

Spicy Thai Fried Catfish Cakes (Tod Mun Pla)

By David Schmetterling | Preparation time: 15 minutes | Cooking time: 5-10 minutes | Serves 4



Thai food is simple and easy to prepare, and the ingredients are bold and fresh. Although Montana's culture, climate, and landscapes differ entirely from Thailand's, I enjoy preparing Thai dishes—with a Montana twist.

For this recipe, catfish link the two cultures. The Mekong River that forms Thailand's northeastern border is home to 22 species of catfish, including the Mekong giant catfish, which can top 650 pounds and is the world's largest freshwater fish species. From my several visits to Southeast Asia, I've learned that catfish are part of the cuisine in many villages along the Mekong's route from China to Vietnam.

Montana has four catfish species, notably the channel catfish, found in the middle to lower reaches of the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers and their tributaries.

Each spring, friends and I fish for channel cats on the Missouri between Fort Benton and Fort Peck Reservoir using set lines baited with chunks of sucker or goldeye. We fish when water temperatures are rising and consistently over 50 degrees F. Typically we keep catfish that are between two and five pounds, although we do catch much larger ones.

Filleting and preparing catfish is not difficult. The trick is to remove any colored muscle or fat and then get the fillets on ice as soon as possible. This ensures the meat will be sweet, flaky, and firm instead of muddy tasting and mushy.

Fish cakes are a common way of preparing catfish and other species found in the Mekong. My favorite is Tod Mun Pla. You can find most of the ingredients, including red curry paste, in many chain grocery stores across Montana. Harder to locate are Thai lime leaves and Thai chili peppers, found mainly in the Asian food markets in big cities. For lime leaves, substitute 1 teaspoon each of lemon and lime zest. For Thai chili peppers, substitute any hot pepper you can tolerate. If you like really spicy dishes, increase the amount of red curry paste.

Serve with cooked white rice and the cucumber relish on the side.

—David Schmetterling is FWP's Fisheries Research Program manager in Missoula.

INGREDIENTS

- 1 lb. channel catfish fillets (or walleye, yellow perch, haddock, cod, or tilapia)
- 1 egg
- ¾ c. finely sliced green beans
- 6 Thai lime leaves, finely sliced (or 1 t. each lemon and lime zest)
- 1 t. brown sugar
- 1 t. salt
- 1½ T. red curry paste
- 4 T. vegetable oil for frying

DIRECTIONS

Cut fillets into pieces small enough to fit into a food processor or blender and grind them into a paste. You can also mash the fish with a fork in a bowl.

In a large mixing bowl, beat the egg. Add the green beans, lime leaves or zest, brown sugar, salt, and curry paste. Mix with your hands until the ingredients are blended. Wet your hands and form four or five patties. Be careful not to touch your eyes during this step. The curry paste will burn them.

Heat the oil in a large frying pan on high until a test drop of water pops and crackles. Add the fish cakes. Fry for two minutes on each side until golden brown. Drain on paper towels set on a cake rack.

CUCUMBER RELISH

- ½ c. white vinegar
- ½ c. brown sugar
- 1 cucumber, peeled and diced
- 3 shallots, finely sliced
- 2 Thai chili peppers (or other hot peppers), thinly sliced
- 1 T. crushed roasted peanuts

Mix vinegar and sugar until sugar dissolves. Add cucumber, sliced shallots, sliced peppers, and crushed roasted peanuts. Spoon mixture over fish cakes.