



When choosing fish, freshness and ease in cooking are primary considerations.



When buying fish, know the good stuff

If you don't own a fishing pole or have a friend with one, the next best thing is a visit to a fresh seafood market.

More fish and seafood is being sold and consumed than ever before by a diet- and health-conscious public.

I recently spent several hours talking to Roy Phillips, owner of Roy's Seafood Market in Farmington Hills, about selecting and preparing fish. We agreed that the most important considerations are freshness and ease in cooking.

Phillips purchases his seafood from east coast and Florida fish brokers. To insure freshness, the fish is brought from what is called a "one-day boat." This fishing boat fishes and returns the same day. The fish are sold that night, placed in ice, and shipped by plane immediately to wholesale and restaurant customers.

When faced with the many varieties available shoppers need to know how to select and prepare the right fish.

Available for sale are fresh perch, whitefish, trout, mackerel, bass, catfish, halibut, salmon, flounder, swordfish, shark and monkfish. Also available are numerous varieties of smoked fish, along with shellfish like clams, mussels, crabs and oysters.

Here are some hints:

- WHOLE FISH**
 - When pressed with your finger, the flesh should be firm and elastic, not soft so that your finger leaves an indentation.
 - Eyes should be clear and full, not milky and sunken.
 - Gills should be bright red, not a muddy gray. This is where bacteria starts.
 - They should smell clean, often with a cucumber-like odor.
 - Skin color should be unblemished, with no red patches.
- FILLETS OR STEAKS**
 - Fish should have a clean-cut appearance and a firm moist texture.
 - There should be no leathery traces, yellowing or browning around the edges.
 - Have your dealer cut filets or steaks from fresh fish.
- FLAVOR**
 - A fresh fish will taste sweet, never "fishy." A strong or rancid flavor indicates improper handling when stored fresh, or improper handling during the freezing process if you buy frozen fish.
 - As a rule, aquatic animals containing small quantities of oil keep better than fish which have a high oil content. Mackerel, lake trout, herring and smelt are more likely to become rancid than cod, yellow perch, halibut or sole.
 - All fresh clams, oysters and mussels are alive when purchased. They must be kept at 40 degrees under refrigeration. Their valves must be tightly closed when bought. When refrigerated, they'll stay alive for several days.
- COOKING METHODS**
 - Clams and Mussels — In a two-quart pot, add ½ inch of water and a pinch of salt. Bring to a boil. Add clams or mussels, cover and steam until all shells are open. Serve with clarified butter and lemon wedge.
 - Broiled fish — Brush with vegetable oil, sprinkle lightly with paprika and salt. Broil until fish flakes, or broil two minutes and finish in 500-degree oven for 6-8 minutes, depending on thickness of fish.
 - Barbecued fish — The following fish cut in steaks barbecue well: halibut, grouper, swordfish, shark, salmon and sea bass.
 - Brush with vegetable oil, salt lightly. Brush the grill with oil, also, so fish will not stick. Do not remove bone. Barbecue until fish flakes.

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Roy Phillips carves up a fish in his Farmington Hills store.

- buttermilk and lemon wedge.
- Variation: Add one or a combination of 2 tsp. white wine, garlic, butter, bay leaves, rosemary or thyme to water. Sprinkle with tabasco and lemon or dip in a cocktail sauce.
- Oysters — Cherrystones are best eaten fresh and raw on the half shell. Sprinkle with tabasco and lemon or dip in a cocktail sauce.
- Soft Shell Crabs — Mix together ½ cup milk and one egg. Dip in egg-milk mixture. Then dredge crab in seasoned flour. Sauté in light oil and serve with tartar sauce and lemon wedge.
- Monkfish — Poach in heavy cream until firm. Then brush with butter and broil 1-2 minutes.
- Ben Pearlman is chef-owner of Benjie's Family Restaurant in Sylvan Lake.

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Fresh appearance, large stalks and a crisp, firm texture are signs that field-grown rhubarb is fresh and of good quality.

The rhubarb is coming! The rhubarb is coming!

Long stalks of fresh, field-grown rhubarb should be showing up in your supermarket any day. May is the peak production month for this vegetable that we consume primarily as a fruit.

Michigan shoppers can readily get fresh, home-grown rhubarb because this state is the nation's third largest producer of field-grown rhubarb. Some 200 acres produce about 2,500 tons of rhubarb annually. Production tends to be quite stable because rhubarb is a perennial crop. Bernard Zandstra, Michigan State University horticulture specialist, expects the 1982 crop to be about average.

Field-grown rhubarb can generally be identified by its thick stalks (called petioles) that are more greenish than red. (Hothouse rhubarb generally has slimmer stalks which are red or pink).

Michigan is No. 1 in the production of hothouse (forced) rhubarb. An additional 85 acres of rhubarb are grown for transferring to hothouses. The resulting forced rhubarb is marketed during the winter.

Fresh appearance, large stalks and a crisp, firm texture are signs that field-grown rhubarb is fresh and of good quality. Refrigerate rhubarb unwashed in a plastic bag to maintain quality. Use within a week.

"Pie plant," an old-fashioned term for rhubarb, denotes the most common use for this tart tasting food. Purchase about 2 pounds for a fairly thick 8- or 9-inch pie.

Rhubarb tastes good in sauce, pudding, cakes, salads, preserves, cobbler, crisp and punch. Consider substituting rhubarb for the applesauce in your favorite applesauce cake recipe.

You won't often find fresh rhubarb served after the first of July. Folklore has it that rhubarb is poisonous after June. But that isn't so, says Jesse Saylor, horticulture specialist at MSU.

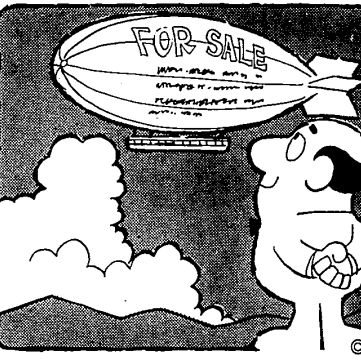
"You can eat just as much rhubarb in July as you do in May," Saylor says. "It may be rubbery or tough, but it won't be poisonous."

The harvest period for field rhubarb is about two months — from early May to the first of July. Harvesting stalks after July 1 may weaken the plant, and that's the reason you don't find it being served. Saylor advises that, during the remaining summer months, home gardeners allow the plant build up its crown for the following year.

Though the petioles do not become poisonous, the leaves always are, Saylor warns. They contain chemical compounds called oxalates and should never be eaten.

One way to enjoy rhubarb after its short, fresh season is to freeze some for later use. Wash stalks thoroughly in cold water, drain and cut into ½-inch chunks. Pack into moisture vapor-proof freezer containers, seal and freeze.

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