

Best Fish Fry Techniques and Secrets from a Pro

First, let's talk a little about history. The Deep South has a fancy for perfectly deep-fried fish and the roots of fish fries are deeply entangled in Southern food culture.

"Fish fries are working people's food," says John T. Edge, American Food author and the director of the Southern Foodways Alliance at the University of Mississippi.

In the South, textile Mills are always located on or near a river. So even if you didn't have a farm or livestock, people could fish and whatever they caught, they'd eat on Sunday at a fish fry.

Fish camps came about as place where people caught fish and then ate them during the Depression era. A fish camp is really just a permanent fish fry house, located near or on a river or body of water. Later, in the 1950s, these camps turned into fry shacks and restaurants.

Today's Fish Fries

Today, fish fry houses or restaurants serve up thousands of pounds of shrimp and seafood from around the globe.

"We bring the bounty of the sea to the mountains," say owners George Baxevanis and George Vlahos, of Fisherman's Quarters II, a family-style seafood restaurant in the mountains of Asheville, NC where they serve Calabash-style seafood in abundance!

This operation serves at least 40 pounds of fresh cabbage, daily, for its delicious homemade Cole slaw; 100 pounds of fried baby shrimp; 100 pounds of flounder; and 100 pounds of Alaskan Whitefish. So, this proves that fish fry houses are still extremely popular in the south.

Typically, fish that is fried is whatever is local – catfish, whiting, flounder, you name it. If it swims, they can fry it! Shrimp is also a favorite.

Methods of Frying Fish

There are two different approaches to how to batter or coat your fish when frying. First is with some type of batter. Batter is going to give the fried fish a golden coating that encrusts the filet. Batters range from tempura which is Japanese to the American favorite – beer batter. No matter which one you choose – the fluffy golden outcome is decadent!

Second, is the traditional southern method which is simply dredging the fish in a cornmeal mix and then frying. This method produces a lighter end result and also gives the fish a crust, just not as much as the batter does. For delicate types of fish filets this is the method of choice.

With either method, cocktail sauce and tartar sauces are a common favorite. And, don't forget the lemon.

Below are two recipes that demonstrate each method and also tips for deep frying:

Deep Frying

Preheat oil to 190 degrees Celsius (375 degrees Fahrenheit). Sprinkle fish with salt. Coat with batter or cover lightly with flour. Dip in milk or beaten egg, then coat with flour or crumbs. Fry a few pieces at a time. Follow cooking guidelines above. Drain on absorbent paper. Use fresh or thawed fish. Be sure the fat returns to 375 degrees Fahrenheit before frying anymore. Serve with lemon wedges and cocktail and tartar sauces.

Crispy Batter for Deep-Frying

- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 1 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 2 teaspoons sugar
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 1 cup water

Coat fish in batter. Let excess drip off. Fry fish in hot oil (370 degrees) for two minutes or until golden. Never fry too many filets at the same time...only a few at a time. Drain on paper towels; keep warm. Repeat until done!

Corn meal mix for frying fish

- 2 cups cornmeal
- 1/4 c. flour
- 1 tablespoon paprika
- 1 1/4 tsp. salt
- 1 teaspoon fresh ground black pepper
- 1 egg
- 1 cup milk
- 2 teaspoons baking powder

Coat fish with cornmeal mix, shake off excess. Fry fish in hot oil (370 degrees) for two minutes or until golden. Drain on paper towels; keep warm. Repeat until done! Now you are ready for a treat – calabash-style seafood – come get some y'all!

