

The Secret to Holiday Cheer Revealed: Salmon Rillettes

The perfect have-on-hand dish for the holiday season.

By [Jennifer Eremeeva](#)

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A Happy Christmas to everyone celebrating what the Russians call “Catholic Christmas” today!

Once upon a time, this venerable holiday represented the pinnacle of the holiday season for me, but now it is just another steppingstone in the marathon that is our Russian-American November - January Bacchanalia. We’ve pared down our “Catholic Christmas” considerably, exchanging books and smaller presents in our stockings, mindful that we have New Year’s Eve, Russian Christmas, and even Old New Year’s Eve to come.

The one thing that remains central to our “Catholic Christmas” celebrations is the food, and Christmas for me is all about salmon. Whether this is a nod to the ethnic origins of the

birthday boy or two decades of living in Salmon Central, I can't open my stocking or mix up the first Bloody Thor (Bloody Mary made with Icelandic Aquavit) until I've had several slivers of cured salmon on dark Borodinsky Bread. Several days before December 25, I cure a few sides of salmon to be sure we have enough for Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and Boxing Day breakfasts and brunches. By December 26th, there are several ends of the sides knocking about in the refrigerator. And then I know it is time to make salmon rillettes.

I have a two-pronged approach to holiday entertaining: do as much as possible ahead of time and keep the spreadables flowing. I feel notably calmer with a lasagna or six in the freezer, and nothing says "come in, sit down, we're glad to see you" as much as a generous tray of cheese, charcuterie, hummus, labneh, eggplant caviar, mackerel pate, and salmon rillettes lying in wait for arriving guests. When we've got a roaring fire and enough wine and bread, trays like this often do double duty as appetizer and dinner or are the centerpiece of one of those longish afternoons that morph effortlessly into evening. This is how I most like to entertain, keeping these and other spreadables in constant rotation from late November to mid-January, at which point I'm ready to banish rich food from the kitchen and live for a few weeks on bone broth and kale smoothies.

Classic rillettes are made from pork, rabbit, poultry, or wild game such as grouse, and began life as a method to extend the shelf life of fresh meat. Cooked slowly in lard, then shredded or pounded into a smooth consistency, chilled in a jar or ramekin and covered with a seal of clarified butter, the resulting potted meat is served on toasts or crackers or as a cold hors d'oeuvres.

But when in Russia, I always pivot to a seafood version to take advantage of my adopted country's delightfully abundant salmon supply. Combined with some of the most complimentary flavors for salmon — mayonnaise, sour cream, butter, capers, dill, and lemon — a glittering stack of salmon rillettes in Weck jars in the fridge is a reassuring sight as the holidays loom. This is such a popular part of the holiday line up that they make an appearance not only at the extended cocktail hour but also at breakfast or at the cobbled together midday meal. Pretty jars of rillettes make a superb holiday gifts with an admirable effort to reward ratio.

Rillettes need not break the holiday food budget. If you know a nice fishmonger, ask for a discount on the end pieces of large fillets of salmon — these are harder to sell than the center cut pieces and often linger longer in the case. Similarly, if you know a grocer who sells the ends and remnants of smoked salmon, these are often much cheaper than the main slices, but just as flavorful.

There are three approaches to making rillettes, and each has its own merits. In Scandinavia and Canada, the fish is cooked in ample amounts of butter either in a sous vide or a poaching pan. It is then pounded into tiny pieces and poured with the cooking juice into the ramekin or jar. When I first made rillettes, I often salted the salmon for half an hour, then roasted it in foil with only olive oil rubbed into the skin of the fish. I like the robust flavor this produces, and the fish takes on a lovely deep color. But I've ended up most loyal to the method championed by David Lebovitz and Dorie Greenspan: poach the salmon in a light combination of wine and water, then discard the poaching liquid, folding the flaked salmon into a mixture of butter and mayonnaise.

Both Lebovitz and Greenspan add smoked salmon to their rillettes, which deepens the flavor considerably. As always, I add a few local ingredients to my version to make it taste more Russian — and when my budget runs to it, I top the rillettes with red caviar for a lovely visual contrast and superb pop of flavor.

But any way you spread them, salmon rillettes will make your winter holidays merrier and easier!

Ingredients

- 1 tsp salt
- 1 pound (500 grams) salmon fillet (ends are fine)
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 large bunch dill, divided into two parts, finely minced
- 3 sprigs of thyme
- 1 tsp cloves
- 2 cups white wine
- 2 lemons, one zested
- 1 stick salted butter (113 grams) at room temperature
- 5-6 scallions, finely sliced
- 1 shallot, finely chopped
- ½-lb (225 grams) smoked salmon, cut into small pieces
- ½-cup (120 ml) mayonnaise
- 2 Tbsp whole grain mustard
- 3 Tbsp capers
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 3 Tbsp fresh tarragon, finely minced
- Red caviar for garnish (optional, but it really jazzes things up)

Preparation

- Salt the salmon fillets and let them rest for 20 minutes at room temperature.
- Place the bay leaves, one-third of the dill, thyme, cloves, wine and 1 cup of water in a Dutch oven and bring to a gentle simmer.
- Place a small rack inside the Dutch oven and lay the salmon in it. Cover the Dutch Oven and cook for 7 minutes. Remove the pot from the heat and let sit, covered, for an additional 5 minutes. Place the salmon on a baking tray and chill for one hour. You can make the salmon a day ahead.
- Place the butter, mayonnaise, mustard, and capers into a food processor fitted with a steel blade and pulse to combine.
- Add in the smoked salmon, shallots, scallions, lemon zest, freshly ground pepper, and the juice of one lemon. Pulse briefly to combine.
- Place the mixture in a mixing bowl. Flake the poached salmon into small pieces and fold them into the mixture with a rubber spatula. Fold in the snipped dill and tarragon. Place the rillettes in clean glass jars with lids and chill for at least 8 hours before serving.
- Garnish with red caviar and more fresh dill. Serve with crackers, Melba toast, or a fresh baguette.

Recipe adapted from Dorie Greenspan

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