. Hand-sliced in thick vertical strips, the smoked salmon is available in three different cuts with varying flavor profiles, and can be shipped internationally. www.houseofsverre.com

RUSS & DAUGHTERS

Offering up a variety of cold- and hot-smoked specialties—including gravlax, Gaspé Nova and Norwegian salmon—this 104-year-old New York institution ships nationwide. russanddaughters.com

pay attention to it,” Hansen tells chef Roux. “It’s a cathedral.”

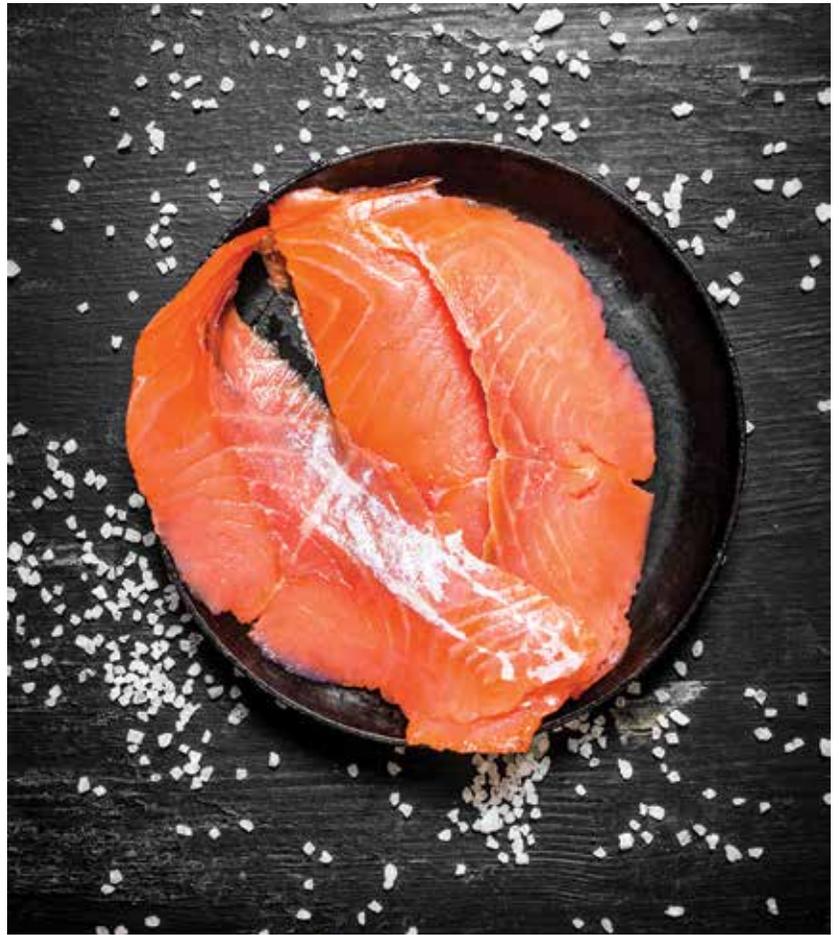
While his process is rooted in tradition, Hansen has added one step that might just be the biggest secret to his success—and also the most unexpected: a piano. Drawing from his musical background, Hansen serenades the salmon with tunes that change from day-to-day based on his mood. “[It’s]

“I wanted to recreate a smoked salmon recipe my grandfather made. I tasted his salmon as a child. It’s a memory that I’ll never forget.”

—Ole-Martin Hansen

stimulation of the senses,” he tells Roux. “I argue that the sound waves penetrate the flesh of the fish, and it goes in and explodes and [...] enriches. It’s really a moment where the kiln is loaded, the salmon is resting and I am resting. We give each other a break.”

The result is a product that has gained notoriety around the globe. Once a best-kept secret in London, local chefs in high-end restaurants have called on Hansen & Lydersen to supply smoked salmon for their menus. A sheik from Kuwait sent his private jet to purchase the fish from Hansen, and Prince Charles has even enjoyed a slice or two. It’s an honor Hansen doesn’t take lightly, and despite his success, salmon remains his only product. “A proper artisan is someone who just does one thing,” he tells British arts journalism website The Arts Desk, “and being allowed to learn something like that is a big honor for someone I think, and involves trust.” ☺



KNOW YOUR TERMS

COLD-SMOKED

After being wet- or dry-brined in salt, this salmon is smoked for 10 to 15 hours at a temperature of 80°F or less. Cold-smoked salmon can have more specific names, depending on the region it’s from, such as Nova (Nova Scotia), Norwegian or Irish.

HOT-SMOKED

Also known as “kippered,” this moist, flaky salmon is first wet-brined, and then smoked for one to three hours at a temperature of 130°F to 140°F. The result is a piece of fish that tastes more cooked.

LOX

Referring to the fatty belly of the salmon, lox is cured in salt, but not smoked. It’s often enjoyed on a bagel with cream cheese.

GRAVLAX

This Nordic specialty involves curing—but not smoking—raw salmon in a mixture of spices, like salt, sugar and dill. It is usually served thinly sliced.