

# Fish fillets get their crisp from instant-potato topping

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**S**EAFOOD sales are sluggish, according to national statistics. If it weren't for canned tuna, fish would hardly make a dent in the American diet, relative to other proteins.

But let's not forget why seafood was spotlighted in the '80s. It's a healthful, low-fat protein. A good fish recipe or two might be needed at the moment, in order to get seafood back on the menu more often.

Many people enjoy a good tuna or swordfish steak smoky from the grill. Delicate tilapia fillets are now on practically every restaurant menu, along with a host of other choices.

A bargain-priced package of frozen fish fillets may be hopelessly anachronistic, but their flavor is "fresh" and the price is right. Frozen fillets aren't great for grilling, of course, so this recipe requires a very hot oven.

Sure, it's summer, but many cooks are busy roasting vegetables at this high temperature — 450 degrees.

The crispy topping for these fillets is a mound of mica-thin flakes of instant mashed potatoes tossed with seasonings and a bit of canola oil. Instead of messing about trying to bread watery, partially thawed fillets, this solution piles the seasoned potato flakes on top of the fillets and bakes them until crisp and golden. The potato-fish flavor combination is reminiscent of England's favorite fish-and-chips.

Be sure not to buy granular instant mashed potatoes for this purpose; you'll need the flakes. And keep some potato flakes on hand for thickening vegetable-puree sauces and soups and fresh-corn chowders. Add the flakes to stretch and flavor

tuna burgers, crab cakes and salmon patties. The flakes are good in meat loaves, too.

## POTATO-CRISPED FISH FILLETS

**¾ cup instant mashed-potato flakes**

**2 tablespoons canola oil (or any other, including olive oil)**

**½ teaspoon onion salt (or less, as desired)**

**½ teaspoon dry mustard**

**Hot pepper sauce, as desired**

**1 pound frozen fish fillets, such as cod, or fresh farmed-catfish fillets**

■ Thaw fish in original wrappings in the refrigerator at least a few hours to partially thaw. (Fresh catfish from aquaculture farms may also be used if the price is comparable to frozen cod, turbot and other frozen fillets; cod is a classic favorite, good with the potato flavor, but scarce these days; any frozen, mild, white fish will do).

Have oven heating to 450 degrees. In a small mixing bowl, stir together the potato flakes, the oil, onion salt, dry mustard and hot sauce. Place partially thawed or thawed-and-drained fish fillets in a single layer on a lightly oiled baking sheet with a rim (a jelly roll pan is ideal). Thickly cover the tops of each fillet with the potato-flake mixture.

Bake at 450 degrees, uncovered, for about 12-15 minutes, until the topping is crisp and golden. If liquid cooks out of the fish, especially from partially thawed fillets, the potato topping shouldn't be disturbed. Simply lift the fillets from the rimmed baking sheet with a slotted pancake turner.

Serves 4.