

Smoking and Curing Fish in Alaska, Norwegian Style

by Charles W. Smythe

Referred to as “little Norway in Alaska” by its residents, Petersburg is situated on the northwest point of Mitkof Island, midway between Juneau and Ketchikan. A Norwegian fisherman named Peter Buschmann built a cannery on his homestead there in 1896 to take advantage of the abundant salmon runs in the area as well as its closeness to Frederick Sound, one of the best inside halibut fishing grounds in Alaska.

The snow-capped coastal mountains, forest, sky and water provided a beautiful setting. As the community grew, Buschmann encouraged permanent settlement by giving away land to people to build houses with lumber he sold from his sawmill. The timber resource was also valuable to the developing fishing industry, yielding the raw materials for salting barrels and packing crates used for shipping canned salmon.

On the existing shipping route, steamers passed by the Petersburg site as they entered the Wrangell Narrows on their way south from Skagway, Juneau and Sitka to Ketchikan and Seattle. Fish was transported to southern markets on these ships. Using the ice which floats into the Narrows from nearby LeConte and Thomas Bay Glaciers, fish packers were able to keep the fish cold—particularly the halibut—on the long trip to Seattle, providing another means of preservation in addition to canning and salting.

Although not the first inhabitants of the area—Tlingit Indians from Kake had established fish camps on the north end of Mitkof Island—Norwegians were nevertheless the first to develop a permanent community. Norwegian fishermen from the Seattle area, accustomed to fishing Alaskan waters for salmon and halibut, and others who came directly from Norway were attracted by the fishing opportunities. Five species of salmon were plentiful in summer months, and cod and halibut, traditional Norwegian seafood, were available during the remaining months. Herring, used for halibut bait, could also be caught in winter months.

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View of Petersburg Harbor from the cannery dock.
Photos by Charles W. Smythe



Through the years, other seafoods have been added to the Petersburg fishing repertoire, including shrimp, king and tanner crab and, most recently, herring roe. The shrimp fishery, a longstanding industry in Alaska, was started in Petersburg. Since different methods of harvesting are used for the various species, by changing gear types fishermen were able to fish for many months of the year and provide themselves a stable source of income. Presently, the high cost of gear and restricted seasons have made the more traditional methods, such as long-lining for halibut and trolling for salmon, less economical.

Norwegians brought with them their customary methods of smoking and curing fish. In their diet, fish is a staple in the way red meat is to many Americans. The Petersburg fishery included those species to which Norwegians were accustomed – grey cod, halibut, and herring – and quickly adopted several more such as steelhead and salmon species (white and red king, red, silver, humpie and chum salmon). Another fish, the black cod, is unique to Alaska and has become one of the favored delicacies when smoked and prepared in Norwegian fashion.

The Norwegian style of preserving fish is the “cold smoke,” in which the temperature is kept low and the fish is cured in the process, rather than cooked or kippered. This method requires a relatively high smokehouse, so that the fish hang well above the heat source generating the smoke. An interior height of eight feet is adequate. Alder is the preferred wood for smoking in Petersburg and elsewhere in Alaska, giving a better flavor than hickory.

For best results, black cod, like other fish, is cleaned and bled (including removing the gills) immediately after it is caught. To prepare for smoking, the fish are “split” – sliced in half lengthwise to remove the backbone and most other bones – washed, and soaked in salt brine solution for about three hours. After soaking, the sides are rinsed in fresh water to remove the salt and hung in the smokehouse for about 18-20 hours of cold smoking. They are then carefully wrapped and frozen until ready for cooking.

Smoked black cod is served in the traditional Norwegian meal of boiled fish and potatoes. Boiled fish is considered very good for the stomach; Petersburg townspeople say it is served in Norwegian hospitals to people with stomach ailments and that one sleeps very quietly after such a meal.

The fish is poached by putting it in a pot of cold water and bringing it to a boil. When it starts to boil, the pot is removed from the fire and set off to the side for a few minutes before serving. Melted butter is served with the fish and peeled potatoes. A “sweet soup,” similar to stewed prunes or other fruit, is served with cod along with bread or crackers.

Another Petersburg delicacy is lox made by the cold smoke process. The most favored fish for this is steelhead, followed by white king, red king, red, silver and humpbacked salmon. Using fresh frozen fish, the method entails first curing the fish in a mild salt. To prepare the fish for salting, smaller fish are sliced (as described above) and shallow slits made on the skin side, or larger fish are cut through to the skin from the flesh side so the salt will penetrate. The fish is covered with the salt, the excess shaken off, and the fish laid in a tub for 20-24 hours depending on thickness. No brine is added since the salted fish produces its own. After brining, the fish are washed off and soaked (freshened) in fresh water for 1 to 1½ hours, then well drained, preferably by hanging them until they stop dripping. The sides of fish are hung by the collar on stainless steel



Rosemaling on storefronts along the main street of Petersburg.

hooks in the smokehouse, leaving plenty of room inbetween so that the smoke can circulate freely.

The best time of year to smoke this way in Petersburg is in winter, when it is cold (around freezing) and the heat can be controlled. During other seasons it is too damp and difficult to control the temperature in the smokehouse. Kings and fat, ocean-run steelhead are cold smoked for ten to fourteen days; smaller salmon, such as reds, silvers and humpies, are smoked for six to seven days.

Another method of making lox, called *grave laks* in Norwegian, is by curing instead of smoking the fish. The sides of fish (2 lbs.) are covered with a mixture of salt (5 tablespoons), sugar (6 tablespoons) and coarse-ground white pepper (about 20 corns). The sides are put together, flesh to flesh, with lots of dill inbetween, and pressed for three days. After letting it sit untouched for 12 hours, the fish is turned periodically. When the process is completed, the fish is wiped off, not washed, and kept refrigerated.

Some people in Petersburg are fond of making *lutefisk*. A dish usually made in the fall and traditionally served for Christmas dinner in Norwegian homes, it can nevertheless be frozen and cooked anytime throughout the year. *Lutefisk* is grey cod that is soaked in a lye solution. The fresh-caught cod (40 lbs.) is cleaned, split and soaked for three days in a solution of 6 tablespoons of lye in 6 gallons of water. When it is glassy and translucent, it is ready to be soaked in fresh water for four days, the water being changed daily. Then it is ready for cooking (boiling) or freezing (if it is to be stored).

A favorite of some Petersburg fishermen is pickled herring. Like the other fish, the herring are best cleaned and bled just after they are caught to ensure clean, white, firm meat. Using a "gibber," the fisherman gibs the herring, that is, pulls the gills and stomach out with a kind of pliers. The herring are placed in dry salt for eight to ten days, after which they are washed off and immersed in a salt solution for keeping until use. They are packed in layers like sardines (head to tail), with each layer cross-wise to the next.

To ready for pickling, a batch (12-15) of herring is freshened, cut up, and soaked again to taste until it is no longer salty. The herring are fileted (sliced into two sides) like larger fish. To remove the backbone, the belly bones are cut away as are any remainders of the dorsal fin. The skin is then peeled off and the meat cut into chunks for eating. The chunks are placed in a mixture of sugar (1½ cups), boiling water (1 cup), vinegar (1 quart), and a handful of pickling spices. Herring is kept for two to three days before eating and served with warm, boiled potatoes or as a snack with crackers.

Another delicious snack is dried halibut or cod called *rekklings*. As one fisherman noted, "It is good to chew when you're on watch through the night." The best time to make *rekklings* is while fishing off-shore, away from flies, in sunny weather. Fresh halibut is sliced into thin strips, washed thoroughly in fresh sea water, and hung in the rigging to dry. It keeps as long as it stays dry, although it can be frozen and served in that condition.

Other Norwegian foods given an Alaskan signature in Petersburg are Norwegian fish cakes, fish balls, and fish pudding made in many different shapes and sizes with the variety of fish available in Petersburg.



House built on pilings.

Suggested reading

Petersburg PTA Cookbook 5th edition, 1978.
(Available from Mrs. Roe C. Stedman, Box 513,
Petersburg, Alaska 99833.)

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Whelan, Jack. *Smoking Salmon and Trout*. Bowser, British Columbia: Aerie Publishing, 1982.