

THE THRILL OF THE GRILL

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Cooking foods outside on a grill over coals is one of my earliest food memories. I lived with my Grandparents as a kid and we caught a lot of trout. My Grandmother would simply season them inside and out, slip a slice or two of lemon into the cavity and wrap them in bacon and grill them over hot campfire with a funky grill propped on rocks. Delicious!

Grilling vs. Barbecue:

These are two different techniques though they share some similarities. Grilling is quick short time cooking, generally directly over hot coals, of tender meats and vegetables. Using a ridged grill pan in the kitchen over high heat on the stovetop also falls into this category.

To “barbeque” a term which is often used interchangeably with grilling is technically a different technique. Despite the fact that everyone uses the term “barbeque” to describe the typical cookout - - to barbeque (ask any Southerner) means to cook relatively tough and larger cuts of meat slowly over relatively low heat (250 degrees or so) with lots of smoke to both flavor and tenderize. The word comes from the Spanish *barbacoa*, which originally described the apparatus for slowly cooking or drying meats over an open flame. I don’t want to get too hung up in the differences, but it is useful to understand them.

Probably the first serious book written on outdoor cooking was by James Beard back in 1941. He noted that “Grilling, broiling, barbequing - - whatever you want to call it - - is an art, not just a matter of building a pyre and throwing on a piece of meat as a sacrifice to the gods of the stomach! For while barbequing is a very old and primitive way of cooking, it is also one of the most appetizing methods of dealing with meat known to man, and it deserves to be done with some semblance of technique, accuracy and care.” Beard’s barbequing tips were simple. His secrets: make sure you had an even distribution of heat from coals that were “veiled in a lovely white ash” before you started cooking. He went on to advise that “A good fire, good coals and patience, rather than speed, should be your watchword.”

Grilling is very much like sautéing or pan roasting except it has the additional benefit of a smoky flavor that comes from cooking over coals or a live fire (gas grills work too, see below). What makes all these techniques so enticing is that each develops a delicious browned crust that is full of flavor. It is often described as “caramelization” and means that the natural sugars (present in all living things) begin to brown when heat is applied.

Since grilling uses the highest heat, even higher than we get when we sauté or pan-roast, it is the best technique for maximizing caramelization or browning. The scenario then when we grill is that we want to do it quickly, over high heat, which means that its best used with foods that are tender and cook quickly. We are looking to brown or sear the outside for maximum flavor and still have interiors that are moist and juicy. The gamble is always that we can also quickly overcook and dry out the food in our desire to maximize flavor.

So where do we start?

First . . . the Grill

There are an almost endless variety of grills on the market. Many come to us from different cultures that have long used grilling as a primary technique for preparing food. Hibachis from Asia, braziers from Africa, spits from Europe quickly come to mind.

The primary question facing most of us is . . . do I get one with a cover or not. My vote is to get one with a cover. The familiar kettle shape is the one that most often comes to mind for most of us. The purpose of the cover is to hold heat in so that you can cook larger cuts of meat or whole birds and the like which take longer to cook. The cover is not there to help control flare-ups (even though we sometimes resort to that). You do that by using the two-level heat combination described below. I also suggest you get one that has as large a grill surface as you can comfortably house and handle. This will give you the best chance to use the direct or indirect heat methods also described below. Make sure that the cover is tight fitting and look for one that uses thick stainless-steel rods (at least 1/4 inch in diameter) for the grill surface. Thick rods hold the heat better when you place food on them and are less likely to stick. Stainless is also easier to clean.

Clean up is easy. All you need is a stiff wire brush to do the job. These are available at any hardware store. Be sure to brush the grill clean every time when you finish cooking while the coals and grill are still hot. Cooked on food comes off more easily then. A little additional tip - - cover the grill with a layer of heavy-duty aluminum foil immediately after you have removed the food and while the fire is still hot. This traps the heat and helps burn off the fat, grease and other stuff leaving a residue that is easily brushed off. If you are using a gas fired grill you can still do the same thing by leaving the grill on for 10 minutes or so after covering.

Next . . . what fuel and how do I light it?

For a charcoal grill either briquettes or lump charcoal work fine.

To light your fire there is no question that either a chimney starter or an electric coil starter are the best choices. Lighter fluid, a petroleum product may be faster but is clearly unacceptable in terms of what it does to the atmosphere. To use a chimney, set it in the bottom of your grill on top of the fire grate. Crumple up some newspaper to fill it halfway, fill the rest of the way with charcoal and light the newspaper. This will start the charcoal burning and when its red hot, dump it out and add as much additional charcoal as you are going to need on top. In another 15 minutes or so you will have it all going. Spread it out so that you have two levels of heat as described below.

Two Cooking Strategies:

1. Indirect Vs. Direct Heat: When using charcoal, it only covers one half of the bottom of the grill. With a gas grill turn on one side of the grill and leave the other side off. This is best for larger pieces of meat such as roasts, legs of lamb, whole chickens or turkeys that will take more than 30 minutes to cook through. You can use a combination of the two by first searing it directly over the coals to give color and caramelization and then moving the food away from the coals to finish slowly cooking. The ability to move between the direct and indirect gives you a lot more control.

2. One vs. Two Levels: A variation of the above where half the grill has more charcoal than the other half or with a gas grill one side is turned on relatively high while the other side is cooler.

For all my grilling no matter what the food, I always use one of these methods to give me the most flexibility and control.

A couple of tips:

- Keep a spray bottle full of water next to the grill to calm down flareups with a charcoal grill and cool things down if you need to (including the cook!). Did you put too much charcoal on the grill?
- Always start with a clean grill and oil it lightly after it is hot and before you place any food on it.
- Remember that the hood is your friend! Unless you are cooking something that only takes a minute or two such as shrimp, close the

hood. The convection created by the heat rolling around inside the hood will cook your food more evenly and quickly. Seems like men are the ones who need to watch the fire. No doubt something primal.

- If you want to add some smoke the easiest way is to take chips (you don't need to soak them first), wrap them up loosely but completely in heavy duty foil bag and poke holes in the bag. Place this right on the grill grate, close the hood and when it begins to smoke add your food. The advantage here is that you can remove the foil bag at any time and control the amount of smoke your food takes on.

Finally, let's debunk a few myths:

Myth # 1: Get your grill really hot so that you can sear meat (or whatever) first.

Use the 2-level method with a grill that has a cover (see above) to give your temperature control. Thicker cuts of meat benefit by doing the "reverse sear", which is kind of a red neck sous vide. Start by cooking on the cooler side to warm the meat and bathe it in some smoke. Then move it to finish on the hot side to create that flavorful caramelization and color.

Myth # 2: Searing meat seals in its juices.

Meat is mostly water. High heat squeezes out this water and other flavorful juices. Sure, the surface gets crusty and brown, but it has mostly dried out. Try the reverse sear method instead.

Myth # 3: Marinades tenderize meat.

Marinades are a way of adding flavor, not tenderness. A marinade will not penetrate meat very far even if left in the marinade for hours so no "denaturing" (that is tenderizing) can happen.

Myth # 4: Cook poultry until the juices run clear.

You can end up way overcooking your meat. Harold McGee in *On Food and Cooking*, talks about this. He notes that the meat and juices in chicken, turkey, and even pork are water that is colored pink by the protein myoglobin. When myoglobin is cooked, its structure changes and the altered molecules no longer appear pink. The question is, at what temperature does myoglobin change.

Turns out there is no fixed temperature because other factors come into play, especially the acidity (pH) of the meat. Muscle pH differences are a function of genes, pre-slaughter stress conditions, and climate. So, the color of the juices can remain pink long after the meat is pasteurized and safe by cooking to 160 to 165°F or they could run clear before the meat is safe.

Bottom line is that color is not a reliable guide in any meat, only temperature is.



John Burgess Press Democrat

GRILLED FAVA BEANS

Serves 2 or more

A recipe from the Emilia-Romagna region of Northern Italy. It celebrates spring with both new green Favas and the young sheep's milk cheeses which are available at that time and often served together. Do not use aged grating cheese like pecorino Romano. I remember cafes all over this region serving this both as an appetizer or as the cheese course following the meat course. I have grilled the favas here but if you can find them very fresh, young, and tender, do as the Italians also do and eat them raw. By seasoning

the outside of the beans when you grill them, you get delicious stuff sticking to your fingers which flavors the beans as you eat them!

1 pound or more fresh young fava beans, still in their pods

A couple glugs of good olive oil

A generous sprinkling of good sea salt

Optional seasonings: Red pepper flakes, lemon zest, and chopped fresh herbs

Other accompaniments: Grilled lemon slices, Breakfast radishes, young Pecorino cheese and Salumi of your choice

In a large bowl toss the fava bean pods with olive oil and salt along with any of the seasonings that you like. Arrange them in a single layer on a grill over medium-high heat. If you are using a grill pan, you may need to cook them in batches.

Grill until blistered on one side – 3 to 4 minutes, then flip and grill for a couple of minutes more on the other side. If you aren't sure when to pull them off, snake a pod off the grill, open and taste one of the beans. You want the fava beans to be smooth and creamy when you pop them out of their skins - not undercooked. Keep in mind that they'll keep steaming in their pods for a few minutes after they come off the grill, unless you eat them as soon as you can handle the pods without singeing your fingers - which is what I usually do.



John Burgess Press Democrat

GRILLED TROUT WITH HERBS AND BACON

Serves 1 or 2 depending on rest of meal

This recipe is a gift from my Grandmother. Use any fresh herbs you have on hand. You can substitute thin sliced pancetta for the bacon. This would be a good time to pull out your fish grilling basket if you have one.

2 teaspoons chopped mint
2 teaspoons chopped sage leaves
1 teaspoon finely grated lemon zest
1 whole trout, cleaned and boned (10 - 12 ounces)
Olive oil
Kosher or sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
2 slices thin bacon
Lemon wedges to serve.

Prepare the grill for direct heat. If using a gas grill, preheat to medium (350 degrees). If using a charcoal grill, light the char wood or charcoal briquettes. When the briquettes are ready, distribute them evenly under the cooking area. For a medium-hot fire, you should be able to hold your hand about 6 inches above the coals for about 6 seconds. Have ready a spray water bottle for taming any flames. Lightly coat the grill with oil and place it on the grill to heat.

Meanwhile, combine the mint, sage, and lemon zest in a small bowl. Open the trout like a book; lay it flat on a cutting board flesh side up. Brush with olive oil and season generously with salt and pepper. Sprinkle the herb mixture over the inside of the trout. Fold the fish over to close.

Wrap the fish with the pancetta and brush lightly with olive oil. Gently place the fish, with the open side away from you, on the hot grill. Close the grill lid and cook for about 8 minutes, until the flesh is opaque. Carefully slide a large spatula or fish turner underneath the fish to transfer it to a plate. Serve with lemon wedges to squeeze over.



John Burgess Press Democrat

GRILLED ASPARAGUS WITH LEMON OLIVE OIL, BURATTA AND PROSCUITTO

Serves 4

One of the simplest and best ways to cook asparagus is to give it a light coating of olive oil and grill it. Grilling brings out the sweetness and I prefer it to steaming or boiling

which seems to bring out more of the “vegetal” notes. I’m convinced too that keeping the asparagus away from water minimizes that interesting condition called “asparagus pee”. I won’t go any further but see if it works for you! Add some good olives if desired. Lemon infused olive oil is available in Italian markets and good gourmet stores. Agrumato brand from Italy and “O” from California both make great citrus infused oils.

1 pound fresh asparagus, tough ends discarded
2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
Flaky sea salt such as Maldon’s
Freshly ground black pepper
3 tablespoons or so Italian or California basil or lemon extra virgin olive oil
4 ounces fresh buratta cheese
8 very thin slices prosciutto or coppa
2 tablespoons capers, drained, patted dry and fried till crisp in olive oil
Lemon wedges
Grated hard-boiled egg (optional)

Brush the asparagus with the olive oil and season generously with salt and pepper. Over hot coals or a gas grill preheated to medium high grill the asparagus till it takes on a bit of color. Roll and turn so that it’s marked on all sides but still green and crisp. Place on a plate and drizzle with lemon olive oil. Cut buratta into wedges and arrange attractively on the asparagus with the prosciutto. Scatter capers around. Serve lemon wedges on the side and a grating of hardboiled eggs over, if using. Add more salt and pepper if desired.

GRILLED SWEET AND SOUR EGGPLANT SALAD

Makes about 5 cups serving 6 – 8

This is a great picnic or alfresco salad that is also delicious served on crostini and as a topping for almost any grilled or crisply fried fish or meat. How about pasta?

2 medium eggplants (2 pounds), ends removed and sliced about 1/2 inch thick
1 large white onion (3/4 pound), peeled and thickly sliced in rounds
1/3 cup or so extra virgin olive oil
Sea salt and freshly ground pepper
4 large peeled garlic cloves
2-1/2 cups seeded ripe tomatoes cut in 1/2-inch dice
2-1/2 tablespoons sherry vinegar, or to taste
1-1/2 tablespoons sugar, or to taste
2 tablespoons each coarsely chopped mint and parsley

Optional garnishes: Caper Berries, olives, bouquerones

Brush eggplant and onion slices liberally on both sides with 4 tablespoons or so of the olive oil and season with salt and pepper. Skewer the garlic cloves and brush with olive oil. Grill all until eggplant is nicely browned, onions crisp-tender and garlic nicely browned but not burned. Chop eggplant and onion into 3/4 inch or so dice, the garlic into slivers and set aside in a large bowl.

Add the remaining olive oil, tomatoes, vinegar, sugar, and herbs and toss gently. Season with salt and pepper and adjust sweet and sour elements to your taste. Cool, cover and allow to sit for a few hours for the flavors to marry. Can be made ahead and stored covered in refrigerator for up to 3 days. Serve with optional garnishes if desired.

CIDER BRINED AND GRILLED PORK TENDERLOIN WITH PEACH BARBECUE SAUCE

Serves 4 – 6

Brining adds flavor and also moisture to the meat via the process of osmosis. Don't put the barbecue sauce on the meat till it's almost done. Since it has sugar in it, it will burn if you put it on too soon. If pork does start to burn, move to a cooler part of the grill and cover with metal pie plate or aluminum foil pan to finish cooking.

For the Brine:

1/4 cup kosher salt
1/4 cup sugar, brown sugar preferred
3 cups apple cider
2 bay leaves, crumbled
4 large garlic cloves, crushed

2 pork tenderloins of approximately the same size (2 pounds or so)
Olive oil
Freshly ground black pepper
Peach barbecue sauce (recipe follows)

Stir the brine ingredients together until the salt and sugar are dissolved. Submerge the tenderloins in the brine and let stand for a couple of hours, turning occasionally. Remove tenderloins from the brine, rinse and pat dry.

Brush the meat with olive oil and a gentle sprinkling of salt and pepper. If using a gas grill, turn the burners to high. Close lid and heat fully for 10 minutes.

Place pork on the grill and grill-roast for 6 minutes or so or until meat is nicely marked. Turn off the grill, turn meat over brushing both sides liberally with the barbecue sauce. Cook for another 6 minutes with lid closed until a meat thermometer inserted in thickest end registers 145 to 150 degrees. If not, close the lid and let pork continue to roast in the residual grill heat. Let meat rest 5 minutes before cutting. Pass remaining barbecue sauce to serve with the meat.

Peach Barbecue Sauce

Makes about 1-1/2 cups

2 tablespoons olive oil
1/2 cup finely chopped onion
1 tablespoon finely chopped peeled ginger
2 large cloves garlic, peeled and chopped
1/2 cup dry white or rose wine
1/3 cup peach preserves
2 cups peeled, seeded and chopped ripe peaches
2 tablespoons ketchup
Big pinch ground cinnamon
1/4 cup cider vinegar
1/2 teaspoon bottled hot sauce of your choice, or to your taste
Kosher or sea salt to taste

Heat olive oil in a heavy bottomed saucepan and sauté onion, ginger and garlic over moderate heat until just beginning to color. Add remaining ingredients and bring to a simmer. Cook uncovered adjusting heat so that mixture just simmers for 20 minutes, stirring occasionally. Carefully puree in a blender and add salt to taste. Can be stored covered and refrigerated for up to 2 weeks.



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GRILLED FRUITS WITH MINT CUSTARD SAUCE

Serves 8

Grill sauce

1/4 cup dry white wine
4 tablespoons unsalted butter
3 tablespoons honey
1/4 teaspoon ground white pepper
1/4 teaspoon ground allspice

Suggested Fruit for Grilling

2 large firm ripe nectarines or peaches, halved and pits discarded
4 ripe plums, halved and pits discarded
8 figs, halved
1 small fresh pineapple, peeled, cored and cut in thick slices

Mint custard sauce (recipe follows)
3 cups mixed fresh berries of your choice

In a small saucepan combine the ingredients for the grill sauce and simmer until thickened, about 5 minutes. Off heat and whisk to combine into a smooth sauce. Brush or dip fruits in sauce and then quickly grill over medium hot coals until nicely marked, about 2 minutes total. Remove and slice fruit boldly.

Arrange the grilled fruit attractively in shallow soup plates. Spoon custard sauce around and scatter berries over top.

Mint custard sauce

Makes about 3 cups

This sauce is also a marvelous base for ice cream. Simply add the cooled sauce to an ice cream freezer and follow manufacturer's instructions. Remember that there are many varieties of mint available and each will have its own unique flavor.

1/2 cup sugar
5 egg yolks
2 cups light cream (half and half)
1/2 cup lightly packed fresh mint leaves
1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract

In a bowl, whisk the sugar and egg yolks together until light and sugar is dissolved. In a small saucepan scald cream with mint leaves. Off heat, beat cream mixture into egg mixture slowly.

Return mixture to saucepan and cook over moderate heat, stirring constantly, until sauce just begins to thicken, about 3 minutes. Be careful not to cook too long or egg will scramble. Immediately strain discarding leaves and refrigerate with a sheet of plastic wrap pressed onto the custard to keep a skin from forming. Can be made 3 days ahead.

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