

Kasma Loha-unchit's recipe for Charcoal-Roasted Striped Bass in Banana Leaf

CHARCOAL-ROASTED STRIPED BASS IN BANANA LEAF (BPLAH GKAPONG POW)

A whole striped bass weighing about 1½ pounds
½ teaspoon white peppercorns
6–8 cloves garlic
1 tablespoon chopped cilantro roots
1 tablespoon chopped cilantro stems (if roots are not available, use 2-3 tablespoons chopped stems)
2 tablespoons Thai oyster sauce
2 tablespoons fish sauce (*nahm bplah*)
1 stalk lemon grass
2-3 teaspoons cooking oil
Banana leaf (large enough to wrap around fish once or twice)
Aluminum foil
Slices of tomato, cucumber or pineapple for garnish
Hot-and-sour chili sauce (see below)

Clean the fish, removing the scales, guts and gills. Rinse and drain well. Set aside.

Pulverize the white peppercorns in a heavy stone mortar. Add the garlic and cilantro roots and pound together to form a paste. Mix with the oyster sauce and fish sauce.

Coat the fish evenly with the peppery mixture, including the body cavity. Trim the lemon grass and cut into a length that fits inside the cavity of the fish, using the bottom part of stalk. Crush well with the side of a cleaver or with a mallet, then stuff into the fish. Let the fish marinate about half an hour.

Clean the surface of a banana leaf. Brush oil to generously coat one side of the leaf. Place the fish and marinade on the leaf and wrap the leaf around once or twice. Then wrap with aluminum foil, sealing the edges.

Grill directly over medium-hot charcoal, turning the fish after 8 minutes. Open the package and cut off the excess banana leaves and foil and let fish grill another 8 to 10 minutes, or until it is cooked through. Carefully transfer the fish along with the banana leaf on which it rests onto a serving platter and garnish with slices of tomato, cucumber and/or pineapple. Serve with hot-and-sour chili sauce (see below).

Serves 4 to 5 in a multi-course family-style meal.



HOT-AND-SOUR CHILI SAUCE

10 red and green Thai chilies (*prik kee noo*), or substitute with 2-3 serrano or jalapeño peppers, chopped
4–6 cloves garlic, chopped
1 shallot, chopped
2-3 tablespoons fish sauce (*nahm bplah*), to taste
Juice of 1-2 limes, to taste
2-3 teaspoons granulated sugar, to taste

Pound the chopped chilies and garlic together in a mortar and pestle until pasty. Transfer to a sauce dish and add the chopped shallot, fish sauce, lime juice and sugar. Adjust the flavors so that the sauce is equally salty and sour with a light touch of sweetness. Let sit at least 15 minutes before using to allow the flavors to mingle and blend.

NOTES AND POINTERS:

- Most fresh fish markets in American Chinatowns will clean the fish for you. If you must do it yourself, you may find scaling the fish to be less of a messy job if you do it while it is submerged in a basin of water. Use a sharp knife or a scraping implement. The water will catch the loosened scales so you won't have them flying all over your kitchen. To clean the insides, use a sharp knife and cut along the edge of the belly. Pull out all the guts; also pull out the gills.
- Banana leaves are available packaged in 1-pound plastic bags in the frozen foods compartment of Southeast Asian markets. Instead of foil, the fish can be wrapped in additional layers of banana leaf, the ends sealed with toothpicks or bamboo skewers. The outer layers of leaf may dry up and char; be careful not to allow them to burn through, as this may cause the fish to dry out and stick to the leaf. Turning the leaf packet frequently and sprinkling the outside with water can help.

These recipes come from Kasma Loha-unchit's
It Rains Fishes: Legends, Traditions and the Joys of Thai Cooking