Who doesn't love a grilled fish sandwich!! What better than to make that sandwich than some fresh grouper or amberjack? Gag Grouper, red grouper, scamp grouper, amberjack and almaco jacks are all basically year round catches here along the Emerald Coast. All make great table fare, but if I could chose which one to catch, and which would take my bait, there is no doubt (even though he is one smaller of the species in this lesson) it would be hands down the scamp grouper!!

When to Catch Grouper and Amberjack

We catch gag grouper, red grouper, scamp grouper, amberjack, almaco jacks and warsaw groupers pretty much year round. The only thing you have to do is check the current regulations for both state and federal waters as the open and closed seasons are subject to change.

Where to Catch Grouper and Amberjack

There are several types of places to fish for grouper and amberjack. Here in the Florida Panhandle we catch them in water 100ft to 600ft deep. We find them on natural bottom (coral and rock), wrecks, edges, drop-offs and man-made reefs. For most of the places you would want to fish you can get the GPS numbers from several places. You can buy charts from Half Hitch, or you can look on line at www.myfwc.com/conservation/saltwater/artificial-reefs, or a county site like www.co.okaloosa.fl.us/dept_pw_resources_reefs.html.

You could have a reef company build private spots for you. Most reef builders build 10 to 12 spots at a time. Normally they are built from used chicken coops. A reef builder here in Destin will build you 11 reefs at a time. Each reef is built from two chicken coops chained together. I put them out in strings about 1/2 mile apart. I like a string of four about 10 to 15 miles down the beach in 125ft to 200ft of water. The next string of four I like 20 or so miles down the beach in 250ft to 400ft of water. The last three of my order I like 20 to 35 or so miles from home in water 250ft to 500ft deep, south of my two inshore strings. The cost to get 11 spots like this is about $5000.
When getting numbers the counties have built many nice places. Many time they put a large reef like a tug boat down first and then make a X pattern around the tug boat using Florida Special reefs. Most people want to go and fish the tug boat in the middle of the cluster, but I often find the best fishing on the far ends of the X pattern of reef modules up to a 1/2 mile from the larger anchor wreck. It’s easier for people to find the larger center reef and it just gets fished more.

Using Google Earth to find places is another good way of finding edges, breaks and rocks in water from 180’ to 300’ deep. Google Earth has a neat feature. If you look at Google Earth and really start to zoom in on our area you will see two lines start to appear along the coast form 180’ to 300’. The area inside of these lines is hi-definition bottom. You’ll be able to see all the rocks and ledges in this area.

When you first open Google Earth you need to change the settings. First, go to view and turn on the status bar, and on the bottom right you will now see the GPS number and water depth for where you cursor is pointing. Now, click on the Google Earth icon on the status bar and click preferences and change the GPS format from degrees-minutes-seconds to degrees-decimal minutes, and you are ready to start looking for spots. There will be a hand for a cursor at this point and it is a little hard to hover the exact number you want but zoom in and turn on the ruler to give you a bull’s eye cursor that is very accurate. I have checked known numbers for rocks and they are within 20ft. You can even use Google Earth to organize all your places.

To really catch grouper and amberjack you’ll need a good bottom machine and GPS unit. When you get to your place to fish you want to see something like this. On your bottom machine I would adjust so you only get the bottom 50 feet when looking for groupers. Having it tuned into the just the bottom 50ft will allow you to see the smallest of breaks or edges that may be holding fish.

**Rods, Reels and Line**
For grouper and amberjacks somewhat heavier tackle is required than for everyday snapper and king fishing.
The most used rods and reels are the old style Penn 4/0 or 6/0 reel with 80lb to 125lb Ande monofilament line on a solid glass Half Hitch BT78M or BT78MH rod. A Shimano Torium 50 or a Shimano Tyranos 30 on a Shimano Tallus rod with 89lb mono works very well, too.

You want to change lead size and can unclip the lead when running in and out and from spot to spot and the rig stores better on the rod. The only real difference is at the top of the rig, on the egg lead rig you use a barrel swivel and the snap lead rig you use a 3-way swivel at the top.

**Baits**

There are a variety of good natural baits.

You can use frozen but of course live is better. If you are going to use a mingo snapper try butterflying him. What is Butterflying? All we are really doing is filleting out the backbone.

To catch bait look just inside the pass and just outside the pass for schools of bait fish flipping. Use a Sabiki rig to catch the bait fish. Most of the time a regular Hayabusa bait rig works great, Sometimes during a full moon the bait fish can be very finicky and difficult to catch. During this time you may need the Fluorocarbon Hayabusa bait rig to get them to bite. One of the things most people hate about
catching bait is how to store the Sabiki rigs at the end of the day. I cut 4 or 5 pieces of pvc pipe 5′ long and zip tie to attach them to a leg of the T-top, I slide the bait rig lead first into the pvc pipe and hook the last hook on the edge. This way the rigs does not tangle on the rod at the end of the day.

Lures

For those of you who are like me and sometimes get bored fishing with bait waiting for a bite there is always butterfly jigging. Jigging works great for snapper, grouper and amberjack. While it will work on any rod and reel having all the right components makes the whole thing work. You need a fast powerful reel like the Shimano Torium or Shimano Talica II filled with braided line and a wind-on leader. You fish a tight drag to get the fish out of the wreck on a powerful rod, Braid does not stretch and that is why you need the wind-on leader to act as a shock absorber so you do not either pull the hook on the fish or break the fish off.

Staying on the Spot
(Reek, Wreck, Natural Bottom)

For me trying to watch the bottom machine and GPS and stay on the spot is difficult just because I do not do it often enough. You see the charter boats just hover in place looking only at the electronics. For me tossing over a Suremark buoy when we get to the spot makes it so much easier. The nice thing about the Suremark Buoy over other models is once you throw it over it feeds out just enough line to stay right on top of the wreck and not drift out of place.

Accessories to make your trip better!!

Get some Cush-It rod knobs...my favorite for ease of use. Reel it in with a Calcutta rod belt or grab it good with an Aftco gaff.