

How to Select Fish and Seafood

Yvonne Maffei's cooking school continues with tips on how to select the best fish for your table and some seafood too



Fish and seafood varieties are so vast that there is something for everyone to experiment with and try, no matter where you live in the world. The trick for having a successful experience with its taste is to choose the correct fish for your cooking needs and your tastebuds and making sure you pick something that is fresh and healthy from the start. Because fish and seafood deteriorate as soon as they come out of the water, it's absolutely critical to purchase only what is fresh and to know what that looks like.

Fish versus seafood

Fish is often referred to as the non-shellfish inhabitants of water, e.g. salmon, halibut and mackerel; whereas seafood includes both fish and creatures with shells that also inhabit the sea such as shrimp and crabs, also referred to generally as crustaceans or molluscs. Seafood also includes other types of edible aquatic life like kelp, seaweed and creatures from freshwater bodies.

Is fresh really fresher than frozen?

What most people may not realise is that fish purchased in supermarkets is often trucked in on ice or in trucks with freezers. Once it arrives in a supermarket, it is thrown onto ice and displayed in cases in the supermarket's fish and seafood section. This means that day after day it ages and deteriorates, making it essential that it be cooked fairly soon after getting it home. On the other hand, fish that is frozen and sold in packages is usually done so as it comes off the boats and is cleaned, cut and processed. Generally speaking, that means that frozen fish can sometimes actually be 'fresher' than the defrosted kind you find in the store.

If you are fortunate enough to purchase fish from an outdoor market, a dockside stand or a fishmonger specialising in daily catch, you can still use the same tips included here, although it will be a lot easier to ask questions about the quality of your purchase.

What to look for when buying fresh fish or seafood

Here's what you need to look for when

buying fresh whole fish on ice, every single time:

- Clear eyes
- Bright red gills
- Scales intact
- No odour (except that of the salty sea with saltwater fish and seafood)
- No slime, although the skins should feel slippery to the touch.
- Bouncy flesh when you press on it - yes, ask if you can touch it.

If the fish is not whole, go by smell. If the fish smells 'fishy', it's not fresh. For cut fish, look at the colour of its flesh for any discolouration, which is not a good sign. Both of these tips apply whether or not fish and seafood have been defrosted on ice or comes in a bag from the freezer. As for shellfish like mussels and clams, they should always close when cooked, so if you take some home that have passed all of the above criteria and they still don't close, they should be discarded.

Farmed versus wild fish and seafood

There is a rising number of fisheries around the world, particularly for salmon, tilapia and shrimp. The reason for this phenomena is to meet high demand and thus control breeding as much as humanly possible. This can be both good and bad and comes with much controversy when the use of antibiotics is thrown into the mix in an effort to prevent or control the outbreak of diseases that are common in each species. Additionally, many fish are fed GMO-corn as a constant supply of feed, which is alarming to many consumers.

If you decide to purchase farm-raised fish, try to find out as much as you can about the fishery in order to know where the fish is coming from and what their stance is on both antibiotics and feed. My general rule of thumb is that if I don't know what they're feeding the fish, I'll choose wild-caught over farmed. Needless to say, in your search you may come across a fishery that is doing everything they can to raise healthy fish that are healthy for people too and as such they may become a great source of your family's fish and seafood intake.