

Drum and Chips

By Tom Dickson | Preparation time: 20 minutes | Cooking time: 30 minutes | Serves 4 to 6



INGREDIENTS

2 lbs. skinless, boneless drum or other white-fleshed fish, cut into 1-inch-wide, ½-inch-thick strips

Salt

2 qts. vegetable oil (safflower or sunflower is best) for frying

2 lbs. russet or Yukon gold potatoes, sliced into ⅛-inch-thick rounds

½ c. flour

1 t. baking powder

1 t. salt

7 oz. brown beer, cold

DIRECTIONS

Salt the fish and set it aside. Start heating the oil: You want it to be between 350 and 360 degrees. Turn the oven to the lowest temperature and put a cookie sheet inside with a wire rack atop the cookie sheet.

Mix the flour, baking powder, salt, and beer. Refrigerate for 15 to 20 minutes.

While the batter is resting, slice the potatoes and put them into a large bowl of cold water. When you are done slicing, remove the potatoes and pat them dry with a paper towel.

The oil should be hot by now. Fry the potato slices, 10 to 12 at a time, for 3 to 5 minutes, or until they start to brown at the edges. Don't wait until they are uniformly brown or they will overcook (the chips continue to brown a little out of the fryer). Remove the potatoes with a slotted spoon and salt immediately. Store each batch on the wire rack in the warm oven.

Once the potatoes are done, take the batter out of the refrigerator. Dip the fish in the batter and let the excess drip off for a second or two. Holding one end of the battered fish, lower each piece gently into the hot oil, being careful not to splash yourself.

Fry in batches for 5 to 8 minutes until golden brown and crisp. Remove from the oil and salt each batch at once. Keep warm in the oven with the potatoes while you finish the rest.

Serve the fish with lemon and tartar sauce, aioli, or malt vinegar along with the potatoes.

Right about now, the fishing is picking up on the lower Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers. Anglers after catfish, shovelnose sturgeon, walleye, and sauger in those water will often hook a silvery-sided fish with a high sloping forehead and thin, white lips. Those 2- to 3-pound fish are freshwater drum, and they should go into the livewell or on a stringer, because they are great to eat.

Drum, also known as sheepshead, are a Montana native also found throughout central and eastern North America from the Yukon to the Yucatan Peninsula. They are closely related to saltwater members of the drum family, and in the South are often used as freshwater substitutes in the famous dish Blackened Redfish.

In Montana, drum are found throughout the lower Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers and their tributaries. (The closest places for western Montana anglers to find drum are the Marias River and the Missouri downstream from Great Falls.)

Drum can be filleted just as you would any other game fish. The white meat is firm, bone free, and delicious—indistinguishable from walleye or perch when cooked. I trim off the strip of gray fatty meat on fillets of larger specimens.

I've been eating drum and writing about its culinary qualities for 25 years. But if you still have doubts, a sure-fire way to prepare drum is as fish and chips. The recipe here is an amalgamation of various recipes I've tried over the years, including one by Hank Shaw, author of the James Beard-award-winning blog "Hunter Angler Gardener Cook." This recipe also works well with other boneless, white-fleshed game fish such as perch and walleye, as well as cod, shark, tilapia, haddock, or pollock found in grocery stores.

The only challenge in preparing this dish is heating the large volume of oil. Do it in a 3-quart Dutch oven and use a candy thermometer to make sure the temperature does not exceed 360 degrees. This recipe also substitutes thin-sliced potatoes, which are easier to prepare, for the traditional french fries. 🐾

—Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.