

Smoked salmon tasting – the VantagePoint verdict!

At a recent editorial meeting, it was our Lauren who came up with the idea of tasting various smoked salmon in the December issue and give our verdict to readers. As you can imagine, we all warmly embraced the idea.

I researched the contact details for all the major supermarkets in the VantagePoint area, and also contacted a couple of mail order specialists. The first person to get in touch was Lance Forman from H Forman & Sons in London, the world's oldest producer of smoked salmon. He immediately offered to provide some of their salmon but insisted on bringing samples down himself so that he could talk to us about the evolving history of smoked salmon and offer tips on what to look for when doing a tasting like this, to which we readily agreed.

H Forman & Sons was founded in London's East End by Lance's great-grandfather, Aaron 'Harry' Forman, in 1905 and is the last surviving smokehouse in London. A Russian émigré from Odessa, he saw potential in the curing of fresh salmon as a means of preserving the fish. The fish used originally originated from the Baltic but they soon started using Scottish salmon, which became very popular and Britain's first home-grown gourmet food.

The secret was the 'London Cure', which was and is a very simple recipe which preserves those wonderful flavours – the freshest salmon, a little salt, just the right amount of oak smoke. Nothing else. 'London Cure Smoked Salmon' is the only smoked salmon in the world with the highly prized protected name (PGI) status, and London's first ever food or drink to achieve this coveted recognition.

The popularity of smoked salmon and its introduction to supermarkets and a wider audience saw big changes in the industry. Salmon farms started, and bigger, more commercial smokehouses started up, mostly in Scotland to be nearer the source of the fish. The way the fish was preserved also became more commercial for a number of reasons – to reduce costs, increase margins, meet price points and generally keep the product affordable for most consumers. As you can imagine, this has an impact on the flavour.

Three quarters of all smoked salmon in the UK now comes from Norway, and while it is 10-15% cheaper, it also takes much longer to arrive, compromising the freshness of the fish. The rest comes from Scotland, almost all of which is now farmed, as there are currently some curbs in place over the fishing of wild salmon, making it very much more rare and thus expensive. Do remember to check the packaging and note that 'Scottish smoked salmon' is not the same as 'Smoked Scottish salmon'!

When deciding what product to buy, the key ingredient to look out for is sugar. This is used for a number of reasons – to reduce the taste of additional salt sometimes used to prolong shelf life or to add weight to the fish by retaining more of the water in it to make it a cheaper product. It may also be used to counteract excessive smoking on fish that is perhaps not as fresh as it could be – the smoke helps disguise the flavour. Purists insist that quality smoked salmon should contain no sugar at all, unless it is Gravavlax which is not smoked and has a completely different curing process.

The two main complaints about smoked salmon tend to be that it is too smoky and/or too slimey. Good quality salmon should be neither. See below to see how the whole team got on with our tasting, which took place at the beginning of November...

In addition to the H Forman & Sons salmon, we were provided with samples sent to us from the following suppliers: Loch Fyne, Sainsburys and Waitrose. In addition, we bought packs from Aldi, Lidl, Marks & Spencer and Tesco. All were tasted straight from the packet with no other flavourings.

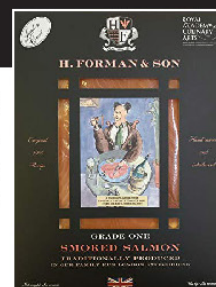
★ Full star ★ Half star

1 London Cure Smoked Salmon (H Forman & Sons)

This really was excellent. Lovely light colour, very slightly smoked with a great, almost buttery salmon flavour, not overly salty. A lovely soft texture. We tried two versions, a 'lean' cut and a 'fatty' cut which come from different parts of the same salmon, both having their devotees. You can specify when ordering or the standard packs will have some of both. We also tried the Royal Fillet, which was exceptional. ★★★★★

£12.95 for 200g.

www.formanandfield.co.uk



2 Bradam Orach Smoked Salmon (Loch Fyne)

This was not too smoked with a good texture. Very meaty and a good flavour, reasonably salty but not excessive. Light colour. Very enjoyable. Winner of the Fish & Seafood category of the Scotland Food & Drink Excellence Awards 2018. ★★★★★

£10.50 for 200g.

www.lochfyne.com



3 Twice Smoked Scottish Lochmuir Smoked Salmon (M&S)

This was perhaps a little chewy but not too smoky, very lean, with a good salmon taste, smooth texture. Attractive colour. Very good. ★★★★★

£5 for 100g.

www.marksandspencer.co.uk



4 Finest Mild and Delicate Smoked Scottish Salmon (Tesco)

Quite gamey, good texture, quite lean and not over smoked. Pale colour. A bit oily and salty but very pleasant. ★★★★★

£4 for 100g.

www.tesco.com



5= Sliced Smoked Salmon (Aldi)

This looked as if it had been previously frozen and it was a little mushy on the palate. Quite lean, lightly smoked, a little greasy perhaps but a good flavour. The fish is Norwegian. ★★★

£3.99 for 200g. www.aldi.co.uk



5= Chestnut Smoked Scottish Salmon (Waitrose 1)

Quite a good texture and very lightly smoked. Not a great deal of flavour and certainly no chestnut. Very lean, pleasantly thin slices. Not bad at all. ★★★

£5.99 for 100g.

www.waitrose.com



The others:

Finest Strong and Robust Smoked Scottish Salmon (Tesco) ★★★

Very smoky flavour, quite chewy, salty and not comparable to their other salmon.

Deluxe Scottish Smoked Salmon (Lidl) ★★

Quite smoky, very chewy, not a good texture and not much flavour. Odd colour.

Maple Cured Scottish Smoked Salmon glazed with Maple Syrup & Orange (Sainsburys) ★★

The salmon flavour drowned out by an overly sweet glaze which was not great. Good texture though.

Specially Selected Smoked Salmon (Aldi) ★★

Did not taste very fresh, quite tough, very smoky, greasy and not a great aftertaste.



The Forman and Sons salmon is available by mail order. Usually when you order, the salmon will have been smoked the previous

day although at Christmas this may be a little different. Last day for orders for this Christmas is Friday 14th December. Order at www.formanandfield.co.uk.

While we tasted the salmon on its own, we did pair them afterwards with blinis and cream cheese. For those who wanted to, we also added some Onuga Herring Roe, a 'completely natural . . . caviar substitute', made from smoked herring plus a little added salt, honey, lemon juice and seaweed. I have to admit that, thankfully for my wallet, caviar is really not for me, and it takes away from the taste of salmon which in most cases is not what you would want. Marcus quite enjoyed it but served it on a biscuit with just cream cheese. It is available in Sainsburys at £4 per jar. More information available at www.onuga.com.

Stefan Reynolds, Publisher

