

Making the Most From Your Catch From the Surf to Your Table

TIPS ON GETTING THE BEST FLAVOR AND FULL USAGE FROM YOUR CATCH OF
SMALLER FISH

By Tony Murray



Surf fishing for whiting at St. George Island. The water temperature was 61 degrees and there were no fish to be found via boat so we tried the surf.

We landed 30 whiting and kept 20 for our dinner and all the boys had a great time contributing to the catch. This method of handling and preparing fish goes for all types of smaller fish; spotted sea trout, white trout, white snapper, jolt head porgy, mangrove snapper, rock bass, whiting or any other smaller fish that you have a bunch to clean. You can see the boys were hungry for fish.





In getting the best flavor from your fish, if, at all possible, attempt to keep the fish alive and in good shape up until you are ready to clean them. Then upon completion of the cleaning, prepare them for the dinner table immediately. I have had the oil heating up prior to beginning the cleaning of live fish on occasion. If you are on your boat and you have a live well you can take a few live fish home for dinner that night and taste the difference. Note the vibrant colors of this whiting caught from the bayside; compare to the silver-white surf caught fish below. It is amazing how fish can alter their color and patterns to match their surroundings.

The fish that you choose to ice down put into an ice slurry immediately. Handle the fish with gently respect, this means don't pitch them across the floor of your vessel or toss them into your fish box or leave them on the floor of your boat. Mishandling of fish can cause the meat to become bruised and the cells rupture, associated off taste can occur. This standard cooler tray has been drilled out to allow the water to drain through it. This is the tray that cleaned fish are placed into after being cleaned to keep water away from the fresh meat. A clean dry ice is used – not an ice slurry – for the flesh of the fish to be kept cold. This is extremely important when the temperatures are over 70 degrees. Keep the fish iced down at all times.

When you place your fish on ice, a slurry is best. Ideally, this slurry is 80% ice and 20% water at first. Upon catching a fish and placing it on ice make sure it is immersed within this slurry. This slurry completely surrounds the complete fish including its gills. If you add a small amount of sea water (or direct dry salt such as rock salt) to your ice you can decrease the temperature of your ice slurry www.GAFFmag.net



substantially for longer trips.

A note about your ice: first if you have or use your own ice if you put it in your deep freezer, which is probably about -20 degrees F; this ice is much colder than the ice you get at the bait store which is at about 28 to 30 degrees F. This is why this ice melts so quickly, because it melts at 32 degrees. The colder the ice; the longer it takes to rise to melting temperatures and the longer you have it. Consequently the better the shape your fish will be in at the end of

the trip and the fresher they will be.

If you are leaving your fish on ice for overnight, leave the fish in a draining cooler so the fish are sitting in ice which is draining through the stop-cock of the cooler and the fish are not sitting in water. This leaves the fish very clean upon dressing them out and washes the slime layer from their bodies. Elevating one end of the cooler about 3 inches assures there is no pooling water in the bottom which can allow for a pool of stagnate off-smelling water.



This was our make shift live-well at the beach, it was a soft side cooler buried in the sand; we kept 20 fish alive for 2 hours by shuttling in fresh buckets of salt water every 10 minutes and keeping the top closed.

This silver-blanch whiting must be almost invisible in the surf zone. I always examine fish for overall vitality of the fish. Clear eyes, vibrant gills, no sores or cuts on the fish, no scales with deformities. Additionally, upon cleaning the fish a review of the internal organs gives a good idea of the health of the fish. Parasites in the meat

can be found upon close examination on specific species of fish during specific seasons, such as worms in trout. Additionally, I always note the stomach contents to determine what the fish has been feeding on and where it is in its feeding cycle. This is the perfect size fish for frying when cleaned as presented below.





These fish were transported live to be dressed out. Remember that Florida Law prohibits the dressing out of fish on boats. All fish have to be whole for FWC officers to be able to inspect the fish for species, size and bag limit.

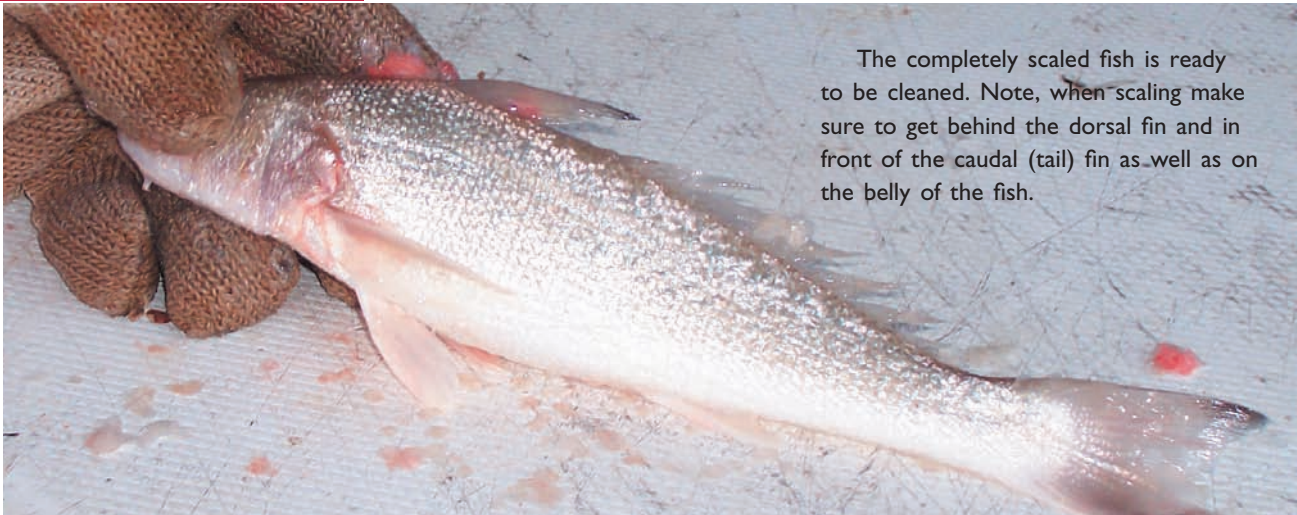


Every animal should be treated with the utmost respect. A quick and solid rap to the top of the head with the butt end of the scaler takes the life from this beautiful fish for the cleaning process. The fish goes limp immediately.



A quick scaling can be performed in about 20 seconds per side.

FISH GUTS



The completely scaled fish is ready to be cleaned. Note, when scaling make sure to get behind the dorsal fin and in front of the caudal (tail) fin as well as on the belly of the fish.



The initial cut is from the vent up the centerline of the fish. I insert the knife into the vent at an angle and make a shallow cut to not slice through the intestines, stomach or the green gland.



A cut is made on both sides of the head directly in front of both the pelvic and the pectoral fins in preparation for the head to be removed. Note that the cut is made up over the top of the head of the fish in the shape of a C because there is a lot of meat that people leave behind when the head is cut straight off. Examine the final product in which this cut is C shaped, tapers in towards the head and follows the line of the gills.



Here is a different angle of the diagonal cut that is made on both sides of the fish to remove the head. The gut area is not sliced through which leaves the entrails intact. There meat directly on top of the head of fish is salvaged with this cut. Upon completion of this cut the head is bent backwards and the vertebrae separates at the nearest (front) joint. Complete usage of the fish is always my goal; this represents to me a respect for the life of the animal, the resource and the sport.



This is a close-up picture of the evil green gland and the intact entrails of the fish; if this gland is punctured or pinched it will both stain and excessively off flavor the fish. I have seen people leave behind large portions of the fish when filleting large fish such as grouper because they do not even want to get near this gland. Knowing where this gland is located and how to work around it is the key to this process.



The following two cuts are the ones that most people do not take the time to make. The number of bones that are removed when the anal and dorsal fins are removed make the difference between enjoying the fish at the dinner table or ending up with a mouthful of bones. A deep slice is made on each side

of the anal fin and is joined together at the anterior end. This is why the Kevlar glove is used. Note this is a gravid female (laden with developing eggs) and the roe is left intact for separate removal. Another name for these eggs is caviar; and can be fried separately and are quite good when they are young and tender.



This cut allows the anal fin to be removed with a backwards pull; when the anal and dorsal fins are removed correctly in this manner it

pulls out feeling like you are opening a zipper. This leaves only the backbone and the rib bones to deal with when eating.



This is one of the trickier cuts because of the depth of approximately ½" and it is on the rounded portion of the back of the fish. The removal of the dorsal fin with the associated bones on this size fish makes for much more pleasant eating.



The dorsal fin is removed in the same manner as the anal fin by pulling gently backwards on the fin towards the head. Note the bones are not cut through, but cut beside and then pulled out.



The gut lumen is gently cleaned out. Note, I do all of this without any water. The only washing of the fish that is performed is after scaling and directly before cooking. Otherwise the fish are stored back immediately on ice or are seasoned directly and refrigerated. Each fish will take me about 2 minutes per fish to clean in this manner which includes the scaling process.

FISH GUTS



I included a quick lesson on filleting smaller fish here also. I have also included the technique that I use for filleting smaller fish, this works great on spotted sea trout, white trout, white snapper, jolt head porgy, mangrove snapper, rock bass, whiting or any other smaller fish that you have a bunch to clean. Once I get going, I can fillet two fish per minute (about 30 seconds per fish). I start at the head with that same C shaped cut and go directly almost to the backbone.



The knife is quickly turned and glides down to the tail without cutting the fillet off.



The small tab of skin is left connected to the tail. I typically flip the fillet with the tip of the knife; this cut takes about 3 seconds to perform.

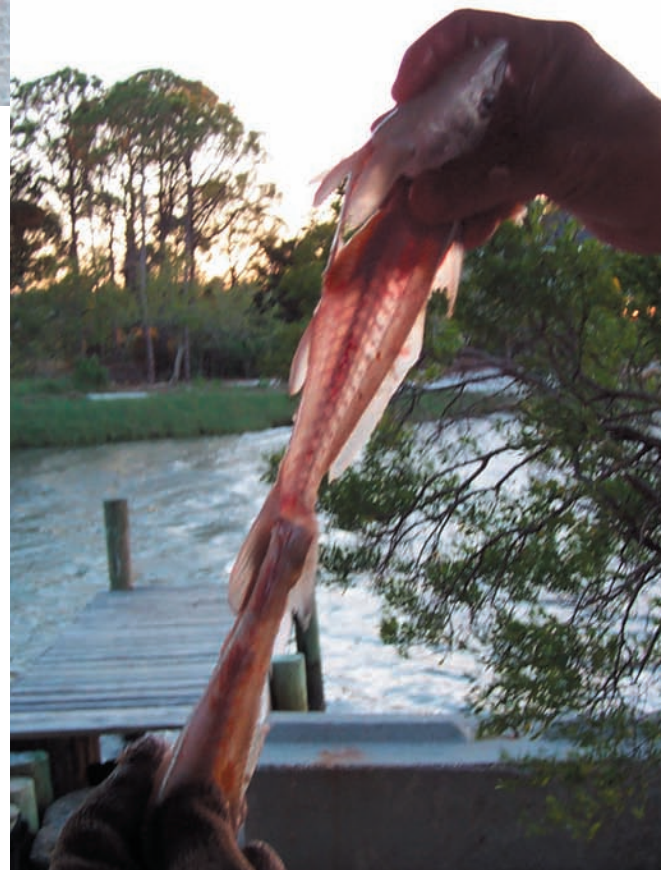
The knife is then laid flat on the table and gently flexed and is held in a static position. The skin side of the fish is moved left to right to remove the skin by starting at the tail area separating the skin from the meat.



The ribs are removed from the fillets and saved for tipping off my grubs on my next fishing trip. Note that there is usually one longer rib bone in the center of this rib cage and that upon feeling it with tip of your knife you can zig-zag around this bone to insure a true boneless fillet. Note the skin above the fillet, no meat has been left upon it.



I feel that I have done a fair job on removing fillets if I can easily see through the carcass. Note the skins of both sides of the fish are still attached to the tail. This carcass was used for the crab trap. On cleaning larger fish, I remove the anal, dorsal and caudal fins and then snap off the head and deep-fry these backbones for the remaining portion of the meat left on the backbone; these backbones are very flavorful. I actively attempt to return to the sea and or/use all portions of my catch out of respect for the resource. The balance of what is taken from the ocean should be respectfully returned in a useable manner when possible. This does not mean tossing all your fish waste off the dock in one area or feeding the pelicans dockside. Good usage of this material is: pinfish traps, crab traps, or chum on your next trip out. I routinely place this by-product into a cut-away gallon milk jug and placed in a separate plastic bag and freeze. I clip these ready-made chum buckets onto the back shackle of the chain of my anchor line with a carabineer to get the bite started over a grouper hole; and it is usual good for over at least two-hours.



FISH GUTS



A comparison of the fillets and the deboned whiting: directly upon finishing the cleaning of a fish, it goes back on a drained ice; e.g. not allowed to sit in any type of water.

These whiting were then rinsed and patted dry and then were gently sliced and garlic inserted in these cuts and then covered with bacon and baked; the fillets were placed on the skewers with the shrimp.



These whittings (center) were served with skewed shrimp and crab claws.



The real test: because you can always depend on the brutally honest answer from the kids!

Here is the real beauty of cleaning a fish like this as seen on the top of the plate. Aside from the rib portion of the fish, all of the fish is eaten without encountering any bones; a lot like eating small catfish at a catfish house.