



Digest

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Stuffed Baked Northern Great Lakes Whitefish, Lake Superior Lake Trout

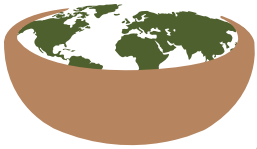
or the Venerable Wild-Caught Pacific Northwest Coast Coho (Silver) or Chinook (King) Salmon (although Chums (Pinks) and Sockeyes (Red) will also do)

By: Janet Gilmore

During my teen years in Eugene, Oregon in the 1960s, a family friend regularly went sport fishing for salmon off the Oregon Coast. When he was successful, he sometimes offered my family a nice big whole salmon, a cause for a summer celebration.¹ Stuffed and baked, this magnificent fish was truly delectable—although in more recent years, split and roasted over an open fire according to Jamestown S’Klallam Elaine Grinnell’s traditional method has topped all salmon taste experiences.²

Among commercial fishing families in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, baked whitefish is also a treat, often anchoring a meal for a special occasion, when guests visit from afar. Below, I offer a recipe for baked whitefish recorded from Eileen Behrend of the Ingallston area north of Menominee, Michigan in 1989.³ Eileen grew up in a commercial fishing family with deep roots in the tradition, and she has spent her married life in a fishing family, on Green Bay’s Western Shore. Her recipe for stuffing and baking a good size northern Lake Michigan whitefish is very close to the one I have followed based on my childhood experience.

When I get a fresh, whole big-bodied fish like Lake Michigan whitefish, Lake Superior lake trout, or a wild-caught salmon from the Pacific Northwest, I generally use Irma Rombauer’s recipe for Baked Fish in the 1946 edition of the *Joy of Cooking* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 230) as my crutch, yet what I do is as much in opposition to the recipe as according to it. Eileen’s recipe below is much like what I do, and so I will present a kind of recipe by “trilog” below, showing what Eileen says she does, and noting my variations and some of Rombauer’s.



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

Fish Size:

Rombauer:

Scrape, remove the entrails, and clean:

A fish weighing 3 or more pounds.

Janet:

A whole fish of at least three pounds and up to around five is a good bet.⁴

Temperature:

Eileen:

...when I bake fish I bake it ...probably like 400 degrees instead of just the 350, and get 'em nice and brown and crispy on the outside.

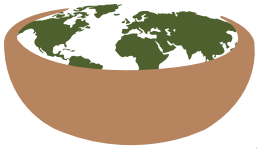
Janet:

Rombauer's recipe calls for 350 degrees, and I sometimes use that recommendation, yet I recall a written recipe of my mother's for baked salmon that says 400 degrees, and I suspect that temperature will more effectively dry out the fish to the proper texture.

Preparation:

Eileen:

...I take the fish that I'm going to bake and clean it out, and I put stuffing in, just regular bread stuffing with a lot of onions, and salt and pepper and sage in...sometimes I tie the fish together, sometimes I don't, if it's a nice big whitefish it usually doesn't need it. And I lay it just on a baking pan, large pan, and I put a couple, some strips of bacon over the top of it, and bake it in a hot oven just until it's done.



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

Janet:

I like a whole dressed and scaled fish that retains the head, tail, and fins, but whose cavity is well cleaned of entrails and blood against the backbone. I make sure to wash the fish well inside and out, and pat it dry. Then I prefer to rub the fish's exterior well with olive oil, top and bottom, and place it on a large sheet of aluminum foil on a low-sided baking sheet (like a jelly roll pan that is approximately 16-17" long, 11-12" wide). I arrange the fish crosswise and make sure that the heavyduty foil extends sufficiently beyond the pan and the fish to support the head and tail hanging slightly over each corner of the pan.

Stuffing:

I agree with Eileen's stuffing recipe that features bread, lots of onions, and a minimal amount of herbs and/or spices. I use Rombauer's recommended Dressing I as a guide, "a fine but plain and unsophisticated dressing," she says, for a fish of 3 pounds [increase for larger fish].

Combine:

1-1/2 cups bread crumbs

[I recommend a fine-textured, somewhat dry sourdough white or light rye bread]

2 Tablespoons chopped onion

[I recommend much more liberal use of onion, perhaps sliced instead]

1/2 cup chopped celery

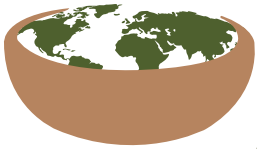
[I omit the celery as too strong a flavor for the delicacy of whitefish, say, while Eileen tells me that she also often adds celery]

2 Tablespoons chopped parsley [if she has it on hand, Eileen says]

1 or 2 beaten eggs [Eileen does not use eggs at all]

Season these ingredients well with:

1/2 teaspoon salt [I omit]



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

1/8 teaspoon paprika [I comply, Eileen uses sage, black pepper, or other herbs and flavorings, according to her mood and what's on hand]

1/4 teaspoon nutmeg (optional) [I usually comply; Eileen does not]

Use enough:

Milk, melted butter or soup stock to make a loose dressing. [Eileen and I mostly skip this step, preferring drier stuffing]

Fill the fish. Sew the sides together with a coarse needle and thread.

[Like Eileen, I stuff the fish loosely and mass any extra along the opening to the cavity. I do not sew the stuffing into the fish.]

Baking:

I loosely shape the foil around the head and tail, leaving the rest of the fish open to the oven. Eileen meanwhile prefers a fish without head and tail.

Eileen:

Usually, I would say, it takes a couple hours for say a four pound fish. It just depends on the size of the fish.

Janet:

Rombauer recommends 15 minutes per pound of fish at 350 degrees, so if you choose the higher temperature, be watchful. I do not use bacon on the top of the fish like Irma and Eileen do, nor do I baste the fish during baking as Rombauer recommends.

Testing for Doneness:

Eileen:



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

I just poke it with a fork or lift up the edge of it, and if it's white opaque all the way through, then it's done. You can usually tell by the brown-ness on the outside. It doesn't get brown and crispy until the fish is done. The inside stays softer.

Janet:

I also poke the fish, at the fullest part of the body, using the point of a small paring knife. I look for an opaque, flakey, and dry texture. If the area poked fills with liquid, the fish is not yet done.

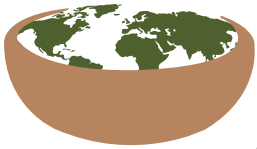
Serving:

The foil acts as a handy lift to transfer the fish to a serving platter, if presentation on one is desired. If the bottom of the fish has been adequately slathered with olive oil before the stuffing is added, the entire fish might yield to transfer from the foil onto a platter. There are tricks for cutting baked fish into appropriate serving chunks relatively free of bones, but these methods depend on the fish, its size, and family aesthetics, and conveying them here resists written description.

Enjoy that Baked Stuffed Fish!

Janet Gilmore and Eileen Behrend, with a little help from

Irma Rombauer—and Dorothy Gilmore



Digest

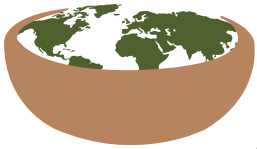
a journal of foodways & culture

Notes

¹ The family friend, Chuck Hayes, was also our appliance repair person at the time. According to 2014-2015 conversations with my mother, Dorothy Gilmore (now in her 90s), Chuck had gone offshore fishing for salmon with a friend for years, but he always got seasick. Since his seasickness lasted for a day after he brought home the fish, he'd bring it directly to my mother so she could cook it while fresh, typically the next day. Chuck and some mutual friends would join us then in enjoying the stuffed, baked fish. My mother cannot recall the first time she baked a stuffed, whole salmon, and suggests many influences, including the wedding gift of Rombauer's *Joy of Cooking* in 1948. Besides friends celebrating whole salmon planked in celebratory feasts, she attributes my dad's high country trout fishing and taste for fish as contributing—and not so much her Norwegian-American heritage. By the late 1950s, she recalls that she had enough experience and confidence in the dish to offer a baked, stuffed salmon as the centerpiece for an “early American” themed potluck dinner. My parents' rotating dinner collective of artist and architect friends brought side dishes associated with New England food traditions, like baked beans and clam chowder, expressing surprise at Pacific salmon on the menu. My mother enjoyed the tease! When I asked her by phone how to bake a stuffed fish, once I was cooking on my own in the 1970s, she directed me to Rombauer's recipe and the flexibility of the stuffing guidelines.

² See Elaine Grinnell biography, interview script and sound recording on “The Cultural Conservancy” website at <http://www.nativeland.org/raft/grinnell.html> (access February 28, 2015).

³ Festival of Michigan Folklife fieldwork, Michigan Traditional Arts Program, Michigan State University Museum, East Lansing. Eileen Kleinke Behrend (b. late 1930s) has lived her entire life a quarter mile from Lake Michigan, on the western shore of Green Bay, north of Menominee, Michigan. She is Swedish and Norwegian on her mother's side, Cape Cod Yankee (fishing people) and German on her father's. Her father fished for a living and she helped him with his work whenever she got the chance. After she married fisher-logger David Behrend in the 1950s, she contributed to their business over the years, fetching parts and supplies and going out in the fishing boats when she got the chance. Long active in the commercial fishing business, she learned to handle and dress fish, and tell when it is fresh. From her mother, she learned to cook and preserve fish in many ways, when she was growing up. After she married, she cooked fish, and more varieties of fish, more often, since her



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

husband enjoyed eating fish more frequently than her family did. Behrend has been active in developing the West Shore Fishing Museum on M-35 north of Menominee, an organization dedicated to keeping Great Lakes commercial fishing history alive.

⁴ In recent years, I've successfully used two smaller whole whitefish, arranging them on their sides with their bellies facing each other, which I stuff and then push slightly together with extra stuffing placed between. I've also used two large whitefish fillets successfully, placing one skin side down, distributing the stuffing on top, and covering it with the second fillet, skin side up. Inspired by Andreas Viestad's "Fried Herring with Apple, Bacon and Celeriac" recipe from the "New Scandinavian Cooking" TV show and website, I've found a bacon, turnip, celeriac, chiogga beet, apple, and carrot stuffing, mixed with a medium dice of tasty sourdough bread crumbs, quite delicious when using the two whitefish fillet option. See <http://www.newscancook.com/recipes-by-chef/fried-herring-with-apple-bacon-and-celeriac/> (accessed February 28, 2015). through the Middle Ages. Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood.