



Asian Catfish (Vietnamese-Style Catfish with Peanuts and Fresh Herbs)

Page 1 of 2

Serves 4

Since my early memories of catfish bring to mind cornmeal-crusted mud, I wanted to give this underrated fish another chance to win me over. I treated it to a very special Vietnamese-inspired preparation: a light sauté of rice flour-and-turmeric dusted catfish followed by a shower of fresh wilted herbs—delicious! The majority of catfish available today is farm raised, eliminating much of the murky flavor of its wild cousins. And while I'm generally not a huge fan of farmed fish, I actually prefer sustainably-raised farmed catfish from the United States. Serve the fish over a bed of cooked rice vermicelli for a one-dish meal.

- 1 1/2 pounds catfish fillets, about 1/4-inch thick, skin removed, fish cut into 1 1/2-inch pieces
- 1/2 cup white rice flour
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 1 1/2 teaspoons turmeric
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil, plus more if needed
- 6 green onions, white and green parts, thinly sliced
- 1/4 cup unsalted peanuts
- 1/2 cup chopped fresh dill
- 1 cup packed fresh cilantro leaves
- Nuoc cham, for serving (recipe below)
- Cooked rice vermicelli, for serving (optional)

If the catfish feels wet or if it was previously frozen, pat it dry with paper towels or a clean kitchen towel. Combine the rice flour, salt, turmeric, and pepper in a gallon-size resealable bag or a wide, rimmed plate. Add half the fish and shake to coat with the seasoned flour. Heat 1 tablespoon of the oil in a large nonstick frying pan over medium-high heat. Remove the fish from the bag, shaking any excess flour back into the bag. Add the seasoned catfish to the pan and cook until golden and cooked through, 2 to 3 minutes per side for 1/4 inch-thick fillets. Transfer the fish to a platter or large plate. Repeat with the remaining fish and 1 tablespoon of oil.

When all the fish is cooked, wipe the pan clean. Heat the remaining 1 tablespoon of oil over medium heat. Add the green onions and peanuts and cook, stirring, until sizzling and fragrant, about 1 minute. Stir in the dill and cilantro and cook until wilted, about 1 minute. Pour the fresh herb mixture over the catfish. Serve over rice vermicelli with nuoc cham on the side for drizzling.





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Page 2 of 2

Variation: I used farm-raised catfish fillets, but you could try another medium-firm textured fillet, such as striped bass or flounder. The catfish I use is fairly thin (about 1/4 inch thick); add a few minutes to the cooking time if you use thicker fillets.

Nuoc Cham

Makes about 1 3/4 cups

Nuoc cham is a staple of the Vietnamese table. The sauce is very basic, yet it introduces a balance of sweet, tart, salty, and spicy to your meal. Keep a batch in the fridge for up to 2 weeks.

1/3 cup sugar
1 cup very warm tap water
1/4 cup Asian fish sauce (check the label to be sure it's gluten free)
1 tablespoon freshly squeezed lime juice
1 tablespoon unseasoned rice vinegar
1 clove garlic, minced
1/4 teaspoon red pepper flakes

In a small bowl, combine the sugar with the water. Stir until the sugar dissolves. Add the fish sauce, lime juice, rice vinegar, garlic, and red pepper flakes. Refrigerate until ready to use. The sauce will keep, covered, in the refrigerator for about 2 weeks.

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