

Ways to Prepare White Perch

by Jennifer Genest (original, with all edits incorporated)

1. You and the boy will cook the catch each evening; she took off for good and with her went all the recipes. He's yours now. You can do this. Start simple. Broil a couple of pieces of fresh perch. Show him how to make tartar sauce by combining mayonnaise and relish. Heap it onto the fish all the way to the edges. Pair it with your favorite bitter ale. Remember to give him milk with his meal and make him finish it. Compliment him on the fish he caught but for God's sake, don't overdo it.
2. Some people claim this is the ONLY way to make Perch: dip it in an egg wash, dredge it through flour and paprika, and then fry the whole mess in sizzling butter. Garnish with lemon. Show him how to choose lemons from the tree, the tree that you and your ex-wife once took as a sign that this house was perfect, the tree she imagined would be a background for baby photos, which seemed to promise she'd have a baby at all (but not the tree you imagined would someday remind you of lost pregnancies and her begrudging permission to give this foster child a home). But now it's your tree—yours and his. Let him cut the lemon into wedges; make sure he's careful. But now it's your tree—yours and his. Let him cut the lemon into wedges; make sure he's careful. Don't forget to lock the knives in the cabinet afterward; it's part of the home check if the social workers drop in. You have a lot to prove as a single dad.
3. The garden still hasn't recovered from your letting it dry up so bring him to the market for fresh ingredients. Poach the fish with half a green leek and pickling spice. Brown the rest of the leek in butter. Add flour, reserved stock, and sour cream. Stir until hot and pour over the fish. The boy at this point will probably think, "Fish again?", but he still hasn't spoken a word. Maybe the only blessing of his silence is that he won't ask about where she is and you won't have to explain.
4. A neighborhood mom has seen the two of you walking home each evening with the fish and tackle. She welcomes the boy to the neighborhood and probably interprets his blank, lost stare and silence as shyness. She hands you a recipe she says is kid friendly: an egg wash, but dredge the perch in flour and crushed pretzels this time. Let the boy crush the pretzels in a plastic bag on the counter using a meat mallet. You search his face for emotional release but it's still that blankness he's had since day one. When you imagine what he's already been through and what he's now probably thinking—that he didn't sign up for a single parent, that maybe she left because he's ten and has baggage and isn't a newborn baby—you want to use something much larger than a mallet to smash pretzels.
5. It takes the whole morning to prepare perch chowder and all afternoon to cook it, so no fishing today. Sit on the floor and play Legos together, the Legos you had when you were

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Moved down [1]: Compliment him on the fish he caught but for God's sake, don't overdo it.

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Comment [KB1]: What happens to the lemon in terms of the recipe / the perch? How do they use the lemon?

Comment [JG2]: Great catch! Added garnish detail above; let me know if it works.

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his age. The bare house begins to warm and smell of cream and butter you think: this is a new memory, just the two of us. On your way to the bathroom you step on a piece of Lego and curse. The boy devours three bowls of chowder. Later, when he's asleep in his room, you sit on her side of the bed where you can still smell her and the stupid tears come as you hold your bruised foot.

- Get up when it's still dark to find the boy already filling the cooler with ice. Pack a carton of night crawlers; a couple of peanut butter sandwiches, the leftover pretzels, and a thermos of homemade lemonade. Packing is a silent ritual; you can learn from this boy. Together you put on your hats and vests, walk down the pine-needled path, poles over your shoulders. You reach the lake and the tiny rowboat you told her was too small to name—an argument you now know is ridiculous. Nothing is too small to matter—not the blank stern of a small boat, not a tiny white perch, not the cells of a baby that stopped growing, not the possibility that this boy could be happy with you.

You continue to spend every day of paternity leave here, weather permitting. He takes his place at the bow, leaning over to dip a finger into the still water as you cast off. This lake is overrun with white perch and you are hungry; you are ready for the moment he hooks another one.

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Call your mom and ask about a fish recipe she used to make for you; it involves taco mix and corn meal. She asks how it's going and when she can meet him. You tell her, "Soon." She asks when things will be final and you tell her in your mind, they already are. You make the recipe but you're distracted and screw something up; the fish doesn't crisp up right—the coating is soggy and too spicy and the fish itself is tough. The boy picks at it, as if afraid, and you decide to huck both of your meals into the trash. "That recipe sucked," you say. "Let's get some friggin' McDonald's." You think you see a tiny smirk and then it's gone.¶

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Comment [KB3]: For parallel structure, need an article here. What would be best - Some? A couple? A few?

Comment [JG4]: Great idea – added "a couple"

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