

Surf and Turf, French Style

Saumon aux lentilles is a classic coupling of rich fish and earthy pulses.

BY ANDREA GEARY

Niki Segnit, author of *The Flavor Thesaurus* (2012), has a fresh take on combining the bounty of the sea with that of the land: "Surf 'n' turf is all very well, but fish goes best with ingredients that truly taste of turf, not just graze on it . . ." The French duo of buttery salmon and gently braised lentils, with its deeply comforting textures and rich, savory flavors, proves that she was onto something.

That said, my first attempt missed the mark. A fan of efficiency, I was drawn to an en papillote scenario: Combine drained canned lentils with vegetables on a sheet of foil, perch a salmon fillet on top, enclose the lot, and roast it in the oven. But freed from its steamy packet, the salmon was pallid and its skin squidy. The lentils, sodden with juices, had lost their delicate earthiness. I needed to cook the two parts separately.

Lentilles du Puy (French green lentils), a variety grown in the mineral-rich volcanic soil of the Auvergne region, were my choice, not just because of their provenance, but also because they hold their shape when cooked. Lentils can be boiled like pasta, but the excess water washes away flavor. Instead, I sautéed a mirepoix base and then added the lentils with just enough water to be absorbed by the time they cooked through. A spoonful of tomato paste augmented the lentils' meaty depth, and garlic and thyme added unmistakable Gallic flair.

For the salmon, I used our revolutionary cold-start technique: Place brined fillets skin side down in an unheated nonstick skillet that's been strewn with salt and pepper (no oil) and turn on the heat; soon the fish releases some of the fat that lies just beneath the skin, crisping it. When the bottoms of the fillets start to turn opaque, flip them to brown the flesh side in the rendered fat.

To finish, I brightened the lentils with sherry vinegar and Dijon mustard; a glug of fresh extra-virgin olive oil added grassy top notes.

SAUMON AUX LENTILLES (PAN-SEARED SALMON WITH BRAISED LENTILLES DU PUY)

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 1 1/2 HOURS

To ensure uniform cooking, buy a 1 1/2-pound center-cut salmon fillet and cut it into four pieces. Using skin-on salmon is important here, as we rely on the fat underneath the skin as the cooking medium. If using wild salmon, check for doneness earlier and cook it until it registers 120 degrees. Small, olive-green lentilles du Puy are worth seeking out for their meaty texture, but if you can't find them, substitute another small green lentil. Do not use red or brown lentils.



Lentils

- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, divided
- 1 large onion, chopped fine
- 1 celery rib, chopped fine
- 1 carrot, peeled and chopped fine
- 3/4 teaspoon table salt
- 1 tablespoon minced garlic
- 1 tablespoon tomato paste
- 1/2 teaspoon dried thyme
- 1/2 teaspoon pepper
- 2 1/2 cups water
- 1 cup dried lentilles du Puy (French green lentils), picked over and rinsed
- 1 tablespoon sherry vinegar
- 2 teaspoons Dijon mustard

Salmon

- 3/4 teaspoon table salt, divided, plus 1/4 cup for brining fish
- 3/4 teaspoon pepper, divided
- 4 (6-ounce) skin-on salmon fillets

1. FOR THE LENTILS: Heat 1 tablespoon oil in medium saucepan over medium heat until shimmering. Add onion, celery, carrot, and salt and stir to coat vegetables. Cover and cook, stirring occasionally, until vegetables are softened but not browned, 8 to 10 minutes. Add garlic, tomato paste, thyme, and pepper and cook, stirring constantly, until fragrant, about 2 minutes. Stir in water and lentils. Increase heat and bring to boil. Adjust heat to simmer. Cover and cook, stirring occasionally, until lentils are tender but not mushy and have consistency of

thick risotto, 40 to 50 minutes. Remove from heat and keep covered.

2. FOR THE SALMON: While lentils are cooking, dissolve 1/4 cup salt in 1 quart water in narrow container. Submerge salmon in brine and let stand for 15 minutes. Remove salmon from brine and pat dry with paper towels. Allow to stand while lentils finish cooking.

3. Sprinkle bottom of 12-inch nonstick skillet evenly with 1/2 teaspoon salt and 1/2 teaspoon pepper. Place fillets, skin side down, in skillet and sprinkle tops of fillets with remaining 1/4 teaspoon salt and remaining 1/4 teaspoon pepper. Heat skillet over medium-high heat and cook fillets, without moving them, until fat begins to render, skin begins to brown, and bottom 1/4 inch of fillets turns opaque, 6 to 8 minutes.

4. Using tongs and thin spatula, flip fillets and continue to cook without moving them until centers are still translucent when checked with tip of paring knife and register 125 degrees (for medium-rare), 5 to 8 minutes longer. Transfer fillets, skin side up, to clean plate.

5. Warm lentils briefly if necessary. Stir in vinegar, mustard, and remaining 1 tablespoon oil. Season with salt, pepper, and vinegar to taste. Divide lentils among wide, shallow serving bowls. Arrange salmon skin side up on lentils and serve.

