

BLACK COD: THE BEST FISH YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF

For the Santa Rosa Press Democrat

I've been asked in the past "if you had to eat only one fish . . . what would it be?" Without question it's black cod (*anoplopoma fimbria*). To set the record straight it's not part of the cod family and it isn't black. It's also known as Sablefish, Butterfish, Coalfish, Skilfish and Gindara in sushi restaurants. It has so many names because of its global popularity.

Most of this rich, buttery fish is exported to Japan but it's widely available cryovaced and frozen (not a problem because its high fat content) and fresh in good fish markets. Black cod makes an excellent substitute for Chilean sea bass which has been generally badly overfished.

Black cod is harvested from northern California all the way through the Aleutian Islands. It is the cold water, Gulf of Alaska source that is the most highly desired. Black cod mature quickly and have long lifespans. The oldest recorded was more than 90 years old. That means they can reproduce early and long, making them a good sustainable seafood choice according to the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch which ranks it as a "Best Choice".

Black Cod is an amazing fish. Not to be confused with "true cod" or Pacific cod, it is a deep-sea fish. It can live up to 5,000 feet below the sea. In this cold, dark world it stores a lot of fat in the form of omega-3's. Black Cod have the highest omega-3 content of any white fish, even higher than most species of salmon. This high omega-3 content makes Black Cod super healthy. The high fat content gives Black Cod its unique silky texture and rich, buttery flavor. One of the reasons why it is also known as Butterfish.

From a cook's point of view, Black Cod is probably the most forgiving fish to cook. Because of its healthy fat you really can't overcook it. It will fall apart eventually but it will still be rich and buttery unlike other white fishes that will dry out if they get

overcooked. Halibut is a prime example of how quickly the texture changes when overcooked. Black Cod lends itself to every cooking technique including grilled, smoked, broiled, poached, steamed, roasted or sautéed. It is especially good using Asian flavors such as soy, ginger and miso marinades. It is a great fish to serve to kids and others who claim, “not to like fish”.

HOT SMOKED BLACK COD

If you have a dedicated smoker this is very easy. Just follow manufacturer’s directions. Alternately you can use a stove top smoker as long as you have good ventilation or jury rig a wok with a cover. If using the latter, make sure to control temperature. Use whatever smoking chips you like. I prefer fruit woods like apple or cherry. Serve *on* crackers, flaked over a tossed green salad or with bagels and cream cheese (with capers, of course).

1-pound sablefish fillets, skin on
Soaked smoking chips
4 tablespoons honey

For Brine

1 quart water
6 Tbsp kosher salt
6 Tbsp granulated sugar
Juice of 1 lemon
Juice of 1 lime
Zest & Juice of 1 orange

Combine all ingredients for the brine and stir until salt and sugar are dissolved. Brine sablefish for 4 hours, refrigerated.

Rinse and pat dry, then allow to dry further in a cool, breezy place to form pellicle (a thin skin or film).

Preheat smoker to 225°F. place fish on an oiled cooking rack, skin side down and smoke for 2 hours or so depending on thickness of fish. After 1 hour brush sablefish with honey. Remove from smoker and serve.



BLACK COD FRITTERS

Serves 6

This follows the technique for making the famous Spanish Bacalao which uses salt cod that first must be soaked and rinsed several times. Using black cod simplifies the process. Here bite size fish cakes, dipped into rich, spicy, aioli make a great tapas style appetizer.

1 1/4 pounds medium floury potatoes such as Yukon Gold or Russet

1 1/4 cups milk

6 green onions finely chopped

1-pound black cod fillet

3 tablespoons olive oil

2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley

1 tablespoon lemon or to taste

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

1 large egg, lightly beaten

All-purpose flour, for dusting

3 cups dried white breadcrumbs such as panko

Olive oil, for shallow frying

Smoked paprika aioli (recipe follows)

Lemon wedges and fresh herbs, to serve

Cook the potatoes, unpeeled, in a pan of lightly salted boiling water for about 25 minutes or until tender. Drain. As soon as they are cool enough to handle, peel the potatoes, then mash with a fork or use a potato masher.

Pour the milk into a pan, add half the onions and bring to a simmer. Add the black cod and poach very gently for 10 minutes, or until it flakes easily. Remove and drain the cod and flake it with a fork into a bowl, discarding any bones and skin.

Add 4 tablespoons of mashed potato to the cod and beat them together with a wooden spoon. Work in the olive oil, then gradually add the remaining mashed potato. Beat in the remaining green onions and the parsley.

Season with lemon juice, salt and pepper to your taste. Add egg to the mixture and mix it until thoroughly combined. Chill until firm.

Shape the chilled fish mixture into 12-18 balls, then gently flatten into small round cakes. Coat each one in flour, then dip in the remaining beaten egg and coat with dried breadcrumbs. Chill until ready to fry.

Heat about 3/4-inch oil in a large, heavy frying pan. Add the fritters and cook over a medium-high heat for about 3 minutes. Turn them over and cook for another 3 minutes until crisp and golden. Drain on paper towels and serve with the aioli, lemon wedges and herbs.

Smoked Paprika Aioli

Makes about 3/4 cup

4 large blanched garlic cloves

1 tablespoon or so olive oil

2/3 cup mayonnaise

1 teaspoon smoked paprika or to taste

Drops of lemon juice to taste

Salt and drops of hot sauce to taste

Mash the garlic thoroughly with the side of a chef's knife and stir in with the rest of the ingredients until smooth. Store refrigerated for at least 1 hour to allow flavors to blend before using.



BLACK COD AND ASPARAGUS SALAD WITH SPICY LIME DRESSING

Serves 4

This is a simple Thai inspired salad. Any Alaskan fish could be substituted such as salmon, halibut or pollock. If asparagus isn't available try sugar snap, green beans or whatever is best in the market. Remember that the size of the asparagus has nothing to do with its tenderness. Blanch a spear to determine if it needs to be peeled or not before cooking. Be sure to make the dressing ahead and have everything else ready to go before you cook the fish.

1 teaspoon minced fresh red chili or to taste
2 teaspoons finely minced garlic
1 tablespoon rice vinegar
4 tablespoons sugar or to taste
1 tablespoon cilantro leaves, coarsely chopped

Combine all ingredients and stir until sugar is dissolved. Let stand at least 30 minutes before serving for flavors to develop. Adjust salt/sweet/tart/hot flavors to your taste.

KAFFIR LIME AND COCONUT SOUP WITH BLACK COD

Serves 4 – 6

Anything could be added to this soup in place of or in addition to the cod including tofu, shrimps or other fishes, grilled thinly sliced meats and more. Prepared Thai curry pastes are available in Asian markets as are kaffir lime leaves. My favorite curry paste brand is Mae Ploy.

4 ounces thin rice vermicelli noodles
1 tablespoon vegetable oil
2 cups sliced white onion (1 medium)
1 – 2 tablespoons yellow or green curry paste
5 cups chicken or vegetable stock
2 cups or so stirred coconut milk
3 large kaffir lime leaves, bruised
2 tablespoons fish sauce or to taste
2 teaspoons chili garlic sauce or to taste
1 tablespoon palm or brown sugar or to taste

1/4 cup or so cup fresh lime juice

1-pound black cod fillet, skin and bones removed and cut into 2-inch pieces

3 cups gently packed baby spinach leaves

1/4 cup scallions cut on the bias

Thai basil and/or cilantro sprigs

Soak the rice noodles in hot water for at least 15 minutes in a bowl. Meanwhile heat the oil in a deep soup pot and sauté the onions until just softened but not brown. Add the curry paste and cook for another minute and then add stock, coconut milk, lime leaves, fish sauce, chili garlic sauce and sugar and bring to a simmer. Stir in the lime juice and cod and cook until fish is just done, about 5 minutes. Adjust the sweet/hot/sour/salty elements to your taste.

To serve: Drain the noodles and divide among deep bowls along with the spinach leaves. Ladle the hot soup over and top with scallions, Thai basil and/or cilantro sprigs.



MISO MARINATED BLACK COD

Serves 6

A traditional preparation made famous in America by Nobu Matsuhisa. Miso makes a wonderful marinade and the following can be used on all kinds of fish, chicken or pork. Serve with steamed rice.

3 tablespoons mirin*

3 tablespoons sake wine*

1/2 cup white *shiro* miso*

1/3 cup sugar

6 skinless, 6-ounce sablefish fillets cut 1-inch thick

3 tablespoon canola or other vegetable oil with a high smoke point

Garnishes: Seaweed Salad or sweet pickled sushi ginger, daikon sprouts and toasted sesame seeds, if desired

Add mirin, sake and sugar to a small saucepan and bring to a simmer. Stir until sugar is melted. Whisk in miso until smooth. Transfer to a bowl and cool. Add fillets, turn to coat well, cover with plastic and refrigerate for at least 6 hours or overnight.

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Add oil to an oven proof sauté pan large enough to hold the fish in one layer. Heat the oil over moderately high heat. Scrape the excess marinade off the fish and cook until lightly browned on one side, about 2 minutes. Turn fish and place in oven until cooked through and flaky, about 6 minutes. Serve on warm plates topped with garnishes.

*available in Asian markets and most supermarkets.



STEAMED BLACK COD WITH GARLIC AND GINGER

Ca Hap Toi Gung

Serves 4

A delicious Southeast Asian riff using black cod. Serve with steamed rice and baby bok choy to catch all the sauce.

Flavoring Sauce

1-1/4 teaspoons brown or palm sugar

1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

2 tablespoons oyster sauce

2 tablespoons soy sauce

2-1/2 tablespoons canola or other neutral oil
2-1/2 teaspoons finely chopped garlic
2 tablespoons peeled and finely julienned ginger
3 scallions, green part only, chopped

3 scallions, white part only, cut lengthwise in thin strips
2 8-ounce boned fillets of black cod
2 teaspoons toasted sesame seeds
1 teaspoon finely grated lime or lemon zest
Cilantro sprigs

Make the sauce by combining the sugar, pepper, oyster sauce, soy sauce and stir to dissolve the sugar. In a small skillet heat the oil over medium heat. Sauté the garlic for about 15 seconds then add ginger and cook for about a minute or until fragrant. Pour in oyster sauce mixture and bring to a boil. Stir to combine, remove from heat and stir in chopped green scallions. Set aside at room temperature. Can be made a couple of hours ahead. Cover with plastic to prevent it from drying out.

Select a heatproof safe plate or non-reactive cake pan one inch smaller in diameter than your steamer tray. Set aside some of the scallion strips for garnish and scatter the rest on the plate. Arrange fish on top and pour flavoring sauce over. Place plate in the steamer tray.

Fill the steamer pan (or wok) half full of water and bring to a boil. Place the tray with plate in pan, cover and steam fish for 6 – 8 minutes or until fish is cooked through.

Carefully remove plate from steamer and place on a platter. Sprinkle sesame seeds and lime zest over. Top with reserved scallion strips and cilantro and serve immediately.

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