



## Chapter Thirteen

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# FRIED BRANZINO WITH THAI CHILI LETTUCE CUPS



**Gordon Ramsay Teaches Cooking II: Restaurant Recipes at Home**

## FRIED BRANZINO WITH THAI CHILI LETTUCE CUPS

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This dish may look intimidating because it's a whole, fried, crispy fish but trust me, follow the procedures. When it hits the table, it's got that wow-factor.

### Chapter Review

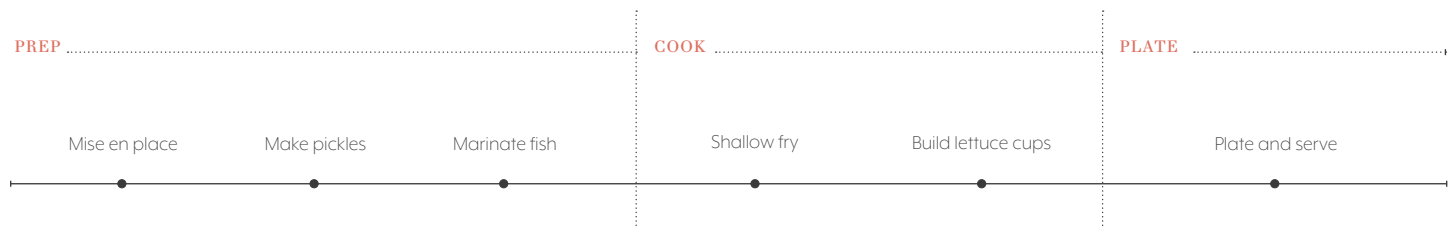
When Gordon spent six months in southeast Asia, he spent time living with a family on the Mekong River Delta in southern Vietnam. This dish is a refined version of the whole fried snapper the family would often make for dinner. It's visually stunning and interactive. Your guests will come together over the whole fish and build their own lettuce cups. Since this will be presented in the middle of the table, it's important to trim the sharp, spiky fins.

Look for the natural angle of the fish when slicing to create the portions that guests will be able to easily pull off the bone. Open up the belly to create a stable base when you're ready to place it into the hot oil.

Branzino is sweet, meaty and full of flavor. Leaving the skin on creates a crispy texture and cooking the fish whole results in incredibly moist flesh. The longer you marinate the fish, the more flavorful it will be. Dredging the fish in cornstarch and rice flour creates a crispy skin and keeps any marinade from hitting the oil and spitting. Cornstarch and rice flour are pure starch while all purpose flour is lower in starch and contains gluten. Starchier flours will crisp and brown more quickly in a shallow fry with a quick-cooking protein like fish. Open up the belly to create a stable base when you're ready to place it into the hot oil. Look for the natural angle of the fish when slicing to create the portions that guests will be able to easily pull off the bone.

The natural shape of the iceberg lettuce creates cups that hold all of the components of the dish. The pickles and lime add acid and the Thai chili sauce adds sweetness and heat.

### RECIPE TIMELINE



## FRIED BRANZINO WITH THAI CHILI LETTUCE CUPS

### Buying Fish

*From Gordon Ramsay Home Cooking  
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I always like to buy my fish whole because it gives you more clues about its freshness, and that is very important when buying. Some fish, such as mackerel, will deteriorate very quickly, and can take on a muddy flavor. Look for bright, glossy eyes, fresh red gills, and firm flesh with a shiny, but not slimy, sheen. Contrary to popular belief, fish should not smell “fishy” but just faintly briny. Steer clear of anything tired-looking, especially with sunken or cloudy eyes or dry, soft skin that doesn’t bounce back when you prod it with a finger.

Don’t be put off if you see that fish has been previously frounceen. It may well be “fresher” than the fresh fish. Deep-sea fishing boats are often out for weeks at a time, and better that it is frounceen on board rather than merely kept on ice. Of course, this should never be the case with fish caught by day boats around our shores.

In an ideal world, we’d all buy our fish from the local fishmonger, who can tell us what has just come in, but sadly they are disappearing faster than independent butchers. If buying from the supermarket, it is often better to buy pre-packaged fillets that sit in a plastic tray rather than from the fish counter, as pre-packed fish is flushed with inert gas to preserve it better. There seems to be a fashion now to shrink-wrap fillets, which I think is the worst way to buy fish, as it marinates in its own juices and the flesh quickly becomes waterlogged and mushy. Crabs, lobsters, mussels, oysters, and scallops all thrive in the cold waters of the northern states, producing sweet, juicy flesh. Lobsters are usually prohibitively expensive, though I often prefer the flavor of crab anyway, which can be a really good value, although the meat doesn’t come out as easily as lobster meat does. For ease, you can buy them dressed, meaning cracked open, the flesh removed and picked over, then repacked into the empty shell. With a bit of practice, they are easy to dress yourself too. When buying a whole crab, look for one that feels heavy for its size.

Mussels are probably the most sustainable seafood on the planet. You’ll find them in large net bags at supermarkets and they make a great quick lunch or supper, but for scallops and oysters you’ll normally have to go to a fishmonger or buy online. Mollusks should always be cooked live, so as soon as you get them home, store them wrapped in a damp dish towel in the bottom of your fridge and eat within a day. Clean mussels only when you are about to eat them. Discard any with cracked shells or any open ones that fail to close when you give them a sharp tap. Then rinse them under running water, pulling away their stringy “beards” and using a knife to cut away any barnacles.

### Prep

- The lettuce cups can be wrapped in plastic wrap and refrigerated for a few days before use. Watch out for browning of the edges of the leaves.
- The marinade and Thai dipping sauce can be made up to one week in advance.
- The branzino can be marinated up to two days beforehand for a more intense flavor.

### Ingredient Notes

- If you can’t find branzino look for any white fish with a meaty flesh like cod, snapper, or bass.
- Shaoxing wine is an amber colored rice wine with a nutty flavor profile similar to dry sherry. Stay away from labels that say “cooking wine.” You want wine of a good enough quality that you would drink it on its own.
- Thai red chilis use serrano or cayenne chilis or a milder variety like jalapeno or cherry bomb if you prefer.
- Store the cooking oil in a mason jar in the refrigerator and reuse until xx. When it’s time to dispose, pour the cooking oil into a vessel (like a milk carton) for easier disposal or look up grease recycling in your area.
- Little gem lettuce is another type of lettuce that works well in this dish. If you like, you can skip the trimming step since the leaves are the right size all on their own.
- Lemongrass has a very unique flavor and is difficult to replace in a dish, but if you can’t find it you can substitute lemon peel and mint. The peel of 2 lemons and 1 sprig of mint can replace 1 stalk of lemongrass.

### Dietary Restrictions

- This dish is gluten-free.

### Beverage Pairing

- Gordon recommends you pair this dish with a crisp, dry white wine like sauvignon blanc.

## Crispy Whole Fried Branzino, Thai Chili Dipping Sauce, Lettuce Cups, and Assorted Pickles

*Serves 4-6*

### Crispy Whole Branzino

2 pound whole branzino, gutted and scaled  
2 garlic cloves, crushed  
½-inch knob ginger, sliced  
1 shallot, sliced  
½ stalk lemongrass, rough cut  
4 Thai chilis, halved  
1 cup Shaoxing wine  
¼ cup fish sauce  
½ cup honey  
½ cup rice wine vinegar  
½ cup cornstarch  
½ cup rice flour  
1 quart vegetable oil for frying

Heat 1½ inches of vegetable oil 350-360°F. Place a sheet tray with a wire rack or lined with paper towels next to your frying station so you can easily remove the fish from the wok after frying.

Use a sharp pair of scissors to cut the fins and tail off of the fish. The fish scraps can be saved in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to three days and made into make a fish stock.

Use a chef's knife or fillet knife to cut ⅓ inch deep down both sides of the vertebrae. Starting one side of the fish one inch away from and parallel to the gills, make 4 to 5 diagonal slices into the flesh, cutting all the way to the ribs and spacing the slices 2 inches apart. Repeat with the other side.

In a large bowl, combine the garlic, ginger, shallots, lemongrass, Thai chilis, Shaoxing wine, fish sauce, honey, and rice wine vinegar. Let marinate for a minimum of one hour before use.

Place the branzino in a large baking dish. Use a pastry brush to liberally brush the Shaoxing marinade inside the cavity, into the cuts, and onto the skin. Season each area with a few pinches of salt and a few twists of fresh cracked pepper. Drain the excess marinade and place fish onto a new baking tray.

Combine the cornstarch and rice flour. Sift over both sides of the fish with a small hand strainer. Make sure all the fish is covered with flour, including the cuts to ensure a crispy crust. The drier the fish is the more even fry it will produce. Shake off any excess flour, then stand the fish up on its belly pulling the belly flaps outward. If the fish falls over, make a longer cut from the belly to create a wider base and help the fish stand up easily in the wok.

Set the center of the fish (where it holds the most weight) onto a spider and carefully place into the hot oil. The oil should froth and sizzle. The temperature of the oil will

## Crispy Whole Fried Branzino, Thai Chili Dipping Sauce, Lettuce Cups, and Assorted Pickles

*Serves 4-6*

### Crispy Whole Branzino *continued*

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drop once the fish is in so increase the heat to medium-high to bring it back up to a sizzle. Shallow fry the fish until deep golden brown and very crispy, 8 to 10 minutes. As it cooks, ladle hot oil over any exposed part of the fish to ensure even cooking. You will see the cuts you made open up away from the spine and turn golden brown. Once the flesh no longer looks opaque it is done cooking. Remember that the cooking process will continue even after the fish is out of the oil because of the heat trapped in the flesh.

Carefully remove the fish from the oil. Use one hand to grab the tail (if it is too hot use tongs or a towel), lift the tail end of the fish slightly, and slide the spider under the belly. Lift the fish and carefully set on the wire rack over a sheet pan to drain. Season immediately with salt. Turn off the heat, let the oil cool down, and reserve in a mason jar or dispose.

### Thai Chili Dipping Sauce

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5 tablespoons Thai fish sauce  
1 lime for juice  
2 Thai red chilis, thinly sliced  
2 teaspoons brown sugar  
2 garlic cloves, minced

In a medium mixing bowl, stir together all the ingredients. Chill in the refrigerator and chill until ready to plate

### Assorted Pickles

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½ Japanese Cucumber, thinly julienned  
½ mango, thinly julienned  
½ carrot, thinly julienned  
2x1-inch knob knob ginger, thinly sliced  
2 cups rice vinegar  
2 cups sugar  
2 cups water  
1 tablespoon coriander seeds  
2 teaspoons salt

Heat the water, sugar, and vinegar in a medium sized saucepot over medium heat until the liquid comes to a boil and the sugar dissolves. Add each julienned vegetable to separate bowls or mason jars. Pour the hot pickling liquid over the ginger and carrots and let soak for 20 minutes before refrigerating. Let the pickling liquid cool before pouring over the cucumbers and mango. Chill for 1 hour or longer before serving. Once ready to use drain the pickles and mix all of the pickles together evenly.



## Crispy Whole Fried Branzino, Thai Chili Dipping Sauce, Lettuce Cups, and Assorted Pickles

*Serves 4 to 6*

### Lettuce Cups

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To make the lettuce cups, select a big, dense head of iceberg lettuce that looks fresh and free of pinkish discoloration. Peel and discard wilted outer leaves and use a paring knife to cut out the core.

Place the head of lettuce core side up in an ice bath, allowing the water to fill in between the leaves to separate them slightly. Lift the lettuce up out of the water and tilt upside down to drain the water. Carefully separate the leaves until the leaves become too small or too curly for making cups and set aside in a colander to drain. Save the rest of the lettuce to chiffonade or plating.

To trim into a lettuce cup place a leaf in the palm of your hand, use a pair of clean kitchen scissors to trim off the stiff white stem and the edges of the leaf into a 3 to 4 inch circle. Repeat with the remaining leaves. Reserve the nice lettuce cups in stacks of 4 to 6 on a tray or plate lined with paper towels.

### Plate + Garnish

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2-4 iceberg lettuce heads, or enough to  
make 6-12 lettuce cups

1-2 cups iceberg lettuce hearts, chiffonade

2 scallions, thinly sliced

Microgreens

6 lime wedges

Marinate the fried branzino with two spoonfuls of the Thai dipping sauce in the crevasses and let it rest for 2 minutes. Place the fried branzino on the center of a long rectangle platter or slate board. Place one to two tablespoons of chiffonade iceberg lettuce into each lettuce cup, followed by one tablespoon of the mixed pickles. Top the pickles with a pinch or two of the sliced scallions. Spoon about one teaspoon of the Thai dipping sauce into each lettuce cup. Place filled lettuce cups around the fish, three above and three below. Pour the remaining Thai dipping sauce into a small serving bowl with a spoon. When ready to serve, use a utility knife or two forks or tongs to pull of a portion of fried fish into a lettuce cup and pour one spoon of Thai dipping sauce over the fish. Add more filled lettuce cups to the platter as needed.