

# How to buy

# FISH

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**N**utrition experts and gourmet foodies agree that eating seafood is good for the body and the palate. It's one thing to sample delicacies from the sea at a restaurant, but quite another to attempt the purchase and home cooking of fish and shellfish. For nautical food neophytes, a trip to the local fishmonger can be a stressful and confusing time.

Tom Farmer, a Syracuse resident and long time purveyor of pisces, owns Fins & Tails with his wife, Margret Ringler. He offers advice on what to expect from a seafood store, how to properly select a fish, what various fish taste like and how to differentiate between cuts of meat.



**FINS AND TAILS** owner Tom Farmer holds a fresh pompano at his seafood store in DeWitt.

Jim Commentucci/Staff photographer

## Avoid 'fishy' stores

Farmer said that a good seafood store should be transparent about its practices and suppliers. They should also help you to select your fish, offer you suggestions for other fish you might like and advise you on proper handling of the fish and tasty ways to cook it.

"The three most important things in freshness are where it's caught, how it's handled and eviscerated, and how it was transported," Farmer said.

A store should tell you where and when the fish was caught, and where and when the fish was gutted and cut, Farmer said. They should be knowledgeable about their stock — what fish is in season, what is especially good and what might suit your tastes based on other seafood you have enjoyed.

Find a fish seller whom you trust, because as in all businesses, there are some proprietors who will sell inferior-quality fish or misrepresent the fish they are selling.

"Some places will say they're selling you sole, but really it's flounder. There is no domestic sole; the only true sole is European. They just call the flounder a sole because it sounds sexier," Farmer said.

## Find a fresh fish

A good, fresh fish should have a nice sheen to it, and the meat should be springy to the touch. If you press your finger onto the fish, it should not leave an indentation. Fresh fish should not give off much of a "fish" odor.

"It should give off a scent of the sea, not fish," Farmer said.

When selecting your fish, take into account what type of flavor you want — mild, savory or meaty. Bear in mind any allergies that your family or guests might have. Farmer also said to be sure to address any environmental concerns you might have about how the fish were raised, if farm-bred, or where they were caught, if wild.

## Pick your catch

There are many types of fish available on the market, and Farmer advises that you should be willing to try something exotic. There are also many good entry-level fish that can suit any budget and help you discover where your tastes are.

### For example

**Tilapia:** This farm-raised fish is easy to cook and is often sold in fillets. It is mild, skinless and boneless ... making it a great starter fish for newbies. It can be cooked in many ways: baked, poached, fried or grilled. Farmer recommends tilapia with a mustard/bread bake or a teriyaki marinade broil.

**Tuna:** Don't be deterred by tuna in the can — fresh tuna is a whole different kettle of fish. Different tuna is good during different seasons, and it can be light and lean (good for a salad) or meatier, good for sushi, sashimi or grilling. "It's great on the grill — it's as close to steak as fish gets. Put some Dinosaur barbecue sauce on it," Farmer said.

**Snapper:** Although there are many different sorts of snapper, there is only one true red snapper. It's an American fish, carefully regulated and only available fresh at certain times of the year. Red snapper tastes like lobster. All kinds of snapper are great also on the grill or in a salt crust.

"The red snapper is a highly sought-after fish. You can only get it the first 10 days of the month; that's how they regulate it," Farmer said.

## Choose your cut

The terminology of fish cuts is easily mastered. There are four main categories, Farmer said, and many fish will be available in any of these cuts. Most stores will cut the fish for you in the store.

**In the round:** A whole fish just caught from the sea, sometimes this fish will be eviscerated, or gutted. This is the name for a fish that still appears to be looking at you.

**Steak:** A cut is made straight across the whole fish, right through the bone.

**Fillet:** The most manageable cut for home cooking, this cut is achieved by a knife cut along the backbone toward the belly, creating a fillet. In ocean fish, this results in a boneless fillet. In freshwater, there may still be pin bones that need to be removed. Some fish, like trout, have bones that can be ingested safely.

**Butterfly:** This occurs when the tale and spine are pulled straight out. This is an especially good cut if you want to stuff your fish. Although some people should consult with their doctors before consuming fish, such as pregnant or nursing women, Farmer said that eating fish should be safe.

"I've been in the fish business for 32 years, eating fish about three times a week. I'm still here!" Farmer said. "Go ahead, pick up a fillet. It's nothing to be scared of."

