

Steamed Fish

Fish doesn't come as a fillet, battered and fried, served with tartar sauce on the side. It's steamed whole, in an oily gingery soy sauce. It's paired with hot white rice and stir-fried bok choy, not cornbread or hushpuppies. It's the only dish my dad cooks.

Fish wait in a partition of the kitchen sink. I wonder if they're alive or dead. They've been writhing in methylene-tinted water for the better part of an hour on the ride home, and they're stiff and curled, but their gills still flutter. The catfish has smooth silvery skin over a broad head. "It's a flathead," my dad says. He says channel catfish and flatheads are good to eat, but "mudcats" aren't. There's crappie and bass, too, but I can't tell them apart, so I take his word for it. They have scales that feel smooth running one way, but catch on my finger the other way. My dad doesn't let me gut the fish, but I watch.

He takes a dull paring knife and shaves off millions of shards of scales from the fish into the sink. Then he takes shears and jabs them into the fish's belly, splitting it down the middle, and hacks through the jaw. He tears out its innards but sets aside the yellow roe. He rinses off the blood. The fish is limp.

I'm too short to reach the counter, so I take in the smells of fish guts and the strong umami odor of simmering soy sauce and scallions. My dad tucks slivers of ginger into the cavity of the fish and lays four fish in a metal pan with yellow roe on the side. Water streams into the bottom part of a steamer, and the whole contraption is assembled on the stove. The lid of the steamer fogs up and obscures the metal pan of fish inside. Twenty minutes later, my dad takes out the metal pan with tanned, bare hands and drizzles the soy sauce mixture over the fish whose eyes are clouded over. He carefully spoons over the soy sauce, so it flavors every part of the fish. He sets the scalding pan on a dining table lined with junk mail and newspapers. When it's

cooked, I can glide a fork down the side of the fish and slide a whole section of clean white flesh and glistening skin off its bones. I drizzle over soy sauce and eat it with rice, savoring the roe.

There's usually none left over.

The gutted, uncooked fishes go into a chest freezer in the garage until next dinnertime. And when my dad has had enough of the house, he goes fishing again and takes me along. I clamber down jagged rocks surrounding a wide reservoir while my dad takes deep steps carrying three poles, a box of gear, and a cooler of minnows.

An artificial waterfall rains tons of water. I imagine fish falling by the hundreds through the white spray. Organic yellow foam lines the edge of the water amidst cans of dip, bottles of black spit, and miles of nylon line. Glints of sodium-vapor lamps oscillate on the water.

My dad chats while he's fishing with this man wearing a camo jacket and a white beard, and he asks my dad how we eat fish. My dad nods and smiles and says we *"fillet it and fry it, fillet it and fry it."*