

How to cross-cut fillet a plaice

The technique outlined below to cross-cut fillet a plaice is that used in the new 'Introduction to Fishmongering' programme jointly developed by the Sea Fish Industry Authority (Seafish) and Billingsgate Seafood Training School. This information is copyright by the Sea Fish Industry Authority (Seafish) and was written by Duncan Lucas and Sue Hallman of 'Passionate about Fish'.

Flat Fish - Plaice *Pleuronectes platessa*

Length: Maximum 1m (39in) Usually 50cm (20in)

Weight: Maximum 4.6kg (10lb 3oz)

A broad, deep bodied, demersal, flat fish with a small, right facing head. The dorsal fin begins above the eyes running the length of the body to the tail. The lower anal fin only runs three-quarters of the length to the relatively long, squared ended tail. The upper side is a warm brown with bold orange or red spots. The underside is usually pearly white, although variations often occur, sometimes to the extent of two dark sides. The underside will not have the coloured spotting.

A bottom dwelling fish whose habitat varies from sand to gravel or mud. Can be found in any depth of water, but most abundant in 10 to 50 metres.

Spawns January to March. When in roe, the eggs can equate to 50% of the total body weight. The eggs and young fish are pelagic, until they reach a length of around 18mm, when they settle on the sea bed.

Eats molluscs, crustaceans and worms.

Flat Fish (Cross-cut fillet) - Plaice



Fresh plaice will be covered with a clear slime. For training purposes it would be better to wipe this from the skin. Plaice will always be gutted at sea and there will be a cut through the fish, behind the head, where the gut was removed. The white fillet is naturally thinner, so you should start with this side. Position the fish with the head in front of your right shoulder, tail pointing away. Standing at arms length place your left hand on the fish, to the left of the lateral line. With your thumb inside the gut cavity, lift the fillet to enable you to see inside. Insert the tip

of your knife into the fillet at the back of the cavity just above the bone (see insert).



With the back of the blade against the right hand side of the lateral line push the knife forward, ensuring it remains level, above the skeleton. You should be able to see the outline of your knife through the skin. Insert the knife as far as possible, then with a slow sawing motion, move the blade to the right, along the top of the bone.



Continuous pressure needs to be applied to the back of the knife, guiding the blade towards the curve of the fin. You will find the knife will release the fillet with ease, along the length of the fish, from head to tail. If the fillet is not released with your first cut, lift the front of the fillet, replace the back of your knife along the lateral line, on top of the bone. Repeat the process with a slow sawing motion, until the tail is reached.



There is a raised ridge in the skeleton, running directly beneath the lateral line of the fish. This acts as your guide when placing the back of your knife into the fish. At this stage your knife should never cross this ridge.



Ensure the tail end of the fillet is fully released (see photo). The fish must remain in position on the work surface, hold the outer edge of the released fillet and gently pull back, over the left hand side of the fish. This will expose the bone and ridge following the lateral line. Raise the handle of your knife high, vertically above the lateral line, near the tail end of the fish. With the blade towards you, insert the very tip of the knife into the left hand side of the fillet, just inside the ridge. Cut downwards, only a few millimetres, until you feel the bone. With a firm grasp of the released fillet, pull the knife towards you along the full length of the ridge. As you reach the gut cavity you will feel resistance from the rib bones. You may need to sharply jerk your knife, ensuring full control, to complete the cut. Now, release the fillet from the head by cutting around the left hand side, to the very tip of the fillet.



Keeping the fillet wide open, turn your knife and place the edge of the blade away from you, along the left hand side of the ridge. Keeping the blade flat, push the handle of the knife towards the tail in a sweeping motion, following the curve of the fin. This cut will not fully release the fillet. Place your knife flat on the bone in front of the head. The tip should be visible at the head of the fish (see photo above). Lay the released fillet back on top of the knife, and in a sweeping motion push the knife towards the tail ensuring the tip is visible at all times.



The handle of your knife should be ahead of the blade at all times while making this cut. The tip should follow the natural shape of the fillet, remaining on top of the fin. Once the knife reaches the tail of the fish, the fillet will be fully released.

Turn the fish over and holding the head, run your knife around the bony curve, keeping as close to the head as possible. Cut down to the bone. Holding your knife parallel to the block, insert the tip into this cut on top of the bone. With the back of your blade against the right hand side of the lateral line, push the knife forward ensuring it remains level, above the skeleton. You should be able to see the outline of your knife through the skin. Insert the knife as far as possible, then with a slow sawing motion, move the blade to the right, along the top of the bone.



Continuous pressure needs to be applied to the back of the knife, guiding the blade towards the curve of the fin. You will find the knife will release the fillet with ease, along the length of the fish, from head to tail.



Ensure the tail end of the fillet is fully released. The fish must remain in position on the work surface, hold the outer edge of the fillet and gently pull back, over the left hand side of the fish exposing the ridge. Raise the handle of your knife high, vertically above the lateral line, near the tail end of the fish. With the blade towards you, insert the very tip of the knife into the left hand side of the fillet, just inside the ridge. Cut downwards, until you feel the bone. Pull the knife towards you following the left hand side of the ridge.



Keeping the fillet wide open, turn your knife and place the edge of the blade away from you, along the left hand side of the ridge. Keeping the blade flat push the handle of the knife towards the tail in a sweeping motion, following the curve of the fin.

As before, it may take more than one cut to fully release the fillet. Always ensure you are in full control of your blade. Slow, continuous motion will produce perfect results. Both fillets will require trimming to remove rib bones, and possibly fins.



Rib bones are removed by firstly placing the white fillet tail towards you. With the blade on its side, place the tip onto the block in front of the fillet, at the lateral line. Putting pressure on the knife to create a bend, draw the knife back on top of the fillet. Your aim is to slide the cutting edge of the blade under the rib bones with a gentle sawing motion, scooping the bones from the flesh. Repeat this method, cutting in the opposite direction with the dark fillet. Fins can be easily removed by holding your knife vertically and cutting around the outer edge of the fillet.