

FOOD & WINE

SEAFOOD | FROM PAGE D1

Many, many new fish

How a community came together to save Okanagan sockeye salmon

In the 1950s, both Canada and the U.S. began “channelizing” the rivers, making them easier for humans to navigate, but destroying the sockeye’s natural habitat in the process. In the entire Columbia Basin, only a small stretch of river beneath McIntyre Bluff was left untouched.

The salmon population plummeted. By the 1970s, the Okanagan Nation could no longer rely on their traditional food, and the elders were raising the alarm. But nothing happened until the entire stock collapsed in the mid-1990s. Fortunately, a lot of other things happened at the same time.

Next

“What happened in the mid-1990s was a lot of First Nations fishery rights came up,” says Howie Wright, the fisheries manager for the Okanagan Nation Alliance. At the same time, tighter environmental legislation in the U.S. required the Americans to mitigate the man-made loss of habitat. And with the official collapse of the fishery, the DFO was mandated by law to do something about it.

The Okanagan Nation pressed the provincial and federal governments to seek the maximum compensation from the U.S. With funding secured — and the U.S. still foots most of the bill for the project — the Okanagan Nation joined with the province, the DFO and a team of biologists to bring the sockeye back to Osoyoos Lake.

By 2003, salmon returns were still low. So the biologists got more proactive. They harvested eggs and milt from the last remaining stretch of natural sockeye habitat below McIntyre Bluff, and incubated them until the fry were born. Then they released the fry into Osoyoos Lake.

The population boomed. “So far it’s been working,” says Wright, who is delighted to see that the salmon have begun reproducing naturally. “It’s the third year we’ve had adults spawning.”

If it’s unusual to see First Nations, scientists and government officials working so harmoniously together, it’s even more unusual to see a whole community jump on board a project like this. Yet, throughout the South Okanagan, chefs, environmentalists, recreational fishers, business people and everyday consumers have all become involved in the project, in big ways and small, through groups like the Okanagan Salmon Community Initiative.

Among them is Jarrett whom, in her role with Slow Food, is keenly aware of the salmon’s environmental, nutritional and cultural significance, especially for her First Nations neighbours.

“It’s about food sovereignty,” she says, “connecting them with the food that connected their people.”

Now

Although it is related to the salmon we know so well on the coast, the Okanagan sockeye is an ancient and biologically unique species.

“They’ve adapted to the environment that’s in the Okanagan,” Wright explains. “It’s the only desert in Canada. They migrate at higher temperatures than the Fraser or the Skeena. They have a higher tolerance to heat.”

The fish travel up the rivers in June, arriving in July full of fat because they won’t feed again until they spawn in October. For the first month, the fish are available only to the Okanagan Nation as part of their indigenous food fishery. By August, assuming the stocks are healthy, recreational and commercial fishers can harvest them, and the sockeye begins appearing on local menus.

The fish is sweet, mild and buttery, with a soft, delicate texture and deep, coral-coloured flesh. It’s a smaller fish — on average, two to four pounds — and has unusually high levels of nutrient dense fatty oils, making it an especially healthy choice.

“It’s not that far off from any other sockeye you have. It’s a little richer. It’s got those gorgeous colours, that gorgeous deep, deep pink,” says Scott Adair, executive chef at the Watermark Beach Resort, who likes serving it grilled as a main or cold-smoked for appetizers. “It just goes with everything.”

If you plan to cook an Okanagan sockeye, Adair suggests doing as little as possible to it, to preserve its natural goodness.



Chef Scott Adair prepares grilled Okanagan sockeye with red pepper and cucumber relish at the Wine & Tapas Bar at the Watermark Beach Resort in Osoyoos. It’s so naturally delicious, simple preparation is best, he advises.

RECIPES

GRILLED OKANAGAN SOCKEYE SALMON WITH ROASTED RED PEPPER AND CUCUMBER RELISH

At the Watermark Beach Resorts Wine & Tapas Bar, Chef Scott Adair serves this with creamed corn and grilled local patty pan squash. You could also offer a fresh-from-the-garden salad tossed with honey Dijon vinaigrette (Find Adair’s dressing recipe online).

Relish:

3 red bell peppers, roasted, peeled and diced

1 cucumber, seeds removed and diced

4 cloves garlic, minced

1 stalk celery, diced

2 large shallots, diced

Juice and zest of 2 lemons

2 tsp (10 mL) ground coriander

1 tsp (5 mL) red pepper flakes

1 tsp (5 mL) smoked paprika

¼ cup (60 mL) capers, chopped

¼ cup (60 mL) pumpkin seeds, toasted

½ cup (125 mL) chopped parsley

¼ cup (60 mL) white wine vinegar

Salt and pepper to taste

Salmon:

4 pieces of Okanagan sockeye salmon filet, 5 oz (140 g) each

Salt and pepper to taste

Make the relish: Combine all the ingredients in a large, non-reactive bowl. Cover and let sit in fridge for a minimum of 1 hour. Relish will last up to 7 days for serving.

Grill the salmon: Prepare a gas or charcoal grill for medium-low heat. Lightly season the salmon with salt and pepper, then lay it directly on the grill. Cook it for approximately 3 minutes on one side. Flip it to the other side and cook for another 3 minutes.

When it is ready, it should pull away easily from the grill. Serve topped with a dollop of relish.

Serves 4

B.C. VODKA CURED GRAVLAX

If you can get hold of some Okanagan sockeye (or any other salmon), you have just enough time to make this elegant cured salmon for your B.C. Day party this weekend. Serve it sliced very thin with pumpernickel rounds and crème fraîche or a mustard sauce.

1 tbsp. (15 mL) coriander seeds

1 tbsp. (15 mL) freshly ground black pepper

¼ cup (60 mL) granulated sugar

¼ cup (60 mL) kosher or pickling salt

2 large centre-cut salmon fillets, 1 lb. (454 g) each, skin on

½ cup (125 mL) chopped fresh dill (or for something different, try another fresh herb, such as tarragon)

¼ cup (60 mL) B.C. vodka, such as the one from Long Table Distillery or Odd Society Spirits

Start curing your gravlax three days before you plan to serve it.

Lightly toast the coriander seeds in small fry pan; let them cool, then crush them in a mortar and pestle or grind them roughly in a spice mill. In a small bowl, mix the coriander with pepper, sugar and salt, and set aside.

Prepare two long pieces of plastic wrap, each about 24 inches (60 cm) long. Lay one crosswise across the middle of the other and place them in a large glass baking dish

Sprinkle half the dill all over the skin side of the salmon and place the fillets side by side in the centre of the plastic wrap, skin side down.

Press spice mixture evenly all over both sides of the fish, then drizzle with vodka. Sprinkle the remaining dill over the fleshy side of the salmon.

Wrap the plastic tightly around the salmon, then place a plate or board on top of it, weighted with something heavy like a couple of tins from the pantry. Place the whole thing in the refrigerator and leave it for three days, turning once or twice a day, and draining any accumulated liquids if necessary.

When it’s ready, unwrap the fish, discard any liquids and brush off most of the dill. Will keep in the refrigerator for three days.

Serves 10 to 12 as an appetizer

VS For more recipes, go to vancouver.sun.com

“You don’t really want to fuss with it very much,” he says. “Just a little salt and pepper. As long as you know that nice little spot where it lets go from the grill.”

Tomorrow

The potential for the Okanagan sockeye is huge. Not only is it once again feeding the Okanagan Nation, it’s also providing new jobs throughout the region for fishing guides and operators.

In addition, its recovery has become an inspiration for fisheries around the world, and there are discussions

about using this model to develop a North America-wide sustainable fish strategy.

And the success story just keeps growing.

Now the salmon are doing what they’re meant to do: migrating through the rivers and lakes. That’s because the dams on both sides of the border have been modified to ease the passage of fish, and, as a result, the sockeye have moved from Osoyoos to Skaha Lake, spawning in Penticton Channel.

“Our next goal is to get fish into Okanagan Lake,” says Bussanich. “And if we do that, that will put us on the map

as one of the biggest sockeye fisheries in North America. It’s a big lake.”

Meanwhile, Jarrett sees immense potential for the kind of tourism opportunities that will attract travellers seeking authentic local experiences. The challenge will be educating people about this new addition to all that is deliciously local in the Okanagan Valley.

“When people see Okanagan salmon on the menu, they are shocked. ‘What do you mean, Okanagan salmon?’” she says. “People have to eat it so they can see what an amazing fish it is.”

And isn’t that the kind of fish story everyone wants to hear?

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IN THE CELLAR



ANTHONY GISMONDI



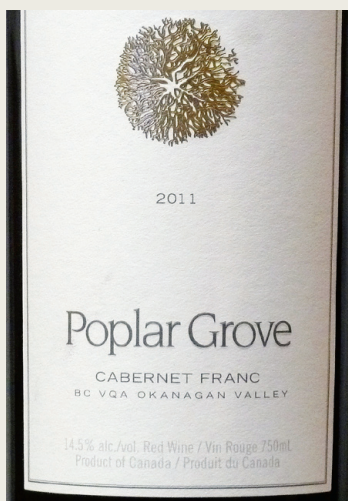
FOR THE COLLECTOR

Selbach-Oster Riesling Zeltinger Himmelreich 2011, Mosel-Saar-Ruwer, Germany

Price \$29 | Score 93/100

UPC: 717215001806

If you haven’t fallen asleep trying to pronounce this name, fear not. The wine will revive you. Halbtrocken is the German nod to half-dry wines; it cannot have more than 18 g/L of residual sugar and can only exceed 12 g/L of residual sugar if the acid level is within 10 g/L of the residual sugar. Are you asleep yet? Wait, the wine is sensational. The nose has a flinty, mineral, salty sea water notes with bits of Vaseline and dried herbs. The attack is marginally sweet with citrus, lemon, ripe apple flavours. A rich, creamy, textured wine with crunchy juicy delicious fruit with endless food pairing possibilities on the West Coast.



B.C. WINE OF THE WEEK

Poplar Grove Cabernet Franc 2011, Naramata Bench, Okanagan Valley

Price \$35 | Score 89/100

UPC: 626990169680

This is perhaps the most fragrant Cabernet Franc yet from Poplar Grove. The 2011 spends 21 months in French oak, the limit I think, but still manages to assert itself thanks to 18 months of bottle aging. Black fruits and milk chocolate mark the nose and the front of the palate with savoury black cherries and warm vanilla notes in the finish. While surprisingly friendly at the moment, this will easily age five years and likely improve further in bottle. Steak Florentine would be a fine match.

NEWS & ITEMS

The British Columbia Pinot Noir Celebration, at Tantalus Vineyards on Sunday, Aug. 31, will bring together a handful of passionate Pinot producers including Tantalus, Meyer Family, CedarCreek, Quail’s Gate, Howling Bluff and Blue Mountain. Two tasting sessions anchor the day, and Behind the Bottle will give a sit-down look at three key regions for Pinot Noir, with a second session that focuses on cellaring Pinot Noir at home and features an al fresco dinner by Kelowna chef Mark Filatow. For more information and tickets visit: eventbee.com/v/bcpn2014.