

AN IMMIGRANT'S SEARCH FOR AN IMMIGRANT'S MEAL: YANGON'S BEST SMOKED SALMON DISHES

By McKenna Kemp Mar. 29, 2018

On one pure, cold day in New York City, a friend and I concocted a plan for what has now been affectionately dubbed "Fishmas." Right before the Christmas holiday, we stood bundled outside the Acme Fish warehouse in Brooklyn at 8am so we could (at half price) procure around four pounds of lox for a bunch of our friends to devour. We laid the fish out on a long wooden table like the Last Supper. We dressed it with dill, cream cheese, onions, and roc. We sandwiched it between bagels, baguettes, and cucumbers — a pink and red and green mass of food fitting for the season. We ate all of it. We were happy. We smelled disgusting.

Cured salmon, in its many forms (lox, gravlax, cold-smoked, etc.) is a piece of New York's history. After Scandinavian immigrants brought over the brining techniques and Jewish immigrants popularized it by serving it on bagels, the trend grew to unbridled proportions in the hot bakeries of 1900s Manhattan and remained a staple to this day.

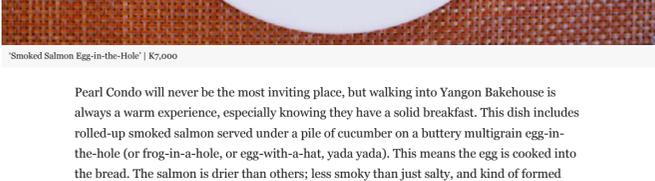
I assumed smoked salmon would be a rarity in Myanmar, so planned what I believed would be my last lox bagel for a long while, spilling caper buds on the floor of my empty apartment, knocking it back with street stand coffee before heading to the airport. This was naive, as a week later, here I was in Yangon, cheerfully ordering a smoked salmon sandwich for lunch, knocking it back with street stand coffee. Globalization wins.

Just as bagels and lox were eaten by Jewish immigrants to cure their homesickness, I, too, have sought the familiarity of smoked salmon as an immigrant in Yangon. I've spent the last year cataloging where to find the special fish. Below a list of what I've found so far.

A few caveats: Most dishes have fairly high price points per the imported product. I've focused on a la carte menu offerings and avoided the hotel brunches or set meals. I hope you'll refer to this list when you seek that salty, sparkling, pink fix. Sensual? You bet. I am not a chef nor have much experience writing about food. At one point I Googled 'food review etiquette' and it was NOT helpful. This is just a girl, looking at a city, asking it to give her all of its smoked salmon.

Yangon Bakehouse (Pearl Condo)

The One that's for Brunch



'Smoked Salmon Egg-in-the-Hole' | K7,000

Pearl Condo will never be the most inviting place, but walking into Yangon Bakehouse is always a warm experience, especially knowing they have a solid breakfast. This dish includes rolled-up smoked salmon served under a pile of cucumber on a buttery multigrain egg-in-the-hole (or frog-in-a-hole, or egg-with-a-hat, yada yada). This means the egg is cooked into the bread. The salmon is drier than others; less smoky than just salty, and kind of formed into a roll. The bread is tough on the outside, yet warm and super buttery on the inside. The contrast of this with the cool cucumber is beautiful, especially when mixed in with the supreme unifier: a pat of dill cream cheese.

The downside here is that I've seen quality differ over time. Capers were too dry on this go, and the egg over-fried on the bottom, which makes a boring yolk. But on the whole, it is a reliable brunch option.

Mahlzeit

The One that's kind of a Pizza



'Flammkuchen mit Käucherlachs (Smoked salmon and leek flatbread)' | K10,000

Mahlzeit is a German restaurant in Sanchaung, and in keeping with European tradition, it features lots of fish on the menu (Side note: This is also one of the most interesting menus in town). I tried this flatbread dish one Sunday, and I found that though it looked a bit suspect, it tasted marvelous. It was a more cooked version of smoked salmon, in contrast to the other dishes on this list, and came scattered on a lovely, light flatbread with more onion-like leeks and savory, melted cheese. The salmon is strong and fishy, but in an ideal way. The flatbread was baked perfectly.

Sharky's

The One that's Handsome



'Smoked Salmon Sandwich' | K7,000

You were all expecting this weren't you? It's true! Sharky's is good, we all agree. But I'm here to tell you that despite the excitement that came with the release of their smoked salmon bagel, it's really all about the *sandwich*. Where the bagel covers up the flavor of the smoked salmon, the sandwich complements it. It's served on a baguette with soft cheese, caramelized onions, and some pickled accoutrements. The salmon is generous, as is the cheese, and a stripe of honey mustard with the baguette adds a delightful touch of sweetness. You're going to want to pile on the pickled onions upfront. The pickles are sweet, and the pepper is a good, spicy note for the end because it's pretty strong.

The bread is good but tough to bite into, and you'll end up covered in bread dust by the end, so just be prepared to walk out powdered with the remains of your lunch. It's served with chips on the side, and my favorite hack is to spray them with the balsamic vinegar for a little more flavor.

Strand Café

The One that's a Soup



'Salmon Tartare' | US\$10

If you want a more light and lemony (and wet? yes, definitely) smoked salmon dish, this is your lady. It's salmon smoked in maplewood and then cut as a tartare, with a dusting of pepper. The cucumber dressing makes it feel more like a soup, and that's how I like to eat it, all mixed together. They dress it up pretty with an artful balsamic flourish on the side, but you'll want to mess that up immediately to get it into the dish somehow because it's a nice addition. Unleash your inner abstract expressionist. Finish it off with their bread and butter, which is also addicting.

No part of this dish is too strong, though I wish the salmon was a bit more savory, which I think is a recurring issue for me. My craving for salt knows no end (maybe because I'm hungover? Or worse: American). At least there's the bonus of the hotel's peaceful midday light, and the quiet, which makes the café a lovely place to work if you can afford the bill at the end.

Babett

The One that's Romantic



'Smoked Salmon Rocket Salad' | K13,000

Sure, smoked salmon isn't that romantic. But under the spotlights and a conversational hum and a happy hour wine, maybe it can be? This salad is sensational, though more like salmon tapas than a salad. It's served with cherry tomatoes, boiled egg, and thin-sliced radish. There's a light sauce similar to a hollandaise and balsamic vinegar to accent it. This is described on the menu as 'old balsamic vinegar,' which sounds funnier than saying 'aged,' I think.

The salmon might be the freshest tasting on this list, with a perfect balance of savory brine to the fish. Your blood pressure has nothing to fear. The texture of the salmon contrasts perfectly with the peppery, crunchy radish and rocket.

Signature Restaurant (Garden Bistro)

The One that's the One



'Salmon Baguette' | K13,000

"Signature? Really?" you all ask.

"Signature!" I shout into the hot, stale air of their Garden Bistro, which faces the lake on the southeast corner of Kandawgyi Park. Signature is better known as a dim sum spot (and crown-owned hangout) than a western food mecca, which is what makes this even more peculiar. Word has passed down friend-to-friend, and now I am here telling you: the smoked salmon baguette is gold (and might as well be gold, because it's expensive).

If you're a baguette purist, this is not the sandwich for you, but for me, who doesn't care, it is delicious. The bread has a thin crust but is mostly soft and doesn't tear up your mouth. The salmon is plentiful and thick-cut, which is necessary, considering the high price point. The cheese is sliced into soft, creamy blocks. The salmon itself has just the right amount of brine and actually tastes like salmon. A rogue element is the thin layer of mayo, which sounds bad, but actually adds a slight tang and sweetness. Altogether, it's a creamy, melt-in-your-mouth experience, best had on their lovely velvet couches over decent Americanos.

They serve it with pesto (not needed, but it does) and ketchup (cue the 'girl with No Good Gesture' emoji) and a forgettable side salad topped with tasteless rubber holes trying to pass as olives. But if you ignore all that, the sandwich is where it's at. The other dishes on this list might be more respected when it comes to culinary craftsmanship and pure ingredients. But if Sharky's is the one your mom wants you to marry, Signature's is the one you ride off on a motorcycle with.

Pickled Ngar Gyinn

The One that's Local



'Pickled Ngar Gyinn from Ocean Supercenter' | K1,200

Myanmar has various local traditions of delicious cured fish, from fermented *ngapi* paste to dried fish that you often see crisping in the sun, laid out like long socks on boulders and sidewalks. But the closest thing to lox I've heard of is the pickled *ngar gyinn* (Mrigal carp), which is a cooked and cured filet mixed with rice and wrapped up in a banana leaf. Sometimes, it's tucked into a tight roll, or cubed like a salad. It packs a deliciously sharp and salty punch, but doesn't quite have that soft, raw feeling that a smoked salmon filet has, nor the touch of sweetness from the brine. There are rumors of smoked and cured river fish in the north. I'm still learning and looking and tasting.

Other notable mentions: Café DiBar's smoked salmon canapés. Mahlzeit, Locale, and Sharky's all have lox bagels (but there's room for more). Savoy and Chatrium have smoked salmon Eggs Benedict.

McKenna Kemp is a designer and artist working in Yangon. You can find her work at www.mckenakemp.com