

You've hooked a handsome specimen just the right size for the frying pan. Now what?

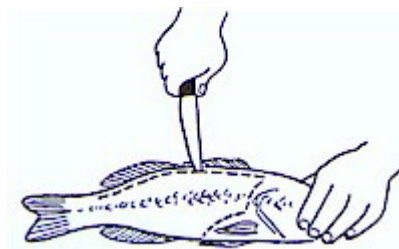
Put your fish on ice in a cooler as soon as possible to preserve texture and freshness. If you don't have a cooler handy, you can keep the fish alive in a wire fish basket dangling in the water. Or, thread a stringer through the fish's gill and out the mouth and secure the other end of the stringer to the boat or shore. Let the fish swim in the water.

Now you must decide how you want to eat the rascal. Perhaps whole, baked with the head on? Or maybe as meaty fillets to deep-fry in a tasty batter?

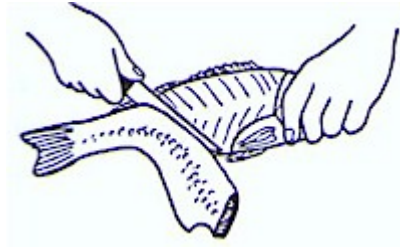
Trout or Arctic Char are eaten whole or cut into steaks, and Walleye (also called Pike), Northern Pike, Perch or Bass are usually filleted. All need to be gutted before cooking. To gut a fish, kill it first with a sharp rap over the head. Hold gently but firmly with one hand and insert the tip of a sharp, narrow-bladed knife or kitchen shears at the vent (anal opening). Make a shallow cut in the belly from the vent to head. Spread open the belly cavity and remove the internal organs. With a spoon or knife, scrape away the dark red kidney line attached to the backbone. pinch out the gills with your fingers if the head is to be left on, then rinse the fish in clean water. You're ready to cook!



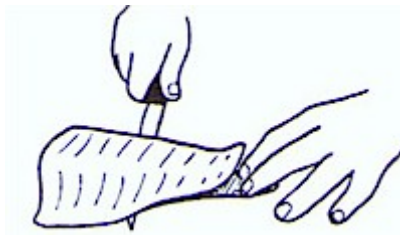
Most panfish and game fish are filleted and don't need to be gutted. Here's how to fillet a fish:



1. Lay the fish on its side and kill it with a sharp blow to the head. Using a sharp filleting knife, make a diagonal cut from the side fins to the top of the head, then cut down to the backbone behind the head. Turn the blade flat and cut along the side of the fish with a sawing motion all the way down to the tail. Remove the fillet and use the point of the knife to lift out any rib bones. That's one fillet.



2. Turn the fish over and repeat. That's two!



3. To skin a fillet, place it flat on a cutting board, skin facing down. Hold the tail end down with your thumb. With a firm stroke of the knife, start at the tail and cut down at an angle until you reach the skin, then turn the blade flat and run it parallel to the board, cutting the skin from the meat with a sawing motion.

Perch, crappie, bass and walleye should have their scales removed if they are not filleted or skinned. Hold the fish by its head and scrape from tail to head with a fish scaler, dull knife or tablespoon until all scales are off.

Catfish and bullheads need to be skinned if they are not filleted. Cut around the head with a very sharp knife, then pull the skin back with pliers.

It's best to eat your fish fresh, but you can freeze cleaned fish or fillets for up to six months. Place the fish in a sealable plastic bag or cleaned out milk carton and fill with water. Seal and put in the freezer. The frozen "fish cube" prevents freezer burn of the delicate flesh. To defrost, place the fish cube in a pan, cover, and let sit in the refrigerator until thawed. You can also place the block under a slowly running cold water tap if you're in a hurry.

**The Famous "Triple-Dip" Fish Fry
(courtesy of the "Fishin' Magician," Dr. Thomas Benedict Sheffy,
and his studious apprentice, D.L. Sperling)**

1 cup flour

1/4 teaspoon
ground pepper

1/4 teaspoon
paprika

1/4 teaspoon salt
(optional)

1 egg

1/8 cup water

1-1/2 cups bread crumbs, cracker
crumbs, potato flakes or crushed cereal

about 1 pound of fish fillets

Pat fish dry with paper towels and set aside. You will need three shallow dishes to prepare the coating. In one dish, combine flour, pepper, paprika, salt any other spices or herbs to taste. In dish two, beat together the egg and water to make an egg wash. (Some people substitute buttermilk for the egg wash.) In dish three, place the crushed crumbs of your choice.

Pick up a fillet and dredge it in the flour, patting the mix into the fillet. Shake off excess flour but make sure a thin coating of flour clings to all surfaces of the fillet.

Next, dip the floured fillet into the egg wash and turn the fillet over with a fork. Carefully lift the fillet from the wash, letting the excess liquid drain back into the dish. If you've done this correctly, the flour on the fillet should be slightly gummy or tacky.

Transfer the fillet to the third dish with a fork, gently patting the crumbs over the entire surface until the fillet is evenly coated with crumbs. Remove the fillet from the crumbs and place on a plate. Separate layers of coated fillets with waxed paper or aluminum foil until you are ready to fry or bake.

Pan frying: Heat about 1/4 inch of cooking oil in a heavy skillet. When a pinch of flour sizzles in the pan, it's hot enough to fry your fish. Cook a few fillets at a time (don't crowd the pan) and fry until golden brown and crispy.

Oven frying: Coat a jelly roll pan with cooking oil and place it in the oven. Heat oven to 450F. Place fillets on heated pan and cook about six to seven minutes on a side until crispy.