Storing your smelt

In order to maintain the best quality, place the smelt on ice or refrigerate them immediately after you catch them. An ice chest or other suitable container, partially filled with crushed ice, is a good way to store your catch and transport it home.

Clean your smelt as soon as you get them home. (This goes for smelt you buy in the store, too.) Do not keep dressed smelt in the refrigerator longer than two days before you eat them.

If you plan to freeze your smelt, place them in the freezer (0°F or −18°C constant temperature) in a moisture- and vapor-proof material, soon after you have caught and cleaned them. (See Home Freezing of Seafood, under “For further information.”)

Freezer storage is a convenient way to keep smelt, but limit storage time to enjoy the best flavor. A good practice is to date your packages as you put them in the freezer.

Smelt will keep up to a year, if you freeze them in a container of water, leaving ½- to 1-inch head space. (Half-gallon milk cartons work very well.)

Store cooked smelt in the refrigerator, in a covered container. Once cooked, they should be used within 3 or 4 days for best quality.

You can store cooked smelt in the freezer if you package them in moisture- and vapor-proof material. For best quality, do not hold cooked smelt in your freezer longer than 3 months.

Preparing your smelt

Baked smelt in mushroom sauce

1¾ lb dressed smelt
1 can mushroom soup
½ cup milk

Arrange a layer of smelt in the bottom of a greased casserole. Dilute one can of mushroom soup with milk. Pour half of the soup over the fish. Arrange a second layer of fish and cover with remaining soup. Bake 30 to 45 minutes in moderate (350°F) oven, or until most of the soup has been absorbed by the fish. Serves 4 to 5.

Basil’s barbecued smelt

2 lb dressed smelt
Barbecue sauce: ¼ cup chopped onion, ⅛ tsp chopped green pepper, 1 clove finely chopped garlic cooked till tender in ⅛ tsp butter, 1 tsp tomato sauce, 1 tsp sugar, ⅛ tsp pepper

Simmer barbecue sauce ingredients for 5 minutes. Cool. Marinate fish in sauce for 45 minutes, turning once. Place fish on broiling rack, broil for 5 to 10 minutes (depending on size), basting with sauce. Turn and repeat, until the fish flakes easily. Serves 6.

Campfire smelt

3 lb dressed smelt, fresh or frozen
2 tsp salt
3 strips bacon, cut in half
dash pepper
½ cup chopped onion
¼ cup chopped parsley

Thaw frozen fish. Clean, wash, and dry fish. Cut 6 pieces of heavy-duty aluminum foil, 12 x 12 inches each. Grease lightly. Divide fish into 6 portions. Place fish on foil. Sprinkle with salt and pepper. Place onion and parsley on fish. Top with bacon. Place onion and parsley on fish. Top with bacon. Bring the foil up over the food and close all edges with tight double folds. Make 6 packages. Place packages on grill about 4 inches from hot coals. Cool. Marinate fish in sauce for 45 minutes, turning once. Place fish on broiling rack, broil for 5 to 10 minutes (depending on size), basting with sauce. Turn and repeat, until the fish flakes easily. Serves 6.

Pan-fried smelt with onion cream gravy

10 to 12 dressed smelt
3 medium onions
2 tbsp vegetable oil
¼ tsp pepper
1 cup milk or cream
salt

Fry onions in fat; when brown, push to one side of skillet. Fry the seasoned fish until brown on both sides. Remove fish to hot platter. Add cream or milk to onions and simmer 5 to 10 minutes. Pour over fish and serve. Serves 4. (Variation: use tomato sauce.)

For further information


Hilderbrand, Kenneth S., Jr., Home Freezing of Seafood, Oregon State University Extension Service Sea Grant Marine Advisory Program Publication SG 7 (Corvallis, revised 1976).
Smelt are popular with many fishermen, though there is some evidence that not all fishermen who catch smelt eat the ones they catch!

The smelt family (Osmeridae) has five representatives on the Oregon coast. They are all small, transparent or silver-sided fish of similar appearance—and they are hard to tell apart. (The larger topsmelt, family Atherinidae, common in bays in summer, looks somewhat like smelt but lacks the small adipose fin on the back.)

One clue to identification is that the surf smelt (Hypomesus pretiosus), the one you are most likely to see, has a small mouth. The other four have the upper jaw extending past the middle of the eye.

The surf smelt spawn in gravelly beaches during the summer. Fishermen use dip nets or special “A-frame” nets to catch them.

The eulachon (Thaleichthys pacificus) runs into freshwater to spawn during late winter and spring; it sometimes enters the Columbia river in great numbers. The night smelt (Spirinchus starksi) spawns on beaches at night during winter and spring; its close relative, the longfin smelt (S. thaleichthys), spawns in coastal rivers in late fall.

The whitebait smelt (Allosmerus elongatus), which is sometimes seen in great numbers in bays, spawns in late October.

Tell the truth: do you clean and cook the smelt you catch... or give them to a neighbor... or (perhaps) end up tossing them in the garbage? A recent study of Minnesota recreational smelt fishermen concluded that 41 percent of them did not eat the smelt they caught. No one has produced a figure like that for Oregon!

Smelt have a delicate, sweet flavor; they are high in protein and low in fat. The Japanese import great quantities of smelt, as much for the roe (eggs) as for the flesh.

Smelt are available in stores, either fresh or frozen, all year round. There are a number of tasty recipes you can try; this bulletin offers a few to start on. Pan-frying and broiling are favorite cooking methods. Deep-fat frying and baking are popular in some areas.

As food prices continue to rise, those smelt you catch are an even more valuable protein source!

Cleaning your smelt

Dressing smelt is easy, although it can be a tedious chore when you bring home a large quantity from the beach or river. Perhaps the quickest way to dress them is with a pair of sharp scissors, but a knife will work as well. (You may prefer to leave the heads and fins on smelt, but many people remove them.)

Cleaning your smelt

Step 1

Cut off head behind the gill cover on a slight angle, so that you remove the pectoral fins at the same time.

Step 2

Insert scissors or knife into the anus and cut along the belly toward the opening created when you removed the head.

Step 3

With your finger, remove entrails by starting at the anus and pulling toward the head.

Step 4

Clean and rinse by running under cold water. Scaling or skinning is not necessary, but you can do it easily by scraping with a toothbrush or your finger.

Cleaning your smelt

Another cleaning method

After you have had some practice with the steps above, you might like to try a method that some experts say saves time and is not quite as messy. You may need to practice it a few times!

Cleaning your smelt

Step 1

Insert scissors or knife into the anus and cut along the belly toward the breast.

Step 2

Cut from back of the head, on a slight angle, to behind the pectoral fins—but without completely severing the head.

Cleaning your smelt

Step 3

Pull head, pectoral fins, and innards out all at once. (You will actually snap off that last bit of flesh on each side, but it’s easy to do.)
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Smelt will keep up to a year, if you freeze them in a container of water, leaving ¾- to 1-inch head space. (Half-gallon milk cartons work very well.) Store cooked smelt in the refrigerator, in a covered container. Once cooked, they should be used within 3 or 4 days for best quality.

You can store cooked smelt in the freezer if you package them in moisture- and vapor-proof material. For best quality, do not hold cooked smelt in your freezer longer than 3 months.

Preparing your smelt

Baked smelt in mushroom sauce

11/2 lb dressed smelt
1 can mushroom soup
1/4 cup milk

Arrange a layer of smelt in the bottom of a greased casserole. Dilute one can of mushroom soup with milk. Pour half of the soup over the fish. Arrange a second layer of fish and cover with remaining soup. Bake 30 to 45 minutes in moderate (350°F) oven, or until most of the soup has been absorbed by the fish. Serves 4 to 5.

Barb's barbecue smelt

2 lb dressed smelt

Barbecue sauce: 1/4 cup chopped onion, 21/4 tbsp chopped green pepper, 1 clove finely chopped garlic cooked till tender in 21/4 tbsp butter, 1 tbsp tomato sauce, 1 tbsp sugar, 1/2 tsp pepper

Simmer barbecue sauce ingredients for 5 minutes. Cool. Marinate fish in sauce for 45 minutes, turning once. Place fish on broiling rack, broil for 5 to 10 minutes (depending on size), basting with sauce. Turn and repeat, until the fish flakes easily. Serves 6.

Campfire smelt

3 lb dressed smelt, fresh or frozen
2 tsp salt
3 strips bacon, cut in half
dash pepper
1/2 cup chopped onion
1/2 cup chopped parsley

Thaw frozen fish. Clean, wash, and dry fish. Cut 6 pieces of heavy-duty aluminum foil, 12 x 12 inches each. Grease lightly. Divide fish into 6 portions. Place fish on foil. Sprinkle with salt and pepper. Place onion and parsley on fish. Top with bacon. Place onion and parsley on fish. Top with bacon. Bring the foil up over the food and close all edges with tight double folds. Make 6 packages. Place the individual packages under cold running water. (This goes for smelt you buy in the store, too.) Do not keep dressed smelt in the refrigerator longer than two days before you eat them.

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Thawing your smelt

1. Schedule the thawing so that you will cook the fish soon after you thaw it. Do not hold thawed fish longer than a day before cooking.
2. Place the individual packages in the refrigerator to thaw. Allow 24 hours for thawing a 1-pound package.
3. If emergency thawing is necessary, place the individual packages under cold running water. Allow 1 to 2 hours for thawing a 1-pound package.
4. Never thaw fish at room temperature or in warm water.
5. Never refreeze fishery products.

Pan-fried smelt with onion cream gravy

10 to 12 dressed smelt
3 medium onions
2 tbsp vegetable oil
1/4 tsp pepper
1 cup milk or cream
salt

Fry onions in fat; when brown, push to one side of skillet. Remove fish to hot platter. Add cream or milk to onions and simmer 5 minutes. Serves 4. (Variation: use tomato sauce.)

For further information


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Extension Service, Oregon State University, Corvallis, Henry A. Wadsworth, director. This publication was produced and distributed in furtherance of the Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914. Extension work is a cooperative program of Oregon State University, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Oregon counties.

Extension's Marine Advisory Program is supported in part by the Sea Grant Programs, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce.

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