

Chef's Corner: Spiny Dogfish Processing 101

JANUARY 2020

This incredible meat fish is one of the first to show up when the winter waters turn toward spring, so don't miss out on this excellent source of fresh protein!

This is the second segment on overlooked food fish and aims to change perceptions and break down paradigms when it comes to oft misunderstood fish and each's respective place on the list of palatable table fare.

Next to the stingray, Spiny dogfish sharks (*Squalus acanthias*) are vastly underrated and overlooked meat fish and the first to show up in the late winter and early spring.

This fish is delicious—soft, delicate and moist—and I'm amazed we don't eat more of it.

In England this and other dogfish are sold in fish and chip shops as "huss" or "rock eel." It was historically sold as "rock salmon" until that term was outlawed by consumer legislation. In France it is sold as "small salmon" (saumonette) and in Belgium and Germany it is sold as "sea eel" (zeepaling and Seeaal, respectively).

Although tricky to work with ("you need to know its anatomy"), once the fillets are prepped you have a beautiful, fresh fish that resembles a long, white with an almost pinkish tinge, eel. During these early months, Spinies are one of the most available fish in the sea, yet local anglers almost never fish for the infamous "horn dog." In fact, as with stingrays, most consider them nuisances and discard them as trash fish. That is, unless a fisherman has actually had the opportunity to sit down to a steaming plate of dogfish.

They are so tasty; I usually target these fish early and happily brave the chilly March and April winds to put some of these delicacies in the cooler!

As a boy growing up in Leigh-On-Sea, I knew this fish by its local name - "Rock Eel" – and along with Skate Middle, it was one of the most popular items on the menu at the local chip shop.

When filleted and skinned, a spiny dogfish will provide a long narrow fillet of white meat that can then be crosscut into perfect size portions which can be cooked in just about any fashion someone likes to cook fish.

It can also be cut into steaks for grilling or using in a delicious Osso Buco variation as picture here!

There are no bones, and the cartilaginous skeleton is easy to cut through.

The fins and tails are processed into fin needles and are used in less expensive versions of shark fin soup in Chinese cuisine.

The flesh has a mild flavor and tender texture similar to Mahi, and it freezes very well – although once you've tried it, it may never make it past the table to find a place in the freezer!



Author with a nice April Spiny Dogfish!



Dogfish Steak Osso Buco is Absolutely Delicious!

Field Care and Prep:

While not quite as dangerous as stingrays, spiny dogfish are classified as dangerous fish and must be handled with care.

Their bodies are dark gray above and white below, often with white spotting on the sides.

The species name, “*acanthias*,” refers to its two prominent spines located near the dorsal fins.

These defensive features are used defensively and must be managed as the shark arches its back to pierce its captor. The spines secrete a mild venom capable of inflicting painful wounds if not handled properly.

Spiny dogfish have very small teeth, but unlike the “smooth” dogfish, the teeth are quite sharp and will easily cut an ill-placed finger or hand, so handle with care when removing the hook.

Once I beach the fish in the surf and safely remove the hook, I immediately immerse it in a bucket of fresh seawater to calm it down. Then, I proceed to field-dress it before it dies to bleed it out and get it on ice as soon as possible. This assures optimum preservation and maintains near-perfect freshness and texture.

Field Dressing:

1. Remove the head and entrails as shown and thoroughly rinse in fresh seawater – this step is a must.
2. Carefully remove the fins, spines, and tail (optional, but this step helps larger fish fit in cooler!)
3. Rinse once more in fresh seawater and immediately place in a cooler and cover with ice.

NOTE: The spines and fins may be removed in the field or on the fillet table.



The rearmost of the two spines – handle with care!



A typical Doggie in the NC surf.



Ready to field-dress & rinse.



Watch out for the Spines!



Removing the Head & Entrails.



Dressed & Ready to trim the fins.



Field-dressed Doggies ready to Ice!

Skimming, Portioning, and Wrapping the Final Product:

I usually bring the iced-down dressed carcass home to fillet in a kitchen or, for larger dogfish, at my fish cleaning station in Salvo, NC.

A standard fillet knife is all that's required to remove the meat from the cartilage as shown below.

The following pictorial sequence demonstrates the filleting process. In this case, I was in the kitchen at my cottage in Salvo.



Dressed carcass with head and entrails removed and fins intact.

NOTE: another method is to cut the skinned fish into steaks for grilling, broiling, stewing, etc. Or, cut several steaks out of the middle sections and fillet the ends – whatever suits your needs!



Remove first dorsal & spine.



Remove second dorsal & spine.



Dorsal fins & spines removed.



Remove tail & split skin.



Peel each side of the skin off.



Fins, tail, & skin removed.



Belly meat ready to skin.



Skins after belly meat is removed.



Skinned core & belly meat.

A bonus of dogfish fillets is that there will never be any pin bones or bones of any nature for that matter, so they are ideal for kids and others that worry about fine bones when consuming most other fish! Also, the belly meat is well worth salvaging and makes incredible Po' Boy sandwiches when fried crispy – a Germanos family favorite!



Skinned & ready to fillet..



Slice down each side of cartilage.



Use knife to remove cartilage.



Separating cartilage from fillet.



Cartilage removed.



Fillet ready for portioning.

Dogfish fillets can be portioned, vacuum-sealed, and frozen – as can dogfish steaks. I like to trim the fillets and cut them into uniform shapes. These trimmings are added to the salvaged belly meat and used in a variety of dishes from soups and stews to fish tacos and Po' Boys! Just one more example of the ethical utilization of every inch and every ounce of edible flesh!

Once you get the hang of it, the skinning process goes very quickly, and you are left with these beautiful fillets!



White meat fillets portioned and ready to go!



End product – succulent white meat.

The edges around these fillets are trimmed, saved, and fried crispy for awesome Po' Boys on Hoagie Rolls!

As these pictures suggest, the yield is well worth the effort, and the flesh is extremely versatile. I have literally produced dozens of recipes and tasty dishes using stingray meat and have not had a bad one yet!

Master the art of processing these critters, and you will be amply rewarded!

Trash Fish or Meat Fish?

Until now, dogfish have been considered trash fish. This never ceases to amaze me. As a meat fish, they are plentiful at a time of year when many other fish are hard to come by. They are relatively easy to catch, and as for palatability, Spiny Dogfish are right up there with Puffers on my *personal* game fish list every spring!

Just look at the diversity of these dishes which I have recently created using Spiny Dogfish as the main ingredient:

- English Pub Dogfish Fish-n-Chips with Malt Vinegar and hand-cut homemade fries
- Dogfish Po' Boys – I like to save the belly scraps and fry them up in a crispy batter to serve on hoagie or hot dog rolls with shredded lettuce, grated cheddar, pickle, tartar sauce, and a side of fries.
- Dogfish Osso Buco – made with thicker steaks and every bit as good as the Italian veal shank classic!
- Spanish Dogfish Stew with Picada and Veggies (can use steaks or fillets)
- Blackened Dogfish Bites (can also blacken whole fillets or steaks)
- Doggie Poppers –these fried delicacies are excellent served with a nice lime-garlic aioli, fresh lemon, Cajun shake, or homemade tartar sauce!
- Fried Dogfish Fingers with Honey Mustard, Buffalo Wing, and Barbecue Dipping Sauces, with Celery and Carrot Sticks and my homemade Chunky Bleu Cheese Dressing
- Dogfish Steaks in lemon sauce with sautéed fresh spinach over angel hair pasta
- Dogfish and Cheddar Sandwich with my homemade Tartar Sauce and hand-cut fries
- Dogfish Tacos

And that's just the tip of the iceberg!



Spiny Dogfish-n-Chips.



Spiny Dogfish Belly Po' Boy!



Spanish Dogfish Stew.

Look for these recipes in current and future editions of VBAC's Chef's Corner!

Contributed by: VBAC Member John Germanos, aka "The Instinctive Chef" and inspired by my Hometown Chip Shop in Leigh-On-Sea, Essex, England.