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Marine Extension
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Grilling Alabama Seafood

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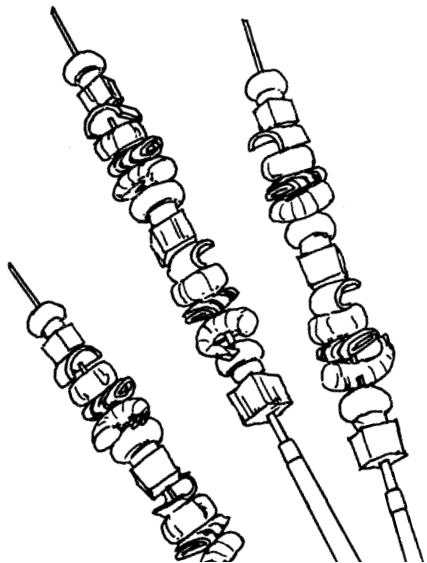


Grilling Alabama Seafood

On any warm evening from spring through autumn, Alabama families take part in a generations-old tradition: the backyard cookout. Besides simply being a means of preparing food, "cooking out" or grilling can also be a form of recreation or diversion, provide the focal for an evening of family activity, and allow the cook an opportunity to be creative.

In years past, grilling usually meant cooking hot dogs, hamburgers, steak, or chicken over charcoal. Among the equipment now available for outdoor cooking are electric and gas grills. Nowadays, an unlimited array of food seems destined for the backyard grill.

Many seafoods are prime candidates for grilling because of their nutritional composition, physical attributes, and flavor. Most seafoods are low in fat, which (aside from being less prone to flare-ups) provides a healthful source of lowfat protein. Seafood also has smaller percentages of skeletal and connective tissues than equal portions of red meats or poultry; that makes seafood fast and easy to grill. And seafood offers a variety of flavors that can be brought out, enhanced, or augmented during the grilling process.



“Grill-able” Alabama Seafood

Whether you catch them yourself or purchase them from a seafood retailer, many Alabama fish, crustaceans, and molluscs are ideal for outdoor grilling. The following is a basic list of Alabama seafood suitable for the grill. Check with your local seafood retailer to find out what is fresh, seasonal, and suited to your budget.

Fish

Amberjack	Rainbow Trout
Bluefish	Shark (several species)
Catfish	Snapper
Cobia (Ling)	(numerous species)
Dolphin (Mahi Mahi)	Spanish Mackerel
Drum (several species)	Striped Bass
Grouper	Swordfish
(numerous species)	Triggerfish
King Mackerel	Tuna

Molluscs

Clams
Mussels
Oysters
Scallops

Crustaceans

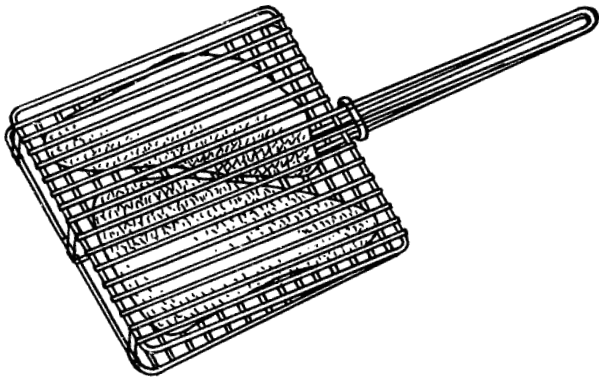
Softshell Crabs
Freshwater Lobster Tails
Freshwater Prawns
Rock Shrimp
Shrimp (numerous species)

Serving Amounts

When purchasing whole or drawn (eviscerated) fish, allow $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1 pound per serving. For pan-dressed fish, allow $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ pound per serving. And, purchase about $\frac{1}{3}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ pound of fish steaks or fillets per person.

Usually, 6 to 8 medium to large clams, oysters, or scallops is a normal serving, although some people will eat more. It may take as many as 1 dozen mussels to provide one serving because of their smaller size.

Depending on the size available, one or two softshell crabs is a normal serving. It usually takes three or four freshwater lobster tails to make one serving. One pound of tail meat from prawns, rock shrimp, or shrimp will feed three to four people.



Freshness And Quality Attributes

Fresh seafood should not smell “fishy.” Choose seafood that has a faint sea odor. Freshly cut fish, peeled crustacean meats, and shucked mollusc meats should be moist, never slimy or dried around the edges.

Fresh, high-quality fish have clear, well-rounded eyes. Older fish may have eyes that are clouded, dry, and sunken-in. The gills of a fresh fish are bright red, not darkened or slimy. The fish should be moist and springy to the touch, not mushy.

Crustaceans also have several easily noticed quality-recognition points. The tail meat from prawns, shrimp, lobster, and rock shrimp should be uniformly light colored with no signs of discoloration around the tail joints. Reject crustacean tail meat that is slimy or smelly. Likewise, fresh softshell crabs should have a mild, pleasant odor. The crab’s color should be bright.

Make sure molluscs purchased in the shell, are alive. Live, hard-shelled molluscs hold their shells closed tightly when handled. Containers of shucked mollusc meats must bear either a “last sale date” or “date shucked.” Fresh mollusc meats can only be sold up to 14 days after the date shucked. Choose oysters that have a natural creamy color and clear liquid.

Storing Seafood

Fish, crustaceans, and molluscs are among the most perishable muscle protein commodities. Ideally, seafood should be purchased the day it is going to be used. Of course, that is not always possible. Therefore, care must be taken to adequately and appropriately refrigerate or freeze fish and seafood until it is prepared and cooked.

Live, hardshell molluscs stored un-iced in the refrigerator at 34° to 38°F should remain alive for 7 to 10 days. Freshly shucked mollusc meats can be stored for a week to 10 days if packed in ice in the refrigerator. With the exception of shucked scallop meats, frozen molluscs are not good candidates for grilling because the meat is soft and prone to shrinkage.

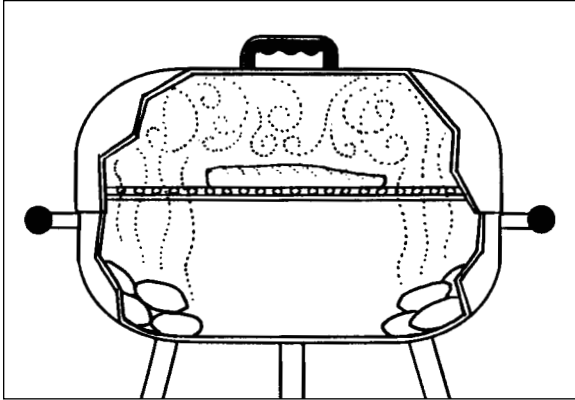
Fresh softshell crabs will maintain their quality better when wrapped in plastic and packed in ice in the refrigerator; for maximum quality, use them within 2 days of purchase. Softshell crabs can be stored and good quality maintained for up to 6 months if they are wrapped in several layers of plastic and stored in a freezer at 0°F or lower. Thaw softshell crabs overnight in the refrigerator only.

If you plan to eat them fresh, fish, shrimp, scallop meats, freshwater prawns, and lobster tails can be placed in zip-top storage bags or plastic storage containers and kept on ice in the refrigerator (32° to 34°F). Fresh, shucked scallop meats and crustacean tail meat can be stored in this manner for 3 to 4 days. Fresh fish stored this way will keep 5 to 7 days. Alternately, scallop meats, crustacean tail meat, and fish can be frozen in water and stored in a freezer at 0°F or lower for 4 to 6 months. Thaw these seafoods carefully, either overnight in the refrigerator or under cold, running tap water immediately before use.

Grilling Techniques

- If you intend to cook with charcoal briquets, line the interior of the barbecue grill with foil for easier clean-up.
- Clean the grill thoroughly.
- Avoid strong lighter fluids or self-lighting briquets, because their odors can overwhelm delicate seafood flavors. Use an electric fire starter or kindling instead.
- A moderately hot fire (375° to 425°F) is best for cooking seafood. Start briquets about 30 minutes before you begin cooking. Let the briquets burn until white-hot, then spread coals out in a single layer. An outdoor gas or electric grill should be set at 425°F and preheated for 15 minutes.
- Oil both the grate and the seafood with vegetable oil or non-stick spray to prevent sticking before placing the grate on the grill.

- Place the grate on the grill and adjust the height to 4 to 6 inches above the heat source.
- Cook small whole or butterflied fish, fish steaks, fillets, kabobs, crustaceans, and molluscs directly over the heat source.
- Use indirect heat for large whole or stuffed fish. If you are cooking with briquets, bank hot coals on either side of the barbecue grill and place the fish in the middle of the grill. If you are using an electric or gas outdoor grill, heat the burner on one side and place the fish on the opposite side.



- For fragile fish, use an oiled, hinged fish basket, a small-mesh seafood grilling screen, or perforated aluminum foil.
- Baste seafood frequently to maintain moistness and prevent sticking.
- Most seafoods need to be turned halfway through cooking time. Fish fillets under 1 inch thickness need not be turned.

Cooking Time Is Critical

The most important point to remember when cooking seafood is to not overcook it. Perfectly grilled seafood is moist and flavorful. Overcooked seafood becomes dry and tasteless. To estimate cooking time, measure the seafood at its thickest part (including stuffing). Grill 10 minutes (at approximately 400°F) per inch of thickness. Remember to turn the seafood halfway through the cooking time.

Fish is done, but still moist, when it turns opaque and just starts to flake when tested with a fork. A large whole or stuffed fish cooked with

indirect heat requires 10 to 12 minutes per inch of thickness to reach an internal temperature of 145°F. (A meat thermometer should be used to determine doneness in the thickest part.)

Softshell crab, lobster, scallop meats, and shrimp turn opaque when done. Molluscs in the shell, like oysters, clams, and mussels, open when cooked. The edges of mollusc meats begin to curl and turn opaque when done.

Added Flavor

- Speciality woods like oak, hickory, pecan, mesquite, fruit woods, and grapevine cuttings lend a subtle flavor to grilled seafood. Soak some wood savings or chips for 30 minutes before cooking. Place a handful of drained, damp chips on briquets (or in a separate aluminum or cast iron “smoke pan” just above the heat source in electric or gas grills) just before cooking.

- Fresh or dried herbs like thyme, rosemary, dill, basil, and oregano enhance the flavor of seafood. Soak herbs in water for several minutes, drain, and pat dry. Toss damp herbs directly onto briquets (or lava rocks) just before cooking.

- Marinades can be as easy as a bottled salad dressing or a homemade combination of oil with vinegar or fresh lemon or lime juice and your choice of seasons. Save extra marinade to brush on seafood as it cooks.

- Sauces should enhance—not mask—the taste of seafood. Match the flavor level of the sauce to the seafood being grilled. Baste with a mixture of equal parts of lemon juice and butter or margarine. Alternately, mayonnaise can be spread on fish fillets to keep them moist.

Other, General Pointers

- Be sure fish and crustaceans are completely cleaned (scaled, eviscerated, peeled) before grilling.

- Make sure molluscs are alive. Remove mud from shells by scrubbing with a brush under running water.

- Pat seafood dry with paper towels before applying oil.

- Use square-sided, not round, skewers for seafood kabobs.

References

This pamphlet was compiled using information condensed from the following publications. Consult them for additional information about seafood grilling, nutrition, preparation, preservation, safety, and storage.

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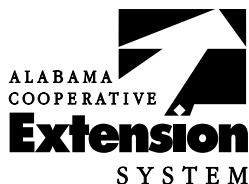
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