

Chef's Corner: Stingray Processing 101: Just Wing It!

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Stingray is the most overlooked meat fish readily available in our coastal bays and surf – until now! This feature de-mystifies the process of turning the proverbial “trash to treasure!”

In the angling community, I am known for my ability to change perceptions and break down paradigms when it comes to oft misunderstood fish and each's respective place on the list of palatable table fare.

Next to smooth and spiny dogfish, stingray is without a doubt **THE** most underrated and overlooked meat fish throughout our coastal bays and beaches. This is likely due to a general fear of the buggy-whip tail & stinger; an unusual physical anatomy; and limited how-to information on properly transforming this protein-rich bounty into some of the most versatile fillets available – bar none!

When my family was in the restaurant business, we were one of the first to recognize and popularize several local dishes, most notably – Monkfish. The parallels here are amazing. Once we got past all that slime, the ginormous head, and the anxiety of how to prepare the meat for the table, Monkfish fillets became one of our best sellers, and we made good margins since most fishermen considered them trash fish and either discarded them or were more than happy to unload them (sound familiar?). I feel that is where we are with stingray. The amount of pure edible fillets that come from the two wings of an average 10- or 20-pounder is well worth the processing effort.

Field Care and Prep:



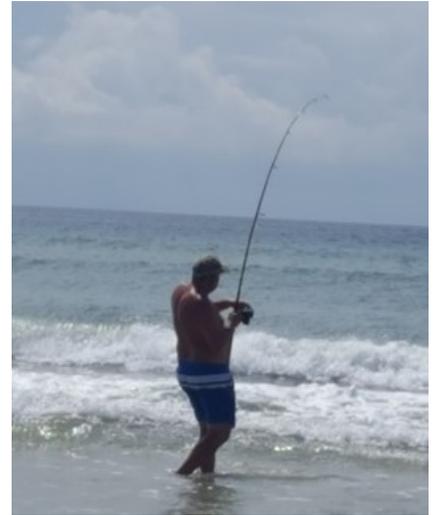
Beware of the whip-like tail and barbed spine!

let it return to the water! If you choose to remove the hook, use a long-handled de-hooker or longnose pliers, and steer clear of the tail! It's best to flip the ray on its back if possible. This keeps the barb-side down and exposes the mouth to facilitate hook removal.

If you plan to process the fish for food, flip the ray on its back, pin the tail down to prevent it from whipping about, then quickly cut through the tail close to the body to eliminate any chance of getting speared!

I always remove the stinger from the severed tail to ensure no one inadvertently steps on it after removal.

With the tail removed, the stingray is relatively harmless, and processing may safely begin.



Author battling a Ray on 10-lb tackle.

Once the tail is removed and stinger safely secured, simply trace cuts along the edge of each wing, following the contour of the body as shown below. Stingrays do not have hard bones, so cutting through the flesh and cartilage only requires a sharp, stout knife. I have several blades I call “*stingray knives*” that I use just for this purpose.

Once I have separated the wings from the carcass, I immediately take each wing to the water and do a preliminary rinse to remove all sand. Once the worst is rinsed off, I conduct a more thorough rinse in a 5-gallon bucket of clean seawater. At that point, I immediately place the wings on ice. If I do not have a large enough cooler with me, I head back and get ice on them as soon as possible – after all, I have enough meat for the day, and my arms could use a rest!

The stingray shown was caught on a simple Fishfinder rig with fresh cut mullet in Salvo, NC. It yielded just over 15 pounds of net meat after processing and filleting! Note the relative girth against my hand.



A typical 20-pounder in the NC surf.



Flip on its back for hook removal.



Tail removed and initial cuts made.



Separating the wings & carcass.



Wings prepared for saltwater rinse.



Rinsing in fresh salt water.

Filleting the Wings:

I usually bring the iced-down wings home to fillet in a kitchen or, for the larger rays, at my fish cleaning station.

A standard fillet knife is all that's required to remove the meat from the cartilage as shown below.

The meat is relatively firm and easy to fillet. Just run the knife along the cartilage as you would if you were filleting a flounder. Like a flounder, the dark side is thicker, and I often fillet that side first, but the order isn't critical – do what's best for you.

Once the first fillet is removed, flip it over and fillet the other side. All that should remain is a translucent flap of cartilage with virtually no meat to speak of other than a trace at the very ends.

The following pictorial sequence demonstrates the filleting process. In this case, I was in the kitchen at my cottage in Salvo.



Ray on the run – hang on tight!



Fillet white side from cartilage.



Fillet dark side from cartilage.



Left wing with cartilage removed.



NOTE: Stingrays are similar to flounder and other flatfish in that their eyes are on one side. As with flounder, stingrays have a light side (underside) and a dark side (top), and the dark side is notably thicker. Therefore, I tend to reserve the light-side meat for frying and other dishes that do not require thicker, meatier slabs.

The picture below left shows one wing's-worth of fillets. The picture below right is from both wings in my double sink at the cottage. As you can see, this fish provides an incredible amount of pure white meat fillets and is well worth the effort!

A bonus of stingray fillets is that there will never be any pin bones or bones of any nature for that matter, so they are ideal for kids and others that worry about fine bones when consuming most other fish!



Right wing fillets ready for processing.



Both wings filleted and ready to be skinned and processed.

Skimming, Portioning, and Wrapping the Final Product:

The skin-on stingray fillets can be portioned and frozen with or without skin. Since there are no scales, the skin is edible for those that care to partake, and it does add a level of protection when freezing. I vacuum-seal all my fish before freezing, so I tend to remove the stingray skin and portion and package the meat into meal-size servings.

To skin, place the fillet skin-side down on the cutting board. Gently remove the skin using a flat knife held about 30° to the board. Use a slight rocking motion to gently pull the fillet to you as you slide the blade between the flesh and the skin.



Skinning the fillets.



End product – succulent white meat.

Skinning Tip: A light dusting of kosher salt on the skinning board can make the job go quicker and reduce slippage!



The edges around these fillets are trimmed, saved, and fried crispy for awesome Po' Boys on Hoagie Rolls!

Once you get the hang of it, the skinning process goes very quickly, and you are left with these beautiful fillets!

Processing a Large Ray – 40 Pounds or More:

The basic procedure is the same, but a larger cutting board and sturdy fillet knives are advised to keep things tidy.

The set-up below is my fish cleaning station at our cottage in Salvo, NC, and it works great for almost any fish – large or small. Small folding plastic tables are inexpensive and work just as well when a larger surface is needed (see below)!



I like to use my outdoor fish cleaning station for larger rays so I can utilize my custom cutting board.

I typically have 3 or 4 “Ray Knives” that I keep on hand for processing these larger fish.



These two wings were approximately 20-lbs each!

These larger, thicker sections make incredible barbeque. I have served stingray barbeque to family and friends who will swear they were eating a traditional NC Pork BBQ sandwich! The texture is perfect, and properly processed stingray meat is meaty, not fishy. Needless to say, the leftover BBQ heats up VERY well and yields days of superior, high protein, low fat BBQ sandwiches. Although I must admit, I have been known to use a little bacon grease in my Stingray BBQ!



Nice thick wings from a 50-pounder!



Note the thicker topside much like flounder.

The pictures above really put the wing thickness in perspective. Two of these wings do not fit in a 5-gallon bucket and make for a heavy load in the cooler! This particular ray was the only one I kept during the 2018 VBAC Salvo Fall Open, but at one point, I had three large ray hook-ups at one time! That makes for a lot of heavy lifting on light tackle!



Separating the meat from the cartilaginous skeleton.



Topside "dark" fillet removed.

Proceed with the filleting process just as you would with a smaller ray, just use a heftier blade!

TIP: Once filleted, I usually cut the slab into two or three medium-sized sections to make skinning easier!



Filleting the thinner light-side.



Light-side fillet removed.



Translucent cartilaginous remains from each wing.



30+ pounds of protein-rich, hi-quality net meat!

Another benefit of stingray meat is its ability to retain its quality and texture when frozen. I vacuum-seal mine, and they easily last for up to year or more without any loss of quality! We always make at least one batch of Stingray BBQ for the hunting cabin each fall.



Once filleted, the meat can be shaped and portioned.



Pure white meat trimmed & ready for the grill or skillet!

As these pictures suggest, the yield is well worth the effort, and the flesh is extremely versatile. I have literally produced dozens of recipes and tasty dishes using stingray meat and have not had a bad one yet!

Master the art of processing these critters, and you will be amply rewarded!

Trash Fish or Meat Fish?

Until now, stingrays have been considered trash fish. Noted for drag-smoking runs and occasional aerial displays, these powerful fighters are excellent table fare, moving them onto and up my *personal* game fish list!

Just look at the diversity of these dishes which I have recently created using Stingray as the main ingredient:

- Blackened Stingray Bites – Recently served at the Ocracoke Club-level Tournament meeting these puppies are spicy, juicy, have great texture, & plain blow away Tuna bites!
- Stingray Poppers – Recently served at the March 2018 VBAC Surf Committee meeting, these fried delicacies are excellent served with a nice lime-garlic aioli, fresh lemon, Cajun shake, or homemade tartar sauce!
- NC-style Stingray BBQ with Cole Slaw and Creamy Potato Salad – most folks can't believe it's not pork!
- Manhattan-style Stingray Fish Chowder with minced Clams and Grilled Garlic Toast

- Fried Stingray Fingers with Honey Mustard, Buffalo Wing, and Barbecue Dipping Sauces, with Celery and Carrot Sticks and my homemade Chunky Bleu Cheese Dressing
- English Pub Stingray Fish-n-Chips with Malt Vinegar and hand-cut homemade fries
- Fran’s Stingray & Shrimp Noodle Salad – this is such an amazing beach and general snack food to have in the fridge or cooler and eat cold!
- Creamy Stingray and Potato Soup with Oyster Crackers and a dab of Dry Sherry
- Curried Stingray and Vegetables with Turmeric-infused Basmati Rice and Hot Mango Chutney
- Stingray and Cheddar Sandwich with my homemade Tartar Sauce and hand-cut fries
- Louisiana-style Stingray Gumbo – you’ll be amazed by the flavors and texture
- Stingray Burger Sliders – inspired by the delicious shrimp burgers served at Hatteras Harbor Marina!
- Stingray Po’ Boys – I like to save the trimmings after I shape steaks or cutlets and fry them up in a crispy batter to serve on hoagie or hot dog rolls with shredded lettuce, grated cheddar, pickle, tartar sauce, and a side of fries.

And that’s just the tip of the iceberg!

As I continue to experiment and publish Stingray recipes, and as folks begin to try this overlooked delicacy, I am convinced Stingray will start showing up in local restaurants that are “in the know” once they feature this local fare in the proper light!

So, the next time you catch a nice stingray in the surf, try “winging it” !



Stingray Burger Sliders.



Spicy Thai Stingray Fishcakes.



Curried Stingray with Vegetables.

Look for these recipes in current and future editions of VBAC’s Chef’s Corner!

Contributed by: VBAC Member John Germanos, aka “The Instinctive Chef”