

COOKING FISH AND SHELLFISH

Fish lends itself to most cooking methods, as described over the following pages, and the methods can be applied in the same way regardless of the fish. When fish is cooked, it should look opaque, right through to the bone, and the flakes of the fish should be more obvious. Try to avoid overcooking, as it will make the fish shrink, toughen, and become dry.



DEEP-FRYING

Small whole fish and small pieces of fish and shellfish, coated in a barrier such as flour, batter, or egg and bread crumbs, are suitable for this cooking method. It is this protective coating that keeps the fish moist, gives it crispness, and seals in the flavor.

Here are a few rules:

- Use a deep-fat fryer, a heavy-bottom pan, or a wok large enough so that the fish is completely immersed in the oil.
- Don't fill the pan more than half full.
- Use a vegetable oil, such as sunflower-seed or corn oil, but not olive oil as it spits.
- The temperature of the oil should be between 350–375°F/180–190°C so that the coating is sealed immediately, which protects the fish from the hot fat and prevents the fat from soaking in and the food becoming greasy. A simple way to test to see if the temperature is correct is to drop a cube of bread in the oil. If it rises to the surface, fizzes immediately, and turns brown in 30 seconds, the oil is hot enough.
- Cook the fish in batches so that the pan is not overcrowded and the temperature of the oil doesn't drop. This will assure that the fish is thoroughly cooked, evenly browned, and crisp.
- Oil that has been used for deep-frying can be used two or three times before being discarded.

KEEP IT WHITE

Lemon juice, white wine, or vinegar, added to the liquid when poaching or steaming fish, helps to keep the flesh of the fish white and firm.

PAN-FRYING

This is suitable for whole fish, steaks, fillets, and shellfish, which are sometimes coated in flour before pan-frying to protect their flesh, making them crispy, and sealing in the flavor. Use a large, uncovered skillet so that the fish will fit comfortably in it as, if it is overpacked, the temperature of the fat will drop. It is important to use the minimum amount of fat and to keep it hot so that the fish browns without absorbing the fat and becoming greasy. The fat used can be a vegetable oil, such as sunflower-seed oil, clarified butter, or butter, which gives a good flavor. If you are solely using butter, heat until it is foaming, but watch it carefully as it burns quickly. Adding a little oil to it helps, as the oil reaches a high temperature before the butter burns.

Don't turn or move the fish too often, as it will stick to the bottom of the pan. Allow it to brown first before turning. If cooking thick pieces of fish, pan-fry quickly until browned, then reduce the heat and cook until the flesh is tender.

STIR-FRYING

This is suitable for small pieces of firm-textured fish that need only the quickest of cooking. A wok is traditionally used, as its sloping sides make it perfect for continually stirring and tossing the fish. However, a large skillet can be used as a substitute. Only a small amount of oil is needed and this should be heated until very hot before adding the fish.

POACHING

This is a moist method of cooking most fish, immersed in a liquid, on the stove or in the oven. A fish poacher or large pan is used on the stove or a large roasting pan, covered with foil, in the oven. The poaching liquid can be Court Bouillon (see page 44), Fish Stock (see page 44), wine, cider, beer, milk, or flavored water, and sometimes this liquid is then made into a sauce to serve with the fish. It is important that the liquid never boils but just trembles, so that the fish doesn't fall apart.

To poach fish, first weigh the fish. Heat the liquid in the pan, add the fish, cover, and let simmer very gently, allowing 10–15 minutes per 1 lb/450 g, according to the thickness of the fish, or about 20 minutes for a small piece of fish.



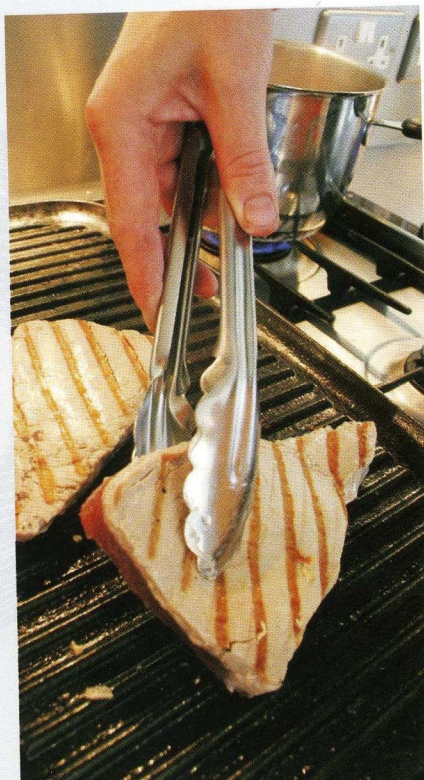


STEAMING

This is a gentle, moist method of cooking whole fish, fillets, steaks, and shellfish in a water vapor over boiling water. A steamer, with a tight-fitting lid to trap the steam, is needed but if not available, you can improvise by cooking the fish between two greased plates over a pan of boiling water. You could even use a pan with a tight-fitting lid and a strainer. The fish should be well seasoned otherwise it may taste bland. The water in the pan should be boiling, but watch that it does not bubble up over the fish during cooking.

SEARING AND GRIDDLING

Searing and griddling are suitable for cooking whole and thicker pieces of fish and produce browned skin and flesh. The methods are the same except that seared fish is cooked in a heavy-bottom skillet and griddled fish is cooked on a cast-iron, ridged stovetop grill pan or flat griddle plate. The grill pan or griddle plate is first wiped with just a little vegetable oil, heated until it is very, very hot, and the fish, which should also be brushed with a little oil, is placed on it and cooked on both sides until browned.



BROILING AND BARBECUING

Whole fish, steaks, fillets, and skewered pieces of fish all lend themselves to these dry cooking methods, but for good results, their thickness should be no more than 2 inches/5 cm and whole fish should be scored at the thickest part of the flesh so that the heat penetrates and cooks the fish right through. Oily fish are particularly suitable, as the natural oils baste the flesh during cooking. Broiled and barbecued fish also benefit from being marinated before cooking and the marinade should be basted over the fish while it is cooking to keep it moist.

It is very important to preheat the broiler at its highest temperature before cooking, as intense heat, and being cooked as close to the heat source as possible, is the secret of successful broiled fish. This will cook the fish so that it is browned and crisp on the outside and moist inside. Barbecues should also be preheated and the flames and smoke allowed to die down so that the fish is only cooked over the red hot embers. Brush the broiler rack or foil, if using to line the rack, barbecue rack, or a fish barbecue holder, and also the fish, with vegetable oil to prevent the fish from sticking. As barbecuing is a method of cooking by intense heat, the fish can dry out quickly, so you may prefer to wrap it in oiled foil, which will help to keep it moist.

BAKING

Baking is an ideal method of cooking whole fish, particularly stuffed fish, as well as steaks and fillets. As this is a method of cooking by dry heat, a tablespoon of butter and a little stock, milk, lemon juice, or wine is added to the fish and the fish should be covered to prevent it from drying. This can be done either by covering the dish with foil or by wrapping the entire fish in waxed paper, known as en papillote (see the recipe for Porgy en Papillote on page 208). When cooked en papillote, the fish is served in its paper bag.

BRAISING

This is a moist, one-pot method of cooking, usually a whole fish, on the stove or in the oven. The fish is placed on a bed of vegetables with just enough liquid to cover the vegetables, and the pan or dish should always be covered. The fish is then cooked gently. At the end of cooking, the vegetables are discarded and the liquid is usually used to make a sauce to serve with the fish.

STEWING

Whole fish, chunks of fish, and shellfish can be cooked in liquid with other ingredients, such as vegetables and flavorings, to form a stew. The fish flavors the liquid but, unlike a meat stew where it is cooked for a long time, the fish in a fish stew is often added to the liquid toward the end of cooking so that it is not overcooked.

Classic fish stews include Bouillabaisse (see page 121), which is traditionally served as two courses, Bourride, where the fish is not left whole as in Bouillabaisse, Matelote, made with freshwater fish, and Cioppino (see page 122) made from shellfish.

MICROWAVING

Microwave ovens are excellent for cooking fish because, as the fish cooks in its own juices, it is a moist form of cooking. However, a few rules should be observed for successful results.

- Arrange the thickest part of the fish toward the edge of the dish.
- Tuck in the tail end of fillets to create a more even shape.
- Don't overseason fish as this causes a rapid loss of moisture.
- Cut pieces of fish into the same size and thickness so that they cook evenly.
- Slash the skin of whole fish in two or three places to allow steam to escape and prevent it from spitting during cooking.
- Cover fish during cooking, unless the recipe says otherwise, to retain the moisture.
- Don't fry fish in the microwave.

DON'T FIDDLE

When searing, griddling, broiling, and barbecuing, don't be tempted to turn or move the fish around while cooking, as it may stick to the pan, griddle, or rack and fall apart. Ideally, turn the fish only once during cooking.

