

Hooked and Cooked: Mahi

Raw or cooked, mahi-mahi is a real treat.

By Pat Ford



Mahi-mahi have it rough—even fly-fishers, who often practice catch-and-release as if it were a religion, rarely let them go.

You probably know why: Mahi is one of the cleanest and best tasting fishes in the oceans and it is abundant and relatively easy to catch. As a bonus, you don't have to feel sorry for keeping a few. These fish are fast-growing, often stretching to 36 inches long or longer in their first year, and the generous limit in Florida is 10 fish per angler, per day.

This pelagic offshore fish prefers waters above 68 degrees. They are caught year round in Florida but are most abundant in spring and summer, often coinciding with the migratory tarpon run. That coincidence allows anglers to target the silver king on favorable tides and spend the "off-hours" running to the bluewater for mahi. Fortunately, Florida's seas are calmest during spring and summer, which allows modest sized vessels to reach the mahi grounds.

Mahi range in size from two-pound schoolies to 50-plus pound bulls. The state record is 81 pounds. The largest fish, meaning 15 pounds and larger, often swim in pairs, typically a bull and a cow. Anglers often troll a spread of lures or baits to locate these fish and then cut the engine and cast flies at the desired target. Other anglers prefer the run-and-gun method, whereby they run at full speed from one sargassum weed-line to another, especially if frigate birds are spotted.

Flotsam also attracts baitfish, which in turn attracts mahi. Between May and September the chances of a piece of flotsam having fish under it is an unofficial 90 percent. If you find a chunk of plywood or a log and you don't find mahi near it, someone beat you to the punch.

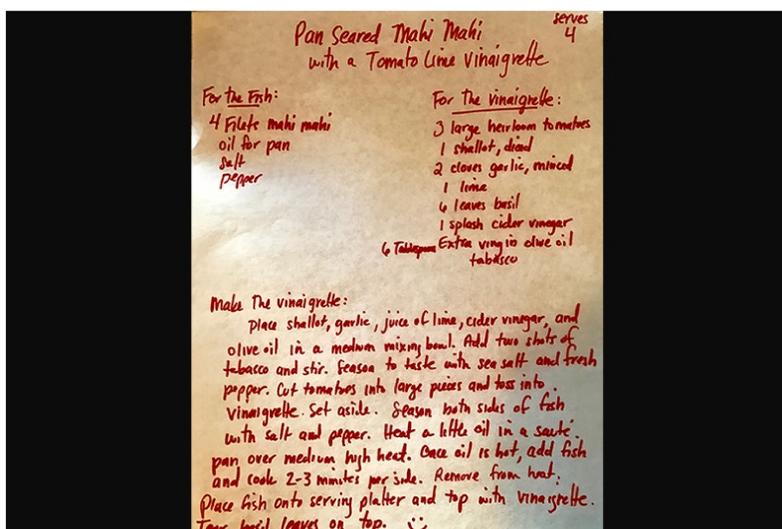
Mahi are spectacular fighters no matter their size and can be easily caught on a fly rod. You'll want an 8 or 9-weight for the schoolies and a 10-to-12-weight for the slammers. A 30-pound mahi on a 10-weight will tear you up. Mahi are super aggressive and hit most any fly. My go-to's include the Puglisi Baitfish, big Clousers, Chunk Flies (to imitate a cut up bonita), and the Bunker Fly. When fishing mahi I use 50-pound shock tippet because these fish do have teeth. You can fish mahi with floating or sinking/sink-tip lines.

If you hook a mahi, which are often called dolphinfish, on conventional gear while trolling, keep it in the water near the boat—it will attract other mahi to the boat and keep them fixed within fly-casting range. It's also a good idea to throw a few chunks of cut bait or pilchards into the water and then cast into the mix. If the mahi won't take a dead-drifting fly speed up the retrieve.

Adult mahi are more difficult to catch. Sometimes you may hook a bull and a cow on conventional gear, but often you only hook one of them. When that happens the fish on the line should be brought near the boat. Most often, its mate follows along. If you cast a fly toward the second fish, you'll often get a hookup. Throwing a couple chunks of cut bait in the water also helps when working these larger fish.



Big or small, mahi is a real treat on the plate. Like all fish, it's best when eaten the day of the catch, but the meat freezes well. In the Old Man And The Sea, the main character survives on raw mahi while trying to tame a giant marlin. Around the globe, wherever mahi are found, sailors treasure this fish because it is easy to catch and tastes so great. Most restaurants in the Florida Keys will cook your catch. If you're the chef don't get overly creative—just season the white-meat fillets with salt, pepper and lemon and grill accordingly. Remember, the only way you can ruin this fish is to overcook it.



Pat Ford

Pat Ford honed his sports photography skills at Notre Dame. His first article for Saltwater Sportsman appeared in 1969, and he has shot and written for every major fishing publication since that time. He has held more than two dozen IGFA line class records and now, as a retired Miami trial attorney, spends his time writing books and traveling to exotic locales. See more of his work at patfordphotos.com