

How To Cook Perfect Salmon Fillets on the Stovetop

When it comes to simple, quick-cooking weeknight meals, salmon fillets always have a place in my regular lineup. This foolproof technique delivers a perfect medium-cooked fillet that's tender and flaky with deliciously crispy pan-seared skin.

Buying the Salmon

When cooking salmon in the oven or on the grill, one large piece of fish works well. But when pan-searing on the stovetop, opt for individual fillets. One six- to eight-ounce fillet per person is a good amount. And if you're buying multiple fillets, don't be afraid to ask your fishmonger to portion them for you.

The 3 Rules for Super-Crispy Skin Every Time

1. The very best thing about pan-seared salmon (in addition to a no-fuss process and super-quick cook time) is the skin. When cooked any other way, fish skin is, well, kind of unappetizing. But when a fillet is perfectly pan-seared, it's a totally different story. The skin cooks up to be super crispy; it's thin, brittle, and savory, in a way that's kind of on par with really good potato chips or bacon. Follow these three rules and you'll be rewarded with perfectly crispy skin every single time.

2. Don't start with cold fillets: Cold salmon fillets pulled straight from the fridge are not a friend of a screaming-hot pan. When cold fish is added to a hot pan, the fillets will immediately seize up and are more likely to cook unevenly. Instead, remove the fish from the refrigerator about 15 to 20 minutes before you're ready to start cooking, in order to bring them up closer to room temperature.

3. Make sure the fillets are dry: Before adding the salmon fillets to the pan, use a paper towel or a clean dish towel to pat each one dry. When the fillets are moist or wet, they're more likely to stick to the pan, and the skin won't crisp quite as nicely.



Use a really hot pan: A hot pan and high heat don't necessarily go hand in hand. Keep the flame around medium to medium-high, but before anything touches the pan, let it get hot — like, really hot. After, pour in a thin layer of oil and heat until it shimmers. Then add the fish and let it do its thing.

Always Start with the Fillets Skin-Side Down

While the salmon will cook on both sides, the process should always start by adding the fish to the pan skin-side down. The skin is tough and durable, and can withstand more time on the hot surface of the pan without overcooking.

Trust and the Waiting Game

This is arguably the hardest part of cooking pan-seared salmon. Once the fish hits the pan, the very best course of action is to step away (but not too far) and let it do its thing. It might take some serious willpower, but you need to trust the process — no touching, no poking or prodding, and no moving the fillet around. You'll be tempted to lift the fish or move it around the pan to see how it's coming along, but the very best thing you can do is to keep your hands off and wait.

Let the Visual Cues Guide You

When pan-searing, the bulk of the cooking takes place while the salmon is skin-side down. After it's been cooking for a few minutes, you'll start to notice the color of the fillet slowly begin to change. Starting from the bottom, where the skin touches the pan, and working its way upward along the sides of the fillets, you'll see the flesh lighten from deep, dark pink to a much more pale color.

This change in the color of the flesh will act as your indicator for how the cooking is progressing. Once the color change has moved up about three-quarters of the way from the bottom, it's time to flip. Since the bulk of cooking has already happened, the salmon will cook for a couple minutes more after flipping it flesh-side down. What you'll get is a tender and flaky piece of salmon, cooked perfectly to medium, with super-crispy skin.

