



06 Jan 2017

The Australian, Australia

Author: Necia Wilden • Section: General News • Article type : News Item
Audience : 97,419 • Page: 11 • Printed Size: 667.00cm² • Market: National
Country: Australia • ASR: AUD 13,479 • Words: 1478 • Item ID: 709193266

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Hot tips for fish and chips

Fresh? Yes. But there's a sliding scale of essentials

NECIA WILDEN

Fish and chips? They're the lottery of the food world. The odds of winning are greatly outweighed by the likelihood that promising little seaside spot will turn out to be just another limp-chip joint selling frozen crap from Asia. But still we persevere, trying to crack the code.

Price is no guide: fish-and-chip let-downs are as rife in restaurants as they are at the takeaways. Looks are not much help, either: the best f&c I've had in the past couple of years came from a shop in the main street of Victor Harbor, South Australia, that looked as if it were last renovated in 1970 (The Original Fish Shop, since you ask; it has been there since about 1920). Proximity to ocean? Good luck on that one.

Mr Seafood, Rick Stein, reckons the Greeks make the best fish and chips. In his latest book, Rick Stein's *Long Weekends* (BBC Books, \$55), he raves about a little place in Thessaloniki "with a garish neon sign" that didn't prepare him for "the best and moistest thick fillets (of salt cod) from the centre of the loin ... accompanied with fried potato discs and easily my favourite sauce in Greece, skordalia.

"My wife Sas and I were in heaven," he writes.

Still, you may not be headed to Thessaloniki any time soon, so we've asked our trained seafood sleuths to answer a few questions aimed at getting you a little closer

to f&c heaven. In Australia.

They are: Lucas Ruchniewicz, marketing and purchasing manager at seafood wholesaler Clamms; and Roberta Muir, manager, Sydney Seafood School.

1. What are the keys to great fish and chips? Is it freshness, freshness and freshness?

Freshness of fish is paramount and it certainly helps if the species was caught locally. Ideally it has not been frozen. Battered fish must be crisp, crunchy and brittle enough to almost explode as you take a bite. A free potato cake or two doesn't hurt, either — LR.

Freshness really is the key — fresh fish and fresh oil — RM.

2. Is frozen fish ever OK?

Fresh Aussie (or New Zealand) is always best. — RM

Fresh is king! Trouble is, the fresh product has a short shelf life and commands a premium price that many neighbourhood f&c shops can't sustain. If the fish has been frozen it must be from Australia or New Zealand because the fisheries are well-managed and the product is processed to a high standard. Some of the best and worst f&c I've eaten have been in rural fishing towns on the south and east coast of Australia; the best experiences are in the few

days after a fishing boat unloads and the worst are when the shops are relying on the cheap, nasty stuff (often imported) in the freezer. — LR

3. Grilled, crumbed or battered? Which fish suit which style of cooking? Is it a culinary crime to ask for your King George whiting in beer batter, for example ...

If it's headed for the deep-fryer, it's important the fish be firm, with

big flakes and not oily. For me, beer-battered flathead is as good as traditional fish and chips gets. I've had delicious crumbed whiting too. Oilier fish can be good for grilling where a bit of extra moisture is a good thing. I like salmon or tuna grilled. And no, it's certainly not a culinary crime to have battered KGW. It's superb! — RM

The varieties of fish you'd expect to see at any chippie are quite versatile and are suitable for most cooking methods. Batter helps to add volume and increase satiety but also gives structure to delicate species such as flathead and blue grenadier. If you're happy to spend a little more on something like KGW (not bloody blue whiting; if the board says "whiting" it will often be the much cheaper southern blue whiting, which is unrelated to KGW), simply grilled and seasoned is ideal to let the fish's natural flavour star — LR.

4. What makes the best batter?

Light is what you want — the thinnest, crispest coating possible. That's why beer batter is so popular as the bubbles in the beer help aerate the batter, making it light and crisp; soda water serves a similar role in making light, crisp tempura. The other key is to make it thin enough that it just coats the fish with a thin layer of batter, not a thick, gluey coating. — RM

A light coating that stays crunchy shouldn't be too much to ask. Tempura is the best batter but you are unlikely to find a real tempura at your local f&c shop. Beer batter will go soggy quickly thanks to the sugars in the beer, so if you are home cooking use soda water for a tempura-style batter with crunch. I've never met anybody that enjoys the thick, almost



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gelatinous coating of pre-battered fish ... ugghh. — LR

5. Are those frozen pre-cut chips in bulk any good?

Most places these days use frozen chips and, as long as they use good fresh oil to fry them in, it's a good option. The quality of chips comes down to the oil, it needs to be changed often and smell fresh. You can tell by the smell as soon as you walk into a f&c shop whether the oil's been there too long or not — if you can smell deep-frying, chances are it has been there too

long. I'm not a fan of seasoned salt on chips (just an excuse to add sugar if you ask me — NW); just some great salt flakes is all you need. — RM

Most shops will be using pre-cooked chips of varying quality; the classic 13mm or 10mm chip is best for f&c. The crinkle-cut chip is on trend at the moment. — LR

6. Are hand-cut the best?

Not necessarily. Hand-cut has a nice up-market sound to it, but some of the best restaurants in town use frozen french fries for their consistency and reliability. It's all about the crunch! — RM

Hand-cut or house-made chips are a dying treasure that has pretty much been relegated to restaurant f&c. That said, there are decent pre-prepared chips available but the pricing and quality are strongly correlated. — LR

7. What's the best oil to use?

At home, I love frying chips in olive oil for the great flavour it adds, but for a commercial fish and chipper a good neutral vegetable oil is best as it has a longer life and a higher smoking point. What's most important is that they filter it often to remove burned bits of chips and batter, and replace it regularly. — RM

Beef tallow is the essential old-school cooking fat for anyone wanting classic f&c. More commonly, though, a longer-life oil is preferred such as cottonseed or rice bran. The oil temperature and age of the oil are also very important — a lower temperature with a longer cooking time will yield a crisp shell and fluffy inside. — LR

8. Are twice-cooked chips bet-

ter?

Twice-cooked is a good idea — at home, in restaurants and f&c shops. For the best result, blanch the chips at a lower temperature (around 160C) to par-cook them, then heat the oil up to 180C or 190C and give them another quick flash to brown and crisp them. — RM

I love a good twice-cooked chip but I haven't seen one outside of New Zealand chippers or restaurants over here. Heston Blumenthal has an amazing recipe for triple-cooked chips that are worth the effort at home. — LR

9. What questions should you ask your chippie with the aim of getting the best experience?

The best indicator of a chippie is the fish display or lack thereof. You wouldn't buy meat from your butcher without browsing their display window first, would you? Why we are happy to do so with a product as volatile as seafood I'll never know. Ask the guy who prepares the fish, not the cashier: "What do you recommend? Can I see the fish? Has it been frozen? Where and when was it caught?" I recently inquired about the species of fish in the "Fish 'n' chips" menu item at an up-market pub. The waiter said, "basa or something". I had the parma. — LR

Ask what fish they're using and where it comes from — if they can't tell you (and if they're using cheap frozen imports they likely can't — or won't want to) go somewhere else. — RM

The quality of chips comes down to the oil, it needs to be changed often and smell fresh. You can tell as soon as you walk in to the shop



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ROHAN KELLY

Look for fish and chips cooked in fresh oil and a light batter