

THE HIBERNATING GOURMET

How to make a bear's sandwich.

By *Mike Lemkowitz*



The life of *Ursus Americanus Altifrontalis*, the black bear native to the Pacific Northwest, is defined by a never-ending quest for food. After coming out of hibernation in the springtime, black bears begin to eat. They don't stop eating until fall when they go to sleep again, twenty to forty pounds heavier.

Black bears are omnivores, but what they eat is 95% vegetarian, their diet consisting mostly of foods such as nuts, berries, fruit, honey, dandelions, and other weeds and grasses. As the seasons progress they become more carnivorous, integrating salmon, insects, grubs, and other meat into their meals. If the occasion arises they will eat larger animals like beavers and deer. This is not common, though, since North American black bears are bad hunters. They are, however, excellent opportunists, and they love to attack and eat animals that are already dead. This has some implications for humans. While pretending to be dead will deter a grizzly bear from attacking you, it will only encourage a black bear to see you as food. A black bear will eat just about anything if it's hungry. Male black bears have even been reported to occasionally devour their own young. This is also why *Ursus Americanus Altifrontalis* is known to dine from National Park garbage bins from time to time.

Each bear has its own diet, with its own likes and dislikes. These bears possess an innate ability to determine food's nutritional value. When a bear consumes food, it receives either positive or negative

feedback. This feedback is based on what the bear's nutritional needs are during that time of the year, and what kind of body mass it needs. This talent helps each bear to decide what it wants to eat at any given time, and to form a distinct set of favorite foods. Because black bears have an incredibly acute sense of smell, they are also in command of an extremely refined palate. The one dining habit that is the same for all black bears, though, is that *Ursus Americanus Altifrontalis* will eat until its stomach is physically unable to hold any more. It will then proceed to sleep the meal off.

Consider the black bear's supermarket, the Pacific Northwest's forests and streams. An endless selection, and all of it there for the bear to eat. Now compare this to the grocery stores and farmer's markets of the human realm. Sure, humans have heirloom tomatoes, but who cares? Everything that the black bear eats is fresh, organic, free range, locally grown, and every other euphemism that the food culture has.

How can humans, who cannot eat a fraction of what the black bear does, and whose food can never be of such a consistently high quality, possibly compete with the endless repast of the bear? Though *Ursus Americanus Altifrontalis* is an animal known for being drawn to campsites by the smell of raw hot dogs, the more one thinks about it, its diet becomes increasingly enviable to even the most fastidious



gourmet.



NORTH AMERICAN BLACK BEAR SANDWICH

Ingredients:

- Salmon Fillet (At least 1 inch thick)
- Honey (Either Basswood or Avocado)
- Chopped Dandelion* (Uncooked)
- Watercress
- Crusty Bread (Such as Ciabatta)
- Creme Fraiche
- Squeeze of Lemon
- Salt and Pepper

Special Equipment:

- Barbecue

About the Ingredients:

Salmon- black bears learn to avoid the food sources of brown bears, which are the dominant predators. black bears will often only fish salmon streams when brown bears aren't around.

Honey- The North American black bear eats honey, but it likes eating bees even more. A black bear will eat all the bees and larvae first, and save the honey for afterwards.

The two types of honey I recommend for this recipe are either basswood honey, or avocado honey. Both are native to the United States, and have their own distinctive qualities. Basswood honey is moderately difficult to obtain because basswood trees are only in bloom for two weeks in early July. It has a fresh raw flavor, an especially thick consistency, and

a distinctly tea-like aftertaste.

Avocado honey is even more rare, because avocado trees bloom the same time as orange trees, which most beekeepers choose to work instead. Despite its origins, avocado honey tastes nothing like its namesake fruit. It has a deep amber color, and a rich flowery flavor with a buttery aftertaste. It is much less sweet than most commercial honey, and therefore will not overpower the flavor of the dish.

Dandelions- Though thought of by most home gardeners as nothing more than a pesky weed, dandelions have long been enjoyed as a delicacy by both bears and humans alike. Dandelion can be eaten either cooked or raw, and their blossoms can be made into wine. Dandelions contain more vitamin A than carrots, and more iron and calcium than spinach. Fresh raw dandelion, which this recipe calls for, has a naturally bitter taste with a flavor similar to chicory.

When picking raw dandelions to eat, remember that the younger the dandelion plant, the better.

Only harvest dandelions whose flowers have not yet bloomed. After germination, the chemistry of the dandelion changes, and it is only edible when cooked. Dandelions are easy to obtain. Just pick them off of any poorly maintained lawn that hasn't been treated with pesticides.

Instructions:

Rub your barbecue's grill with oil to help minimize sticking. Light your coals, continuing to add briquettes until they are piled up high, almost to the level of the grill. Let the coals burn until they are completely white. It's extremely important that your barbecue be as hot as possible. Cut your crusty bread for sandwiches, and toast on the grill until golden, about one minute per side.

Season the salmon fillet with salt and pepper, and then slather both sides of your fish with a generous layer of honey. Put the salmon onto the grill. You only want to cook the salmon long enough to char the

outside and caramelize the honey. This will take a maximum of two minutes per side on the barbeque, uncovered.

Remove your salmon from the barbecue, and place it onto a piece of grilled bread. Top your sandwich with the chopped dandelion and watercress. In a separate bowl, add a squeeze of lemon to your crème fraîche, season with salt and pepper, and whisk to incorporate. Place a dollop of crème fraîche on the sandwich, cover with the remaining slice of bread, and serve.♦♦

