

*The Complete Guide to*  
NORTHERN  
GULF SEAFOOD



# Making Your Selection

There are hundreds of types of seafood on the market today. Once you know what you want to eat, how much should you buy? The amount of fish or shellfish needed depends on the type of preparation and, obviously, how hungry you and your dinner companions are.

The following chart is a good guide. Consider smaller portions for appetizers or for use in a casserole or salad.

Type of Seafood	Amount per Serving
Fish, whole	$\frac{3}{4}$ pound
Fish, dressed or pan-dressed	$\frac{1}{2}$ pound
Fish, fillets or steaks	$\frac{1}{3}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ pound
Fish, sticks	4 to 5 sticks
Clams, in the shell	6 to 8 clams
Crab, cooked meat	$\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{3}$ pound
Lobster, live	1 small to medium whole lobster
Lobster, cooked meat	$\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{3}$ pound
Oysters, in the shell	$\frac{1}{2}$ dozen
Oysters, shucked	$\frac{1}{2}$ pint
Scallops	$\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{3}$ pound
Shrimp, headless	$\frac{1}{3}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ pound
Shrimp, peeled and deveined	$\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{3}$ pound
Shrimp, cooked meat	$\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{3}$ pound

## Fresh Fish

Fish are categorized many ways, but all of them are lumped into the broad categories of lean or fatty.

Fatty fish have an oil content of greater than 5 percent of its flesh. Since the oil is distributed throughout the flesh of the fish, the flesh tends to be darker than that of leaner

fish. The exact percentage of oil in fish flesh depends on such variables as species, season, and even habitat's water depth. Fatty fish do not freeze as well as lean fish and should be thawed and eaten within three months of purchase. Fatty fish include amberjack, bluefish, croaker, mullet, pompano, Spanish and king mackerel, and swordfish.

Lean fish are those with a fat content ranging from .5 percent to no more than 5 percent, with the oil in these fish characteristically concentrated in the liver. These fish maintain quality while frozen for up to six months. The very leanest can be held in the freezer up to a year. Lean fish include black sea bass, black drum, flounder, grouper, shark, sheepshead, almost all snappers, tilefish, triggerfish, and whiting.

When deciding what kind of fish to use, keep in mind that, generally, fish containing higher percentages of oil have more flavor. Lean fish may be substituted for fatty fish in a recipe, but the flavor of the dish may be masked and more frequent basting may be required due to the lower oil content. Also, if a recipe requires frequent handling of a fish, as in chowders, soups, or pickling, a firm-fleshed fish (such as grouper, red snapper, and triggerfish) will retain its shape and have a more pleasing finished appearance.

When selecting a whole fish (just as it comes from the water), or drawn fish (internal organs removed), look for these signs of freshness:

- Bright, clear, and bulging eyes.
- Bright red gills, free of slime. Don't be shy! Lift up the gill cover—called the operculum—right in back of the fish's head and peek underneath.
- Firm and elastic flesh, not brown or dry.
- Characteristically marked and colored skin. If it looks

faded, the quality of the flesh probably is fading fast, too.

- Fresh and mild odor, with no disagreeable, fishy smell. The key term here is *disagreeable*. Fish are fish and all have a distinctive fish odor. If in doubt about what your nose tells you, visit several fish markets or ask friends and acquaintances for recommendations. You will notice

a difference between one that deals in fresh fish and one that lets the fish hang around too long. A foul-smelling market will make you swear off fish forever—don't let that happen. Find a good, fresh market, and you will be assured of excellent seafood.



## Frozen Fish

A high-quality frozen fish will have these characteristics:

- Solidly frozen, not discolored flesh. Check for freezer burn on the flesh (a white, dry appearance around the edges). Examine the package for ice crystals. Those crystals may indicate moisture loss from the flesh that could have resulted from thawing and refreezing.
- Little or no odor.
- Tight packaging. Fish should be wrapped in moisture-proof materials with little, if any, air space between the fish and the wrapping. The quality of the fish wrapped in plastic is generally higher if the plastic is vacuum-sealed.

## Shrimp

A fresh shrimp should have the following qualities:

- Firm and translucent flesh, free of black spots. If you are purchasing head-on shrimp, the head should be firmly attached to the tail section. If the front half of the shrimp (the part that contains the entrails) looks mushy, dried,



or discolored, or is barely hanging by a thread to the tail section, that shrimp has been too long in the case.

- Fresh and mild odor.  
Cooked shrimp should be pink and have a fresh and mild odor.

## Oysters

When these animals are purchased in the shell, they should be alive. You can tell by shells that are closed tightly or will close tightly when tapped. Gaping shells indicate that the shellfish is dead and not edible.



Shucked oysters should have a plump and creamy flesh. The liquor (juice inside the shell) should be clear and the odor fresh and mild.

## Crabs and Lobsters

These creatures may be purchased alive and, if so, should show movement and have no disagreeable odor.

Frozen lobsters are sometimes available. The gulf lobster lacks the claws of its New England cousin and is more often sold frozen or iced in markets than the New England lobster.

Crab meat should have a mild odor and appear clean and moist.

## Scallops

Scallops should have a sweet odor and, when bought in packages, should not include excess liquid.

The gulf offers the smaller bay scallop, which can be found in markets and can be gathered recreationally in a few locations. The large sea scallop, sometimes found in markets, almost assuredly came from somewhere else.

## In General . . .

- Plan to use fresh fish or seafood within two days of purchase. If you cannot use fish within two days, cook or freeze it. Cooked fish maintains quality in the refrigerator at 32 to 40 degrees for two to three days.
- Fresh fish or seafood keep best when loosely wrapped and packed in finely crushed ice to prevent moisture loss. If you are buying seafood at a market, make it the last purchase on your shopping trip. Take it home immediately and put it in the refrigerator or freezer.



# Handling and Preserving

**F**ish in the refrigerator are like visiting relatives. The longer they hang around, the less pleasant they are. Buy a fish or catch a fish—either way, get it on ice and/or into the refrigerator as swiftly as possible. Cook it by the second day or freeze it.

## How to Handle . . .

*Fresh fish.* Place fresh fish in the refrigerator in a leak-proof wrapper as soon as possible after purchasing. Store at 35 degrees. If you don't know the temperature of your refrigerator, place the fish in the coldest area.

*Frozen fish.* Commercially packaged frozen fish should be dated and placed in the freezer immediately after buying. Don't linger at the pastry counter and let the seafood partially thaw; get home with it as quickly as possible and make it the first item you move from the grocery bag to the freezer. Store at 0 degrees or lower to avoid loss of color, flavor, and texture. Limit storage time to retain the true flavor of the fish. Typically, the leaner the fish, the longer it can remain frozen and still have quality flavor and texture when thawed and cooked. Always use seafood that has been in the freezer the longest first.

*Fresh shellfish.* Shellfish, such as live oysters, lobsters, and crabs, should be kept in a moist, cool place. Shucked oysters and scallops will stay fresh for seven to ten days; shrimp, two to three days; and cooked crab, four to five days, if packed in ice in the refrigerator.





*Frozen shellfish.* Frozen shellfish should be dated on the packaging and placed in the freezer at 0 degrees or lower immediately after purchase. Most shellfish are commercially frozen to maintain quality for up to one year.

*Cooked seafood.* Store cooked seafood in the refrigerator or freezer. In the refrigerator, place in a covered container and use within three to four days. For the freezer, pack in a moisture- and vapor-proof container. Cooked seafood can be held for up to three months.

### **How to Freeze . . .**

Seafood may be served throughout the year by freezing good-quality products during peak seasons.

Rapid freezing is important. A rapid freeze creates many small crystals so that the tissue cells are not ruptured. Rapid freezing also reduces the amount of time that bacteria and enzymes have to act on the flesh. Large, bulky packages or inadequate air circulation created by improper spacing in the freezer can prolong the time it takes to thoroughly freeze the fish. The freezer should be turned to its coldest setting prior to freezing and returned to its normal setting once the fish is frozen.

*Fish.* Before freezing fish, butcher it the way you plan to eat it and in a quantity suitable for one meal. Protect the fish from oxidation (rancidity) and dehydration (freezer burn) by glazing the fish. To glaze, place the fish on a tray, cover with aluminum foil, and freeze. Remove from the foil. Dip frozen fish in ice water to form a glaze. Return to freezer. Repeat process two or three times until the fish is completely glazed. Package fish in cling wrap, aluminum foil, or freezer paper, eliminating air pockets.

Another way to freeze dressed fish, fillets, and steaks is in a sealable plastic bag from which all the air has been removed. Load the bag with cold water. Hold the fish in the closed end and bring the bag out of the water, fish end first. Pulling the bag out upside down like this creates a vacuum,

thus eliminating all air. Seal the bag and put it in the freezer.

Fish also may be frozen in block form in waxed cartons (thoroughly cleaned milk cartons, for example), plastic containers, or pans.

*Shrimp.* Shrimp can be frozen cooked or raw, with the shell on or off. Maximum storage life and quality usually can be obtained by freezing what are commonly called “green headless” shrimp, raw, shell-on tails. The shell offers extra protection against oxidation and dehydration. Shell-on shrimp should be frozen in waxed cartons, plastic containers, or heavy plastic bags that will resist being punctured by the shells.

After a thorough washing, the shrimp should be placed in the container and frozen. After freezing (four to eight hours, depending on the package size and temperature), the plastic containers or waxed cartons should be filled with cold water and refrozen. This will expel the air and create a protective coating on the shrimp.

*Blue crabs.* Picked blue crab meat does not freeze satisfactorily because of texture and flavor changes that happen during the freezing process. Research indicates that rapidly frozen crab cores (what remains after debacking and cleaning) can be stored without significant quality loss. The thawed cores can be picked prior to consumption.

Crab cores can be prepared in two ways. The live crab can be boiled for twelve to fifteen minutes, debacked, gills and entrails removed, then washed and frozen. The other method requires debacking, cleaning, washing, then boiling and freezing. The second method probably is better, since less handling is involved after the crab is cooked. Rapid cooling after cooking is essential, so individual cores should be wrapped and frozen or frozen and glazed as rapidly as possible before they are wrapped in a larger package.

*Oysters, clams, and scallops.* People often are disappointed when they expect frozen oysters, clams, and scallops to taste as good as fresh ones. It is almost impossible to avoid changes in flavor, texture, and color during frozen storage.

With proper handling and freezing techniques, these changes are not severe, especially if the product is cooked immediately after thawing.

Shell oysters and clams should be alive at the time of purchase and can be kept alive for seven to ten days if stored in a moist, cool place. Do not shuck oysters or clams that will not close after being tapped lightly on the shell. Wash the outside of the shell before shucking. Shuck oysters and clams into a strainer (the liquor should be clear and can be saved) and wash the oyster and clam meat to remove sand and pieces of shell. Place shellfish in a container and cover with water. Use small containers to ensure rapid freezing. Scallops are shucked and packed in ice at sea. They are available fresh or frozen.

*Lobster.* Whole lobster or lobster tails, raw or cooked, may be frozen. Since the shell protects them from drying out, glazing is not necessary but recommended, particularly if the lobster is to be kept for longer than four months. The exposed meat on lobster tails should be protected by tight wrapping. Cover the lobsters in freezer paper and place in the freezer set to 0 degrees Fahrenheit or lower.

### **How to Thaw . . .**

Schedule thawing of fish and shellfish so it can be cooked soon after it is thawed. Do not store thawed seafood for more than one day before cooking. One effective way to thaw seafood products is under cold running water. Allow a half hour per pound with this method. Seafood also may be thawed in the refrigerator. A one-pound package thaws in eighteen to twenty-four hours. The lowest cycle on a microwave oven may be used for thawing seafood products. To retain quality, seafood should be thawed quickly, but never at room temperature or in warm water. Do not refreeze. Frozen seafood may be cooked without thawing, if additional cooking time is allowed. However, if the fish is going to be prepared stuffed, breaded, or cooked with a sauce, thawing is recommended.



# Fish Forms and Butchering

**M**ost experts will tell you that there are six basic market forms of fish: whole or round, drawn, dressed or pan-dressed, steaks, fillets, and butterfly fillets. However, I have friends who insist on using dull knives and inventing new cuts of fish every time they are lucky enough to visit a fish-cleaning station—they hack and whack and usually require a trip to the drugstore for adhesive bandages after every fish-cleaning adventure. I have wondered whether the consumption of cold beverages, which often takes place around fish-cleaning stations, could have anything to do

with the creativity and carelessness that takes place. My friends seem to always have huge amounts of fun at the cleaning station, so don't discount their efforts. What's left when they finish is still a nice batch of tasty fish, even if the cuts look a little—or maybe a lot—weird.

Don't be discouraged by my friends' recklessness. The basic cuts, or market forms, of fish, are not difficult to master. Following are cuts that they should have had when the task was complete:



*Whole or round.* The fish just as it comes from the water. Before cooking, the fish must be scaled and gutted to remove its internal organs. Usually, the person cleaning the fish also removes the head and fins before cooking. The fish can then be cooked as is, filleted, or cut into steaks or cubes.



*Drawn.* The whole fish, entrails removed. To prepare for cooking, follow the procedure for whole or round fish.



*Dressed or pan-dressed.* The whole fish with the scales, entrails, and usually the head and fins removed. The fish may then be cooked, filleted, or cut into steaks or cubes.



*Fillets.* The lengthwise cuts of fish, typically boneless or near-boneless. Small fish bones sometimes hide in fillets only to reveal themselves after being cooked, so be careful. Fillets are ready to cook as purchased.



*Steaks.* The cross-section cuts of large, dressed fish. They are ready to cook as purchased.



*Butterfly fillets.* Two single fillets held together by a small portion of skin or flesh. Actually, it is a curiosity why this is considered a basic cut of fish. Also, it is hard to understand why anyone would go to the trouble of preparing a cut of fish in this manner when two separate fillets would work just as well with almost all recipes.

## Cleaning and Dressing Fish

If you catch fish while fishing on your own, you typically are stuck cleaning the fish. If you catch fish while on a party boat or charter boat, or if you purchase fish fresh from the market, you have a few options. Those options have plusses and minuses.

If you are a decent fish butcher, you will get more yield when you clean the fish yourself. This is because you will (most likely) take more time getting that last little nugget of flesh and will be (most likely) more careful when filleting to keep the knife blade near the bone. Waste not, want not.

On the other hand, after a hot, long day on the water when you find yourself standing, covered with dried salt spray and fish slime, cleaning your catch may not be the thing that you want to do most. At that moment, a hot shower followed by a cold beverage probably will be among your first priorities. If this is the case, pay a fish butcher, console yourself that you may not get as much flesh as had done the job yourself, and go clean up.

Fish cleaning comes with the cost of a charter for many boats. The butcher usually is the deck hand. By the end of the day, he or she wants to get home and clean up as much as you do, so even though there are few fish butchers better than a good deck hand, he or she isn't going to take pains to reap every last morsel. Also, if the deck hand has worked hard all day, as most do, it would be nice to pay him or her a little extra for the fish cleaning.

At some docks, a central fish-cleaning operation handles the butchering chore rather than the deck hands. The result is about the same. These guys are experts. It is amazing how swiftly they can butcher a fish. However, they have to move fast in order to stay even with the flow of fish arriving at the door, so they too may not be as careful in getting every last bit of meat. These operations usually charge by the pound of uncleaned fish.

Workers at most fresh markets will butcher a fish in almost any manner that you wish. Typically, the

butchering does not cost extra, or, if it does, very little. Unless they are swamped, market butchers will take more time to provide you with maximum yield and will provide whatever cuts you desire. When they are through, they will package everything—including the carcass—if you want them to.

If you decide to clean your fish yourself, you will need a sharp knife, a cutting board, and fresh running water. Some notes:

*The knife.* The edge is a lot more important than the blade. I've seen people use inexpensive, four-inch Rapala knives and what looked to have been the curved blade of a scimitar. Something in between probably is best—a six-inch, thin, sharp blade, and maybe a second knife with a strong, serrated edge to whack through rib bones. Cheap knives are just as good as expensive ones, so long as they will hold a sharp edge. Find something with which you are comfortable. Some tackle shops will sell used knives from commercial fish houses at bargain prices; in most cases, the blade has been sharpened so many times that it is way narrower than it was originally. For the casual fish cleaner, however, it still has years of life left. Plus, as one friend said, it already knows what to do. There is one knife preferred by the more fumble-fingered of fish cleaners: one that floats. Many fish-cleaning stations are over water at the end of a dock. There is some attraction about a nice bone-handled or solid-handled knife that draws it to the water. Few are the fish cleaners who want to jump in to retrieve the blade, no matter how beloved it might be. Some argue that a wood- or hollow-handled knife never falls into the water, but that is not true. It is true, however, that you remain a lot drier by retrieving a floating knife than diving for a sinking one.

*The cutting board.* A number of fish-cleaning stations are made of metal, probably for reasons of sanitation and odor. On a sunny summer day, it gets so hot that a fish could almost fry right there on the cutting surface. If you are one of the creative fish cleaners such as those mentioned above, a metal cutting surface does wonders at dulling

a sharp blade. Find something to sit on the metal. Most kitchen shop cutting boards are made of great material—wood, bamboo, or some sort of manufactured stuff that is hard enough to hold up under pressure and soft enough not to torment a sharp blade. The trouble is that most kitchen boards are made for trimming a pork chop, not cleaning a fifteen-pound red snapper. If you want a store-bought item, it needs to be a whopper, maybe a couple of feet long. Keep in mind that keeper amberjack and cobia must exceed two feet in length. A better option is to use a board two inches high, twelve inches wide, and about two and a half feet long. Treated and finished lumber is not needed—we are not building a deck here, after all. Put the board on top of the metal, wash it down, clean the fish, and wash it down

again. Now you know why you see chunks of lumber laying around fish-cleaning stations for no apparent reason.

*Running water.* Fish are slick and slimy. The slime is a protective coating when they are alive. Wash it off so that you can get a good grip on your fish when cleaning it and so that the slime doesn't smear all over the flesh. When you are finished cleaning each fish, wash away the scales, guts, slime, and other scraps so that you have a clean starting place for the next fish. When you are done, give everything a good scrubbing and wash it down. No one wants to come behind you and find a grimy, smelly cleaning station.

Following are step-by-step directions for preparing the basic market forms of fish:

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### *Dressed*



1. Lay the whole fish on a board and hold firmly. Using a scaler, dull knife, or large tablespoon, scrape from tail to head to remove scales.



2. Cut entire length of belly. Remove entrails and pelvic fin.



3. Using a sharp knife, remove head and pectoral fins by cutting in front of the collarbone.



4. Remove the dorsal fin by cutting along the length of each edge. Grasp trailing edge of fin between the thumb and flat of knife blade and give a quick pull toward the head. Clean and rinse fish thoroughly.

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### *Steaks (Large Fish Only)*



1. Follow steps 1 through 4 for dressed fish.



2. Cut fish across backbone into pieces approximately 3/4-inch thick.

## *Fillets*



1. Follow step 1 of dressed fish, unless the fish is to be skinned.



2. Cut along back of fish from tail to head.

If fish is to be skinned:



1. Cut down to backbone just behind pectoral fin. Turn knife flat and slide along backbone to tail. Turn fish over and repeat process.



2. To skin, place fillet skin side down on a board. Hold tail section firmly. As close to tail as possible, insert knife between skin and flesh. Hold knife blade flat (parallel to board) and push knife forward while pulling the free end of skin firmly with fingers.

An important note (if you want to keep your knife sharp and your language at the “G” rating): when making cuts into the fish, angle your blade so that it goes between the fish’s scales rather than through them. Fish scales attach to the fish on the edge nearest the fish’s head. The tail side of each scale is loose. This means that inserting your knife blade at a slight angle toward the head and allowing it to find its way between the scales. Hacking through scales is like scrubbing the edge on a whetstone—it’s not good for you or your knife.

Also, when preparing skinless fillets, some find it easier to follow step 1 but leave the fillet attached at the tail by a small amount of skin. This allows the fillet to be flipped like a book page away from the fish so that the skin side rests on the board. By leaving the fillet attached by this small amount of skin, you can use the fish as an anchor to hold for working through step 2. Having the body of the fish to hold on to, particularly when your hands are slippery (which they will be), usually makes the process easier and quicker.

A note about triggerfish: Because these fish have extremely tough and leathery skin, they call for a different cleaning technique. Those skilled with an electric knife sometimes cut through the skin and fillet the fish as mentioned above. However, filleting with a non-electric knife is best done with a few additional steps:

1. Run your index finger along the top of the head from front to back. At the place where the bone ends and the flesh begins, insert the blade of a sharp fillet knife through the skin but not the flesh. With the sharp edge of the knife pointed up, slide the blade from the insertion point to the tail to separate the skin from the flesh.
2. Go back to where you inserted the knife point right behind the head, insert the knife point at the same location and then cut a slit perpendicular to the first cut, basically from the top to the bottom of the fish.
3. Without removing the knife tip, turn the blade 90 degrees and cut a half-inch-long slit along the belly to snap the ribs and break the whole fillet away from the body of the fish.

4. Remove the knife blade, grab an edge of the skin at the top of the fish and pull hard toward the tail. The skin will tear off, leaving the flesh intact. Throw away the skin or, as one fisherman claimed he has done, dry it out and make yourself a pair of shoes.
5. Repeat the process on the other side of the fish.
6. Once the skin is removed, removed the fillets using the previous instructions.

A note about amberjack: These are big fish, and hacking through the large rib bones can quickly dull a knife, if not ruin it. There is a technique that expert fish butchers employ that looks easy but requires some practice. The technique is to fillet the fish, skin on, cutting around the rib cage rather than through it.

1. Cut a small hole near the tail of the fish big enough for a finger.
2. Grasp the amberjack in front of the tail, and hold it up as high as your arm will reach. (This requires some strength, since amberjack are large fish.)
3. Inserting a finger in the hole, pull downward swiftly and with some vigor. The rib bones should snap away like dry twigs.

This may sound easy, but you will look like a fool until you get the hang of it. The technique is a huge time- and knife-saver once you master it.

Some fish cleaners don’t care about the meat between and around fish ribs. The ribs are sharp, numerous, and quickly can dull a sharp blade. If you don’t want to bother with the extra hassle, here’s what to do:

1. Make the cut behind the head as explained above.
2. Slide the blade down the fish’s backbone from head to tail, but don’t go into the rib cage. Stop your knife point at the spine and work back toward the tail until you have cleared the rib cage.
3. Push the knife blade to the bottom of the fish and continue the fillet process.
4. Go back and cut just above the rib cage from front to back until the fillet releases.

## *Butterfly Fillets*



1. Follow steps 1 and 3 for dressed fish.



2. Beginning at the head, cut lengthwise along the backbone to the tail. Don't cut the flesh and skin of the belly. Lay fish open, exposing the body cavity. Remove entrails. Clean and rinse fish thoroughly.

One last tidbit: a little rigor mortis can be a good thing, particularly where fish cleaning is concerned. If you are too quick to the dock, your catch may still be flopping. Not only does it try not to get filleted, for some it also seems less pleasant to butcher a live creature than a dead one, even though the end result is the same. If you have caught fish and thrown them in the cooler but returned to the dock before they stiffened up, the flesh can wobble around and make filleting more difficult. This occurs particularly in larger fish. The easiest fish cleaning is with a fish that has been laid flat in the cooler and that has been in the cooler long enough to get stiff. We're not talking about a fish being dead for days—we're talking about fish that have been thoroughly iced but are only two to eight hours from being caught. A flat, stiff fish butchers more easily because the fish does not flop and the flesh does not wobble while you are working.

### **Snapper and Grouper Throats**

There is a cut of snapper and grouper that coastal fishermen consider the tastiest cut of either fish, but it is found only in select locally owned and operated restaurants and fresh markets. It is the throat. If comments by Andrew Zimmern on his strange-food television show are accurate, then indeed this may be the best part of the fish. On fish of five pounds or larger, the throat can be as large as a chicken breast. Even though it contains several funky-shaped bones, they are large and easily worked around. If you can find throats in the market, you're lucky. If not, you will have to either purchase a fish whole or catch your own.

The throat has the general shape of a full chicken breast, and, like the chicken breast, is often split down the middle. Cut through, it provides two flat pieces of meat. Alternatively, it can be butterflied so that both sides of the throat will lay flat for cooking.

Throats can be prepared in most of the same ways as other grouper, snapper, and large, lean fish. Grilling and frying are probably the two most popular cooking methods for this cut. Whatever spices and seasonings that you enjoy on other seafood dishes will work with throats.

The throat is that part of the fish below the backbone, behind the gills, and back toward the belly. Some say that the throat ends just in front of the pectoral fins. Others, however, include the muscle group that works the pectoral fins. In fact, some throat experts say that they leave on the pectoral fins because they make good “handles” when eating the fish. Says one fisherman, “Just cut as much stuff away that doesn't look like meat, and you'll be fine.” However, I feel that more precise directions are in order.

A sharp knife and a pair of small sharp shears are handy to separate the throat from the fish. Also, there is an additional question to answer: to scale or not to scale? Some fishermen advise not to bother scaling the throat if you plan to grill it. After grilling, the meat pulls away from the skin, which is discarded. Others advise to scale the throat while the fish is whole, and that this should be done if the fish is to be prepared by any method other than grilling. After scaling (or not scaling) your fish, fillet it per previous direction. Then:

## *Grouper Throats*



1. With the knife, cut from lower throat latch (gill slot) angling upward to intersect your filet cut behind the head. Turn the fish over and do the same on the other side.



2. The throat will be held under the fish's chin by a small segment of bone. Snip it with the knife or shears. This will result in a large lump of meat.

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3. Rinse to clear any random scales and other residue.

# Basic Cooking Techniques

If you learn nothing else from this book, learn this: No matter how you choose to cook seafood, timing is the real secret. Fish is done when the flesh becomes opaque and flakes easily with a fork. Overcooking toughens and dries the flesh.

Here is a simple and practical method of timing fish. Measure the fish fillet or steak at its thickest part. Allow ten minutes of cooking time per inch of thickness. For fish measuring less than one inch, shorten cooking time proportionately. Double the cooking time for fish still frozen. If fish is cooked in foil or in sauce, allow an extra five minutes per inch. Periodically test for doneness to avoid overcooking.

The basic cooking methods fall into eleven categories. Start with whichever you enjoy most, add as few or as many ingredients as you like, and everything will be just fine.

*Baking.* This is method uses dry heat. To bake, place the fish in a greased baking dish, being sure to keep it moist and flavorful with seasoned oil, sauce, or any condiment of your choice. Fillets and steaks adapt easily to many recipes that require baking. A dressed fish may be stuffed with herb and bread stuffing and baked with the head and tail still attached. However, more genteel cooks don't like their food to stare back at them, so don't be afraid to lop off the head. Bake in a 350-degree oven until the fish flakes easily when tested with a fork. Cooking time varies according to thickness of the fish.

*Boiling.* Bring water and salt (one quart water for two tablespoons salt) to a rolling boil in a large pot. Add seafood and return to a boil; reduce heat, maintaining a slow boil or,

better, a simmer. Shrimp is done in two to four minutes; rock shrimp in thirty-five to forty seconds; lobster and crab in twelve to fifteen minutes, and finfish in eight to ten minutes. Shellfish and fish are boiled when they are to be served with a sauce or flaked and combined with other ingredients. Cooks in the Carolinas and Louisiana have made quite an art of boiled seafood, with one especially popular dish known as the Lowcountry boil. The idea is a basic dish of good things thrown in a pot: crabs, shrimp, pieces of boneless fish, one-inch segments of kielbasa sausage, new potatoes, corn on the cob, and some good seafood seasoning (many enjoy Old Bay and some of the Cajun seasonings, but there are plenty of others). There are lots of versions of this dish. Find one that sounds the tastiest to you and go at it.

*Broiling.* To cook by direct, intense heat, a pan-dressed fish fillet or steak works best. Place the fish in a single layer on a well-greased broiler pan. The fish should be four to six inches from the source of heat. Cooking time usually is between eight and ten minutes. Turn thicker pieces, such as pan-dressed fish, halfway through the cooking time, and baste. Baste well with oil or basting sauce before and during cooking. Fat fish require less basting than lean fish. Trust your eyes to tell you the amount of basting needed to keep the fish moist.

*Deep-fat frying.* Any cooking method that involves frying will not be the first choice of the most health conscious among us. Eating too much fried food clogs up our blood vessels and lowers our overall health. But Southerners do love it, and preparing a dish with the three basic Southern food groups—meat, flour and grease—results in a mighty tasty

dish. So, if you hope to perpetuate your Southern heritage, here's what to do: fill the fryer no more than half full of oil to allow room for fish and bubbling oil; heat to 350 to 375 degrees. Place breaded or battered fish, one layer at a time, in the fry basket so the pieces do not touch. Fry in deep oil until the fish is brown and flakes easily with a fork. Before frying additional fish, be sure the oil returns to the correct temperature.

*Grilling.* The pan-dressed, fillet, or steak cuts of fish are best for grilling. Charcoal, electric, or gas grills work equally well. The big trick here is knowing how to flip the fish without breaking the fillet and allowing part of it to fall through the grill. Thick cuts are preferable because they are too big to fall through the grill grate. For those less skilled in turning fish on a grill, the best crutch is a well-greased, long-handled, hinged wire grill. It is a contraption that incarcerates the fish and prevents it from escaping through the grate, making it much easier to turn. It does not diminish the quality of the cooked fish. Baste the fish with sauce before and during grilling. Grill approximately four to six inches from moderately hot briquettes for ten to twenty minutes, depending on the thickness of the fish. Fish is done when it flakes easily with a fork.

*Microwave cooking.* To cook in a microwave oven, follow your manufacturer's directions for best results. Oven settings can vary from one microwave to the next. Seafood is generally cooked at a high setting, which radiates the most power and cooks food quickly to retain natural goodness, texture, and flavor. Like other cooking methods, when in doubt, trust your eye test to determine most precisely when the fish is done.

*Oven frying.* This might not carry quite as many calories as the deep-fat and pan-frying methods, but it still uses oil. However, it does allow cooks to pretend that they are preparing a much healthier dish, because it employs the oven. Fish cooked by this method does not require turning

or basting. Because this allows a large amount of fish to be cooked at once, it is a good option if you are feeding a large number of people. Dip fish in salted milk (a milk and egg wash works well too; its main purpose is to give the breading something to hold on to) and coat with any breading mixture that you enjoy. Place fish in a shallow, well-greased baking pan. Pour melted fat or oil over the fish and bake in an extremely hot oven, 500 degrees, until fish flakes easily with a fork. Cooking time will be short.

*Pan-frying.* This achieves a similar result as deep frying, but the process is different in that you don't sink the fish into a pot of oil. Instead, heat about 1/8 inch of oil in the bottom of a heavy frying pan. Place breaded fish in a single layer in the hot oil. Do not overload the pan. Fry fish at a moderate temperature until lightly browned on one side, then turn over and cook on the other side until browned.

*Poaching.* Poached fish tends to come off a little bland, so it most often is used as a main dish with a sauce, as a primary ingredient in a casserole, or chilled and flaked for a salad or dip. To poach, place fish in a single layer in a wide, shallow pan. Barely cover with a liquid, which can be lightly salted water, water seasoned with herbs and spices, milk, or a mixture of white wine and water, depending on the flavor profile that you want to achieve. If in doubt, use the one with which you are comfortable. Nothing magic here—it will taste good. Simmer fish for five to eight minutes or until it flakes easily with a fork.

*Steaming.* This cooking style has become quite popular with restaurants in recent years, with a number of restaurants devoting whole menu sections to steamed seafood. To do it yourself, use a deep pan with a tight cover. If a steam cooker is not available, anything that prevents the fish from touching the water can serve as a steaming rack. The water may be plain or seasoned with various spices. Bring water to a rapid boil. Place fish on a well-greased rack. Cover the pan tightly and steam for eight to ten minutes.

*Smoking.* This involves a similar process as grilling with a charcoal, electric or gas grill. To smoke, keep the grill closed while cooking, and add aromatic wood chips, often water-soaked, to the coals to give the fish a smoky flavor. Place fish on the grill, skin-side down, and baste frequently

during cooking. Cooking time varies with weather, heat of the grill, amount of moisture in chips, type of grill, and distance of fish from the source of heat, so keep a close eye on the fish so that it doesn't overcook.