

# go wild!

Salmon season begins now. Get it while it's fresh. BY IVY MANNING

I'LL NEVER FORGET THE FIRST TIME I cooked a wild salmon. I had just moved from the Midwest to Portland, Oregon, to attend culinary school, and I was working as a line cook, too. So there I stood in the restaurant prep kitchen, staring at the 25-lb. fish lying on my cutting board. It was gorgeous, a king salmon with gleaming silver-black skin, sturdy bones, and bright orangy-red flesh. Back in Wisconsin, I'd only worked with farmed salmon, whose flesh is pale pink and rather flabby, with thin, soft bones. But this wild salmon was nothing like that; I swear, it felt almost alive in my hands. The flesh was firm and resilient, the bones strong as I cut through them. It was the freshest, most robust fish I'd ever cooked.

And my first bite ... wow! I finally understood why people pay a premium for wild salmon. It practically melted in my mouth, and tasted like a complex combination of sweetness and the sea. It reminded me of breathing ocean air when you first get to the beach.

Since then, I've cooked hundreds, if not thousands, of wild salmon recipes in restaurants, in cooking classes, and at home, yet I still get a rush when the

first fresh wild salmon arrive at the seafood counter in May. From then until late September (when the season ends), wild salmon is on my table at least once a week. And in the off-season, I buy and cook frozen wild salmon (albeit a little less frequently, because it's pricier and the texture isn't quite the same).

Wild salmon should be on your table, too. Not only is it incredibly delicious, but it's also good for you and the environment. On the following pages, I'll explain why and tell you about the five salmon species you'll find at the market. I'll also share some of my favorite recipes for wild salmon cooked every which way. You'll see: Wild salmon is a luxury worth every penny.

*What's wrong with farmed salmon?*

While some fish can be farmed in an ecologically responsible, sustainable way, salmon isn't usually one of them. There are myriad issues of concern: Crowded salmon pens and the waste the fish pro-

# The 5 species

There are actually seven species of wild Pacific salmon, but the five below are what you'll find at the market; the other two, found in Asian waters, are rarely sold in North America. There are subtle differences in the texture, color, and flavor of each species, but they can all be used for the recipes on the following pages.

*King*  
(in season  
May to June)



Also called Chinook, this is the largest Pacific salmon species (average adult weight is 20 lb., but it can go up to 50 lb.). It's the earliest to market and the most sought after, prized for its high fat content and melt-in-your-mouth flesh that ranges in color from ivory to deep orange-red.

*Sockeye*  
(in season  
mid-May to  
late July)



Known as "red salmon" by fishermen because its skin changes from gray to bright red during spawning season, sockeye is a smaller species (average weight is 6 lb.) with the firmest texture and a strong, rich flavor.

*Coho*  
(in season  
August to  
September)



Also called "silver salmon" for its bright, silvery skin, coho's deep orange flesh is firm and meaty, with a more delicate flavor than king salmon. Cohos are the second largest species, with an average weight of 12 lb.

*Keta*  
(in season  
June to  
September)

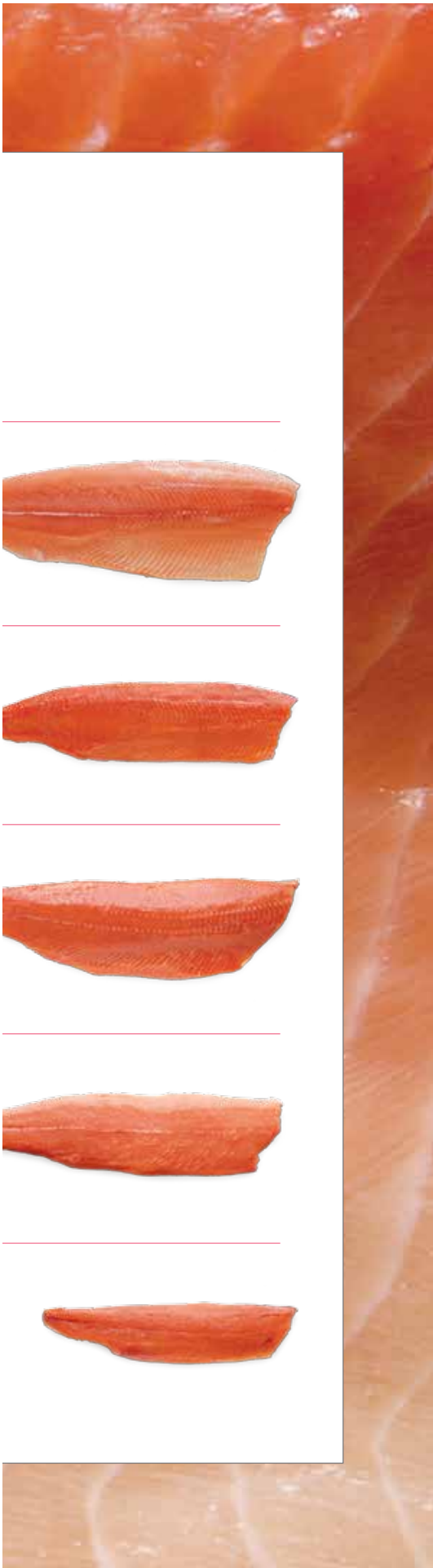


Formerly called chum, this medium-size salmon (average weight is 8 lb.) has firm, light orange-pink flesh, a mild flavor, and relatively low fat content. It's often smoked, but recently, it's become more popular as an affordable fresh fish. Sushi lovers prize keta's large, juicy eggs.

*Pink*  
(in season  
mid-June  
to mid-  
September)



The most abundant of all the species and the smallest (average weight is 2 to 3 lb.), pinks have rosy flesh, a tender texture, and the second-highest fat content. They are often smoked and/or canned, but have recently gained favor as an economical fresh or frozen choice for those who appreciate mild-flavored fish.



duce can create dead zones in the water surrounding the pens; diseases like sea lice are prevalent and often treated with antibiotics; escaped farmed salmon compete with wild salmon for habitat, spread disease, and can breed with wild stock. These issues and more have led environmental groups like Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch and the Environmental Defense Fund to put almost all farmed salmon on their "avoid" and "eco-worst" lists (but check their websites for updates, as advances in sustainable aquaculture are being made every day).

You also need to understand where your salmon comes from. To begin with, there's no such thing as commercially available wild Atlantic salmon anymore. Centuries of overfishing and habitat disruption have brought Atlantic salmon (*Salmo salar*)—a different genus than Pacific salmon (*Oncorhynchus*)—to near extinction; all commercially available Atlantic salmon are now farm-raised. There are also Pacific salmon being farmed in Canada and Chile, often sporting the confusing label "ocean-raised."

To ensure that you're buying truly sustainable salmon, look for the words "wild" and "Pacific" on the label or signage at the fish counter. Seeing "Alaska" on labels is another good sign; 95% of the wild salmon you'll find at the market are caught there, and their state constitution ensures habitat conservation and well-managed fisheries.

## Why is wild better?

Pacific salmon are anadromous, which means that they begin their lives in fresh water—rivers and streams—and migrate to the ocean after one to four years. After spending another one to seven years at sea, adult salmon use their incredible olfactory senses to return to the exact freshwater spot where they were hatched; there, they reproduce (spawn) and ultimately die.

That upstream journey from the ocean is a mostly summertime affair, beginning in May and ending in October, depending on the species. It's a long, hard trip, with some fish swimming up to 2,400 miles to their spawning ground. Before they go, salmon gorge on krill and small fish, storing the energy from the food as fat in their flesh.

To catch the salmon at this point, at their fattest (and tastiest), fishermen meet the salmon close to the coastline and in estuaries before they swim upstream. The fish are caught, immediately stored in ice slush in the fishing boats' hulls, processed on land shortly thereafter, and swiftly air-shipped across the globe. In other words, the wild salmon you can buy in Manhattan on Friday could have been caught in the Pacific Ocean as recently as Wednesday.

Wild salmon have a meaty, succulent texture and rich flavor thanks to their diet and active lives, in contrast to farmed salmon's softer texture and milder flavor, a result of life in confined spaces eating processed food pellets.

On the dinner table, wild salmon's high fat content, so rich in omega-3s, makes it a healthy, delicious choice. That fat also translates into versatility in the kitchen, letting you cook wild salmon any number of ways. Read on for some of my favorite recipes.

## Wild salmon, at the store and at home

### BUYING

- For the best flavor and texture, buy fresh wild salmon the same day you are going to cook it.
- Use your nose—salmon (and all fresh seafood) should smell of nothing but the sea. Avoid any that smell "fishy."
- For whole salmon, the eyes should be clear and moist, not sunken or red. The gills should be bright pink or red, not brown or gray.
- For fillets and steaks, look for tight flesh with no gapping. Gaps appear as the flesh deteriorates and can also be a sign that the salmon was handled roughly during processing.
- Larger fillets from the head end of the salmon tend to have a more uniform thickness, so they cook more evenly.
- Look for salmon displayed on mounds of ice or in dry trays at the fish counter; when fish sits in liquid, its flavor leaches out.

### STORING

- If you can't cook fresh salmon right away, loosely wrap it in plastic and keep it in the coldest part of the refrigerator for no more than 2 days, or wrap well in plastic and heavy-duty foil and freeze for up to 3 months.
- Defrost frozen salmon overnight in the refrigerator. Put the unwrapped fish on a rack over a rimmed baking sheet or in a colander set over a bowl so that any liquid can drain away.

## Beware of pin bones

Pin bones are small, flexible, needle-like bones that run the length of each salmon fillet. Some fishmongers will already have removed them for you, but it's best to make sure before cooking. To check, run your fingers lengthwise in both directions down the center of the fillet, feeling for the tips of the bones, which are spaced about ½ inch apart.



If you find any, use clean needle-nose pliers or tweezers to grab the tip of each bone and give it a gentle tug, pulling it out in the same direction it lies; pulling the pin bones out in the opposite direction will tear the flesh. (You can watch a video demo of a clever trick for removing pin bones at [FineCooking.com/extras](http://FineCooking.com/extras).)

### COVER RECIPE

## miso-glazed wild salmon with sesame asparagus

*This savory one-pan supper is weeknight-friendly because you can marinate the salmon before work or for as little as 30 minutes before you broil it. To cook the cover, add a handful of cherry tomatoes to the baking sheet 1 to 2 minutes before the salmon is done. Serves 4 to 6*

- ½ cup white miso
- ¼ cup dry sake or dry white wine
- ¼ cup mirin
- 1 Tbs. honey
- 1 Tbs. soy sauce
- 2 tsp. finely grated fresh ginger
- 1 1½- to 2-lb. skin-on wild salmon fillet, pin bones removed (see Beware of Pin Bones, left)
- 1½ lb. medium-thick asparagus, trimmed
- 2 tsp. vegetable oil; more as needed
- Kosher salt
- 1 tsp. Asian sesame oil
- 1½ tsp. toasted sesame seeds

**In a baking dish or on a rimmed baking sheet** large enough to accommodate the salmon, whisk the miso, sake, mirin, honey, soy sauce, and ginger until combined. Turn the salmon in the mixture to coat and leave flesh side down. Marinate for 30 minutes at room temperature, or cover and refrigerate for up to 12 hours.

**Position a rack 6 inches from the broiler element** and heat the broiler on high. In a large bowl, toss the asparagus with the vegetable oil. Line a large rimmed baking sheet with foil and lightly brush with oil. Leaving a light coating of the marinade on the salmon, transfer it skin side down to one side of the sheet. Arrange the asparagus on the other side of the sheet. Sprinkle ½ tsp. salt over the fish and asparagus.

**Broil until the salmon is browned** around the edges, 2 to 4 minutes. Toss the asparagus and continue to broil until the asparagus is tender and the salmon is cooked to your liking, 3 to 5 minutes more for medium rare and 5 to 7 minutes more for medium. Use a paring knife to check for doneness; medium-rare salmon will be slightly translucent in the center, and medium salmon will be opaque but juicy.

**Transfer the salmon and asparagus** to a serving platter. Drizzle the sesame oil over the asparagus, sprinkle the sesame seeds over both, and serve.





## wild salmon-avocado ceviche

*One of the best ways to celebrate the pure flavor and texture of wild salmon is to enjoy it raw, “cooked” only by the acid in fresh lime juice. It’s safe to eat this way as long as you buy “flash-frozen at sea” wild salmon. In Peru, ceviche is traditionally served with popcorn for a crunchy contrast, but tortilla chips are tasty with it, too.*

**Serves 4 as an appetizer**

- ¾ lb. thawed, flash-frozen wild salmon fillet, skinned, pin bones removed (see Beware of Pin Bones, opposite), and cut into ¼-inch dice**
- ¼ cup fresh lime juice (from 2 medium limes)**
- 1 tsp. lime zest**
- ¼ cup finely chopped shallot**
- 2 Tbs. chopped fresh cilantro**
- Kosher salt**
- 2 small radishes, very thinly sliced into half-moons**
- 1 large ripe Hass avocado, cut into ¼-inch dice**
- 1 medium ripe mango, cut into ¼-inch dice**
- 1 Tbs. rice vinegar**
- 1 Tbs. minced jalapeño (with seeds); more to taste**
- Pure New Mexico chile powder (optional)**
- Tortilla chips or popcorn**

**In a medium bowl, combine** the salmon, lime juice and zest, 1 Tbs. of the shallot, the cilantro, and ¾ tsp. salt. Gently stir to combine. Cover and refrigerate for 30 minutes.

**Meanwhile, in a medium bowl,** combine the remaining 3 Tbs. shallot with the radishes, avocado, mango, vinegar, jalapeño, and ½ tsp. salt. Cover and refrigerate for 20 minutes.

**Pour off the lime juice** from the salmon mixture. Spoon ¼ cup of the avocado mixture into each of four glasses or coupes. Top with ¼ cup of the salmon mixture. Repeat the layers, ending with the salmon. Sprinkle chile powder, if using, over the top of each portion and serve with the tortilla chips or popcorn.

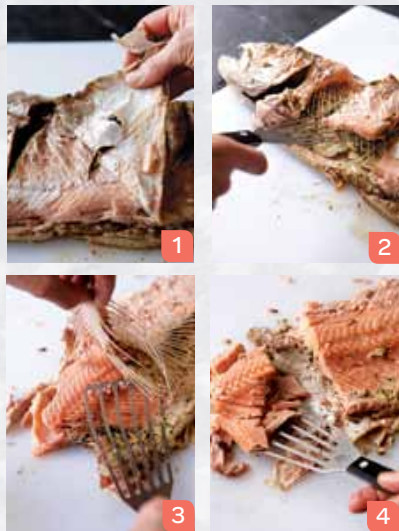
*Go med-rare,  
or raw*

**Don't be afraid to eat wild Pacific salmon that's not cooked all the way through. Its succulent texture shines when the fish retains a touch of translucence in the center. Or be bold and try it raw.**

## Whole wild salmon, on and off the grill

- Make sure the salmon you buy fits onto your grill with enough room to roll it over so you can grill both sides; most grills can accommodate a small coho or standard sockeye or keta.
- Confirm that the salmon has been dressed (gutted and scaled) before you pay for it; it's a messy job better done at the store.
- Two large spatulas are necessary to roll the fish over.
- Heating the grill grates well and oiling them several times help keep the salmon skin from sticking. Dusting the skin with flour and oiling it just before it goes onto the grill help, too.
- Don't forget to soak the toothpicks so that they don't burn during grilling.

### Carving a whole salmon



Remove the toothpicks, and transfer the fennel at the opening of the cavity to a small serving bowl. **1** Carefully peel back the skin from one side of the fish and lightly season the flesh with salt. **2** Using a slotted spatula, remove the flesh from the bones in sections. Scrape the remaining fennel into the bowl; discard the preserved lemon. **3** Use the spatula to hold the bottom flesh down and then carefully lift up and discard the spine. **4** Lightly season the bottom flesh and remove it in sections, leaving the skin behind.





## Grilling gold

Sometimes, fat is a good thing, like when you consider how the high fat content of wild salmon helps it stand up so well to the heat of the grill, basting it from the inside out.

### grilled whole wild salmon with preserved lemon and fennel

*This showstopping main course is perfect for a summer cookout or celebration. The salmon comes off the grill juicy and tender, perfumed with the preserved lemon-fennel stuffing and deeply seasoned from the cumin-and-garlic-spiked spice paste rubbed into the skin and cavity. Serve with grilled zucchini and eggplant, and warm flatbread.*

**Serves 6 to 8**

- 1 6- to 8-lb. whole wild salmon, dressed (see Whole Wild Salmon, on and off the Grill, opposite)**
- 1 medium preserved lemon, rinsed, pulp and peel separated, and seeded**
- 1/3 cup chopped fresh cilantro**
- 3 medium cloves garlic**
- 1 Tbs. olive oil**
- 2 tsp. ground cumin**
- 1/2 tsp. hot paprika**
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper**
- 1 small fennel bulb, halved, cored, and cut into 1/8-inch-thick slices; fronds reserved for garnish**
- 5 to 6 thick toothpicks or wooden skewers, soaked in cold water for 30 minutes**
- Vegetable or canola oil, as needed**
- All-purpose flour, as needed**
- Fresh lemon slices, for garnish**

**Using kitchen shears**, cut off the salmon's top fins and the fins just behind the gills. Rinse the fish well inside and out and pat dry with paper towels. Using a sharp boning knife, cut deep diagonal slashes almost to the bone 3 inches apart on both sides of the fish.

**With a mini food processor or mortar and pestle, blend the preserved lemon pulp**, cilantro, garlic, olive oil, cumin, paprika, 2 tsp. salt, and 1 tsp. pepper to a smooth paste. Rub the paste into the salmon's cavity and side slashes.

Cut the preserved lemon peel into pieces and stuff them into the cavity along with the fennel slices. Poke the tip of a sharp paring knife through the belly flaps at even intervals, then weave the toothpicks through the holes to close the cavity. Let stand at room temperature while preparing the grill.

**Prepare a hot charcoal or gas grill fire for direct grilling.** Clean and oil the grill grates 3 times at 10-minute intervals, covering the grill between oilings.

**Adjust a gas grill to medium heat** (325°F to 350°F); for a charcoal grill, wait until you can hold your hand about 6 inches above the grate for 4 seconds.

**Measure the thickness of the fish** right behind its gills and calculate 10 minutes of grilling time per inch for medium rare.

**Thoroughly pat the salmon dry** with paper towels, wiping any excess paste off the skin. Dust one side of the fish with flour and then brush liberally with oil. Oil the grill again and place the fish on the grill floured side down, with the belly facing you. Leave enough room behind it to roll the salmon over later.

**Cover and grill the fish** for half of the calculated time. Wrap the tail fin with foil if it begins to scorch.

**Dust the top side of the fish** with flour, and brush liberally with oil. Slide 2 large spatulas underneath the fish, gently loosening any places where the skin may have stuck, and roll it over onto the second side. Cover and continue to grill for the remaining time, or until an instant-read thermometer inserted horizontally into the thickest part of the fish without touching bone registers 125°F for medium rare, 135°F for medium, and 145°F for well done.

**Carefully slide the two spatulas** under the fish at the head and tail ends and transfer to a platter. Tent loosely with foil and let rest for 5 to 10 minutes before serving. See opposite page for carving instructions. Serve the salmon with the fennel stuffing.

## Quick cook

Wild salmon cooks—and overcooks—quickly. A good rule of thumb is to cook it for 8 to 10 minutes per inch of thickness, regardless of the cooking method.

### poached wild salmon steaks with citrus beurre blanc

*Rich, luscious poached salmon offsets a bright and buttery sauce in this elegant entrée. Roasted potatoes and steamed broccoli are delicious alongside. Serves 4*

- 4 6-oz. wild salmon steaks (about 1 inch thick)
- 4 cups dry white wine
- 1 medium carrot, thinly sliced
- ½ medium yellow onion, thinly sliced
- ½ large lemon, thinly sliced
- 9 sprigs fresh flat-leaf parsley, plus 1 Tbs. finely chopped
- 6 sprigs fresh thyme
- 6 black peppercorns; more freshly ground to taste
- 2 bay leaves
- Kosher salt
- ½ cup fresh orange juice
- 1 Tbs. fresh lime juice
- 1 Tbs. fresh lemon juice
- 2 Tbs. finely chopped shallot
- 6 oz. (12 Tbs.) cold unsalted butter, cut into ½-inch pieces

**Let the salmon sit at room temperature** for 30 minutes while you make the poaching liquid.

**To make the poaching liquid**, combine 3 cups of the wine, the carrot, onion, lemon, 8 parsley sprigs, 5 thyme sprigs, the peppercorns, bay leaves, 2 tsp. salt, and 3 cups water in an 11- to 12-inch skillet or sauté pan; bring to a boil. Cover the pan with a tight-fitting lid; if the lid isn't snug, cover with foil and then the lid. Turn the heat down and simmer for 10 minutes. Turn the heat off and let stand until ready to use.

**To make the beurre blanc**, combine the remaining 1 cup white wine, the citrus juices, shallot, and the remaining sprigs of parsley and thyme in a 2-quart saucepan. Boil until reduced to about ¼ cup, about 12 minutes.

**Strain the mixture** through a fine-mesh sieve into a small bowl, pressing on and then discarding the solids; rinse out the saucepan. Return the liquid to the saucepan and heat over low heat until hot, about 1 minute. Gradually whisk







in the cold butter a few pieces at a time until the sauce is creamy and emulsified. Remove from the heat. Stir in the chopped parsley, season to taste with salt and pepper, cover the pan, and keep the sauce in a warm place or transfer it to a small thermos.

**To poach the fish**, return the poaching liquid to a simmer and then turn the heat down to medium low. Remove and discard the herb sprigs. Gently slide the salmon into the liquid, which should come at least  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the way up the sides of the steaks; add hot water if it doesn't. Quickly ladle some of the poaching liquid over the fish, tightly cover the skillet, and cook for 1 minute.

**Remove the skillet from the heat** and let sit, covered, until an instant-read thermometer inserted into the thickest part of the fish registers 120°F for medium rare or 125°F for medium, 7 to 10 minutes.

**Using a slotted spatula**, transfer the salmon to a paper-towel-lined platter or plates; let rest uncovered for 5 minutes. (The salmon will continue cooking as it rests.) Discard the paper towels and serve the fish with the *beurre blanc*.

## sear-roasted wild salmon with leek & artichoke ragù

*Searing the salmon and finishing it in a hot oven yields restaurant-worthy results: a crisp exterior and juicy interior. Serve with jasmine rice. Serves 4*

- 4 6-oz. skin-on wild salmon fillets (about 1 inch thick), pin bones removed (see *Beware of Pin Bones*, page 58)
- 1½ lb. fresh baby artichokes (8 to 14) or ½ lb. thawed frozen artichoke hearts, quartered
- 2 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
- 3 medium leeks, white and light green parts only, halved lengthwise, and sliced crosswise ½ inch thick (2½ cups)
- 2 tsp. chopped fresh thyme
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
- ½ cup dry white wine
- ½ cup lower-salt chicken or vegetable broth
- 1 Tbs. canola oil

1 Tbs. fresh lemon juice

1½ tsp. finely grated lemon zest

2 oz. (4 Tbs.) cold unsalted butter, cut into pieces

**Position a rack in the center of the oven** and heat the oven to 450°F. Pat the salmon dry with paper towels and let sit at room temperature for about 30 minutes.

**Meanwhile, if using fresh baby artichokes**, trim and quarter them following the directions on page 88.

**Heat the olive oil in a 12-inch skillet** over medium heat. Pat the artichokes dry with paper towels. Add to the skillet along with the leeks and 1 tsp. of the thyme. Season with ½ tsp. salt and ¼ tsp. pepper and cook, stirring occasionally, until the leeks are translucent but not browned (lower the heat if necessary), about 8 minutes.

**Add the wine**, turn the heat up to medium high, and simmer until nearly evaporated, about 2 minutes. Add the broth and ½ cup water, bring to a simmer, and cook, uncovered and stirring occasionally, until the liquid is reduced by half and the artichokes are tender when pierced with a fork, 3 to 5 minutes. Turn the heat down to low, cover, and keep warm.

**Season the salmon with salt and pepper.** Turn on the exhaust fan. Heat the canola oil in a 12-inch ovenproof nonstick or well-seasoned cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat until shimmering hot. Add the salmon to the skillet flesh side down and cook, undisturbed, until golden brown, 1 to 2 minutes. With a slotted spatula, turn the fillets over and transfer the skillet to the oven. Roast until cooked to your liking, 2 to 3 minutes for medium rare or about 5 minutes for medium. Use a paring knife to check for doneness; medium-rare salmon will be slightly translucent in the center, and medium salmon will be opaque but juicy (see *Test Kitchen*, page 88). Transfer the salmon to a serving platter.

**Stir the remaining 1 tsp. thyme, the lemon juice, zest, and butter** into the ragù, swirling the pan until the butter is melted. Remove from the heat and season to taste with salt and pepper. Serve the salmon with the ragù.

*Ivy Manning is a wild salmon devotee, food writer, culinary instructor, and cookbook author. Her most recent book is Crackers & Dips. □*