

ROCKFISH

Recipes included:

- Baked Rockfish with Tomatoes and Capers
- Fried Rockfish Agrodolce (Sweet and Sour)
- Rockfish with a Balsamic Vinegar Butter Sauce
- Fish Tacos with Citrus Salsa and Cabbage Slaw
- Rockfish And Asparagus Salad with Spicy Lime Dressing
- Panfried Rockfish with Tomatillo and Avocado Salsa
- Blackened Rockfish Fillets



According to the Monterey Bay Aquarium, rockfish (genus *Sebastes*) includes more than 100 species and many different shapes, sizes and color patterns. Their name comes from the fact that they often are found near rocky reefs, like the Faralone Islands or at rest on rocks at the bottom of kelp forests. They primarily are a product of the Pacific Northwest and Alaska. When I lived in North Beach and shopped regularly in Chinatown, fish

markets would display the incredible rainbow of colors and shapes. Colors vary from black and drab green to bright orange and red, sometimes in splotches and stripes. The most popular (and expensive) have great names like Yellow Eye, Vermillion, Canary, Chili Pepper, Quillback, Dark Blotched Widow, Ocean Perch and more.

These “fancy” rockfishes tend to be loners so must be caught by hook and line rather than nets. This adds a bit to their price since it isn’t possible to catch them more efficiently. It pays off however in the condition of the fish which don’t get beaten up as much as they would in nets. Other and generally less expensive are the schooling varieties often caught in trawl nets.

In an effort to give them more appeal (and increase the price) they have been purveyed under a variety of misleading and unrelated names like “Rock Cod” and “Pacific Red Snapper”. The true Red Snapper is found only in the Gulf and the Atlantic and bears no resemblance to a Rockfish. Although regulations were passed to ban this misnaming, you still find it used.

They remain popular fishes because of their delicate taste and relatively inexpensive price. Their flesh is tender, flakey and mild in flavor and are delicious cooked using any method that you like (except for grilling because they tend to stick). But therein lies a problem. Many don’t breed until they are 20 years old and can live for upwards of 200 years and they have few young. This makes them very vulnerable to overfishing.

You usually find them filleted in the market with skin on. Less often will you find the whole fish. Whole fish must be handled carefully since they have sharp, venomous quills or spines on the dorsal fin. Good gloves are a must when filleting them. Whole fish are a staple steamed in Chinese cooking.

They are deep water fish and if you’ve ever fished for them, you’ll experience their tendency to blow up like a balloon when they hit the surface after their long ride up from the depths.

Most rockfish are excellent eating both whole and filleted and a great alternative in most recipes. If you are serving whole fish, be sure to cut off the very sharp spiny fins before cooking or cutting into the fish. If you get poked, it can be very painful.



BAKED ROCKFISH WITH TOMATOES AND CAPERS

Serves 4

Baking fish in an aluminum foil packet with aromatic ingredients is not only a healthy way to cook, but locks in an abundance of flavor. This technique lends itself well to virtually any meaty fish, and I particularly like cod and halibut. This can be done in a regular or wood fired oven, on a grill or nestled right down in the dying coals of a grill or campfire. These are also known as hobo packs that go back to the Great Depression when those knights of the road “hobos” cooked a whole meal in a single container, usually a coffee can over an open fire. If you like, instead of baking, try cooking the packets over an open fire or on a charcoal or gas grill.

3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
Four 5-ounce skinless Rockfish fillets
Fine sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
8 thin lemon slices (from 1 lemon)
8 sprigs fresh thyme
12 cherry or grape tomatoes, halved
2 garlic cloves, very thinly sliced
3 tablespoons coarsely chopped fresh basil and/or flat-leaf parsley
2 tablespoons drained capers

Cut four 12-inch squares of heavy-duty aluminum foil. Lay the foil sheets out in a single layer and brush with 1 tablespoon of the olive oil.

Preheat the oven to 400°F. Pat the fillets dry with paper towels and sprinkle both sides with salt and pepper. Arrange the fillets on the bottom half of each foil square and slide 1 lemon slice under each fillet and place another on top. Arrange 2 thyme sprigs on top of each fillet.

In a small bowl, combine the tomatoes, garlic, basil, and capers and season with salt and pepper. Spoon the tomato mixture over the fillets, dividing it evenly, then fold the foil over each fillet, tenting it slightly, and crimp the edges together tightly to firmly seal.

Place the packets on a baking sheet and bake until the fish is just cooked through, 6 to 8 minutes (depending on the thickness of the fish). Though it's a little tricky to check for doneness, you can remove one packet and carefully open it, taking care not to lose any of the juices. Remember that the fish will continue to cook off heat as it sits.

Packets can also be cooked on a covered hot grill or directly on coals until the fish is just cooked through, 8 to 10 minutes (depending on thickness of fish). Though it's a little tricky to check, you can remove one packet and carefully open, taking care not to lose any of the wonderful juices and check for doneness of fish. Remember that it will continue to cook off heat as it sits.

Carefully open each packet, reserving the juices, discard the thyme, and serve.

FRIED ROCKFISH AGRODOLCE (SWEET AND SOUR)

Serves 4

Agrodolce is a Mediterranean sweet and sour onion topping that can also be used as a marinade for fish such as trout, a preparation known as escabeche. The topping can be made a day or two in advance and stored covered in the refrigerator, then reheated for serving.

1 cup extra-virgin olive oil
2 large white onions, sliced (about 5 cups)
5 large cloves garlic, thinly sliced
2 bay leaves
1 teaspoon black peppercorns
1 1/3 cups white wine vinegar
1/2 cup fresh orange juice
1/3 cup golden raisins
1/3 cup pine nuts, lightly toasted
2 tablespoons honey
Fine sea salt and freshly ground pepper
8 Rockfish fillets, about 5 oz. each
1 cup unbleached all-purpose flour
2 large eggs, beaten with 1 tablespoon water

1 1/2 cups panko (Japanese breadcrumbs)

In a large skillet, heat 1/2 cup of the oil over medium-low heat. Add the onions, garlic, bay leaves, and peppercorns and cook gently, stirring occasionally, until the onions are soft and golden, about 25 minutes.

Stir in the vinegar, orange juice, raisins, pine nuts, and honey. Raise the heat to medium and simmer until lightly thickened, 8 to 10 minutes. Season with salt and pepper. Set aside.

Wipe out the skillet. Rinse the fillets and pat them dry with paper towels. Put the flour, eggs, and panko in three separate shallow bowls. Dip the fish first in the flour, then the egg, and finally the panko, making sure that the fish is evenly coated. Season generously with salt and pepper.

In a large, deep sauté pan, heat the remaining 1/2 cup of the olive oil over medium heat until shimmering. Working in two batches, fry the fish, turning once, until golden, about 2 minutes on each side.

Serve 2 fillets on each of 4 warm plates, with a big dollop of the agrodolce mixture on top of the fillets.



ROCKFISH WITH A BALSAMIC VINEGAR BUTTER SAUCE

Serves 4

This butter sauce is magical with any fish and can even be used with chicken. Prepare the sauce before cooking the fish.

2 tablespoons olive oil

2 tablespoons butter

4 boned and skinned rockfish, trimmed into 8 filets

Salt and freshly ground pepper

1 cup fine cornmeal, spread out on a plate

Balsamic butter sauce (recipe follows)

2 tablespoons chopped fresh herbs of your choice such as a mixture of chives and chervil

Heat the oil and butter in a large sauté pan over moderate heat. Season the rockfish liberally with salt and pepper, dredge in the corn meal and shake to remove any excess. Carefully add fish to pan and cook over moderate heat until golden brown.

Turn fish and continue to cook on other side until golden brown, about 4 minutes total. Fish should be completely cooked and opaque at this point but still very moist. Spoon the balsamic butter sauce over and around, garnish with a sprinkling of herbs and serve immediately.

Balsamic butter sauce

Makes 1/3 cup or so

1 tablespoon olive oil
2 teaspoons finely chopped shallots
1/3 cup dry white wine or dry white vermouth
3 tablespoons white or golden balsamic vinegar*
1/3 cup chicken or fish stock (depends on what you are serving sauce with)
1/3 cup heavy cream
3 – 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
Salt and freshly ground white pepper

In a saucepan heat the oil over moderate heat and add the shallots. Cook and stir for a minute or two or until shallots soften but don't brown. Add the wine, vinegar and stock and turn up heat to moderately high and reduce by half, 5 – 7 minutes.

Add the cream and reduce until sauce has thickened, 4 – 5 minutes. Stir occasionally during this time. Strain through a fine mesh strainer, add sauce back to pan and reduce heat to low. Whisk in the butter 1 tablespoon at a time. Sauce will thicken and take on a satiny sheen. Season to your taste with salt and pepper and keep warm till serving time. This can be done by placing it in a small thermos or over a pan of warm water for up to 2 hours.

**Both of these vinegars are available in many markets and online. The advantage is that they don't darken the sauce as a regular balsamic would do and they are more delicate in flavor. I like the versions from Sparrow Lane and "O".*

FISH TACOS WITH CITRUS SALSA AND CABBAGE SLAW

Serves 4

In this recipe all of the components can be made ahead of time and the fish cooked at the last moment. Any firm white fish, such as halibut, sea bass or cod can be substituted.

1/3 cup olive oil

1 tablespoon ancho or New Mexico chile powder
1 tablespoon fresh lime juice
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
4 4-ounce boned and skinned filets of Rockfish
4 lightly grilled 6-inch flour or corn tortillas
Cabbage Slaw (recipe follows)
Cilantro Crema (recipe follows)

In a small bowl, combine the olive oil, chile powder, lime juice, salt, and pepper. Brush liberally on the fillets. In a large cast iron pan, cook the fish over moderately high heat until it is just done. It won't take long. To serve, place a warm grilled tortilla on each plate. Top with some of the Cabbage Slaw, a portion of the fish, a heaping tablespoon or two of the Citrus Salsa, and a spoonful of the Cilantro Crema. Fold over and eat with gusto!

Cabbage Slaw:

2 cups finely shredded green cabbage
1/2 cup thinly sliced red bell pepper
1/3 cup thinly sliced red onion
1/4 cup chopped cilantro
1 tablespoon seasoned rice wine vinegar
2 tablespoons corn or other light oil
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

Combine all ingredients but the salt and pepper in a bowl. Gently toss and then season to taste with salt and pepper. This may be prepared a day in advance and kept covered and refrigerated.

Citrus Salsa:

3 medium navel oranges, peeled and segmented and membrane removed
1 lime, peeled and segmented and membrane removed
1 teaspoon chopped fresh cilantro
1 teaspoon seeded and minced serrano chile
2 teaspoons seasoned rice wine vinegar
1 tablespoon olive oil
Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

Combine the citrus segments in a bowl. Add all the other ingredients and gently toss to combine. Season with salt and pepper.

Cilantro Crema

2 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro
2/3 cup Mexican Crema or sour cream

Lime juice to taste

Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

Mix cilantro and crema together. Season to your taste with drops of fresh lime juice, salt and pepper.

ROCKFISH AND ASPARAGUS SALAD WITH SPICY LIME DRESSING

Serves 4

This is a simple Thai inspired salad. If asparagus isn't available try sugar snap peas, 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-pound tender asparagus spears, trimmed

4 5-ounce boned and skinned Rockfish fillets

Salt and freshly ground pepper

3 tablespoons olive oil

Spicy Lime Dressing (recipe follows)

1 large ripe avocado, peeled seeded and cut into large dice

1 large navel orange, peeled and cut into sections

1 cup mixed gently packed tender fresh herb leaves such as mint, basil, cilantro, chervil, mâché. Whatever is best at the moment.

In a large pot of lightly salted boiling water blanch the asparagus until crisp tender, 3 minutes or so depending on size. Drain and immediately run under cold water to stop the cooking. Set aside.

Season fish generously with salt and pepper on both sides. Heat oil in a heavy non-stick pan over moderately high heat and cook until golden brown on both sides about 4 minutes total. Take care not to overcook and keep warm.

Arrange the asparagus, avocado, and oranges attractively on 4 plates. Top with warm fish. Spoon some of the dressing over and then top with herbs. Pass remaining dressing at table to add as desired. Serve immediately.

Spicy Lime Dressing

Makes about 1 cup

1/2 cup fresh lime juice

4 tablespoons Asian fish sauce

1 teaspoon minced fresh red chile 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.



PANFRIED ROCKFISH WITH TOMATILLO AND AVOCADO SALSA

Serves 4

This is a simple recipe that takes advantage of Mexican flavors.

1-1/4 pounds fresh boned and skinned Rockfish fillets
1/2 cup flour
1/2 cup fine cornmeal
2 teaspoons salt
1 - 2 tablespoons pure mild to medium chile powder such as Ancho or New Mexico
1/4 cup olive oil
Tomatillo and avocado salsa (recipe follows)

Garnish: Cilantro Sprigs and Crema or sour cream, if desired

Rinse fish and blot dry. Combine flour, cornmeal, salt and chile powder together on a plate. Dredge fish in mixture and shake off any excess. Heat olive oil in a large sauté pan and sauté rockfish on both sides until golden brown and cooked through.

Place on warm plates and top with a heaping tablespoon or two of the salsa, cilantro sprigs, a drizzle of crema or sour cream and serve immediately.

Tomatillo and Avocado Salsa

Makes about 1 cup

Often tomatillos are cooked when they are used in recipes. Cooking tones down their natural acidity and astringency. Here however, I'm using it raw where it's a perfect foil for the buttery avocado.

1/4-pound fresh tomatillos, husk removed, washed and coarsely chopped
1 teaspoon chopped garlic
1 teaspoon seeded and chopped fresh serrano chile, or to taste
2 tablespoons chopped scallion
1 medium ripe avocado, peeled and pitted
Salt and freshly ground pepper

In a food processor add the tomatillos, garlic, chile and scallion and pulse briefly to chop. Coarsely chop the avocado and gently stir into the tomatillo mixture. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Store covered and refrigerated for up to 1 day.



BLACKENED ROCKFISH FILLETS

Often associated with traditional Cajun cuisine, this technique was popularized by Chef Paul Prudhomme in the early 1980s to duplicate the flavor and style of charcoal grilling in a commercial kitchen. Blackened redfish became so popular that the state of Louisiana imposed a statewide ban on commercial fishing for redfish, in an effort to keep the species from becoming extinct.

Blackening is a cooking technique commonly used in the preparation of fish and other protein foods such as steak or chicken cutlets. It is a fairly violent form of cooking that demands a firm fleshed fish like redfish, rockfish, snapper, mahi, tilapia or grouper.

The meat is dipped in melted butter or vegetable oil and dredged in a mixture of herbs and spices, usually some combination of thyme, oregano, chili pepper, peppercorns, salt, garlic powder and onion powder and then cooked in a very hot cast-iron skillet. Don't use fresh herbs since they instantly burn and turn bitter.

Open all your windows and turn on the fans. Blackening food creates a lot of smoke and sometimes some flames. Preheat your pan, getting it as hot as possible as this will prevent sticking and promote the blackening. I suggest using a cast iron skillet to achieve the best results. They can stand the intense prolonged heat and provide excellent flavor for your chicken or fish, whereas other pans may warp.

2 teaspoons paprika
2 teaspoons onion powder
1-1/2 teaspoons kosher salt
1 teaspoon dried thyme
1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
1/2 teaspoon dried oregano
1/2 teaspoon (or more) cayenne pepper
4 boned and skinned rockfish fillets or any firm white fish
3 tablespoons vegetable oil
Melted butter

Combine the paprika, onion powder, salt, thyme, black pepper, oregano, and cayenne. Coat with oil. Sprinkle the fish generously with the spices on all sides, patting to make sure they adhere.

Heat a large cast iron skillet over high heat until it is very hot. Add the remaining oil and place the fillets in the skillet. Immediately spoon a tablespoon of melted butter over the top. Work in batches if they do not all fit at once. Cook for about 2 to 3 minutes on the first side and gently lift a fillet with a spatula to check the color. Once they are a dark brown, flip and cook on the other side for about 2-3 minutes until cooked through adding another tablespoon of so of butter. Serve over rice or creamy grits.

John Ash