

Salmon Baked with Preserved Lemon and Za'atar

This is my easiest and most popular way of cooking salmon, striped bass, and other types of fish. The secret is to use your own preserved lemons, which are so easy to make, and to get good za'atar with sumac in it. (I like to add more sumac; I adore its lemony flavor.) You can also add fresh thyme or oregano. Serve with rice or couscous. When buying my fish, I ask the fishmonger to cut it into portions, which makes cooking so much easier for me.

Serves 6 to 8

3-pound (1 1/2-kg) salmon fillet, cut into 6 to 8 portions

2 whole preserved lemons (skin and flesh), plus 1/4 cup (60 ml) juice from the jar (this page)

1 tablespoon za'atar

1 teaspoon sumac

1 lemon, thinly sliced

Olive oil

1. Preheat the oven to 425 degrees, and line a sheet pan with parchment paper. Put the fillet pieces, skin side down, on the parchment.

2. Purée the preserved lemons with the juice in a food processor, pour this mixture over the fish, and sprinkle it with za'atar and sumac. Scatter the fresh lemon slices around the fish, and drizzle a little oil on top. Bake for 20 minutes, or until the fish flakes easily.

Preserved Lemons

I have been making my own preserved lemons for almost forty years. The bottled kind you can buy in stores are mostly cured in water with some acidic preservative; the final result is just not as good. I am a purist and do not put in sugar, garlic cloves, or anything other than lemon, salt, and fresh bay leaves if I can find them, for color. These lemons are one of the absolute staples in my refrigerator.

Makes 8 preserved lemons

About 16 lemons

About 1 cup (240 grams) kosher salt

4 fresh bay leaves (optional)

2 tablespoons olive oil

1. Cut off the very ends of eight of the lemons. Slice each one lengthwise into quarters, cutting to but not through the opposite end. Gently open half the lemon over a bowl, and sprinkle a scant tablespoon salt into it; then open the other half and add another tablespoon.

2. Put the lemons into a large jar—it's fine if you have to pack them in, because they will shrink. Juice the remaining lemons, and completely cover the cut ones in the jar with their juice. Slip in the bay leaves, if using. Let the lemons sit for a day, lightly covered with a towel.

3. The next day, pour a thin film of olive oil over the lemons and their juice. This will help keep them sealed while they are being preserved. Now cover the jar tightly and put it into the refrigerator, or store at room temperature, allowing the lemons to cure for 3 to 4 weeks, or until the rinds are soft. They will last for at least a year.

