Lox without bagels

By FAYE LEVY

It's difficult to say who are greater lovers of smoked and cured fish, New Yorkers or Parisians.

In both communities, these fish are considered delicacies. Yet people in each city have completely different ways of savoring these treats.

In my childhood home, as in many Jewish homes on the East Coast of the US, lox with cream cheese and bagels was a top choice for weekend brunches, and at our synagogue, for bar mitzva spreads. The lox-and-bagel brunch custom has since spread throughout the US.

Instead of lox, sometimes we had my mother's favorite—smoked whitefish, which Marlena Spieler, author of *The Jewish Heritage Cookbook* (Lorenz, 2002) calls "one of the glories of deli food."

When I lived in Paris, I found that the French are equally fond of smoked fish. At home and in restaurants, slices of saumon fumé (smoked salmon) are a much-loved appetizer, especially for New Year celebrations. Yet Parisian purists never tuck the fish in a bagel spread with cream cheese. They serve thin salmon slices on a plate, accompanied by lemon wedges, thin toasts, and sweet butter.

There is a difference between smoked salmon and lox. Smoked salmon is first cured in brine or with a dry rub, and then either cold- or hot-smoked. Fish smoked at a low temperature (cold-smoked) retains a silky texture like that of uncooked fish, while the hot-smoked type has the consistency of moist baked fish. Lox and gravlax (dill-flavored Scandinavian salmon) are not smoked, only cured in brine. The cold-smoked salmon favored by the French has a more subtle flavor than Jewish-style lox, and is therefore served on its own.

Smoked fish is a boon for people with hectic schedules because it’s ready to eat. It’s also a fabulous ingredient for creating simple, savory starters. Since smoked fish is not cheap, combining it with other ingredients helps you stretch it to make more portions.

At La Varenne Cooking School in Paris, Chef Fernand Chambrette taught me to make a pate from equal parts of smoked salmon, poached fresh salmon, and butter, which quickly became a favorite on my table and at my cooking demonstrations. Yet sometimes I want a faster, simpler appetizer that needs no cooking.

I got an idea from two tasty salads—one of smoked salmon and one of whitefish—made by Acme Smoked Fish, a fourth-generation family-owned company whose founder started selling smoked fish from a wagon in Brooklyn. Both salads are intensely flavored mixtures of two ingredients—smoked fish and mayonnaise.

To make an easy salad, I combine this formula with the one I learned from Chef Chambrette—I blend smoked and cooked fish, as in his pate, and moisten them with mayonnaise. I add sour cream to cut the saltiness of the fish and lighten my salad—yes, sour cream is lighter in calories than mayonnaise! Instead of sour cream, I sometimes use labneh (thick strained yogurt) or, for a lighter effect, yogurt. Green onion and lemon juice add a fresh touch.

Hot-smoked fish is preferable for these salads because its flaky texture makes it easy to blend with other ingredients. Fish packages aren’t usually labeled cold- or hot-smoked, but you can tell by looking—hot-smoked fish resembles cooked fish, while cold-smoked looks raw. If you’re making these salads with cold-smoked fish or lox, taste the mixture and, if necessary, add more mayonnaise or sour cream to mellow the flavor.

Although curing and smoking developed as a way to preserve the perishable fish of the Mediterranean, these products should still be handled with care. Here are some tips from Eric Cal- sown, president of Acme Smoked Fish, now one of the largest processors of smoked fish in the US:

- Do not leave smoked fish at room temperature (on a buffet table, for example) for more than three hours.
- After you open vacuum-packed smoked fish, use it within seven days. Personally, I try to finish it within two or three days, as the thin slices tend to dry out, even though I wrap them tightly. I find the same is true of the smoked fish that I buy sliced at delis.
- You can freeze vacuum-packaged smoked fish for up to three months. Thaw it in the refrigerator. For best texture, do not refreeze it.

Salmon gives an appealing orange-pink hue to fish salads, but you can make them with other smoked fish to create new variations. As hors d’oeuvres, these salads are attractive and delicious on thin cucumber slices—a classic partner for cold fish. The cucumber’s fresh texture beautifully complements the salads’ richness and pleasingly salty/smoky flavor.

DOUBLE SALMON SALAD

This salad is made of smoked and cooked or canned salmon. The smoked fish adds pizzazz to the tried-and-true formula of salmon salad with mayonnaise. Spread or mound the salad on crisp, thin cucumber slices or on small thin slices of rye or pumpernickel or split mini-pitas. If you prefer crackers, choose salt-free or low-salt ones.

As a variation, use any smoked white fish and omit the cooked salmon.

100 to 120 grams smoked salmon or lox (about 1 cup), flaked or finely chopped
1 cup cooked salmon (poached, baked or broiled) or 75 to 120 grams canned salmon, flaked
3 to 4 tablespoons mayonnaise, regular or low-fat
3 to 4 tablespoons sour cream, plain yogurt or labneh (kefir cheese)
1 to 2 tablespoons strained fresh lemon juice, or to taste
Freshly ground pepper to taste
Salt to taste (optional)

Combine smoked salmon, cooked salmon, and green onion. Stir in 3 tablespoons mayonnaise, 3 tablespoons sour cream, and 1 tablespoon lemon juice. Season to taste with pepper, and if necessary add more mayonnaise, sour cream, and lemon juice. Add salt only if needed. Serve cold.

Serves 6 to 8 as an hors d’oeuvre.

Faye Levy is the author of *1,000 Jewish Recipes* (Wiley) and *The Just-Published Feast from the Mideast* (HarperCollins).