

Weekend Gourmet

Appetite:

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Simple elegance for Mom

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If New Orleans has its blackened red fish, then the northwest states have their cedar-planked salmon. Wood planking was probably one of the original methods of making barbecue, adding a wood flavor to food. The food actually picks up the flavor through the smoke generated by the planks, similar to the wood flavored smoke absorbed by a pork shoulder when making barbecue. It was a widely used method in the 19th and early 20th centuries -- not just for fish, but for poultry and meats as well. Cedar planking adds a very special and local type of flavor to fish that's different from normal smoking or grilling.

It seems in the past year or two that planking fish has become quite popular. It's listed on bunches of restaurant menus now and the cedar planks have become widely available as compared to the first time I tried the method 20 years ago, and had to go to a roofing company to get a plank. Now there are various other woods besides cedar thrown into the mix- alder wood, cherry, and hickory (I'm sure there are some I haven't seen yet).

We are fortunate to have a local source for cedar planks over in Chatham County. Graham Woodworking is making 100 percent natural, organic, Eastern cedar planks. Charleen Graham Cody is busy trying to make believers in Eastern cedar, and she persuaded me, and a grilled seafood class I taught at Southern Season. I find her planks sturdy and thick, which is important. The flavor is the real kick. These planks develop a smoother smoke, equaling a nice finish on the fish with less acidity than many planks. Planks are in limited distribution, and the simplest thing to do is head for the Carrboro Farmers Market where they sell the planks.

I picked this recipe for this column because it is different and showy and tastes fabulous, all things you want for a Mother's Day meal. The key for you is it's so simple to do. Just get those planks soaking Saturday, and the rest comes together quickly. Add grilled asparagus and quick-cooking couscous, and your meal is ready in short-order time. Show your mother what a great cook you are, and skip the craziness at the local eateries.

Cooking for someone is a tremendous show of love. Remember all those meals Mom cooked for you?

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