

Grilled Whole Fish

15 min
PREP

30 min
COOKING



In a food culture where the average dude can identify cuts of beef on sight as if he butchered them himself, there's no excuse to go on ignoring fish. It's every bit as succulent, hearty, nuanced, and open to interpretation as the proteins you prepare every day. You just need to know how to deal with it. We're not talking Tuna Helper here: This isn't Lent. We're talking five fail-safe recipes, supplied by some of America's foremost fish experts. Each dish proves that fish, when done right, is as good as food gets. Barbecued-pork-shoulder good? With these recipes, absolutely.



M

Special Section	1 of 3 →
The Meat Eater's Guide to Cooking Fish	by Howie Kahn
You can manhandle a steak. Chicken, too. But fish? We asked five of our favorite chefs to break down the only skills you'll need—from frying up Baja-quality fish tacos to grilling a whole bass to juicy, flavorful perfection. The lesson? It's a hell of a lot easier than you think	

Photographs by Tom Schierlitz

M

Special Section

2 of 3 →

Fish



Authentic
Hawaiian
Poke



Salt-Crusted
Whole
Fish



1 Put a Flame to It

Hot grill, whole fish: It isn't much more complicated than that. But as Chris Schlesinger of the formidable East Coast Grill in Cambridge, Massachusetts, will tell you, there are a couple of tricks you need to know. "The most common problem is getting the fish stuck on the grill," he says. "Three things will help: a bit of oil on the fish (but not so much it's dripping off); a hot, clean grill (meaning recently brushed); and when you put the fish on the grill, let it sit for three or four minutes. This allows for a sear to develop between the grid and the fish." One more thing: "Use tongs. You'll catch an edge with a spatula. Just kind of worry it. Take the head, shake it a little bit, pry. We say turn it like you would a snoring bed partner."

Grilled Black Sea Bass with Cilantro Mojo

Serves two

- 2 black sea basses, 1½ pounds each, scaled and gutted
- ¾ cup extra-virgin olive oil (for the sauce), plus more for coating the fish
- Salt and pepper
- 2 lemons, sliced thin
- ¾ cup fresh lime juice
- 1 tablespoon garlic, minced
- ¾ cup fresh cilantro, chopped
- Cumin

Directions

For the fish: Make three shallow slits on both sides of each bass. Coat the fish lightly with the olive oil, and season liberally inside and out with salt and pepper. Arrange the lemon slices inside each cavity.

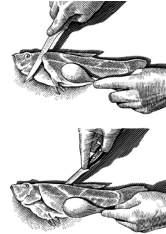
Build a two-level fire on the barbecue. The coals should slope to one side, at medium-high heat. The high side should be 2 to 3 inches beneath the grill. If you're working a gas grill, set one side on high, the other on low.

Start cooking the fish over the high side. Flip after 7 minutes or when the skin turns brown and crunchy. Once both sides of the fish are golden, move to the less hot side.

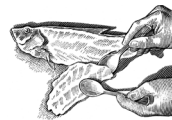
Cover with a tin pan for 15 to 20 minutes. For the sauce: Combine the lime juice, olive oil, garlic, and cilantro in a bowl. Season with salt, pepper, and cumin. Warm in a small saucepan. To serve: Plate the fish and pour the warmed sauced over each. Devour.

How to Fillet a Fish

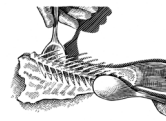
Just because you cook a fish whole doesn't mean you serve it that way. Your guests should enjoy eating the thing; disassembly falls to you. Two spoons and a knife are all you need.



-1- With the fish on its side, make a deep incision, top to bottom, behind the gills. Make a second cut along the dorsal fin (the top of the fish), gills to tail, to separate the top fillet from the bone.



-2- Holding the fish in place with one of the spoons, run the other spoon beneath the top fillet but above the bones and remove.



-3- Slowly lift the skeleton from the bottom fillet. Cut off and discard tail.

-4- Run a spoon along the top edge of the fillets to remove stray bones. Drizzle with olive oil and serve.

2 Encase It in Salt

By roasting a branzino in a shell of sea salt, Dave Pasternack of Esca in Manhattan, achieves a singular, showstopping result. "When you do a fish this way," he says, "all the juices stay in. Nothing runs." The secret, he says, is in how you ready the salt: "It should feel like barely wet sand. If it's too dry or wet, it'll crack. The eggs you'll use are different sizes, so add 80 percent of the egg whites to the salt at first and then see if it needs a little bit more."

Salt-Crusted Branzino

Serves two

- 1 fish (such as branzino, dorado, or black sea bass), 2 pounds, gutted and cleaned
- 3½ cups fine sea salt
- 3 large egg whites
- 4 sprigs flat-leaf parsley
- 2 sprigs of rosemary
- 1 garlic clove
- 2 slices of lemon
- Extra-virgin olive oil
- Salt and pepper to taste

Directions

Heat the oven to 400 degrees. Trace a rough outline of the whole fish on a piece of parchment or waxed paper and cut it out. In a mixing bowl, combine 3 cups of the sea salt and the egg whites with a wooden spoon (again, the mixture should feel like wet sand). Place the parsley stems, rosemary, garlic, and lemon slices in the cavity of the fish. Spread the remaining ½ cup of salt over a baking tray. Place the cutout parchment or waxed paper on the salt and place the fish on top. Use your hands to cover the whole fish with the salt-and-egg-white mixture, pressing down on the fish to pack it tightly. Bake for 18 to 20 minutes, without turning, until the salt crust is hard and golden brown.

Bring the baking tray to the table. Crack the salt crust with the handle of a knife and peel it away. Fillet the fish (see box), then plate. Hit with a quick drizzle of good extra-virgin olive oil. Season with salt and pepper.

3 Savor It in the Raw

Long before every restaurant in America began serving tuna tartare, every native Hawaiian knew from *poke* (pronounced *po-kay*)—the original, and utterly delicious, raw-tuna preparation. Hawaiian chef Alan Wong likes to make it with ahi, or yellowfin, but really any sushi-grade tuna, such as bluefin or bigeye, will work. The thing that separates real *poke* from every lame hotel-room-service tuna tartare is complementing the fish with the perfect balance of sodium, heat from the chili kingdom, aromatics, and crunch. “But no citrus,” says Wong, “because that would cook the fish, like ceviche.”

Real Ahi *Poke* Serves four as an appetizer

- 1 pound ahi tuna, diced medium
- Kosher salt
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup green onions, chopped
- $\frac{1}{3}$ cup white onions, finely diced
- 3 teaspoons sesame oil
- 3 teaspoons *sambal oelek* hot sauce (check the Asian-food section, next to the *sriracha*)

Directions

Place the ahi in a large stainless-steel or nonreactive mixing bowl and season with salt. Then add all the other ingredients and mix gently. Taste and adjust seasoning, and serve immediately.

4 Give It a *Real* Taste of Mexico

If you want to make real Baja-style fish tacos, start heating the oil. “You’ve got to get past what I call fear of frying,” says Traci Des Jardins, whose Mexican outpost, Mijita, in San Francisco’s Ferry Building turns out some of the finest around. Use a deep pot and pick up a cooking thermometer—precise temperature is key. Des Jardins’s fish of choice is mahimahi, but other white fish, like snapper and flounder, also work well. And of course, *soft* corn tortillas. Boxed taco shells have no place in Baja, even when Baja is in your kitchen.

Beer-Battered Mahimahi Tacos Serves four

Slaw

- 4 cups green cabbage, finely shredded
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup white onion, thinly sliced
- 3 tablespoons fresh lime juice
- 2 tablespoons fresh cilantro, minced
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon dried oregano
- Salt and pepper

Sauce

- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup mayonnaise
- $\frac{1}{2}$ large ripe avocado, peeled and pitted
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup fresh cilantro leaves
- 3 tablespoons fresh lime juice
- $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- Salt to taste

Mahimahi

- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup plus 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup plus 2 tablespoons rice flour
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt
- 1 bottle (12 ounces) cold beer
- 1 pound mahimahi fillets, cut into $1\frac{1}{2}$ -by- $3\frac{1}{2}$ -inch rectangles

- Vegetable oil
- 16 soft corn tortillas
- Fresh cilantro
- Lime wedges

Directions

For the slaw: Toss all the ingredients in a mixing bowl to blend. Season to taste with salt and pepper. (Can be made 8 hours ahead of time. Cover and chill.)

For the sauce: Blend all the ingredients in a small food processor.

Add water by the teaspoonful to thin if desired. Season to taste with salt. (Can be made 8 hours ahead of time. Cover and chill.)

For the mahimahi: Combine the $\frac{1}{2}$ cup all-purpose flour, the $\frac{1}{2}$ cup rice flour, and salt in a large bowl; gradually add in the beer. Place the fish in a large strainer and spoon the remaining flours over it. Toss the fish in the strainer to coat. Shake well, releasing excess flour. Mix the fish into the beer batter. (The batter can be prepared an hour ahead of time. Let stand at room temperature.)

Pour enough vegetable oil into a heavy medium-size saucepan to reach a depth of 2 inches. Attach a deep-fry thermometer to the side of the pan and heat the oil to 375 degrees. Working in batches, lift the fish from the batter and drop carefully into the hot oil. Fry until crisp and golden, about 1 minute per side. Transfer fish to paper towels to drain.

Warm the tortillas in a large skillet over medium-high heat, about 20 seconds per side. Stack two tortillas for each taco. Using tongs, place some slaw in the center of each tortilla stack. Top with sauce, a cilantro sprig, and fish. Fold the edges of the tortillas over the filling. Repeat with the remaining ingredients. Place two tacos on each of four plates. Garnish with lime wedges and serve with lots of really cold beer.

The Descending Wine Course



Lesson 7

Muscadet

Choose with care and this briny, bracing white can be more than just an affordable quaffer to down with a dozen oysters—but then again, what’s wrong with that?

When you hear a wine geek use the term “mineraly,” he’s talking about whites like this. Muscadet is native to France’s western Loire Valley, where the sandy, granite-rich soils of the Atlantic coast influence its taste.

Look for Muscadets labeled *sur lie*, a reference to the practice of aging wine on its “lees” (the yeast cells left over from fermentation). This process heightens the wine’s tooth-rattling acidity and adds a layer of creamy complexity.

The better bottlings will age like champs, retaining their zing for a decade or more. —DAVID LYNCH

One to try

Muscadet Sèvre et Maine sur Lie, Domaine de la Pépière 2007, \$14

5 Pan-Fry It Like a Pro

The pan-seared fillets of arctic char, cod, and trout that April Bloomfield serves at the John Dory in New York are textural marvels: supple on one side, additively crunchy on the other. “If you do it right,” she says, “it’s going to remind you of pork loin, complete with cracklings.” Bloomfield calls for a nonstick pan. “It’s unfuckupable,” she says, “a surefire way to get crispy skin.” One other essential piece of advice: For that miraculous crust, start the fillet in a smoking-hot pan skin-side down and don’t mess with it. “Give the pan one good shake so it doesn’t stick and then let it sit.”

Pan-Fried Arctic Char Serves two

- 2 to 3 teaspoons olive oil
- Salt to taste
- 2 fillets arctic char, 6 ounces each

Directions

In a large nonstick (or cast-iron) pan, heat the oil until slightly smoking. Pat the char dry with a paper towel and season with salt on both sides. Gently place the fish skin-side down in the oil. Turn the heat down to medium and cook for 5 minutes. With a fish spatula, gently turn over the fish and adjust the heat to low. Cook the fish for 2 more minutes. The skin should be crisp, the meat medium-rare. Serve immediately over roasted potatoes or sautéed zucchini (or other seasonal vegetables) with a lemon wedge.



Muy Authentic Fish Tacos

MORE ↓

LESSONS ABOUT WINE IN THE ‘DESCENDING WINE COURSE’ ARCHIVE

+ READ ALAN RICHMAN’S WEEKLY RESTAURANT REVIEWS ON ‘FORKED,’ HIS BLOG AT...