PREPARING FISH AND SHELLFISH

Regardless of the way you intend to cook fish, it must be cleaned first. This means removing the entrails and gills and sometimes the scales and fins. Your fish supplier will often do this for you. If not, use the following guidelines to approach the job step by step.

PREPARING FISH

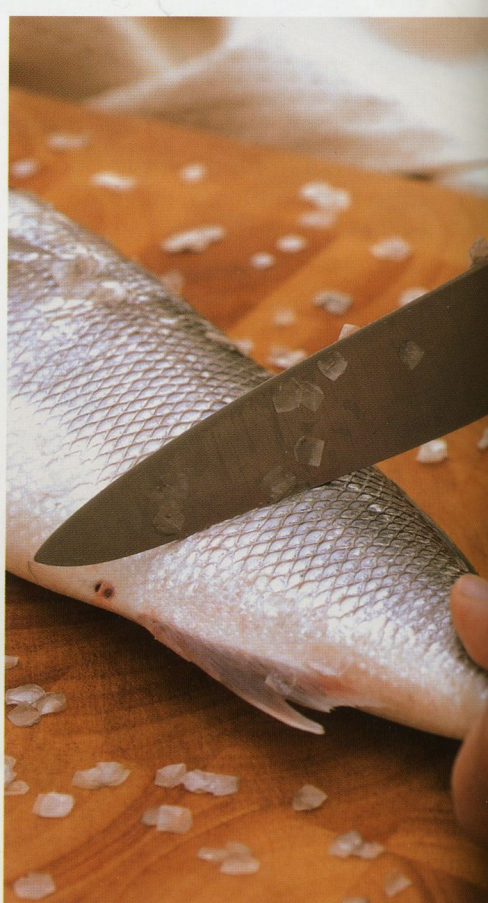
Trimming round- and flatfish

If desired, using kitchen scissors, cut off the gills and fins if the fish is to be served whole. The head and tail may also be cut off using a sharp knife. Rinse the cavity under cold running water. Fins and scales obviously don't need to be removed if the fish is to be filleted or the skin is to be removed after cooking, or in the case of trout, as the scales are part of the skin.

Scaling roundfish

This is necessary for fish such as sea bass, salmon, and snapper.

Using the back of a knife or a fish scaler, scrape from the tail to the head, away from the direction of the scales, in short, firm strokes to remove the scales. As scales have a tendency to fly everywhere, you might find this a cleaner job if you put the fish in the sink, in a large plastic bag or cover it with a large dish towel. Rinse under cold running water and dry on paper towels.



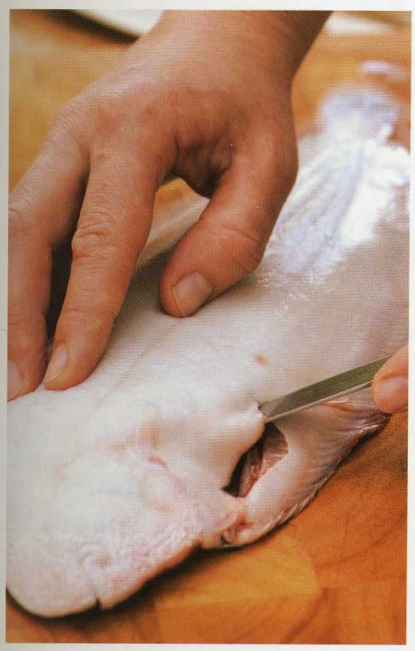
PRESERVING FLAVOR

Cooking a whole fish with the skin on helps to give the fish flavor and prevent it from drying out during cooking.

Gutting flatfish

The entrails of a flatfish occupy only a small part of the fish's body cavity.

To remove them, open the cavity, which lies in the upper part of the body, under the gills, and clean out the entrails as for a roundfish.



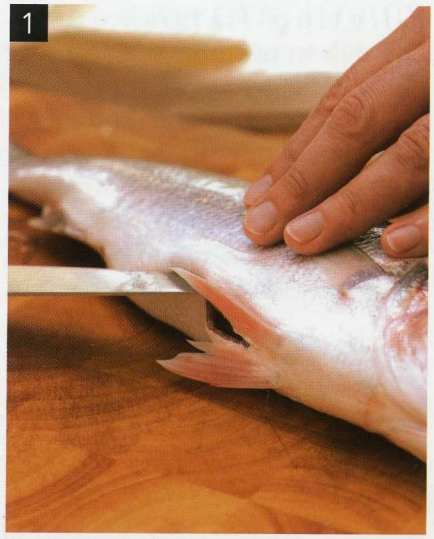
Gutting roundfish

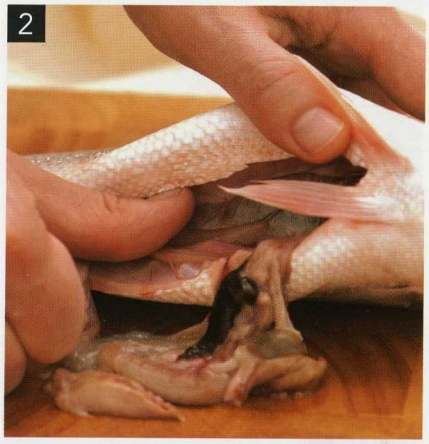
1 To remove the entrails, make a slit along the belly from the gills to the tail vent. Pull out the insides and clean away any blood in the cavity.

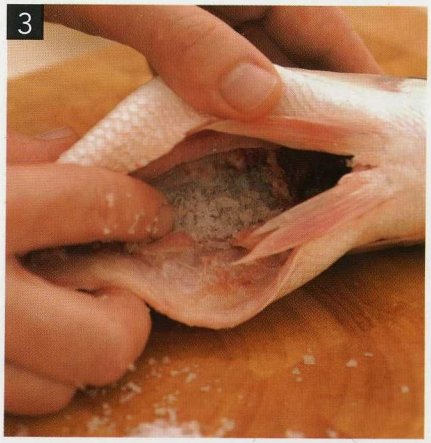
2 Remove the kidneys by running your thumbnail along the underside of the spine.

3 Rub with a little salt to remove the black skin.

Rinse under cold water and dry with paper towels.







Pocket-cleaning roundfish

This is suitable for creating a pocket in a fish while keeping the body intact. The fish is cleaned through the gills, but it is not as simple a method as cleaning a roundfish along its belly.

1 Using a sharp knife, cut the end of the gut away from the anus, then open the gill covering and make a slit to reveal the throat.

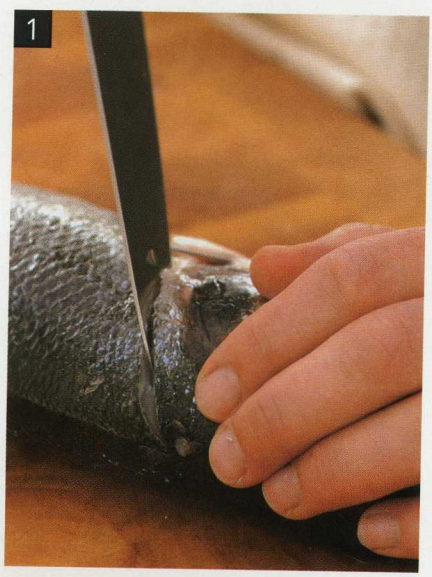
2 With your fingers, pull out the guts through the throat cavity. Rinse under cold water, removing any remaining innards, and dry on paper towels.

Filleting flatfish

Four fillets, two from each side, are usually taken from a flatfish, although sometimes one large fillet is cut from each side and these are known as double or butterfly fillets. To make four fillets, put the fish on a cutting board with its tail toward you. Using a sharp knife, cut around the shape of the head and along the backbone from head to tail. With smooth cutting strokes, working from head to tail, separate the flesh from the bone. Turn the fish over and repeat on the other side.

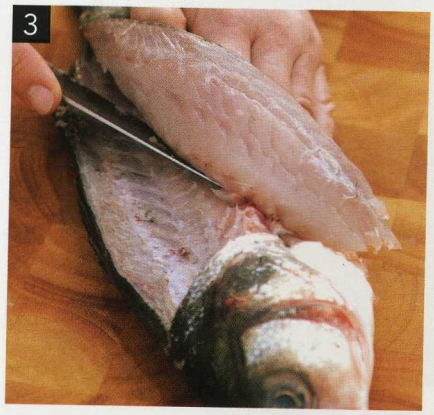
Filleting large roundfish

Two fillets are taken from round fish, although very large round fish, such as porgy, can be filleted into four, following the flat fish method, or the whole sides can be lifted as described here and then each cut into two fillets.



1 Put the fish on its side on a cutting board, with its tail and backbone toward you. Make an angular cut around the gills to the top of the head. It is not necessary to remove either the head or the tail.

2 Cut along the backbone from the head to the tail in order to expose the backbone.

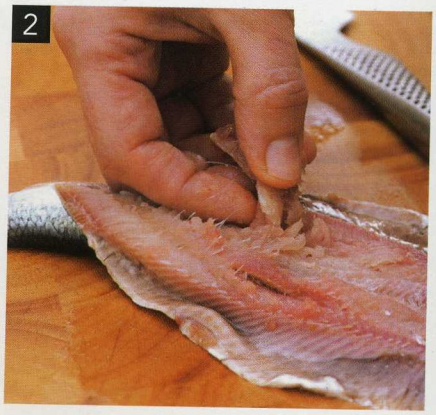


3 With smooth cutting strokes, working from head to tail, separate the flesh from the bones. Turn the flesh over and repeat on the other side, but this time working from tail to head.

Filleting small roundfish

This method, also known as butterfly boning, is suitable for small fish such as herrings, mackerel, and sardines that are usually cooked whole rather than in fillets.

1 Cut off the head and fins. Make a slit along the belly from the gills to the tail vent and remove the guts. Rinse under cold running water. Put the fish, skin-side up, on a cutting board, and with the heel of your hand, press firmly down on the backbone to loosen it.



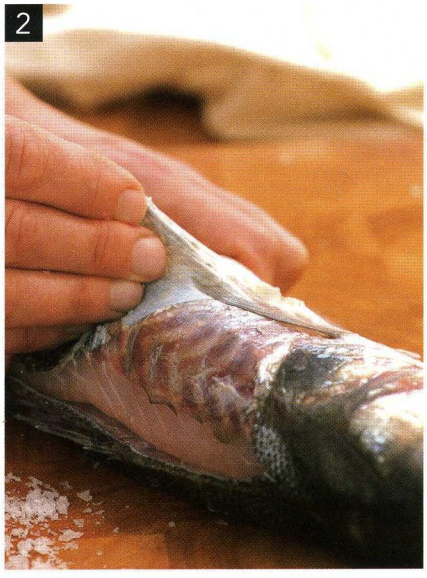
2 Turn the fish over, cut the backbone near the head, then ease the backbone out with your fingers. Remove any pinbones as described in Pinboning Fish (see opposite), then cut off the tail.

Skinning whole roundfish

Whole roundfish are usually cooked with the skin on, which is then removed before serving.

1 With the tip of the knife, loosen the skin under the head. Then, with salted fingers, gently pull the skin down toward the tail, being careful not to break the flesh. Turn the fish over and repeat on the other side.

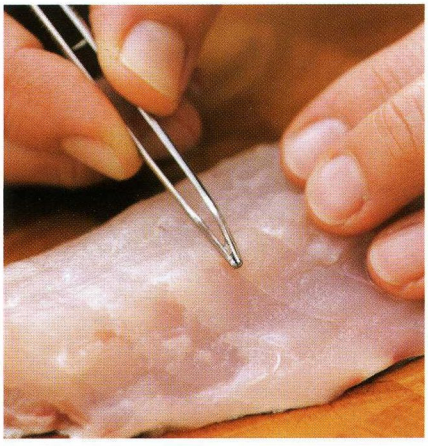
2 Should you wish to remove the skin before cooking, using a sharp knife, cut along the backbone and across the skin just below the head.



Pinboning fish

Small pinbones are to be found at the top of the flesh of roundfish fillets.

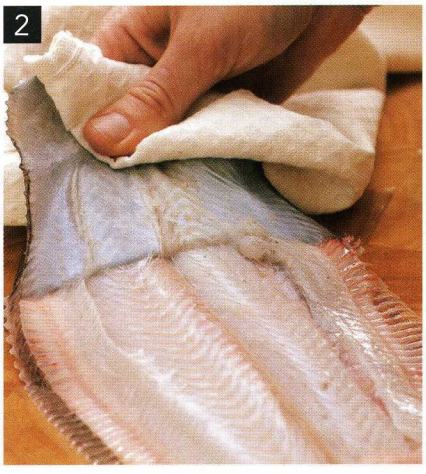
To remove them, feel for the bones with your fingertips and then remove them using a pair of tweezers.



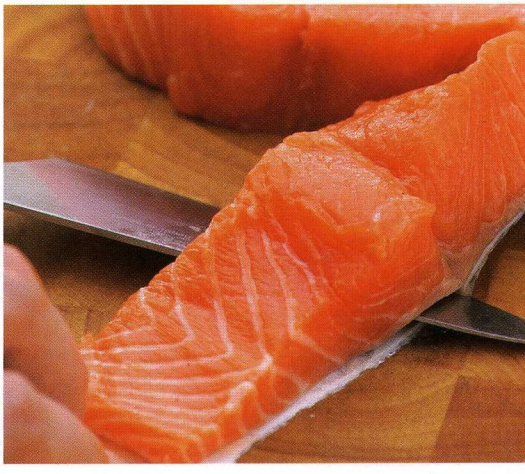
Skinning whole flatfish

Whole flatfish are usually cooked with the skin on. However, Dover and slip soles are traditionally skinned on the dark side only before cooking.

1 Using a sharp knife, make a small cut in the dark skin across the tail.



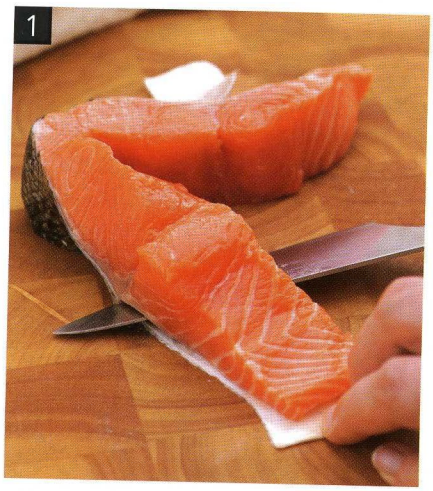
2 Slip your thumb between the skin and flesh of the fish and loosen the skin. Then, holding the tail end firmly with one hand and gripping the skin with a cloth or paper towels in the other hand, pull the skin upwards toward the head. A large pinch of salt may help you to grip the flesh.



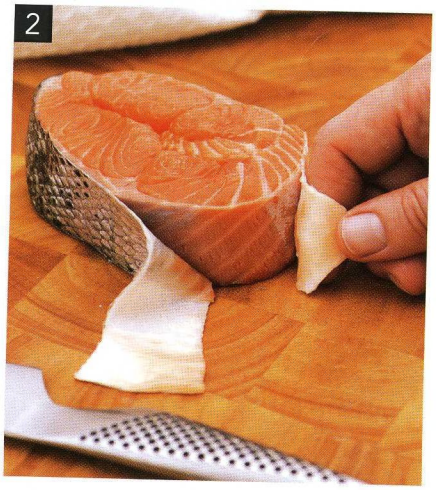
Skinning fish fillets

Put the fish fillet, skin-side down, on a cutting board. Gripping the tail firmly in one hand with a cloth or paper towels and with a knife held at an angle, remove the flesh by making a gentle sawing action away from you. A large pinch of salt may help you to grip the tail.

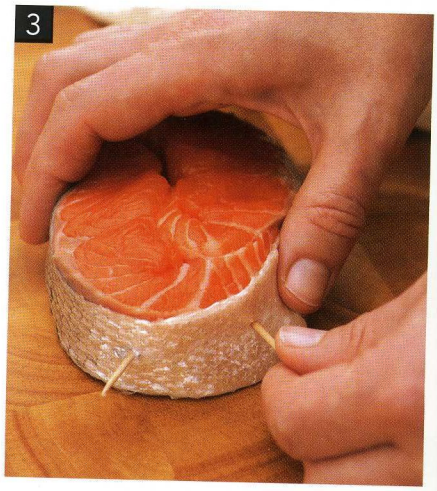
Preparing a fish noisette from a fish steak



1 After removing the pinbones, using a sharp knife, remove the skin from the flesh halfway around the steak.



2 Curl the skinned piece of fish into the center and wrap the rest of the steak around the outside.



3 Wrap the loose piece of skin around the steak and secure the whole noisette with wooden toothpicks.

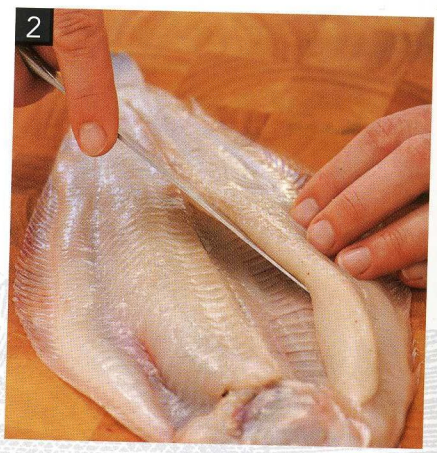
Boning a Dover or slip sole

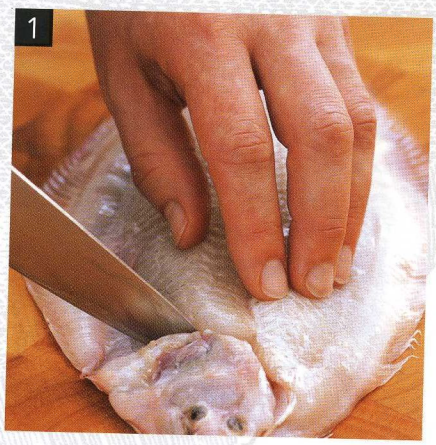
Dover and slip soles can be boned in preparation for stuffing. To do this, skin both sides of the fish as described under Skinning Whole Flatfish (see page 31).

1 Put the fish on a cutting board with its tail toward you and, using a sharp knife, cut around the shape of the head and along the backbone from head to tail.

2 With smooth cutting strokes, working from head to tail, lift the flesh from the bone, stopping when you reach the fins. Leave the fillet completely attached to the head and tail. Turn the fish around and separate the fillet on the other side of the fish in the same way.

3 Turn the fish over and repeat on the other side, leaving the fillets attached to the fins, head, and tail in the same way. Using kitchen scissors, cut away all around the backbone and remove it.





PREPARING CEPHALOPODS

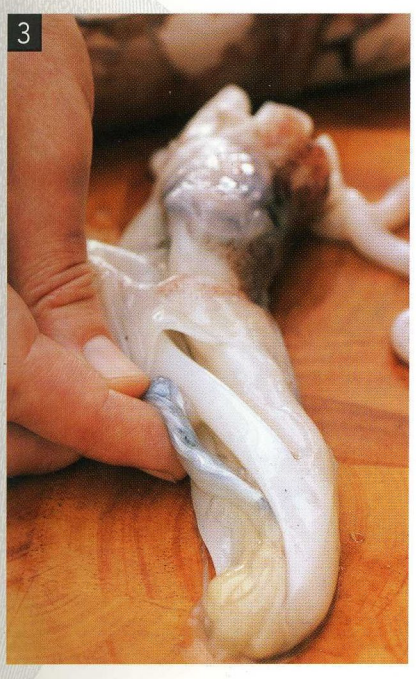
Squid

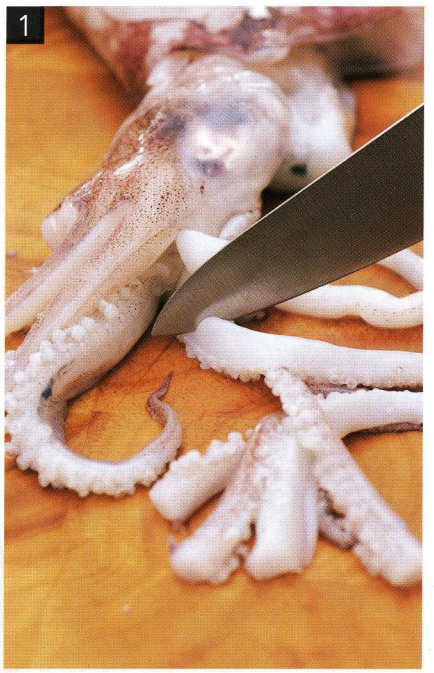
Put the squid on a cutting board and, grasping the body in one hand, gently pull off the head and tentacles with the other hand. The body entrails will come away at the same time and should be discarded.

1 Cut off the edible tentacles just in front of the eyes and reserve, then squeeze out the small, hard beak and discard.

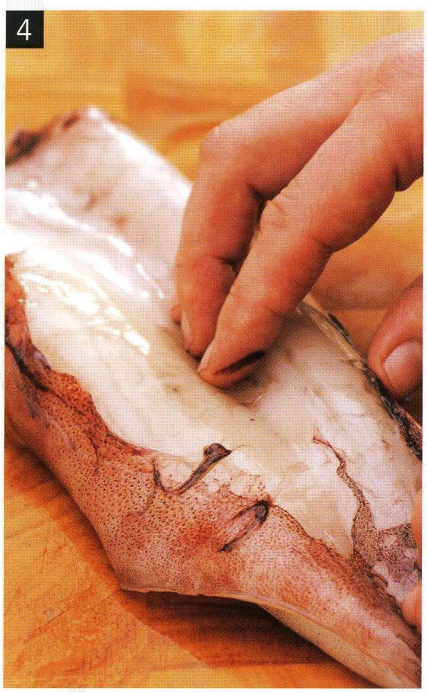
2 Remove the transparent quill that runs along the length of the body of the squid.

3 Carefully remove one or two of the ink sacs from the head so that you do not pierce them and set them aside if you want to use the ink in another recipe. Discard the head.





4 Rub off the thin, dark, outer membrane with your fingers. Rinse under cold running water and dry on paper towels.



SQUID INK

Squid ink can be used in a black risotto. To use, put the sac in a cup and pierce with the tip of a sharp knife. Dilute the ink with a little water, then pass through a strainer.

Octopus

Put the octopus on a cutting board and, grasping the body in one hand, firmly pull off the head and tentacles with the other hand. The body entrails will come away at the same time and should be discarded along with the ink sac. Cut off the edible tentacles just in front of the eyes. Rinse the body and tentacles under cold running water and dry on paper towels, then beat well with a rolling pin or wooden meat mallet to tenderize the flesh.

PREPARING SHELLFISH

Crab

Crabs are usually sold cooked, but should you buy a live one, the most humane and least traumatic way of killing it is by the following method. Put the live crab in a plastic bag in the freezer for 2 hours to put it to sleep. Bring a large pan of heavily salted water to a boil, adding 1/3 cup salt to every 4 cups. Remove the crab from the freezer, immediately plunge the unconscious crab into the water, and cover the pan. Return to a boil and let simmer for 15 minutes, allowing an extra 10 minutes for each additional crab. Let cool in the water.

To prepare a cooked crab, have 2 bowls ready, one for white meat and one for brown meat. Put the crab on its back on a cutting board. Gripping a claw firmly in one hand and as close to the body as possible, twist it off. Remove the other claw and the legs in the same way.

1 Break the claws in half by bending them backward at the joint. Crack the shells of the claws and larger legs with a rolling pin and remove the white meat with a skewer or teaspoon handle. Set aside the small legs for garnishing.

Put the crab on its back with its eyes and mouth facing away from you.

2 Remove the stomach sac and mouth, which are attached to the back shell, and discard them.

3 Gripping the shell firmly, press the body section upward and gently pull them apart. Remove the soft gray gills that are attached along the edges of the body and discard.

4 Cut the body into two or four pieces and carefully pick out the flesh. Scoop out the brown meat from the shell.

Lobster

A live lobster should be cooked in the same way as a crab (see opposite), but when you remove it from the freezer, weigh it quickly before plunging it into the water. Calculate the cooking time by allowing 18 minutes for the first 1 lb 2 oz/500 g and an extra 11 minutes for every additional 1 lb 2 oz/500 g.

1 To prepare a cooked lobster, put it on a cutting board and twist off the claws and pincers. Crack open the large claws and remove the flesh from them, discarding the membrane. The small claws can be reserved for garnishing.

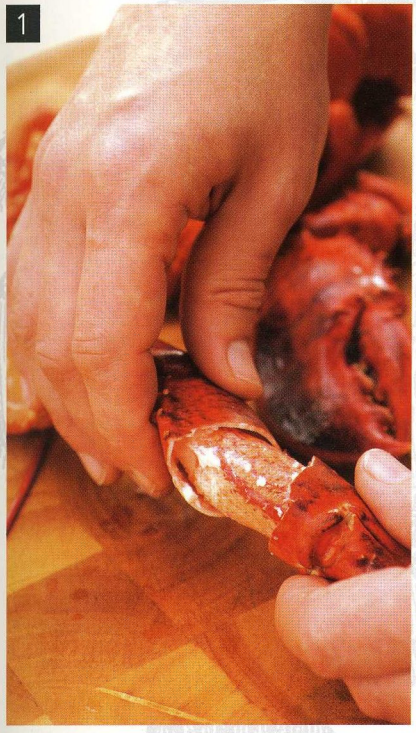
2 Using the tip of a sharp knife, split the shell of the lobster in half from head to tail.

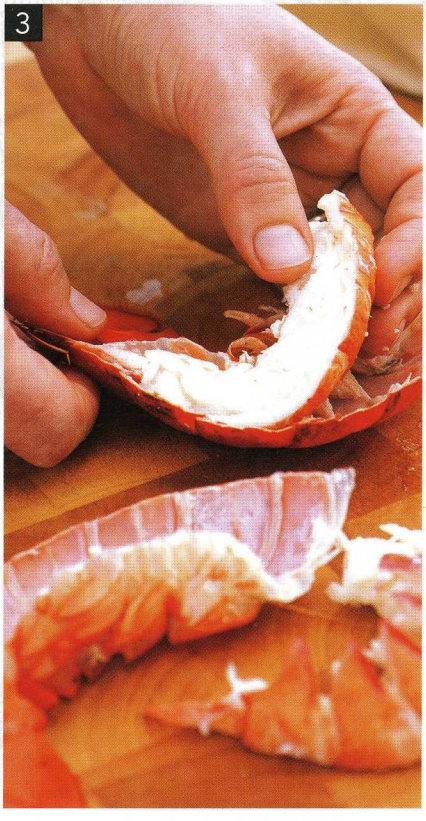
3 Remove the flesh from the tail, reserving the coral (only found in females and at certain times of the year) and, using a skewer, scrape out the flesh from the back legs.

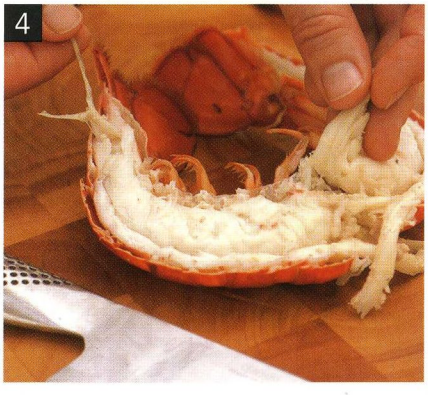
4 Remove and discard the threadlike intestine, the stomach sac, and the spongy gills from the lobster.

DON'T SOAK OR FEED

Never soak shellfish, particularly filter feeders such as oysters, mussels, and clams, in cold water as this will kill them. They should also not be fed, for example with oatmeal, while storing them in the refrigerator, as this can also leave them gaping open and dead.





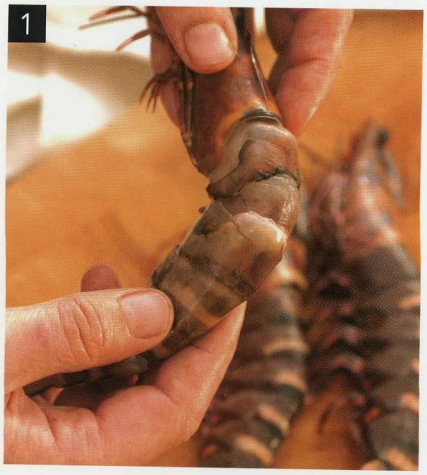


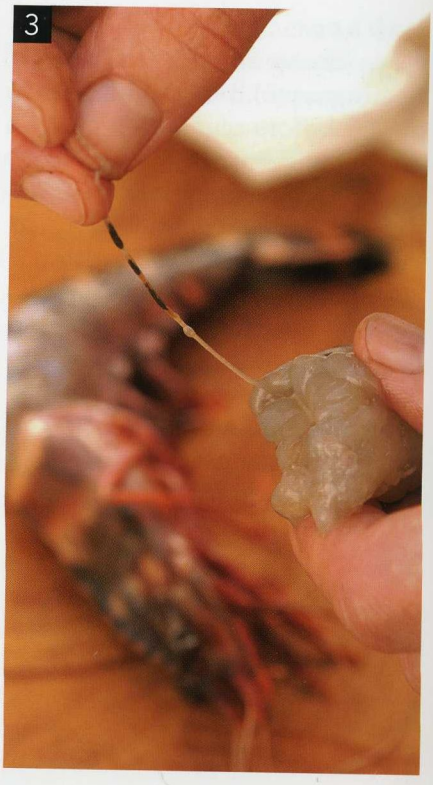
Shrimp

1 To peel a shrimp, hold its head between your thumb and index finger and, using the fingers of your other hand, hold the tail and gently pinch and pull off the tail shell.

2 Holding the body, pull off the head, body shell, and claws.

3 To devein a shrimp, using the tip of a sharp knife or skewer, carefully pull out the dark vein that runs down the shrimp's back and discard.



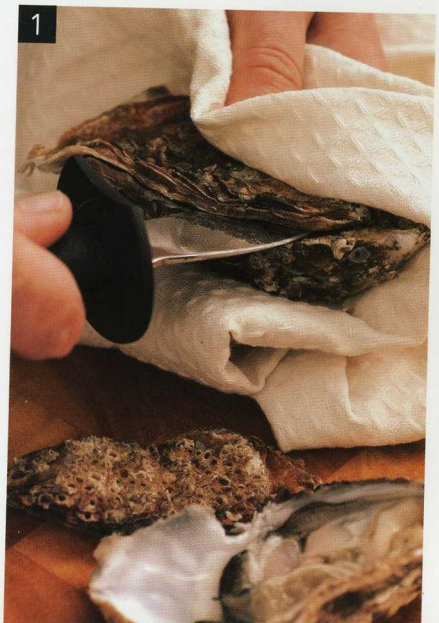


Oyster

Scrub each oyster shell with a stiff scrubbing brush under cold running water to clean. To open an oyster (known as to shuck an oyster), put it on a cutting board, with the rounded side down, and cover with a clean dish towel to protect your hands.

1 Holding the oyster in the cloth and using a strong, short knife or, ideally, a shucking knife, insert the knife at the hinge and prise the shell upward to open the oyster shell. Take great care when doing this.

2 Slide the knife along the inside of the upper shell to cut the muscle and release the oyster. Try to reserve as much of the juice as possible. Oysters served raw "on the half shell" are served with their juices in the bottom shell.



Clam

Scrub each clam with a stiff scrubbing brush under cold running water to clean the shell, then put on a cutting board or hold each clam in a cloth in the palm of your hand and prise the shell open at the hinge with a knife, ideally a clam knife.

If the clams are very difficult to open, they can be helped by putting them on a baking sheet in a very hot oven for 4–5 minutes until they begin to open.

Loosen the clams and leave each in one half of the shell if you are intending to serve them raw. Set aside any juice from the clams, as this can be strained and used in a sauce. It should certainly not be discarded.

Mussel

Clean each mussel by scrubbing or scraping the shell under cold running water to remove any barnacles, mud, or seaweed.

Pull away any beards that are attached to the mussel shells. It is the the beard that the mussel uses to cling to the rocks so you will need to tug hard. If the mussel is open and will not close when tapped sharply with the back of a knife, it is dead and should be discarded.

Also discard any with broken shells or any that feel particularly heavy, as these are probably filled with sand. Put the mussels in a colander and rinse well under cold running water, then drain well.

Scallop

1 Scrub each scallop shell with a stiff scrubbing brush under cold running water to remove as much sand as possible.

2 Discard any scallops that are open and will not close when tapped sharply with the back of a knife. Using a strong knife, prise the shell open. If the scallops are very difficult to open, they can be helped by putting them on a baking tray, with their rounded side uppermost, in a very hot oven for 4–5 minutes until the shells begin to open.

3 Remove and discard the gray beard that surrounds each scallop and the black thread and stomach bag. Detach the scallop and coral from the shell with a spoon. Rinse under cold running water and dry on paper towels.