

## NANBAN-ZUKÉ 南蛮漬け

### Southern Barbarian Style Fried-and-Pickled Fish



The curious name of this dish refers to the Portuguese (the “southern barbarians”) who settled in the southern port of Nagasaki, Kyushu late in the 16th century. They brought with them *escabeche*, a fried and pickled seafood delicacy popular in their homeland. The Japanese adapted it to their tastes, using a variety of small fish such as smelts (*wakasagi*) and baby horse mackerel (*mamé aji*). Today *NANBAN-ZUKÉ* appears frequently on pub-style *izakaya* restaurant menus.

Classic preparations of *nanban-zuké* keep the heads and tails of small fish intact (the belly cavities are usually gutted, however). If you prefer, you can prepare your *nanban* fish as boneless fillets -- *sanma* mackerel pike or *saba* mackerel – is especially good. Or, make a version with boneless chicken (keeping the skin on is best).





smelts (*wakasagi*), left



baby horse mackerel (*mamé aji*), right

Serves 4-6 people.

30 small (2-inches or smaller) fish (smelts, baby horse mackerel, whiting etc)

Several cups salt water (should taste briny, like the ocean)

Several spoonful cornstarch, to dust/dredge the fish

Several cups vegetable oil, to deep-fry

*nanban-zuké* fish marinade:

2/3 cup Standard Sea Stock, *dashi* (separate recipe)

1/2 cup *su* (rice vinegar)

2 tablespoons *usukuchi shōyu* (light colored soy sauce)

2 tablespoons *mirin* (syrupy rice wine)

1 teaspoon *saké*

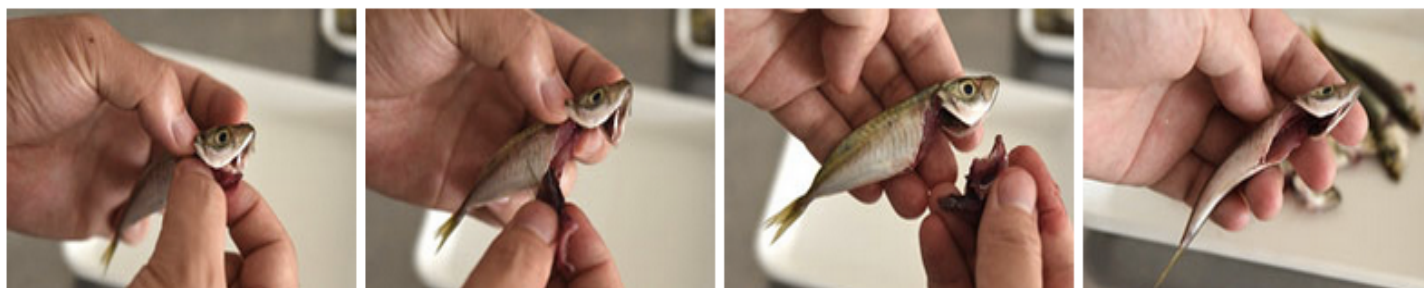
1 *tōgarashi* chili pepper

Garnish:

1 teaspoon *goma abura* (aromatic dark sesame oil)

1/2 round onion, sliced thinly into crescents, about 1/2 cup

1/2 cup thinly sliced vegetable strips (red, yellow, green bell peppers, radish and/or bean sprouts, thin carrot and/or celery strips)



Gut your fish and rinse them thoroughly in salt water.

Gently pat the fish dry, inside and out, before dusting/dredging them lightly with cornstarch.

DEEP-FRY your fish: I find that a wok, narrow at the base and wider at the top, is the best shape for this. Heat the oil to medium-high, approximately 350 F (180 C). Test by dropping a pinch of cornstarch into the oil. It should sink ever so slightly, surface, and disperse immediately, sizzling but not coloring. If it does not surface right away, the oil is not hot enough (continue to heat and test again in about 1 minute). If the cornstarch colors right away, the oil is too hot (stir to help cool it down and test again).





Dredge the fish in cornstarch, tapping off excess.

Deep-fry the fish, in several batches to avoid crowding, for 2 to 3 minutes. (Smelts with head and tails require the longer time.) Drain the fish well on paper towels. When all the fish have been fried once, re-fry them at a slightly higher temperature (about 375 F/190 C) for 1 minute to make them crispy. Drain on fresh paper towels.

Combine the marinade ingredients in an enamel-lined, ceramic or glass container just large enough to allow the fish to lie submerged in the marinade. Break the pepper pod in half and discard the seeds and pith if you wish to keep the fish just pleasantly spicy. If your tastes run toward the incendiary, keep them (the pith is where capsaicinoids, chemical compounds responsible for the tingling sensation of heat, are concentrated). Slice the pepper pod thinly and stir them into the marinade. Transfer the freshly fried fish to the marinade; a hissing sound can be heard if the fish is still hot.

Once there is no longer any steam rising, cover the container snugly with clear plastic wrap and/or lid. Pickle the fish in the spicy sweet-and-sour marinade for at least 6 hours at cool room temperature and up to 72 hours in the refrigerator. The extended pickling time will “melt” the bones of small whole fish, greatly enhancing the nutritional value. However, longer marinating will markedly sharpen the piquant taste.

At least 20 minutes before serving (and up to several days before) prepare the vegetable garnish. Heat the sesame oil in a skillet or wok. Add the sliced vegetables (onion, peppers etc) and stir-fry over high heat just long enough to barely wilt them (less than a minute). Top the marinating fish with the stir-fried vegetables, spooning some of the marinade over them. Let the flavors meld for at least 10 minutes (and up to several days).

When ready to serve, lift the fish from the pickling sauce. If serving small whole fish they are typically placed with the heads pointing to the left, tails to the right, bellies near and backs away from the diner (this is considered to be the “proper” position for serving whole fish). Place fish on a platter or individual plates, topping with vegetables and a few spoonfuls of marinade.

