

How To Select Fish and Seafood

By Curt Hagedorn

No matter what diet plan you read or nutrition information you follow, it is almost universally agreed upon that Americans need to cut down on the red meat and eat more fish. Not only are fish high in protein and low in fat, but the fat they do have – what are called Omega 3 fatty acids – is considered to be a significant factor in reducing “bad” cholesterol and thus the possibility of heart disease. Of course, for those of us living on the East or West coasts, fish can be a fact of life, with a wide variety of fresh and saltwater fish as well as shellfish available, in many cases just caught. And, for a price, the landlocked can enjoy fresh fish flown in from the coasts either chilled or frozen just as it has been pulled from the water and thus almost as fresh as our beach living fellow consumers. However, if your budget is a little less forgiving, you’re often looking at frozen or processed fish which, though still better for you than no fish at all, simply don’t confer the same benefits or have the same variety of flavors as fresh fish.

How do you tell if the seafood you’re considering is fresh? Well, it turns out your sense of smell is an excellent indicator. Fresh fish does not smell “fishy,” the fishier the smell, the older the fish. Thus, no matter how embarrassing it is, always, always ask your fishmonger to let you smell the fish you’ve selected – there’s nothing worse than picking out a beautiful cut of salmon and bringing it home to find that you’ve paid full price for less than full flavor. What should fish smell like? Basically, like water – really fresh fish has the clean smell of the sea or lake water it came from. Fresh fish is also firm and resilient (not rubbery or squishy) to the touch and, if you’re buying fish whole, the eyes are clear, not clouded or milky. For shellfish, lobsters, crabs, etc. should be alive and lively, and clams, oysters, muscles, etc. should be tightly closed – or if slightly open slam shut when touched. Remember to wash shellfish thoroughly to remove sand or grit (keep dunking them until there’s no sand at the bottom of the pot or bowl) and, after you’ve cooked them, throw away any that have not opened – they are inedible.

If you’re stuck without a fish counter and are looking at “fresh” fish filets and shellfish like scallops shrink-wrapped in those little Styrofoam trays, you still should, if possible, smell the fish to see if it’s fresh. If that means calling the butcher or store manager over to rewrap the package after you’ve opened it, so be it – but be considerate and find someone to help you, don’t just poke holes in packages and leave them there. Fresh-frozen fish also can be a good alternative – think of them the way you think of frozen vegetables, almost as good but different – though some varieties seem to freeze better than others so use your taste and preparation method as your guide. Pre-cooked frozen shrimp can be quite a good buy – often better than those little plastic rounds of “fresh cooked” shrimp at the deli counter. The same goes for frozen rock lobster tails –

if you want a little lobster for salad, they're a far easier and often more economical choice than dealing with a whole live lobster.

If you really can't find fresh, locally caught fish that you like and you long for a taste of the sea, you can treat yourself by ordering one of the many packaged clam bakes available from a variety of retailers all over the country from your local gourmet grocery to mail order outlets primarily in Maine and in the Northeast. For a price, you'll receive by overnight express a pot full of all the classic clambake ingredients --- corn on the cob, potatoes, kielbasa or other sausage (sometimes this is left out or optional), clams, mussels and live lobster. All you have to do is add a bottle or two of wine or beer, place on top of the stove and steam until done. At from \$50 to \$100 plus shipping, these are the perfect special family dinner solution, great for parties and also make an excellent gift.

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