

Fish Tacos with Salsa Verde and Cabbage Slaw

Time: About 1 hour

A California surfer did not, as myth has it, discover fish tacos. Fish tacos are not the invention of a San Diego restaurant. Nor are they the result of European influence on the native foods of Mesoamerica—though we could argue that the fish taco is a relation of antique Spanish escabeche (crisp fried fish marinated in citrus). We might like to say that fish tacos are Southern because here, fried fish is always served with pepper slaw, lemon, and a bastardized "chili" sauce, or that hushpuppies are the Southern form of corn tortillas. The truth is, the ethereal combination of maize flatbread and fish is ancient on the American continents and predates European settlement.

But none of that really matters. We know the allure of fish tacos—their crisp, fryer-hot fish, bright salsa, and cool chopped lettuce or cabbage. The modern fish taco is an ode to crispness and high contrasts in temperature and texture.

Yet we did notice something lacking in the modern fish taco: the piece that holds it all together, the corn tortilla. Since we study heirloom hominy and masa corns, we decided to conduct an ancillary study. We decided to make handmade corn tortillas—or masa tortillas, as we prefer to call them—and pair them with the finest, freshest fillings to see what happens when the tortilla gets in on the act. Make the recipe and find out for yourself.

Equipment Mise en Place

For the salsa you will need a rimmed baking sheet, aluminum foil, a sharp paring knife, and a food processor. Thin, snug-fitting rubber gloves, such as surgical gloves, are helpful for protecting your hands from the chiles' heat. For the slaw you will need a chef's knife and a medium mixing bowl. For the fish you will need 3 shallow baking dishes, 2 pairs of tongs, a large ovenproof nonstick or well-seasoned cast-iron skillet, and a baking sheet. To warm the tortillas you will need a heavy square or round griddle, at least 10 inches in size, preferably well-seasoned cast iron, or a 10-inch nonstick skillet.

Ingredients

For the salsa verde:

3 medium tomatillos (8 ounces), husks removed and rinsed

2 large poblano chiles (8 ounces)

3 large jalapeño chiles (2 ounces)

1/4 small Vidalia onion (1 ounce), cut into small chunks

1/2 cup fresh cilantro leaves

Cooking Remarks

Tomatillos the tart, green, tomato-like fruits with papery husks used frequently in Mexican cooking—roast easily and quickly under the broiler. The idea is to let the inner flesh cook to softness under intense heat—but also under the protection of the rather thick skins that blacken and virtually levitate off the fruit during roasting.

The water and oil in the egg wash help promote a lighter breading.

Mexican cuisine is mad for crema, a tangy clotted cream applied by the spoonful onto all sorts of grilled meats, fish, and vegetables. We procured a few different brands of *crema* at the local *tiende* and discovered markedly varying quality. When *crema* is good, it is very good; when it is bad, it veers toward off-flavors and advanced saltiness. (We like Alpura Crema Entera.) Crème fraîche makes a very nice alternative, and sour cream an acceptable one.

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2 tablespoons juice from 1/2 of a juicy lime
1 tablespoon olive oil
1 teaspoon fine sea salt

For the cabbage slaw:

12 ounces white cabbage, finely chopped or shredded (about 3 cups)
1 tablespoon olive oil
2 teaspoons vinegar
Fine sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

For the fish:

1 cup unbleached all-purpose flour
2 large eggs
1 teaspoon plus 6 tablespoons vegetable oil
1 tablespoon water
2 cups panko (Japanese-style breadcrumbs)
12 ounces white fish fillets, such as mahi-mahi, tilapia, red snapper, perch, or cod, skinned
Fine sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

Tortillas and garnishes:

1 recipe Handmade Tortillas from Fresh-Made Masa
1/2 cup Mexican crema, crème fraîche, or sour cream
Fine sea salt
Fresh cilantro leaves (optional)

Directions

1. Make the salsa: Adjust an oven rack about 4 inches from the heating element and heat the broiler. Line a rimmed baking sheet with aluminum foil. Using a sharp paring knife, cut the tomatillos in half at their equators and place them cut-side down on the prepared baking sheet. Slip on the rubber gloves, if using. Cut off the top and tip of each poblano and jalapeño chile, then slit the chile along its length. Open up the chile as you would a book and, using the paring knife, remove and discard the seeds and ribs. Arrange the chiles skin-side up on the baking sheet with the tomatillos. Broil until

the skins have charred and loosened from the flesh, about 5 minutes. The tomatillos will look like this.

2. When cool enough to handle, transfer the poblano and jalapeño chiles to a cutting board and peel away the skins with a paring knife ; when peeled, they should look like this. Cut the poblanos into large pieces and add them to a food processor along with the jalapeños. Pull off and discard the skins from the tomatillos. Using a spatula, transfer the flesh to the food processor along with any accumulated juices in the baking sheet. Add the onion, cilantro, lime juice, olive oil, and salt and process to a coarse-textured sauce, about 20 seconds. Transfer to a nonreactive bowl, cover, and refrigerate until ready to use.

3. Make the slaw: Combine the cabbage, olive oil, vinegar, and salt and pepper to taste in a mixing bowl and toss well.

4. Prepare the fish for frying: Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 300 degrees. Place the flour in a shallow baking dish. Combine the eggs, 1 teaspoon vegetable oil, and water in a second shallow baking dish and beat lightly with a fork. Place the panko in a third shallow baking dish. Set a large ovenproof nonstick or well-seasoned cast-iron skillet over medium heat without oil. Pat the fish fillets dry with paper towels. If they are more than 2 inches thick, cut the fillets in half horizontally. Season generously with salt and pepper, then press the seasoning into the fish. Working one or two at a time and using tongs, dip the fillets in the flour, coating them evenly and dusting off any excess. Using tongs, dip the fillets into the egg wash, coating them evenly and allowing the excess to drip off. Coat the fillets evenly with panko, pressing the crumbs into the fish and gently shaking off any excess. Set the breaded fillets on a baking sheet.

5. Fry the fish: Pour the remaining 6 tablespoons vegetable oil into the hot skillet and swirl to coat. Using tongs, place the fillets in the skillet, gently shaking the pan to keep the oil moving (the oil should sizzle pleasantly, not aggressively). Cook, without lifting the fillets, until golden brown, about 40 seconds. Turn the fillets carefully with tongs, tilting the skillet to distribute the oil under them, then slide the skillet into the oven and cook for 5 minutes.

6. Warm the tortillas: Set a heavy square or round griddle, at least 10 inches in diameter and preferably well-seasoned cast iron, or a 10-inch nonstick skillet over medium heat. When the griddle is hot, heat each tortilla briefly on both sides until warm, pliant, and slightly crisp.

7. Season the crema lightly with salt. Remove the skillet from the oven and check the fish fillets for doneness by pressing on them with your fingertip: They should be firm, with a very slight give at the center. Alternatively, use the tip of a paring knife to cut

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into the center of the thickest fillet; it should be opaque throughout. If the necessary, return the skillet to the oven and continue to cook. Using tongs, transfer the fillets to a paper-towel-lined baking sheet. (If you're still warming the tortillas, slide the baking sheet into the turned-off oven to keep the fillets hot until you're ready to assemble the tacos.)

8. Assemble and serve the tacos: Cut the fish fillets into bite-sized pieces. Place about 1/4 cup cabbage slaw on a warm tortilla, spoon some salsa verde over, top with a few pieces of fish, dollop with crema, sprinkle with cilantro, if using, and serve. Repeat with the remaining ingredients.