



## HANDLING AND FREEZING FISH AND SEAFOOD AT HOME

By  
Jon Bell  
(Revised July 2003)

Seafoods are among the most perishable of all foods. Great care must be taken from the time seafood is caught or bought until it is consumed. The following tips should be useful for handling and freezing seafood.

### **Handling Fresh Seafood**

**KEEP IT COLD!** Seafood should be as fresh as possible before freezing. Do not wait until it is almost spoiled to freeze it. This will result in almost spoiled quality when it is thawed and ready to use. Handle the fresh seafood correctly before freezing.

Fresh seafood should be well iced at all times. Fishing and shrimping trips require a quality ice chest with plenty of ice. As fish are caught, they should be well iced by mixing ice and fish together. Initial icing requires at least one pound of ice to every pound of fish, with 2 pounds ice per pound of fish recommended. Shrimp should also be well iced by mixing. Water from melting ice should be drained off and more ice added as needed.

Live crabs and crawfish should be kept cool, in the shade, and provided with good air circulation. Wooden crates covered with moist, clean burlap sacks are good for storing live crabs and onion sacks are good for crawfish. Never put live crabs or crawfish in sealed or water-filled containers. They will quickly die and spoil.

Live oysters are generally sold in burlap sacks and this is a good way to hold live oysters. When buying oysters, always make sure that the sack has been properly tagged. Oysters should be refrigerated for safety and quality. Do not bury oysters in ice or fresh water, which could kill them. If using a cooler, place the ice in the bottom, and then the oysters on top of the ice.

## **Freezing Seafood**

There are many advantages to freezing seafood at home. Done properly, they are almost fresh in quality when thawed. In addition, seafood tends to be seasonal and freezing offers a method for preserving seafoods when they are plentiful for times when they are scarce. There are many methods for freezing seafood at home. However, your home freezer was designed to hold products that have already been frozen and not large quantities of food.

Seafood should be frozen rapidly. First, thoroughly pre-chill the seafood. Research has shown that rapid freezing results in the best quality of the seafood. Make sure that the temperature of the freezer is around 0°F (-18°C). Put the seafood in small packages and spread them out to allow cold air circulation around them until frozen. After they are frozen, they can be stacked or boxed. One of the worst problems in frozen seafood is freezer burn (dehydration). This is best controlled by using a protective packaging material as discussed in each of the following sections:

### **Fish**

Filletts freeze best when placed flat in sealed ziplock freezer bags. It is not necessary to add water. Before completely closing the bag, force the air out through a small opening, and quickly finish closing the bag. The bag should be pulled down tight around the filletts (like a vacuum package). Remember to spread the wrapped filletts out in the freezer until frozen. Putting filletts in a milk carton or other large container with water can damage them and can waste fish. Large, whole, dressed fish (skin on) are best when they are first frozen, then dipped in ice water to form a protective glaze over the whole fish and wrapped in freezer paper. Small skin-on pan fish may be frozen in water with good results (the skin protects the meat).

### **Shrimp**

Shrimp freeze extremely well. Headless, shell on shrimp should be frozen like fish filletts. The bags should be spread out in the freezer until frozen.

### **Crabs and Crawfish**

Crab meat can be frozen with only fair results. Crab meat should be frozen like fish filletts. Do not put crab meat in water as this will remove all flavor.

Crawfish meat can be frozen if the fat is washed off. This can be done by placing the meat in a colander and rinsing it under the faucet with cool water. The washed crawfish meat should be frozen like a fish fillet. Dipping the crawfish meat in dilute lemon juice solution before freezing will help prevent discoloration.

### **Oysters**

Although oysters can be frozen with fair results, they do not have the same texture and appearance of a fresh oyster when thawed. Commercially frozen oyster retain very good quality and are growing in acceptance because commercial units freeze the meat extremely rapidly. Oysters are best frozen in a freezer bag or small rigid container. There is generally enough oyster liquid in the container to protect from freezer burn.

## **Thawing Seafood**

Rapid thawing is important to protect the quality retention of rapid freezing. Thaw frozen seafood in the package under running water. Opening the package and putting the seafood directly into the water may cause texture, color and flavor changes.