

## A FISH CALLED **SANMA**

# 秋刀魚



Typically, *sanma* is sprinkled with coarse salt, and then grilled, uncut. Each person gets his or her own fish, whole. Served with a *sudachi* lime and a small mound of grated *daikon* radish drizzled with soy sauce, *sanma* is one of the great plebeian pleasures of autumn. Although traditionally grilling was done in Japan around open hearths, nowadays people use nets placed directly over kitchen gas ranges, or racks slipped under stovetop broiling units. Not surprisingly, this creates a great deal of smoke, and an unmistakable smell, especially when cooking a nice oily fish, such as *sanma*. But, the Japanese take a pragmatic approach to their neighbor's cooking odors: most people ignore them, or when that's not possible, offer to share their home-made fare, as I discovered many years ago when I first came to Japan.

Returning home one autumn evening to find that thick smoke had filled my small, rented room in Tokyo, my first thought was to call the fire department. When I realized that no one else in my neighborhood was showing any signs of alarm, and I took another whiff, I decided the aroma was rather good. Following my nose, I arrived at my landlady's kitchen. With apologies for having only humble fare to offer me, I was invited to sample her freshly grilled *sanma*. It was simply delicious -- more succulent than trout, and with far fewer bones.

### MAKING, and EATING SANMA

In Japan, it will be a simple matter to buy fresh, whole ***sanma*** in your local market. Outside Japan, ask for **Pacific saury**. If you are met with a puzzled look, show the image here, and ask again.



Take your prized (but inexpensive) *sanma* home **WHOLE** and **UNGUTTED**. Rinse it under cold water, pat it dry. Refrigerate (up to 12 hours) until ready to cook.



With the tip of a sharp knife make several diagonal slits, parallel to each other, down the length of the body. These slits aid in cooking the fish quickly and evenly, and help prevent the skin from splitting in an unattractive manner.



**NOTE:** the Japanese serve whole fish with the head facing left, the tail right; belly forward and back away. This position is considered "correct" for placing on a plate and serving... so any decorative slits are made on this side. And, this is the side to be exposed to the flame when broiling or grilling.

Pour 2 or 3 spoonsful of *saké* (rice wine) over the fish, flipping gently to be sure that all surfaces have been moistened. Allow the *sanma* to sit for a minute or two before sprinkling all surfaces of the fish generously with coarse salt. Allow the *sanma* to sit at cool room temperature for 5 minutes, or until the fish “sweats.”) Blot up any accumulated moisture from the fish. Re-salt lightly (especially the tail) to insure a crusty, crisp skin. If the fish are too long to fit under your broiler (or place on top of your grill), cut each in half JUST BEFORE COOKING.

Japanese household broilers are fitted with a tray under the rack to catch drippings. Water should be placed in this tray to prevent flare-ups from the fish oils. Specially treated disposable, ridged, foil broiler pans are available in many American supermarkets; these absorb excess cooking oils and fat.



Cooking time varies with the size of the fish and the type of broiler or grill you use, but *sanma* shouldn't take more than 7-8 minutes to cook through. When the fish is done, the eyes will be opaque, the skin will be brown and bubbly (even slightly charred), and the flesh will feel firm (try pressing the belly area lightly with tongs or long chopsticks).



While the fish cooks, peel a chunk of *daikon* radish and grate it, preferably on a ceramic grater to avoid a metallic taste. Grated *daikon* radish is rich in vitamin C, thought to counteract possible carcinogenic effects of grilling. To preserve this air-sensitive nutrient, it is best to grate the radish just before eating. Transfer the grated radish to a mesh strainer lined with cloth (the Japanese use *sarashi*, a muslin-like cloth for this and other kitchen tasks) or paper towel. Lift up the edges of the cloth or paper towel to form a bag enclosing the grated radish. Gently squeeze to drain off excess liquid. Coax the grated-and-drained radish into small mounds and use these to garnish each plate. Cut *sudachi* (or limes) into wedges and place these on each plate, too. Place the fish in the "correct" position on individual dishes and serve with soy sauce to drizzle over the grated radish.

ENJOY!



Eating *sanma*: The skin is edible, though you may prefer to remove it if you want to limit your sodium intake. To remove the skin, insert chopsticks (or the tines of a fork) just under the belly skin. Lift and peel back. Squeeze *sudachi* or lime juice over the exposed top half of the fish. Pull off small bits, top each mouthful with some grated radish and eat!

Like lake trout, the belly area of *sanma* contains finer, softer bones -- the "rib cage" - which, by the way, many Japanese consume, as is. Eat with care, removing bones as necessary. Most Japanese will also eat the innards, though you may prefer to leave them behind. When the spine is fully visible, lift it up and enjoy the bottom half of the fish (no need to flip it over). Head, tail, spine (and skin and innards, if you chose not to eat these) will remain on your plate after you have feasted.



*Sanma*... fully ENJOYED!