

Recipe

Homestyle fried hairtail

- 1 whole hairtail, or 6-8 pieces of frozen hairtail
- 1 teaspoon ginger juice
- 1 teaspoon turmeric powder
- Cornstarch
- Salt

Chop off the head of the hairtail and discard. Using a pair of scissors, trim off the side fins, working from the tail up so they can be easily snipped.

Clean out the guts, making sure the bloodline next to the spine is completely scraped clean. Cut into 5 cm sections, rinse and pat completely dry.

Drizzle with ginger juice and set aside to marinate.

Mix about two tablespoons of cornstarch with salt and turmeric and place into a large ziplock bag. Add the fish sections and shake to coat thoroughly.

Dust off any extra flour, and fry the fish in shallow oil over medium heat. Do not touch or turn the fish until a crust forms on one side. Shake the frying pan gently to loosen the fish from the pan. Turn only after a full five minutes. Medium heat will crisp the fish without burning it.

Drain on kitchen paper and serve with lemon wedges, and a bit of soy sauce on the side.

Note: Substitute five-spice powder for the turmeric if preferred.

Braised hairtail in savory brown sauce

- 6-8 sections of fried hairtail
 - 1 brown onion
 - 1 red chili pepper
 - 1/2 teaspoon freshly cracked black pepper
 - Soy sauce, sesame oil, cornstarch for a slurry
- Make a batch of fried hairtail.

Slice the onion into half, then into thin slices. Seed the chili and cut into fine rings.

Heat up some oil and saute the onions till lightly browned and fragrant. Add the chili and black pepper.

Take half a rice bowl of water and add a tablespoon of cornstarch, a dash of sesame oil and soy sauce to taste. Mix the slurry well and pour into the waiting pan.

Stir as the sauce thickens. Add the fish and cover to cook about five minutes. Plate and serve hot, with rice.



Hairtail is one of the most popular fishes on the Chinese table.
PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

A perennial favorite

Hairtail remains an easy to cook, sweet-tasting fish that is abundant in the seas around China

By PAULINE D LOH

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The hairtail is no beauty. This fish's sinuous body can grow more than a meter in length, and its huge wolf-like head and jaws make it an efficient eating machine. It preys on krill, baby squid and other small fish, and it hunts at night in imposing schools.

This ribbon fish is pretty high up on the underwater food chain — but it reckoned without humans. Or, more precisely, the Chinese.

From north to south and east to west, the hairtail is one of the most popular fishes on the Chinese table. Sectioned, it is deep-fried and shallow sauteed, braised or red cooked.

My husband remembers it as being a special treat in his childhood when he first returned to Beijing in the late 1950s.

Those were very hard years and fish, any fish, on the table was considered a little luxury.

The hairtail (*Trichurus lepturus*), known to the Chinese as *daiyu* — or the fish that looks like a belt — was especially valued because it was a saltwater fish.

Western cooks tend to look down their noses on the hairtail, considering it a trash fish, but Asian cooks have no such

hang-ups and it is a prominent ingredient in both Chinese and Korean cuisines.

The hairtail is caught by the school and quickly put on ice so it stays fresh for market. In the era when ice was not readily available, fishermen would salt it slightly to help keep it from spoiling.

It is a ferocious fighter and will use its fanglike teeth against nets and fishermen alike, twisting and writhing its snakelike body as it is hauled out of the water.

Fresh hairtail is an attractive electric blue when caught, but the color quickly fades to a silvery gray as it dies. It does not have prominent scales but its skin is coated with a fine, powdery glitter.

Freshly caught, the fish are laid out in rows at the fishmonger's, lengthy ribbons that resemble rather flat eels. Once, in a seafood market in Xiamen, in East China's Fujian province, we saw freshly caught hairtail glittering in the sun and they were an unforgettable sight.

These days, hairtails are more often than not sold flash-frozen, already processed and cut into much shorter sections.

It is a member of the cutlassfish family, with double rows of fins running down both sides. It lacks a traditional fish tail and the side fins taper to a thin thread at the tip.

The transparent side fins are attached to thin, long, comb-like

bones that pierce the sides, and these have to be carefully removed before eating.

Otherwise, the hairtail has few other fine bones, unlike the slim forked bones of most Chinese freshwater fish.

For this reason, the hairtail is appreciated, and also for the sweetness of its flesh. It helps that this species of fish has always been in abundant supply in the seas around China, enough to feed the mighty masses.

Hairtail, beltfish, ribbon fish, knife fish — its English names are many, but the Chinese know it generally as *daiyu*, one of the few instances when the country is linguistically united.

It is a fish that is easy to cook.

The most common way is to shallow fry it to a crisp, so that the thin edges can be crunched up while the flesh inside remains sweet and tender.

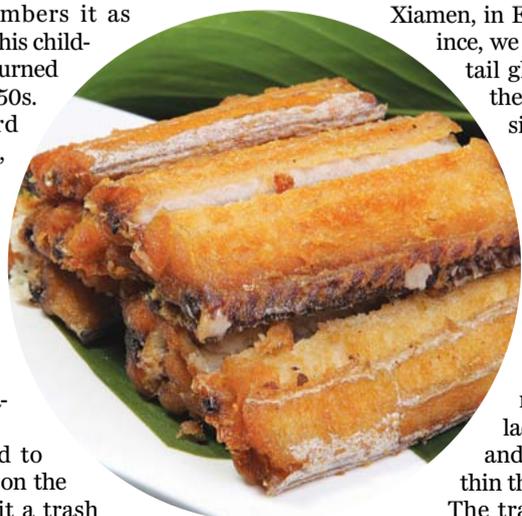
The fried fish can be processed one more step, by braising in a savory brown sauce that varies in different regions. Sometimes, Welsh onions or scallions are added and the fish and herbs become a topping for noodles.

In the northern regions, they like to douse the fried hairtail with an appetite-whetting brown vinegar and sugar gravy, which also helps repel any lingering pungency.

The fish is often red-cooked until tender, with plenty of thinly sliced brown onions and shredded ginger. It can also be cooked with tangy tomatoes.

The Chinese appreciate this fish for its high fat content, and it is believed to be a food that can reduce cholesterol. There is also something in its silver coating that some believe is anti-carcinogenic.

There is no doubt, however, that it is a nutritious fish that is easily available and affordable.



Fried hairtail.