

Cleaning, Preparing, and Frying Marsh Fish

With fish biting everywhere, it's typical to keep a few for the dinner table and release the rest. Being conservation minded doesn't just mean releasing what you don't need, it also means optimizing what you keep to get the most meat with the least amount of cooking possible.

Most of the fish that reside in inshore waters are good eating. They can be excellent eating provided that they are kept on ice as soon as caught, filleted with as little red meat as possible, never frozen, kept chilled in a zip lock bag with some ice in the refrigerator, and cooked with 5-6 days of being caught. An exception: if you plan to grill a redfish or drum "on the half shell" then keep the skin/scales on each side.

Fish can be frozen in vacuum bags and are almost as good as when fresh, but not quite. Frozen fish should be consumed no later than 3-4 months to insure good quality.

I use a filet knife for all my cleaning of marsh fish. This allows me to catch a lot of meat off the backbone that might be lost with an electric knife. Also, the filet knife allows me to carve the filet without cutting the ribcage or into the abdomen. "Busting the fish gut" is not only messy, but for a few species like sheepshead, it leaks urea onto the meat lessening it's quality. Third, an electric knife often does an overkill job removing the skin on soft-scaled fish such as speckled trout or sand trout.

Here's the technique I use:

Cut one side from above the eyes down to the rib cage, then take the knife and run the tip down the body to the tail, all the time keeping the blade against the backbone.





Once a side has been removed from the bone, take the filet knife and cut off the skin. For redfish and drum cut off about 1/8 inch. If you do it right, this will leave all the red flesh on the skin and none on the filet (except the bloodline in the middle of the filet).





An example of that same technique done on a flounder. Unlike a redfish, you can shave the meat right against the skin as the skin contains no blood meat. Speckled trout are like this also. Notice that by using the tip of the filet knife to precision, there is no large amount of flesh left on either side of the backbone.



This is the end result. A dishpan of filets with no bones, no messy “stuff” from the gut section, no blood meat except for the bloodline. Even the bloodline can be removed when cutting into smaller pieces for frying.

FRYING THE FISH

There are several favorite methods for preparing fish to fry. Some mix salt, red pepper and a touch of mustard for a spicier taste, some use a prepared seasoning like Tony Chacheres, or some add a touch of skim milk to give the fish a milder taste.

There are also several favorite methods for battering. However, let me share one that I use which came from Frank Davis. I mix an equal amount of flour, corn meal and seasoned corn flour (usually Zatarains or Louisiana Fish Fry) into my shaking bowl and mix up. This combination Davis claims helps bind the battering ingredients to each other such that very little debris is deposited on the bottom of the frying pan. He’s absolutely right! I’ve even used this for frying shrimp and after several batches, the grease is often very clean and reusable.

My frying oil is often corn/canola blend. This burns higher than corn oil, which is what I want because my folks like their fish crispy. I don't often check the temperature. Often a couple of French fries serve as the Grease Testers. If the oil is smoking slightly, it's hot enough! I like to put the fish in hot, so it sizzles and comes out dark on the outside, but take it out as the sizzle starts to dissipate so it remains juicy inside.

My frying pot is always a black iron skillet or pot. It retains heat better than aluminum and allows me to cook in a minimum of time. It's also very easy to clean up. I tried aluminum at first, but after you go "black", you never go back!

Use a long metal spoon with an insulated handle or a frying spatula to remove the fish from the pot. Place on an open aluminum sheet with paper towels on the bottom (better yet, paper towels on top of newspaper helps soak up more of the grease). Never cover the filets as this will make them soggy. On cold days, I like to bring the freshly-fried fish indoors as soon as they are fried so condensation doesn't set in.

Which brings up my last point. I always fry my fish outdoors. The grease and vaporized water can smell up a house pretty good, even your clothes will smell after frying anything in grease. I wear long sleeve shirts, long pants, shoes and eye protection while frying as a safety precaution. I also use a low height burner. If grease spills from this burner, your feet might get burned but nothing else.