

Great Skate

Sweet, succulent, and easy to handle, this fish deserves a taste-test

BY BOB SARGENT

Skate is great, but nobody seems to know it. This odd-looking fish (think stingray) is mild, sweet, and easy to eat because it has only a couple of pieces of flat cartilage instead of lots of tiny bones. Skate has a luxurious, silky texture, but it's quite low in fat. And it's cheap. In Europe and Asia, skate has been a long-time favorite, but despite its many virtues, it's relatively unknown in the United States. That's beginning to change, however, as more common varieties of fish become scarce and the fishing industry looks for a new catch.

A FISH WITH WINGS?

Skate is closely related to the shark; both have an odd circulatory system, slimy-yet-rough skin, and cartilage instead of bone. Skate are commonly known as



Give skate a quick turn on the grill.

The moist meat takes on a touch of smoke and a crispy, slightly charred outer edge.

Photos except where noted: Maria Robledo

rays or stingrays, and more than a dozen edible subspecies are commercially harvested. From the cook's point of view, the only real consideration is the size of the skate's wings. The wings are the only part of the skate that have any meat; fortunately, they make up the largest part of the skate's anatomy. The rest of the skate's body will make a very flavorful and gelatinous stock, but it's otherwise unusable.

HOW TO BUY SKATE

Skate is sold in three forms: whole skate, skin-on wings, and skinless wings. It's very uncommon to see whole skate, even if you have a great fish market. You're most likely to find some form of skate wing. An average wing weighs about two pounds and will provide about 1½ pounds of boneless meat. An average portion of boneless, skinless skate is about six ounces.

Like all seafood, skate is highly perishable, and poor quality is indicated by a distinct fishy or ammonia smell. The flesh should be shiny, firm, and almost odorless. If you're lucky enough to find skin-on skate, the skin should be covered with slime that smells slightly sweet and fresh. If you detect any odor of ammonia, the skate is already past its prime, and you're better off waiting for fresher fish. If you don't have a source of good-quality, fresh fish, ask your local grocer to order some frozen skate wings. Often, frozen skate is of better quality and has been handled with more care than fresh skate. When buying frozen skate wings, be sure to ask for skinless wings, as the skin can be particularly difficult to remove if it has been frozen.

Create a local market for skate. While skate has become available to restaurant chefs around the country, it isn't yet a regular catch for most shoppers. But there is a sure way to bring skate to your fish counter: ask for it. If your local fishmongers know there's a demand for skate, they'll probably be happy to supply it.

DEALING WITH THE WINGS

Skate wings have a unique internal structure that can take even the most experienced fish cooks by surprise. Instead of a bony skeleton, a layer of soft cartilage runs through the middle of the wing, separating two layers of meat (skate's equivalent of fillets). Skate wings are seldom available without the cartilage, but with a little work, the wings can be filleted while raw, or the meat can be easily removed after cooking.

The flavors of small and large skate wings are equally delicate, but I prefer the texture of smaller wings because they're particularly succulent. While smaller wings are great for many cooking methods, they're especially suited for quick, high-temperature techniques, such as grilling, sautéing, and frying. Thicker wings are best poached, as this method helps prevent the flesh from becoming dried out or stringy, which might occur with longer cooking at higher temperatures.



Only one "bone."

The only internal support this fish has is a flat piece of cartilage that separates the two layers of flesh.

Skinning—If your recipe calls for skinless wings, try to buy them already skinned, or talk your fishmonger into doing the deed for you. If you have to skin the wings yourself, you'll find the process a little tedious but not impossible. Start by sliding a sharp knife between the skin and the flesh at the thickest part of the wing. With the blade parallel to the flesh, carefully separate the skin. Use short, firm strokes while tugging gently at the skin. The difficulty is that the skin has a tendency to tear in odd ways, and



Skinning skate.

1. Pull back the skin with one hand (above) as you make short, firm strokes with the tip of your knife.
2. When you reach the thin edge of the wing, gently scrape the skin away (left).



Cutting boneless fillets.

1. Keep the knife blade pressed firmly against the cartilage to prevent any tears in the meat (above).
2. Roll the meat back as you work (right) to produce a clean fillet.



once it has, it's hard to get a handle on it again.

Skinless wings are easily made boneless (or, more accurately, cartilageless) by using the same basic technique used for skinning, except that you're separating flesh from bone rather than skin from flesh. Don't forget that there's meat on both sides of the cartilage. When I cook skate for myself, I rarely go to the trouble of boning it, as it's easier to simply eat around the cartilage—much easier than eating around most fish bones. But I've found that my customers are more receptive to boneless fish, so I've gotten used to removing skate cartilage regardless of the cooking method.

Poaching safeguards the sweet, succulent flavor of skate. Once poached, the skin should come off easily. The simple court bouillon in which the skate was poached can be strained and used as the base of a rich fish chowder.



TECHNIQUES TO BRING OUT SKATE'S BEST

I choose cooking methods that highlight the distinct qualities of skate—techniques that will play off skate's mild, moist, silky sweetness. A crunchy cornmeal crust, a tart citrus dressing, or a spicy chile rub are all satisfying foils for skate.

Poaching in court bouillon. Poaching and other moist cooking methods are particularly wonderful when you're working with skin-on skate, but will also do justice to skinless wings. Skate skin helps retain a lot of the natural juices and flavors in the flesh, not unlike the way poultry skin moistens and enriches the meat below.

Poaching skate has two distinct benefits: it's a gentle cooking method that leaves the meat extremely moist and tender; and it produces a flavorful poaching liquid that has lots of body (especially if you use gelatin-rich skin-on wings), which can be used as the base for soups and chowders.

Sizzling on the grill. Grilling is probably the least common but most interesting way to cook skate. The sweet flavor of the flesh is nicely offset by the smoke, and the soft texture is balanced by a slightly charred, crunchy crust. The rules for successfully grilling fish—a clean, hot grill and a lightly oiled fish—are especially important when grilling skate. Skate wing is more prone to sticking than many other types of fish because of its delicacy and high moisture content. You can't move it around on the grill as you might a swordfish or tuna steak. For grilling, I always recommend using boneless fillets. The pieces are a little harder to handle, but they cook very quickly and don't cool down the grill, which can cause sticking.

Lots of possibilities. Unlike many white, flaky fish, skate is fairly "sturdy": it will hold together well during cooking, and the meat won't become overcooked in a matter of seconds. This means there are lots of cooking methods to choose from. In addition to grilling, frying, and poaching, skate is excellent when sautéed. Steaming and stir-frying are also quick and easy cooking methods that can be adapted to make great skate.

GRILLED CHILE-RUBBED SKATE WING WITH SWEET CUCUMBER SALAD

The spice rub in this recipe is well suited for the grill. It has enough oil to help prevent sticking and will also take on some of the grill's smoke. Be sure your grill is very hot and scraped clean. Teflon-coated fish grills are best. *Serves four.*

1½ lb. skinless, boneless skate wing

FOR THE SPICE RUB:

- 1-in. cube of peeled ginger, diced fine
- 4 cloves garlic, peeled
- 2 jalapeños or other hot peppers, diced (seeds in)
- 2 chipotle peppers (canned or reconstituted dried)
- ¼ cup vegetable oil
- 1 tsp. ground cumin
- ½ tsp. turmeric

Photos this page: Sloan Howard



FOR THE CUCUMBER SALAD:

- 3 Tbs. rice vinegar
- 1 Tbs. lime juice
- 2 Tbs. superfine sugar
- 1 tsp. sesame oil
- 2 Tbs. vegetable oil
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 2 large cucumbers, peeled, halved, seeded, and sliced 1/8-in. thick
- 1 small red onion, sliced
- 1 medium carrot, cut in julienne
- 1/2 medium red bell pepper, cut in julienne
- 2 Tbs. thinly sliced scallions
- 2 Tbs. chopped cilantro

Combine the ingredients for the spice rub in the work bowl of a food processor and purée until smooth. Spread over the skate fillets and chill for 1/2 hour.

Mix the rice vinegar, lime juice, sugar, sesame oil, vegetable oil, salt, and pepper in a container that you can seal, and shake to dissolve the sugar. Combine the remaining ingredients and toss with the vinaigrette. Let the salad rest while you grill the skate.

Light the grill and scrape any excess spice rub from the skate. Season with salt and place on the hot grill. Cook for 3 to 4 min. and then turn carefully with a metal spatula. Cook 2 min. longer, until the skate is quite tender and flakes easily. Arrange the skate fillets and the cucumber salad on plates.

CITRUS-MARINATED SKATE SALAD WITH BASIL AIOLI

I like the way the citrus in this dressing brings out the skate's sweeter accents. Serves eight.

- 1 1/2 lb. skin-on skate wing (or skinless, but should have cartilage), cut into 4 or more pieces
- 1/2 lb. mesclun greens or other small, delicate lettuces
- 2 oranges, peeled and segmented
- 2 grapefruit, peeled and segmented
- 2 limes, peeled and segmented
- 8 basil leaves, cut in chiffonade (thin ribbons)
- Freshly ground black pepper

FOR THE COURT BOUILLON:

- 1 onion, quartered
- 2 cups dry white wine
- 6 sprigs thyme
- 1 tsp. black peppercorns
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 rib celery, split lengthwise
- 1 leek, chopped coarse and washed
- 1 Tbs. kosher salt

FOR THE CITRUS DRESSING:

- Juice of 1 lime
- Juice of 1 lemon
- Juice of 1 orange
- 1 Tbs. minced shallot
- 1 tsp. Dijon mustard
- 2 Tbs. chopped parsley
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 6 Tbs. olive oil

(Ingredient list continues)

A light and lacy skate salad. Poached skate is gently flaked and tossed with a citrus dressing, which helps to bring out the fish's sweeter flavors.

FOR THE AIOLI:

2 egg yolks
1/3 cup packed basil leaves
1 clove garlic
1/2 cup vegetable or light-flavored olive oil
1 Tbs. lemon juice
Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Combine the court bouillon ingredients in large sauté pan or a shallow braising pan. Bring to boil and simmer for 10 min., skimming occasionally. Add 1 qt. cold water; return to simmer. Add the skate, reduce the heat, and cover. Simmer gently for 5 to 10 min., until the flesh easily separates from the cartilage and appears opaque throughout. Transfer the skate to a warm platter and remove the skin carefully; it will peel right off. Slice the flesh from the cartilage and cover to keep warm.

For the dressing—Combine the citrus juices, shallot, mustard, parsley, salt, and pepper. Whisk in the oil 1 Tbs. at a time.

For the aioli—Put the egg yolks, basil, and garlic into the work bowl of a food processor and blend until smooth. With the machine running, add the oil slowly. Add the lemon juice, salt, and pepper. Refrigerate until ready to use.

To assemble the salad—Gently flake the skate and toss with half the dressing. Chill for 1 to 6 hours. Just before serving, toss the greens with the remaining dressing and arrange on large plates. Mix the citrus segments in with the skate and divide among the plates. Drizzle with the aioli and top with the basil chiffonade and a turn of freshly ground black pepper.

CORNMEAL-FRIED SKATE WINGS

The crispy coating of cornmeal keeps the skate moist on the inside. Serve these wings with lots of cold beer and your favorite cole slaw. *Serves four.*

1 1/2 lb. boneless, skinless skate wing
1 cup buttermilk
1/4 cup yellow cornmeal
3/4 cup flour
1 tsp. salt
1/2 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
2 Tbs. chopped fresh thyme, more sprigs for decoration
1 cup vegetable oil
2 lemons, cut in wedges
1/4 cup chopped parsley

Cut the skate into four equal pieces and let them soak in the buttermilk for a few minutes. In a shallow bowl, combine the cornmeal, flour, salt, pepper, and chopped thyme. Dredge the skate pieces in the cornmeal mixture and shake off the excess. Heat the oil in a heavy skillet or frying pan over medium heat until it barely begins to smoke. Carefully add the skate to the oil in a single layer. If they won't fit in a single layer, fry them in batches. Cook for 3 to 4 min., until the crust is lightly browned. Turn and cook another 2 to 3 min.

Remove the skate from the pan and drain on paper towels. Arrange the skate on plates with the lemon wedges, a few thyme sprigs, and a sprinkle of chopped parsley.

Bob Sargent is the chef at the Harvest Restaurant in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where skate is a regular offering on the menu. ♦

Boneless fillets cook quickly, so watch them closely. The buttermilk and cornmeal coating helps keep the fish from drying out.

