

Fish Planking

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Who doesn't love freshly caught fish grilled with wood smoke? Planking is a variation of grilling that involves cooking the fish directly on a piece of hardwood, allowing the fish to pick up some of the plank's natural flavors while retaining moisture. This simple method brings together the great flavors of fish and smoke to add some variety to your menu.

Don't have a grill (or it's too cold)? No problem! Planking can also be adapted for use in the oven, although planks for the oven are usually thicker, larger and more expensive than those made for the grill.

You can buy specially made grilling planks or cut your own. For delicate foods, like most fish, the more gentle flavors of woods like cedar and alder are a good match. You may also want to try oak, maple, cherry or apple wood. Get full control of the process by making your own planks, and consider experimenting with different types of hardwood.

Head down to your local lumber yard or DIY shop and buy all the wood you need. BE CERTAIN that it is **untreated** to avoid chemical contamination. Cut the wood into planks 1 inch thick and an inch longer and wider than the food you're planning to grill. Make sure the plank fits inside your grill or oven with the lid or door tightly closed. Sand down the plank to avoid splinters.

Preparing the Plank

Plank cooking experts suggest pre-soaking the plank by submerging it under water for 2 - 6 hours or even overnight. Place a jar filled with water on top of the plank to hold it

QUICK READ

- Planking is a grilling technique that imparts a wood smoke flavor.
- Buy a specially made plank or use **untreated** wood to make your own.
- Grill on medium heat or cook in 400 F (200 C) oven.
- Pre-soak the plank, oil it and then place a prepared fillet or whole fish on the plank, skin side down.
- Cook until the fish reaches an internal temperature of 145 F (63 C).

under water. Soaking the plank aids in cooking the fish without burning the plank while it's on the grill.

After it has soaked, dry off the plank and lightly coat the top surface with oil. At this point, you can rub the plank with herbs, garlic or flavored oil.

Preparing the Fish

You can cook fillets or whole fish. Some sources recommend cooking smaller fish (like Arctic char, trout, walleye, bass, perch) whole. For larger fish, cut fillets into uniform pieces to ensure they cook evenly. For whole fish, 1 - 2 pounds, clean, gut, remove tails and fins. Season fillets or whole fish with oil, salt and pepper. Then place the prepared fish, skin side down, on either a pre-heated or room temperature plank .



Pre-heating the Plank, or Not

Pre-heating the plank before placing the fish on it to cook is debated among grilling experts. Some chefs recommend preheating the plank until it crackles and begins to smoke (about 5 - 10 minutes), then flipping it over and placing the fish on top to sear it and trap in moisture. This may prevent warping of the plank. Others skip that step and go directly to cooking the fish.

Grilling Technique

There are four grilling techniques used to cook fish on planks: 1. indirect grilling, 2. direct-to-indirect grilling, 3. direct grilling and 4. oven planking.

1. Indirect Grilling

Prepare a grill for medium heat (350-400 F / 180-200 C), with both direct and indirect cooking zones. Create cooking zones on a charcoal grill by moving the charcoal to one side: the side with no charcoal is the indirect cooking side. On a gas grill, regardless of the heating element configuration, only turn on half of the heating elements. Verify temperature with an oven-safe thermometer. The planks are placed on the “indirect” or cool side of the grill; the food roasts on the planks while absorbing the smoky flavor from the wood.

2. Direct-to-Indirect Grilling

You can also start with a two-zone indirect fire and place an empty plank over the hot side of the grill. Pre-heat plank until it just starts to blacken and smoke, then flip the plank, place the food on the charred side, and move it to the cool side of the grill, cover and cook. Starting on a scorched and smoking plank gives a deeper wood flavor compared to the pure indirect method.

3. Direct Grilling

It's possible to grill on a plank over direct fire. This might burn the plank beyond reuse, but it can also produce more intense smoke and potentially more wood flavor.

4. Oven Planking

Alternatively, you can use an oven to smoke plank fish. Preheat oven to 400 F (200 C). On the bottom rack of the oven, place ½ cup of dry wood chips in a metal pan for 15 minutes. Then, place planked fish in the oven.

Safety

No matter what method you choose, have a squirt bottle filled with water available to put out any flames or to add some extra moisture if any area of the plank seems to blacken too quickly.

Is It Cooked?

Set a timer. A general rule is to cook for 10 minutes per inch of thickness of the fish. However, using indirect heat will take 50% longer than direct heat. Keep the grill lid closed to retain heat and enhance flavor.

When time is up, check the fish for doneness at 145 F (63 C). Insert the food thermometer in the thickest part of the fish. Cooking times are estimates and will vary with every grill and fillet — the internal temperature of the fish indicates its doneness.

Serving the Fish

When the fish is cooked and ready to serve, consider bringing the plank to the table. Make sure any flames have been extinguished with your water sprayer beforehand and be careful around flammable objects and surfaces.

You can also carefully transfer the fish to a serving dish using a turner or lifter. If it is a large fillet, it may take two lifters to keep the fillet intact.

Reusing Planks

First of all, be sure the plank is completely extinguished before you attempt to clean or discard it. Submerging it in a pail of water will accomplish that.

As long as the plank hasn't been charred through, there's no problem reusing it. To clean a plank, start by scrubbing it down with water and a scouring pad without soap. If there's some excess char or food that just won't dislodge, use a fine sandpaper to remove it. The planks should then be put back on the grill or in an oven at 350 F (180 C) for a period of 10 - 15 minutes. Alternatively, you can wash the plank in a dishwasher — as long as you don't use any soap. This procedure will eliminate any bacteria that could continue to grow on the plank. It's important to completely dry the plank before storing it to prevent molding.

If the plank has blistered or charred through, consider breaking it into smaller pieces and using them as wood chips in a smoking pan or directly in a charcoal grill.