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Food

Where to find the perfect Baja fish taco in D.C. (Hint: it's not in a restaurant.)

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By [Lauren Loftus](#) September 20 Follow @thelaurenloftus



Baja Fish Tacos. (Scott Suchman/For The Washington Post)

If I got to choose my last meal on Earth, I'd choose fish tacos.

But I'd need to catch a plane heading west first. Because if I'm dying, I'm not wasting what precious time I have left eating Washington's version of my favorite food.

I'm not a snob, I'm just from California. San Diego, specifically — a short drive north of Baja, a.k.a. the birthplace of the fish taco. Living there made me this way. My ancestors may be Irish, but my palate is Latin, shaped by the Baja flavors of the ocean: fresh fish and salt, hot tortillas and ice-cold cervezas. And lime. Lots of lime.

[[Make the recipe: Baja Fish Tacos](#)]

Washington, some 3,000 miles from Baja, never stood a chance.

As a fish taco expert (self-appointed), this past summer I took on the arduous task of figuring out what goes into real, OG Baja fish tacos. My quest required eating at a lot of local Mexican joints, getting pointers from several chefs and restaurateurs and, finally, trying to make tacos in my own kitchen. I never said this job was easy.

Here's what I learned:

Just say no to lettuce. [District Taco](#), I'm looking at you. The Metro Center location serves fish tacos only twice a week. But it's just as well, because these were . . . not good. Grilled tilapia overwhelmed by smoky chipotle mayonnaise in a double tortilla. They didn't offer the traditional cabbage as a topping, so I opted for shredded lettuce in an attempt to re-create that crunch. Big mistake.

Raw cabbage serves a purpose, said chef Alex Stupak, whose new cookbook, “[Tacos](#),” comes out next month. It’s all about contrasting but complementary textures: “You can feel the crunch on your teeth before you’ve broken through that soft exterior” of the tortilla.



See all that pickled onion on the fish tacos at Tortilla Coast? A bad call. (Lauren Loftus/The Washington Post)

Fried is better. Sorry, grill enthusiasts and health nuts, but real fish tacos use fried fish.

The fish taco trio at [El Centro DF](#) was yummy, but it isn’t authentic. Grilled mahi mahi, while flavorful, was simply too juicy for the miniature tortillas. They crumbled almost immediately, making my hand a drippy mess.

Meanwhile, [Taqueria Nacional](#) did fry the fish for its fish taco but opted for a panko crust instead of a batter. Big no-no. Fish sticks excite no one over the age of 6.

Baja lore suggests that the fried fish taco was born when Japanese fishermen who were docked in the area introduced their tempura technique to local taco slingers. Stupak is skeptical about that, but he points out that both recipes usually include a leavening agent: seltzer water for tempura, beer for fish taco batter. The carbonated bubbles give the batter “a sort of lacy but super-tender crisp, puffed quality,” he said.

No unconventional toppings are allowed. At [Tortilla Coast](#)'s Logan Circle location, the Baja fish tacos are beer battered, but, alas, all that golden deliciousness is completely overwhelmed by the mounds of pickled red onions. The vinegar is just too dominant a flavor for the delicate fish.

And at [Surfside](#), the Maui tacos come with grilled fresh fish (the type of fish changes month to month) and a corn-and-black-bean salsa on top. The tacos are tasty, but you can't call them Baja style. The sweet corn and soft beans aren't suitable substitutes for crunchy cabbage.

A classic fish taco shouldn't be too fussy, said Lesley Téllez, who wrote “[Eat Mexico](#).” “The hot fried fish coming straight out of the pot, the spritz of lime juice and a bunch of cabbage,” she said. “It's something I can make at home.”



The award for best fish goes to Fish Taco in Cabin John, which uses deep-fried fresh, locally caught fish. (Lauren Loftus/The Washington Post)

Don't overseason, and don't skimp on the white sauce. The fish taco recipe in Téllez's book doesn't call for seasoning other than salt and pepper. "Because I feel like when I'm cooking a taco or making some sort of filling . . . it should be fairly simple," she said. "Lean more on the ingredients than a particular mix of seasonings."

The best fish I had on my taco quest was at the aptly named Fish Taco restaurant in Cabin John, Md. They use only freshly caught local fish in deep-fried, generously large fillets. But the beer batter had a tad too much *something* — garlic or mustard powder or oregano. Or perhaps it was the signature sauce. Either way, it was a shame to mask the flavor of such amazing fresh fish.

[Impala Cantina y Taqueria](#) on H Street had the opposite problem. The beer batter on the wild-caught mahi mahi in the Baja Fish Tacos Plato Fuerte was mellow and fried to a perfect crisp. But there wasn't nearly enough white sauce, and the large chunks of raw jalapeño made everything too spicy.

When in doubt, do it yourself. By the time I was served my umpteenth fish taco, I was chewing with a steely resolve. At that point, it seemed like nothing could live up to my memories of the tacos of my youth. So I decided to take matters into my own hands.

First, I phoned an expert: Ralph Rubio, the founder of Rubio's Fresh Mexican Grill, which has more than 190 restaurants on the West Coast. Rubio became a connoisseur by eating a ton of fish tacos during surf trips to Baja California while attending San Diego State University in the mid-1970s. I asked him how to make the perfect fish taco.

“It starts with the best, freshest ingredients,” he said, offering the following tips: The fish should be mild, white and firm, dipped in a light golden batter flavored with good Mexican lager, then deep-fried. Top it with fresh green cabbage, and “you have to finish with citrus, a squeeze of lime.” The white sauce is a secret ratio of mayonnaise and sour cream — “just play around with it,” he suggested. And, perhaps most important, splurge on real, handmade corn tortillas. “That’s nirvana as far as fish tacos go,” he said.

[How to make the most important element of a taco, at home]

I followed his instructions exactly. I researched recipes and bought fresh tortillas from a Latin market in Columbia Heights. I braved the Maine Avenue Fish Market and got a humongous fillet of wild-caught cod. I cleaned my tiny kitchen. I heated the oil.

And I proceeded to make the best fish taco Washington: A generous schmear of white sauce went directly on a warmed tortilla, followed by the hot crispy fish, a squeeze of lime, a handful of shredded cabbage and a few slices of avocado (because avocado never made anything worse). I devoured three in a row, sitting on my porch in Northeast D.C. on a particularly hot, muggy evening. When I licked the salt and lime off my fingers, it was almost like being back at the beach.

Baja Fish Tacos

6 servings

Crisp, beer-battered pieces of fish, a tangy white sauce and shredded cabbage give these tacos their “Baja” vibe.

You’ll need an instant-read thermometer for monitoring the oil.

MAKE AHEAD: You might have sauce left over; it can be refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 5 days.

Based on a recipe from “Eat Mexico: Recipes From Mexico City’s Streets, Markets & Fondas,” by Lesley Téllez (Kyle, 2015), with suggestions by Ralph Rubio, founder of Rubio’s Mexican Grill.

INGREDIENTS

For the sauce

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup regular or low-fat mayonnaise

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup regular or low-fat sour cream

Juice of $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 lime

Kosher or sea salt

For the fish and tacos

Canola or vegetable oil, for frying

2 cups flour, or more as needed

Kosher or sea salt

$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon granulated garlic powder (optional)

$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon powdered mustard (optional)

$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon dried Mexican oregano (optional)

Pinch ground cayenne pepper (optional)

12 ounces (1¹/₂ cups) Mexican beer

1 pound skinless fish fillets (any fresh, firm white fish such as cod, pollock or dogfish), cut into 12 or 18 equal-size pieces

Freshly ground black pepper

Fresh juice of 1 or 2 limes, plus 3 or 4 limes cut into wedges, for serving

Twelve to fourteen 6-inch corn tortillas, preferably homemade (see related recipe)

Shredded (green) cabbage, for serving

Sliced avocados, for serving

STEPS

For the sauce: Whisk together the mayonnaise, sour cream, lime juice (to taste) and a small pinch of salt in a medium bowl. Cover and refrigerate until ready to use.

For the fish and tacos: Pour 3 to 4 inches of oil into a heavy pot; heat to 350 degrees over medium/medium-high heat. Line a rimmed baking sheet with a few layers of paper towels and place it on the middle rack of the oven; preheat to 200 degrees.

Meanwhile, whisk together 1 cup of the flour, a pinch of salt and any of the optional seasonings you wish in a mixing bowl. Gradually pour in the beer, whisking as you pour to form a smooth batter. Let any foam subside.

Season the fish well with salt and pepper, then sprinkle with the lime juice (to taste).

Place the remaining cup of flour in a zip-top bag. Working with a few pieces of fish at a time, drop them into the bag and toss gently to coat. Shake off any excess flour, then use tongs to dip the fish pieces into the batter, so they are evenly coated. (Add flour to the bag as needed; discard it after you've coated all the fish.) Carefully drop the fish pieces into the hot oil; fry for about 3 minutes per side, until golden, then use tongs to transfer them to the baking sheet in the oven. (Break open one of the fried fish pieces to make sure they are getting cooked through, and adjust the cooking time as needed. The fish should be opaque and barely flaky.) As you fry, remove any stray bits of coating in the oil so they won't burn.

You will not use all the batter; discard what's left.

Heat a (dry) skillet over high heat. Cook each tortilla for about 30 seconds per side, transferring them to a tortilla warmer or wrapping in aluminum foil to keep them warm.

When ready to serve, smear a generous dollop of the sauce on each tortilla, then add a small handful of cabbage and a few slices of avocado. Place a piece or two of fish on top. Squeeze a lime wedge over the fish, then drizzle with a little more sauce, if desired. Serve warm.

Ingredients are too variable for a meaningful analysis.

Recipe tested by Lauren Loftus and Bonnie S. Benwick; e-mail questions to food@washpost.com

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