

Homemade fish fry

Hillary Levin/St. Louis Post-Dispatch-TNS
Beer-battered cod filets fry in a pot of oil.

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St. Louis Post-Dispatch

In other places, the transformation from winter to spring is noted by the bloom of the first crocus or the arrival of the first robin.

Around these parts, spring is heralded by the battering and frying of the first fish.

With spring comes Lent, and with Lent comes fish fries. It is an annual ritual as sacred and as inviolate as Spring Training.

But as much as we love supporting all of the local churches, Elks clubs, and American Legion and VFW posts, you don't actually have to go to them to have delicious fried fish. You can make your own fish fry at home.

Your house may smell like the kitchen of a fish-and-chips restaurant, but it's easy and fun.

I fried up what is technically called a mess of fish, with all the fixings (which are technically called fixin's). It tasted like a Friday night at Our Lady, Star of the Sea.

Fish fry fish comes battered and fried, breaded and fried, and baked. I battered and breaded mine, but I did not bake it because it is a fish fry, not a fish bake. I understand the difference in calories, but that's not the point.

The fish-fry fish that is battered and fried is usually going to be cod, though the technique also works with any number of other types of firm, white-flesh fish: haddock, pollock, halibut or even striped bass.

But cod is cheap and plentiful, which makes it the ideal fish for a fry.

The problem with battered fish is the batter. Under the wrong circumstances, it can be too thick and even breadly. So I turned to the writings of J. Kenji Lopez-Alt, who is either a science-minded food writer or a food-minded science writer. As I'd hoped, he had a couple of suggestions for making batter that is as light as air.

And you do that by filling it with air, or at least carbon dioxide. He slowly mixes beer into this batter, which traps little bubbles of carbon dioxide in it. If you don't want beer, soda water will do the same trick.

He also keeps the beer (or soda water) ice cold, because colder liquid holds carbonation better. I put my beer in a bowl of ice water for an hour before cooking to make it as cold as possible. In addition, I mixed the cold beer with ice water, instead of regular water, because colder liquid also keeps gluten from forming — and gluten makes the batter thick.

It took just a little more effort than the unfussy way of frying battered fish, but I think it was worth it. My fish was as good as anything I've ever had at a fish-and-chips restaurant or my nearest VFW hall.

Breading is easier, of course, so I also breaded some catfish fillets. I did this two ways, once after first soaking them in milk and once without the soak.

Common wisdom holds that the milk makes catfish taste less fishy, and, in this case, the common wisdom is correct. I highly recommend soaking your catfish in milk,

and it won't even add any time to your cooking process. Simply put the catfish in the milk when you begin to heat the oil, and you'll be fine.

I used hot oil for the side dishes, too.

There is a simple but effective trick to making french fries that are delicately crisp on the outside and creamy smooth inside: Fry them twice.

It's as simple as that. The first time, fry your hand-cut fries at 325 degrees for a few minutes. That basically cooks the fries all the way through, though the texture is soft. Then, fry them again at 375 degrees for just a couple of minutes. This step cooks the outside again until it becomes crispy without overcooking the interior.

With a liberal sprinkling of salt, the fries will be some of the best you've ever had.

Good fish fries, though, don't limit themselves to French fries. The best fish fries also offer hush puppies.

Hush puppies are one of those great American dishes: cornmeal with a bit of onion, moistened with buttermilk and fried in oil. Nothing else is quite like them.

The ones I made were lighter than most, probably because the batter is made with both baking powder and baking soda. They puffed up enchantingly when they hit the hot oil, and they quickly cooked into golden balls of delicious fried cornmeal.

The french fries looked at them with envy.

The natural condiment with fried fish is tartar sauce; nothing else gives a satisfyingly sharp pop of contrasting creaminess to fried fish. You can buy it in a jar, and it will be fine. You can make it yourself, and it will be fabulous.

It's actually a complex little sauce — complex in flavors, I mean. Mayonnaise is enlivened with minced shallot and emboldened with the addition of capers and chopped cornichons. Parsley adds a rounding note, sugar mellows the vinegar from the cornichons, and salt and pepper season it to perfection.

It all comes together in a matter of minutes, yet it makes your carefully fried fish taste even better.

Of course, it isn't a fish fry unless there is also coleslaw. Without coleslaw, it isn't a fish fry, it's just some fried fish.

I made a batch that emphasizes the cabbage, not the mayo. But the other ingredients (carrots, caraway, mustard, vinegar and sugar) also keep the cabbage from tasting too cabbagey.

It was just the way I like it. If you want more mayo, by all means add more mayo.

After all, it's your fish fry.

BEER-BATTERED FRIED COD

Yield: 4 servings

4 cups peanut or vegetable oil



Hillary Levin/St. Louis Post-Dispatch-TNS

Extra-tangy tartar sauce to serve with a lenten fish fry at home.



Hillary Levin/St. Louis Post-Dispatch-TNS

Breaded catfish, served with hushpuppies and cole slaw, for a homemade lenten fish fry.

1½ cups all-purpose flour, divided
½ cup cornstarch
1 teaspoon baking powder
¼ teaspoon baking soda
Salt
¼ teaspoon paprika
¾ cup light-flavored beer (such as Budweiser) or soda water, ice cold
¾ cup ice water
1 pound cod fillet, cut into 4 (4-ounce) pieces
Note: To keep the beer or soda water extra-cold, put a refrigerated can or bottle in a large bowl of ice water 1 hour before using.

1. Heat the oil to 350 degrees in a large wok or cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat. Meanwhile, whisk together 1 cup of the flour, the cornstarch, baking powder, baking soda, 2 teaspoons salt and paprika in a large bowl. Combine the beer and ¾ cup ice water in a small bowl.

2. Add the remaining ½ cup flour to another large bowl. Toss the fish pieces in the flour until evenly coated. Transfer to a wire rack set on a rimmed baking sheet.

3. Slowly add the beer mixture to the flour-cornstarch mixture, whisking just until batter has the texture of thick paint (you may not need all of the beer). The batter should leave a trail if you drip it back into the bowl off the whisk. Do not overmix; a few small lumps are OK.

4. Transfer the fish to the batter and turn to coat. Pick up one piece of cod from one edge, allowing excess batter to drip back into the bowl. Quickly dip it into the bowl of flour and turn to coat both sides, and then carefully transfer it to the hot oil, lowering it in slowly to prevent splashes. Repeat for all 4 pieces. Cook, moving the fish occasionally with a wire-

mesh spider or long fork, flipping the fish halfway through cooking, until the cod is golden brown and crisp on all sides, about 8 minutes.

5. Transfer the fish to a paper-towel-lined plate and season immediately with salt. Serve with tartar sauce.

Per serving: 352 calories; 14 g fat; 11 g saturated fat; 53 mg cholesterol; 20 g protein; 34 g carbohydrate; 1 g sugar; 1 g fiber; 1,010 mg sodium; 123 mg calcium
— Adapted from "The Food Lab" by J. Kenji Lopez-Alt

BREADED CATFISH

Yield: 2 to 4 servings

1 pound catfish fillets
1 cup milk
Vegetable oil, for frying
½ cup cornmeal
¾ teaspoon salt
1½ teaspoon black pepper
Pinch cayenne pepper

1. Pour milk into a bowl and soak catfish while you heat 1½ inches of oil in a large skillet to 375 degrees. Meanwhile, mix together cornmeal, salt, pepper and cayenne on a plate or in a bowl. When oil is at the proper temperature, remove 1 or 2 fillets from bowl, depending on size of your skillet. Dredge through cornmeal mixture and gently lower into hot oil.

2. Fry, flipping once, until golden brown on both sides and cooked through, about 5 minutes. Drain on paper towels and repeat with remaining batches.

Per serving: 295 calories; 17 g fat; 12 g saturated fat; 66 mg cholesterol; 21 g protein; 14 g carbohydrate; 2 g sugar; 1 g fiber; 503 mg sodium; 55 mg calcium
— Recipe by Daniel Neman

CRISPY FRENCH FRIES

Yield: 4 servings

2 Russet potatoes
Vegetable oil, for frying
Salt

1. Peel potatoes if desired, and cut into fries ¼-inch to ¾-inch thick, keeping the size as uniform as you can.

2. Pour at least 2 inches of oil into a large pot, and heat to 350 degrees. In batches, add potatoes; do not crowd in the pot. The oil temperature should drop to about 325 degrees. Stirring occasionally to avoid sticking, fry at 325 degrees until light brown, about 4 to 5 minutes. Remove with slotted spoon to a wire rack over a baking sheet or a plate with paper towels. Repeat with the other batches.

3. In a few minutes or up to several hours later (if potatoes are kept in the refrigerator), raise the oil temperature to 390 degrees. In batches, add potatoes; do not crowd in the pot. The oil temperature should drop to about 375 degrees. Stirring occasionally, fry at 375 degrees until golden brown and crispy, about 1 to 2 minutes. Remove with slotted spoon to a wire rack over a baking sheet or a plate with paper towels. Salt liberally, and repeat with the other batches. Serve hot.

Per serving: 200 calories; 14 g fat; 11 g saturated fat; no cholesterol; 2 g protein; 19 g carbohydrate; 1 g sugar; 1 g fiber; 587 mg sodium; 14 mg calcium
— Recipe by Daniel Neman

HUSH PUPPIES

Yield: 4 servings

1 cup yellow cornmeal
½ cup all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon granulated sugar
1 teaspoon baking powder
1 teaspoon baking soda
1 teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon cayenne
1 medium onion
1 large egg
1 cup buttermilk
Vegetable or peanut oil, for frying (about 2 quarts)

1. Preheat oven to 200 degrees. The oven will be used to keep hush puppies warm while you are making more batches.

2. Whisk together cornmeal, flour, sugar, baking powder, baking soda, salt and cayenne. Grate onion on the large holes of a box grater into another bowl to yield 3 tablespoons, reserving juice. Add egg and buttermilk and whisk to combine, then stir into cornmeal mixture just until combined, with some lumps remaining. Batter will be as thick as a heavy pancake batter.

3. Heat 4 inches oil in a large, heavy pot or Dutch oven over high heat until a deep-fry thermometer reaches 360 degrees. Working in batches, drop batter by the tablespoon into oil. Fry, turning occasionally, until cooked through and deep brown, 4 to 5 minutes. Transfer hush puppies to a towel-lined baking sheet in the oven while finishing the batches. Return oil to 360 degrees between batches. Serve warm.

Per serving: 370 calories; 18 g fat; 14 g saturated fat; 53 mg cholesterol; 8 g protein; 46 g carbohydrate; 5 g sugar; 3g fiber; 1,447 mg sodium; 316 mg calcium
— Recipe from "Martha's American Food" by Martha Stewart