

Pan grilling or Pan frying Cod

Serves 4

4 x150g pieces of hake or other fish such as cod, haddock or halibut
A little plain flour seasoned with salt and pepper
25 g soft butter or 1 tablespoon olive oil
Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

Place a heavy frying pan or grill pan on a heat and allow to get quite hot. Dry the pieces of fish and then dip in the seasoned flour on both sides. Shake off the excess flour. Butter the flesh side of the fish with a scant amount of the butter or brush with olive oil. Place the fish buttered or oiled side down on the hot pan. The fish should immediately sizzle on contact with the hot pan. Allow the fish to cook for about 6 minutes until golden brown. Use a fish or egg slice to carefully turn over the fish and cook on this side for a further 6 minutes or so or until the skin is nicely crisp.

Remove the cooked fish to hot serving plates and season with salt and pepper. Serve with your garnishes of choice.

Notes on Pan Grilling and Pan Frying

A perfectly grilled steak with a mustard and herb butter, a lamb chop with a roast garlic mayonnaise, a golden fillet of fish with lemon and a herb salsa, a juicy hamburger with roast mushrooms - the sort of food that we love to eat either on a wet Monday or a celebration Sunday. What they all have in common is the technique of pan grilling or pan frying. Being able to grill or fry successfully, either fish, meat, poultry or vegetables, is a crucial technique for all cooks. It is a technique you should be able to approach with no fear and if you are not always happy with your results it is worth thinking about the process involved. The reason I have put the two techniques, pan grilling and pan frying, together is because the process is exactly the same for both techniques, just using a different pan. When I see the word “grilled” or “pan fried” in a recipe title, it says that the dish being served will have a rich and flavoursome colour, ranging from golden brown to mahogany. It is also worth remembering that grilled or pan fried foods do not need to be greasy and fatty, and if you are careful, you can reduce the fat being used to a minimum. The main difference in the results from the different cooking pans is appearance and texture. The grill pan with its raised ridges will give richly coloured lines on the ingredient being cooked so the resulting colour tends to be two-tone and a slightly crispier result, whereas the frying pan gives a more even and single colour result with not as much texture as the grill pan. There is a subtle flavour difference between the two cooking techniques, with the grill pan producing a slightly deeper flavour. You will need a cast iron grill pan for grilling and a heavy cast iron or heavy non-stick pan for frying. These heavy pans will be expensive to buy, but if you mind them carefully they will pay for themselves over time by long outlasting the lighter versions and with less burnt food and more delicious results. It doesn't matter what shape or colour your pan is, but it is crucial it is heavy. Light weight grill pans or frying pans get too hot too quickly and equally they lose their heat in an instant, so they are much more difficult to control. Heat control is all here and the heavier pans conduct the heat more evenly, leaving you with a great deal more control of the situation.

The next important rule is to have the pan very hot to start with. Ingredients will stick like limpets to a cool pan and your skill will be more akin to that of a welder than a cook.

I prefer to put the fat of choice, usually olive oil or butter, on to the surface of the chosen ingredient and not on to the pan. By putting the fat directly on to the food to be grilled or fried, you can use the minimum amount of fat, and as a result you will be less likely to burn the food or the pan. You only want to brown the surface of the ingredient, so there is no need for superfluous fat in the pan as all it achieves is excess smoke.

When waiting for the pan to heat, be patient, say a prayer, hum a tune, have a happy thought, but wait, because if you don't and the pan is not ready, you will definitely be praying and your thoughts will not be happy ones.

The steps

Preparation

Generally when grilling or frying, it is better if the food is dry. So lightly dab the surface of your ingredients with a kitchen towel. You need a little bit of fat to prevent the ingredient from sticking and to add flavour. Olive oil or butter are the most frequently used fats. Dab, paint or rub on the fat on to the surface of the ingredient that will hit the pan first. There is no need to oil or butter both sides of the ingredients, as by the time the ingredient is turned over there will be enough fat on the pan to prevent that side from sticking. You need to be mean, or maybe we should say economical, with the fat. An oiled ingredient should look barely glazed, a buttered ingredient should have the thinnest smear of butter possible. Use your fingers or a brush for the oil and a knife for the butter. Have the butter at room temperature and you will be amazed how much less you will use. Excess oil and butter we just don't need. We use these ingredients because we love them and because they make our food taste good, but a surplus will only cause burnt food, smoke and is a waste of money. Generally speaking I don't put salt and pepper on grilled foods until I have turned them over in the pan. They are less likely to stick with the later addition of the seasoning. I find it is better not to put the fat on the foods being cooked until you are about to put them on the hot pan

Cooking

Place your grill or frying pan on a moderate heat and allow to get very hot. I prefer to heat the pan on a moderate heat so that the metal in the heavy pan is hot all the way through rather than just the surface being like an open faced furnace. A heavy grill or pan will take 5 minutes to heat through properly. You should see a haze or a shimmer of heat coming from the pan. Place the ingredient, oiled or buttered side down on the hot clean pan. The ingredient should sizzle immediately and there will be a little smoke. If there are great clouds of smoke then the pan is too hot in which case whip the ingredient out of the pan and allow the pan to cool a little. If you have difficulty judging the heat of the pan before putting on the ingredient, I suggest that you just drop a corner of the ingredient on to the pan and if it sizzles, the pan is ready, if it doesn't well then the pan is not hot enough. When the ingredient is cooking, you need to control the heat. You will find that as soon as you put the ingredient on to the pan, it brings down the heat a little, so you won't be turning down the heat for a minute or so, but as the ingredient colours and cooks and the pan regains its heat, you will then need to decrease the heat a little. There are no magical formulas or charts for this in terms of time involved. This all depends on the ingredient being cooked, the particular pan you are using and so on. When you think the ingredient is properly coloured and ready to turn, try and lift it at the edge to check the colour and to see if it comes away from the pan freely. If it resists, leave for a minute longer and try again. Flip it over carefully with a slice

to cook the other side. You will probably need to reduce the heat a little now. Continue to cook the ingredient to your liking.

Is it cooked?

To judge if meat, poultry or fish is cooked, there are three words worth remembering. These are appearance, texture and temperature.

Appearance;

Does the ingredient look cooked? With beef and lamb, your preference as to how cooked you like your meat will of course be a determining factor. With chicken there is no grey area. The meat needs to be cooked all the way through, not overcooked, but cooked through, so it should look cooked, in other words, no trace of pink at all in the cooked meat. With pork, it is worth mentioning that there is a fashion now to eat pork slightly underdone. Personally, I don't enjoy or recommend pork served in this way. Like chicken I prefer it cooked through, not dry, but cooked. With fish, I also like it cooked through, again I stress not overcooked, but with the flesh firm and still juicy.

Texture

As we are talking about pan grilling and frying, we will assume that a good colour has been achieved and with no sign of rawness on the surface of any of the cooked ingredients.

But what exactly is happening at the centre of the ingredient? Here is a general rule that I find helpful. Touch the surface of the meat or fish with your index finger and the firmness of the ingredient will tell you how cooked it is. The firmer or harder it feels, the more cooked it is. The softer it feels the more undercooked it is. Being able to judge these stages by touching the ingredient, comes with practice and experience and it is well worth practicing the "finger touch test" as illustrated on page *.

Temperature

If after checking the appearance and texture you are still unsure, you can check the internal temperature. Insert a fine metal skewer or even a darning needle into the thickest part of the meat, poultry or fish and count out 5 seconds. Remove the skewer immediately and test the temperature of the tip of the skewer on your hand. The hotter the skewer feels the more cooked or well done the meat will be, the cooler it is the less cooked or rarer it is.

You can of course use a thermometer but I find these cumbersome, especially on the smaller pieces of meat or fish that one generally uses when grilling or pan frying, and in some models the probe can leave a visible hole in the meat.

If all of the above instruction sounds a bit complicated, I promise you it really is not. Once you have performed these tests several times, you should be able to approach the task of determining how cooked your ingredients are with confidence.

Serving

When I am grilling or pan frying fish I like to serve it immediately it is cooked on a hot plate. With meat, the situation is different as many cuts of meat such as a steak or a lamb or pork chop will benefit for at least 5 minutes resting before being served. If you take a steak straight from the pan to the table and cut it, the meat juices will ooze out on to the plate and make a sloppy mess. Resting the pieces of meat allows the juices to stabilise and the meat to relax after the heat of the pan. I always serve grilled fish and meat on hot plates.