



Tips on keeping fish tasty for the table

By Jim Vashro

a hatchery, most fish on a stringer or in a bucket were dead within 15 to 30 minutes. Just as important, most of the surviving fish that I released after that treatment died later.

“But I’ve got a boat with a livewell,” you say. Studies at bass tournaments have shown that livewells full of fish quickly run out of oxygen. That’s why tournament anglers use automated livewells that replenish water every few minutes. For the average angler who can’t—or forgets to—keep fresh water flowing into the livewell, that container ends up as nothing more than a big, fancy bucket. Used like that, a more descriptive term would be a “slow-death-well.”

Consider a trout hauled up from a depth of 20 feet and placed in a livewell. The surface water in that container is probably 20 degrees warmer than down where the fish had been swimming. A fish’s metabolism roughly doubles for every 10 degrees the water temperature rises. So now you’ve got a fish with a revved-up metabolism in water that’s slowly losing oxygen. Add to that the bumping and banging the fish endures as the boat moves over the water. That combination quickly stresses the fish and causes it to start suffocating in water too warm to preserve it.

A neighbor once brought over some lake whitefish he was having trouble filleting. The delicate meat of those fish, which had

to repeat that culinary delight, will pack home a catch of fish. Months later they dig out from the bottom of a freezer a frost-encrusted package containing tasteless, rubbery fillets.

Prevent that from happening by following some easy tips on fish preparation and preservation that I’ve learned after more than six decades of fishing and eating fish.

The surest way to ruin your catch is to carry uncleaned fish in a creel, on a stringer, or on a willow branch all day—especially in summer. The same holds true for staking fish on a stringer in the shallows. Those fish slowly suffocate as they thrash in the sun-warmed water, their gills filling with silt. Even a fish thrown in a bucket of water doesn’t keep well. In a test I did years ago at

Each fall hunters go afield with friends and family hoping to fill their freezers with tasty venison. Many will argue endlessly over whether to bleed downed animals, how long to hang the carcass, and when to skin it. But discriminating hunters, not to mention meat processors, agree that the best way to get quality venison is to dispatch the animal quickly and field dress and cool the carcass as soon as possible.

So why don’t more anglers treat their fish that way?

Anyone lucky enough to have enjoyed a shore lunch on the edge of a stream or lake, eating a fish so fresh it curls up after hitting the hot oil, knows how indescribably delicious fresh fish can be. Many anglers, hoping

been kept in a livewell for several hours, turned to mush under our knife blades.

Treat like raw hamburger

The best way to keep fish tasting their best is to dispatch them at once and get them on ice as quickly as possible. This is what commercial anglers do with tuna, swordfish, and other high-value food fish. I call the process “Bonk, bleed, gut, and chill.”

Step one is to kill the fish with a sharp rap to the back of the head (bonk). That either kills the fish outright or stuns it until it dies. A live fish bouncing around in a cooler or on shore bruises its delicate meat and fills with adrenaline and lactic acid that spoil the taste. Besides, quickly dispatching any animal you harvest is the ethical thing to do.

Fish have a simple nervous system, and their heart keeps pumping for a few minutes after death. After you bonk the fish, immediately bleed it by lifting each gill plate and cutting straight through the gills. Then put the bleeding fish in water or somewhere else where it doesn’t make a mess. Bleeding out helps the flesh taste better and keep longer if you’re not planning to eat it immediately.

After a fish dies, half-digested food and digestive juices in its stomach start seeping into surrounding tissues. Get the guts out

After 31 years, Jim Vashro recently retired from his position as FWP fisheries manager of Montana’s northwestern region.

4 STEPS TO FRESH FISH



1. BONK

Kill the fish with a sharp rap to the head.



2. BLEED

Cut through the gills to drain the blood.



3. GUT

Remove the guts and bloodline.



4. CHILL

Immediately cool down fish on ice.

quickly, including the bloodline along the meat by the backbone. The bloodline is the fish’s kidney, and it is full of wastes filtered from the blood.

The last step is to quickly cool down the fish. The best use of your livewell is to fill it with crushed ice rather than water. I use a cooler containing chemical ice packs, which stay cold even longer than ice. After each fishing trip I scrub out the cooler and clean and freeze the packs for the next trip. When it comes to chilling my catch, I follow the advice of Montana outdoor writer Jerry Smalley: “Treat your fish like you treat your ham-

burger.” When was the last time you staked a package of fresh burger in the warm shallows or let it sit in the sun for most of the day?

Fillet is the way

Unless I’m going to bake or smoke a fish, I usually fillet it using a razor-sharp fillet knife that has a thin, flexible blade. Filleting takes away all skin and bones, making the meat easier to eat, removing more fat-soluble contaminants, and reducing bulk for storage.

Fish are best eaten fresh, no more than two days after being caught. If that’s not possible, freeze them in a little water in a plastic bag, squeezing the air out as you seal it. Air around a frozen fillet causes the meat to dehydrate and toughen, known as “freezer burn.” Another option is to vacuum-seal fillets. Note that even when frozen in water or a vacuum-sealed pack, the oils in fish flesh continue to slowly deteriorate. I date all my packages and try to consume fillets within a month or two.

Many Montana waters contain contaminants that can accumulate in larger, older fish or species higher in the food chain. Do an Internet search for “Montana fish consumption advisory” to get the booklet pdf showing state waters with consumption warnings.

Eating fish is a delicious, time-honored tradition among anglers. If you choose to keep some of your catch, you will honor the fish and your palate by following these simple tips for keeping the meat as fresh and delectable as possible. 🐟

If releasing your fish, be prepared

Years ago, most anglers kept most of the fish they caught. With the popularity of catch-and-release fishing over the past few decades, most anglers today release their fish, even when it’s legal to keep some.

To give your released fish the best chance of surviving, follow these simple guidelines. Foremost is to release the fish without removing it from the water if at all possible. That is made easier by using soft or rubber-mesh nets that gently hold the fish in the water while the hook is removed. If you want to land the fish for a photo or measurement, be prepared ahead of time. The time to start looking for a pliers, camera, and tape measure or scale is not when the fish is bouncing on the gravel or boat bottom. Hold the fish horizontally, lift it out of the water for a quick shot, and promptly send it back on its way.

How long is too long to keep a fish out of water? When you lift a fish out of water, start holding *your* breath. When you need to breathe, that fish *really* needs to breathe and should be immediately returned to the water.

It’s not required in Montana, but using barbless hooks—and replacing the barbed treble hooks on lures with single barbless hooks—makes it far easier to return a fish to the water with less harm. ■



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