

秋刀魚の塩焼き *Sanma no Shioyaki* Salt-Grilled Saury

Typically, *sanma* is sprinkled with coarse salt, and then grilled, ungutted. Each person gets his or her own fish, whole. Served with a *sudachi* lime and a small mound of grated *daikon* radish, the fish can be drizzled with soy sauce (though I prefer mine as is). Salt-grilled *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 quite a bit 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, she invited me to sample her freshly grilled *sanma*. Simply delicious: more succulent than trout with far fewer bones.

COOKING SANMA

In Japan, it's a simple matter to buy fresh, whole ***sanma*** in local markets. Outside Japan, ask for **Pacific saury**. If you are met with puzzlement, print out the image here, and ask again.



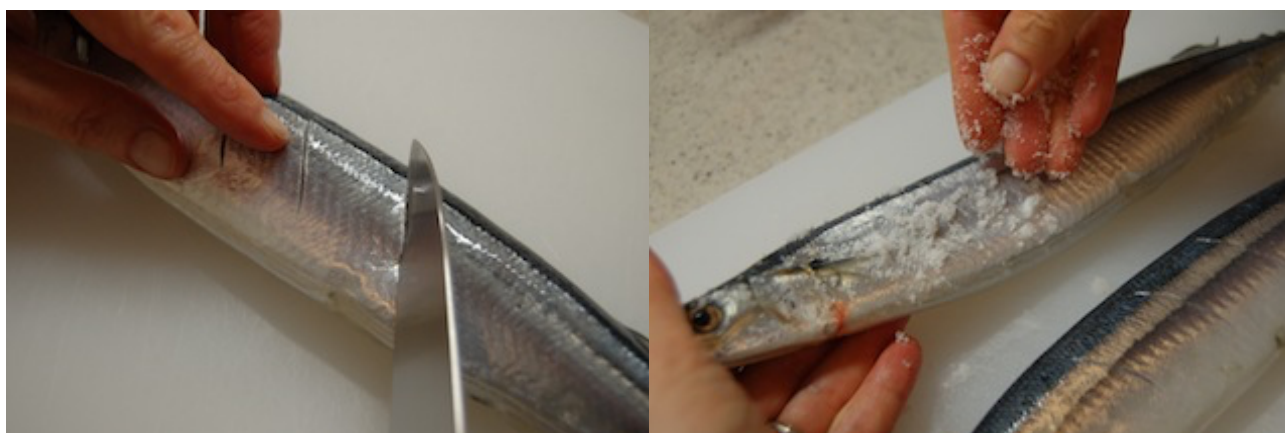
Take your prized *sanma* home **WHOLE** and **UNGUTTED**; rinse under cold water and pat dry.



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. If you really want to gut your fish, now is the time to do it.

Use your fingers to gently pull out the inner organs from the cut end. Rinse under cold water, pat the fish dry.

With the head to the left (this is the “correct” position for serving whole fish) use the tip of a sharp knife to make several slanted slits, parallel to each other along the length of the fish. These slits aide in cooking the fish quickly and evenly, avoiding the need to flip the fish as they cook.



Pour 2 spoonsful of *saké* over the fish, flipping gently to be sure that all surfaces have been moistened before sprinkling all surfaces of the fish generously with coarse salt.

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.



When the Japanese present whole fish on a plate, the head is typically to the left, tail to the right, and the belly facing forward. This is referred to as the "correct" position. Keeping this in mind, place the fish “right side” up facing the source of heat to crisp the skin that will be presented facing up on the plate.

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 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.

