How to fillet a fish

You will need the following:

i. A sharp fillet knife  
ii. A flat cutting board twice the size of the fish.

Important Note:

Before you start, your knife needs to be really sharp. You should be able to slice the skin from a tomato without damaging it as if it were a peeled orange. You should also be aware that it is not necessary to scale the fish you are about to fillet. The scales and skin will be removed in the process. It is also not necessary to remove the fish’s head, fins, or guts before or during the process.

➢ Follow each step once your fish is on the cutting board.

Step 1.

Make your first cut behind the head of the fish while angling your knife at a forty five degree angle. (The gut fin is an excellent guide to use as an indicator of where to start cutting. This “gut fin” is labeled in figure 2.1 for step 2.) Cut toward the head with your knife at this angle as illustrated in figure 1.1 below.

Note:

Fish have a lot of meat around the head area. This is why an angled cut toward the head is preferred.
Step 2.

Cut along the top fin of the fish with your knife almost horizontal but with a slight angle toward the sky as shown in figure 2.2 on page 2. You should be able to feel the bones in the ribcage which will indicate the approximate depth of which to cut into the fish; cut at this depth all the way to the tail.

Figure 2.1

Note:

The “Gut Fin” is circled in this illustration as it is being held between the index and middle finger.

Step 3

Pull the fillet up with your index finger and thumb. This will reveal the fish’s spine bones and ribcage bones. If you cannot see the ribcage bones, you will need to cut further into the fish. Once you locate the ribcage bones with the tip of your knife as illustrated in figure 3.1, proceed to step 4.

Figure 3.1

Step 4

Since many fish (especially fresh water fish like trout, walleye, and pan fish) do not have enough meat to fillet over the ribcage, it is customary to cut through the bones as illustrated in figure 4.1 on page 3. The rib bones will become part of your fillet and will be removed in Step 9.
Step 5

After cutting through the ribcage bones in step 4, you will need to continue cutting with your knife held horizontally against the fish’s bone structure as illustrated in figure 5.1. Cut all the way to the tail until fillet is removed from the fish’s carcass.

Note:

(The bones are an excellent indicator that allows you to adjust the angle of your blade. If you are trying to fillet by holding your knife at too steep of an angle, you will be trying to cut bone. On the contrary, if you do not feel the bones at all, then you may not be cutting deep enough to obtain all the meat on the fish.)

Step 6

Place the fillet on your flat surface with the skin side (scale-side) down. With your knife horizontal, cut between the skin and meat of the fillet at the tail end. You should cut in about an inch or so. This will
allow you to be able to grip the skin (or pin the skin to the flat surface with your fingers or thumb as illustrated in figure 6.1.

Note:

You want to cut the meat from the skin the same way you would remove the skin from a tomato. Be careful to hold your knife flat so you don’t cut the skin as you proceed to step 7.

Figure 6.1

Note:

Gripping the skin allows you to hold onto the fillet as you cut with the other hand.

Step 7

As you grip the skin as shown in figure 7.1, cut the meat by using a back and forth motion that allows the major portion of your blade to remain between the skin and meat. You want to hold the knife as flat as possible while cutting. Continue cutting until you have successfully separated the skin from the meat.

✓ Tip: Sometimes a knife will prevent you from holding the blade flat, resulting in an undesirable cutting angle. Instead of forcing the blade to flex (which can sometimes result in injury due to blade or knife breaking) in order to achieve the desired “flat angle”, try moving the fillet closer to the edge of your cutting surface so your knife handle can hang over the edge. This allows more room for both the handle and your hand while cutting.

Figure 7.1

Note:

Gripping the skin is circled in this illustration as the fillet is being cut by a back and forth motion.
Step 8

Your fillet is almost complete now; just feel around for any bones located around the rib area. All fish species (freshwater and saltwater) have bones located in their upper ribcage. You can usually cut these small bones out using a v-shape cutting pattern.

Figure 8.1

Dotted line area contains small bones that need cut out in v-shape pattern

Ribs contain bones and need cut away

Step 9

Flip fish over and repeat steps 1-8. Thoroughly wash fillets and place them in saltwater to preserve taste.

Tip: Some fish have a strong odor and/or taste. Fish can be marinated just as other meats. Usually milk, vinegar, salts, or spices are used for marinating.