

How to fillet a mackerel

The technique outlined below to take single fillets off the mackerel 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'.

Round Fish - Mackerel *Scomber scombrus*

Length: Maximum 66cm (26in) Usually 40cm (16in)

Weight: Maximum 2.8kg (6lb2oz)

A slender bodied, pelagic fish with a streamlined body and head. It has 2 separated dorsal fins (11-13 spines in the first fin) followed by a series of 5 finlets. Small anal fin again followed by 5 finlets. A forked, widely spread tail with 2 keels at its base. Brilliant blue-green back with black curved lines, white sides with pink and gold reflections. Bright colours fade quickly after death.

Gathers near the surface and midwater in huge shoals. Strongly migratory, swimming north in the summer and south in the winter.

Spawns May to August. The eggs and larvae float near the surface.

Eats plankton, crustaceans and fish larvae. Adult fish feed heavily on other small species.

Mackerel, as with all pelagic fish, are high in Omega 3 oils.

Round Fish (single fillet) - Mackerel



Place the mackerel on the board directly in front of you. Fold the pectoral fin forward and hold it with your thumb against the head. With the boning knife put the butt of the blade directly on top of the fish, in front of the folded fin.

To achieve a good yield the knife needs to be angled away from the head (see photo). In one smooth cut remove the head and fins. Do not apply any pressure to the flesh of the fish. Without moving the mackerel, insert the knife into the gut cavity and gently push forward towards the vent.



Ensure the cut does not extend beyond the vent. Be careful not to push the knife too far into the gut cavity, as this could damage the presentation of the fillet. You can now lift the top flap, revealing the cavity. Place your knife behind the gut and gently push the gut out of the body cavity and discard. Do not use your hands for this process.

Rotate the mackerel, so the back is now towards you and the head end is pointing away. Take your filleting knife and place the middle of the blade against the top of the fish, just above the centre bone (see insert). Hold the fish by gently placing your hand on top of the fish, above the blade. Imagine the bone running along the length of the fish. Pull your knife slowly in a continuous movement, following this imaginary line.



Do not try to release the whole fillet in one cut. The aim is to cut along the back of the fillet, only as deep as the ribcage (see photo). Slight downward pressure needs to be applied to the tip of the knife to ensure good yield is achieved. Three-quarters of the way down the fish, STOP. Ensuring your hand is not in the way of the blade, gently push the tip of the knife forward into the gut cavity. The blade should be visible on both sides of the fish (see photo).



The blade needs to be flat against the bone. In a smooth stroke, pull the knife down the length of the fish, towards the tail. As the knife approaches the tip of the tail ensure you control the blade until the tail of the fillet is released. Carefully

lift the front of the fillet and place the blade of your knife on top of the exposed bone. Using the first 2 inches of the blade, angle the knife towards the gut cavity, and draw the blade down the fish towards the tail. Follow the ribcage, but DO NOT cut through the bone. This will totally release the first fillet from the bone. It may help at this stage to study the bone structure as this will give a better understanding of what you are trying to achieve.



Turn the fish over with the tail end away and the back towards you. The bone will now be flat against the board. Position the centre of the blade against the front face of the mackerel, just above the bone. Gently place your hand flat on top of the fish, ensuring your hand does not make contact with the work surface. Keeping the knife on top of the bone, push the handle forward, drawing the blade along the length of the bone. A continuous slight downward pressure needs to be applied. The positioning of your knife is extremely important. The blade must be behind the handle, as the knife is pushed forward along the bone.



This fillet is released in one cut. As you push forward the blade needs to be visible on both sides of the fish. Steady control must be applied to the knife. If any rib-bones are left on the fillet, these can be carefully removed with your knife.