Fried herring
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Stekt strömming

Herring has long been the backbone of fish cookery in Sweden. Many towns, especially on the west coast, only survived because of the herring fishing industry. Today herring is not nearly as plentiful as it once was, but it is still a cheap fish and plays a central part in Swedish cuisine.

Although street food in Sweden is dominated by hotdogs and burgers, fried herring is still appreciated. I was impressed to see the demand for fried herring at Ystad Jazz Festival, a highly recommended festival (but that’s another story).

Swedes would normally fry Baltic herring, which is smaller than the North Sea (Atlantic) herring. In Britain the demand for herring is low, as restaurant customers feel cheated if offered herring and Brits tend not to like oily bony fish. The result is that the supply of good quality herring is, at best, sporadic. Nonetheless, this dish is worth making, even with Atlantic herring, when you see some good quality fresh herring. John

Tip
• Ask your fishmonger to fillet the herring for you. (If you need to do this yourself it is quite easy, especially if the herring is fresh. Lay the fish on a chopping board, stomach side down, and press quite hard with the palm of your hand. The backbone is pushed away from the flesh and most of the fiddly small bones come with it.)
• Freshly fried herring is normally served as street food on top of buttered hard crispbread, but it is also delicious with creamy mashed potatoes and lingonberries (or lingonberry jam from IKEA if you can’t get lingonberries).
• Look for herring that is full and fat, just before it has spawned.
• Try laying the fillets together with parsley in between before frying them. It is a delicious combination, popular in Sweden.
• Try marinating fried herring. It is as popular as regular fried herring and is sold in many fishmongers. (Fried herring fillets are placed, while still warm, on top of each other in a dish, and a marinade of sugar, vinegar, allspice, bay leaves and red onion is poured over them. They are sliced and eaten cold.)

Ingredients
4 herring, filleted
2 tbsp coarse rye flour, obtainable from a health food shop
salt and white pepper to taste
2 tbsp butter

Method
1. Place the herring fillets skin side down on a cutting board. Season them with salt and white pepper.
2. Mix the rye flour with some white pepper and a little salt on a large plate.
3. Heat a tablespoon of butter in a frying pan over a medium heat.
4. When the butter is hot, just beginning to brown, lay two pairs of fillets in the rye flour, coat them on both sides and then fry them in butter until golden brown on both sides.
5. Transfer to individual plates and keep warm.
6. Repeat with the remaining fillets.
7. Serve on top of buttered knäckebröd or with mashed potatoes and lingonberries or lingonberry jam.