

FLAVORS FROM THE GRILL

An age-old popular cooking technique enhances all menu parts with flavorful possibilities

Prehistoric mankind's first cooked meal was probably enjoyed around a wood-burning campfire and involved men sitting down with a chunk of mastodon on a stick and a handful of wild dandelions. Grilling was and remains one of the most popular cooking styles in history.

Today, grilling awakens our most primitive instincts by mimicking the way our ancestors cooked. It excites with the visual enticement of fire and glowing embers and the aromas released when food meets flames.

Because of its simplicity, grilling delivers one of the most distinctive, memorable and healthful flavors in the entire culinary world.

And, while the basic technique of searing over high heat to lock in food's flavor and moisture never changes, a tour of global grilling techniques and embellishments reveals just how versatile and varied grilling can be.

Over the last two decades, we have traveled around the world eating delicious grilled food that originated everywhere from street carts to fine-dining restaurants. We've learned that just about any food you can imagine — from fresh apples to loaded pizza, to cheese

and fish wrapped in banana leaves — can benefit from contact with a grill and an open flame.

THE MODERN GRILL

In his 1974 classic, "Beard on Food," James Beard described grilling as "one of the most appetizing methods of dealing with meat known to man" and noted that "it deserves to be done with some semblance of technique, accuracy and care."

Today's chefs have taken Beard's words to heart, moving the art of grilling beyond its original function of making meat less raw and using the technique to mark an eggplant's flesh with perfectly defined hatch marks before slow oven roasting or to add a finishing caramelization to a piece of fruit.

Slow grilling from indirect contact with heat can impart a tender smokiness to a whole pig, while quickly searing half a lemon over hot embers can produce an instant condiment.

Another evolutionary phase on grilling's timeline is its movement into the restaurant realm. For years, grilling was a well-established part of suburban lawn

QUICK-TAKE

THIS STORY TAKES A LOOK AT:

- Ways to capitalize on the enticing sights, sounds, simplicity and aromas of the grill
- Heat sources, preparations, aromatic woods and other ways to enhance grilling techniques
- Some global grilling inspirations that can add sizzle to your menu

SKEWER AND GRILL SMALLER CUTS OF MEAT AND OTHER TRIM TO CREATE FLAVORFUL AND ECONOMICAL MENU ADDITIONS .





SUNKIST

GRILL MARKS ADD VISUAL APPEAL AND THE PROMISE OF A SUBTLE SMOKY FLAVOR TO ANY GRILLED ITEM.

culture, whereby dads ruled over sizzling burgers and dogs, but now the technique has moved indoors, into upscale restaurants where sophisticated wood-fired equipment is the centerpiece of an operation's concept and menu.

Take, for instance, Michael Mina's SeaBlue restaurant in Las Vegas' famed MGM Grand. Mina features fish that he sources and flies in from all over the world. Many of the dishes he serves are marked on a freestanding, wood-fired, "island" grill and then finished in specially designed tagines. This two-part process allows Mina to use a variety of oils and to extract the most from the fish's natural juices.

"Our extremely hot wood-burning grill means we don't use butter or cream to cook our fish, and this straightforward style brings out the complexity of the fish and makes SeaBlue different from other seafood restaurants," notes Mina.

"Our tagine method uses the fish's natural juices, herbs, seasonal vegetables and vinaigrettes or a simple broth that might include seasonal mushrooms," he continues. "These are cooking styles that people don't do at home, so there's a wow factor from the food's natural juices."

Mina's custom-designed wood grill proves that while the basic equation of food plus flames remains the same, the evolution of more sophisticated

equipment, refined heat sources and creative flavor enhancements like marinades, rubs and oils are elements critical to delivering flavor.

INTENSE HEAT YIELDS FLAVOR

Grilling equipment is as important to the technique of grilling as the food itself. The high, intense heat that gives food a seared, flavorful crust and juicy interior can be controlled with two or more heat zones and is critical to proper grilling. To achieve the best flavor and texture, many chefs prefer cooking over hardwood or hardwood charcoal because it burns hotter and cleaner and imparts a subtle smoke flavor to the grilled food.

Mesquite wood is one of the most intense heat sources and is very popular in the Southwest but can throw off a strong flavor that is not well suited for all foods. Most chefs experiment with a combination of fragrant and fruitwoods like hickory, oak, apple, cherry and pecan to enhance the flavor of foods.

While hardwood grilling may not be a practical option for many foodservice operations, gas grilling techniques can drive the flavor equation. All forms of grilling contribute some flavor in the form of smoke that rises from small flare-ups caused by fat and juices dripping into the fire.

GLOBAL GRILLING IDEAS

Every region of the world puts its own twist on grilling methods, whether it's an unusual technique, preparation, presentation or finishing touch. Here are some globally inspired ideas.

BRAZILIAN COWBOY STYLE: Gauchos, or South American cowboys, are said to have invented churrasco, or the technique of using fire-filled pits to slow-roast skewered meats. Long, sword-like skewers are filled with chunks of beef, lamb, chicken or whole sausages and shrimp. Brazilians also add a finish of farofa, or savory flour, that mixes with the meat's juices and coats the food.

INDIAN INFLUENCE: An authentic tandoor is a large clay oven sunk into the ground and layered with glowing charcoal. It's used to cook cut-up chicken, meat kabobs and flatbread. The tandoori taste can be approximated by using an extremely hot grill to sear small cuts of meat that have been marinated in an aromatic mix of yogurt, ginger and spices.

JAMAICAN JERK: In this case, a jerk is a paste of vinegar, dried herbs and fiery habanero or Scotch bonnet chiles that is rubbed over chicken, pork and fish. The grilling method is slower, using indirect heat and a covered grill to give a tender, smoky result.

KOREAN CAMPFIRES: Many Korean barbecue restaurants come equipped with tabletop grills fired by gas or live coals over which sweetly marinated and thinly sliced proteins are seared quickly. These delectables are finished with a sprinkling of toasted, ground sesame seeds and wrapped in lettuce leaves.

- **PECAN CHIPS** are similar to hickory and pair well with chicken and pork.
- **DRIED BASIL STEMS** infuse a wide variety of foods with a sweet herbal scent.
- **DRIED ROSEMARY SPRIGS** give a pleasantly woody flavor to beef, lamb, pork, chicken and meaty fish filets or steaks.
- **MIXED HERBS** can be added to the heat source to create a fragrant addition that suits a wide variety of foods.
- **GRAPEVINE CUTTINGS** add fruity flavor to such grilled foods as beef, lamb chicken and fish.

GRILLING TIPS

If using a gas grill, place aromatics in a perforated foil packet and set them over the heat element to ignite and release their smoke and perfume the food.

Aromatic wood additions should be soaked in water for 30 minutes and then drained thoroughly before using. Herbs should not be soaked, as that would make them difficult to ignite.

While a simple sprinkle of salt and pepper can make for a delicious grilled steak, other enhancements that chefs add before the food meets the heat can change the entire flavor profile.

Old grilling recipes and kitchen lore warned that adding salt and seasoning would dry out food. Today we know that pre-treating foods with olive oil and seasoning with salt, pepper, herbs and dry or wet rubs not only contributes flavor but also helps form a savory caramelized crust that keeps meat, poultry and fish juicy and tender. Marinating or brining meats infuses additional flavors.

In order to maximize these flavor opportunities, many gas grills allow the operator to add aromatic wood chunks or chips, as well as dried herbs or grapevine cuttings.

WOOD AND FLAVOR OPTIONS

Choose aromatic additions to enhance food in the same way that you choose spices and herbs to flavor a sauce.

- **ALDER CHIPS** marry well with salmon and other fish and light meats.
- **APPLE CHIPS** enhance chicken and game birds, salmon and pork.
- **CHERRY CHIPS** are similar to apple and complement poultry and seafood.
- **HICKORY CHIPS** deliver a slightly nutty flavor to pork, chicken and turkey.
- **MESQUITE CHIPS** are best with stronger, gamier meats like beef, pork and turkey, all of which can stand up to its distinctly strong flavor.
- **OAK CHIPS** complement pork and beef.

GRILLING ON ALL MENU PARTS

Just watch the expression of a customer walking through the door of a restaurant and encountering the sizzle and aroma of a grill in action. The sensory connection heightens appetites the moment customers catch the first whiff of smoke rising from the fire. If the sight and smell of food cooking on the grill can precipitate such an emotional connection with your guests, why not leverage it on every possible part of the menu?

A GRILLED STARTER

In the appetizer category, there are numerous ways to grill your way toward additional profits while driving the flavor equation. Since the appetizer category is the jumping-off point for consumers who are becoming more

and more adventurous in food, we always encourage operators to think globally and look at “foods from the hot zones” when developing grilled appetizer menu items. Spin the globe and you will find numerous countries and geographic regions that are renowned for their grilled street food, a hand-held style that has been leveraged into the appetizer course on American menus.

The first hot-food region for grilled appetizer inspirations is the Mediterranean, home of many small-plate styles. Some of our favorites include grilled polenta infused with Gorgonzola cheese and fresh rosemary. It's a rugged, humble dish with great flavor, great plate presentation and a very low food cost.

Another Mediterranean favorite is created by searing eggplant slices with attractive hatch marks and then rolling each slice around a mixture of ricotta and mixed hard cheeses, crisp prosciutto ham and toasted pine nuts. This item can be grilled and prepped in advance — making it an efficient use of kitchen labor — then finished off in the oven and served on a small puddle of fresh-tomato sauce.

Another big idea in the appetizer category is shared dishes. Grilled foods that are perfect for passing around the table include charred tomato bruschetta served over grilled ciabatta bread, grilled grape-leaf-wrapped soft cheeses or grilled flatbread with caramelized onions, blue cheese and wild mushrooms. And from Sicily comes another of our favorite sharing-friendly appetizers: grilled mussels served with crusty peasant bread. Mussels, tossed on the grill and steamed in the shell, yield a very flavorful, succulent and easy finished product.

Kabobs are a classic candidate for grilling and sharing. During our travels, we have seen some very innovative ways to improve both the flavor and presentation of food on a stick. For example, Yard House, a small chain of upscale-casual dining operations in Southern California, serves grilled shrimp skewered on lemon grass, an idea that infuses the tender fish from within and creates a fabulous presentation.

We have also seen restaurants use large, woody rosemary skewers for grilling both chicken and shrimp, adding not only distinctive flavor but tremendous credibility to the dish. If you are thinking about adding a Caribbean menu item, consider skewering with sugarcane and adding fresh tropical fruits like mango, papaya or pineapple as an accompaniment to meats on a skewer. The meaty flesh of these fruits stands up to a grill's high heat and balances savory meat flavors.

For Mexican inspiration, quesadillas continue to ride a wave of popularity. Stuffed tortillas are just as easily warmed on the grill, and the resulting char-grill marks make a distinctive presentation.



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NOTHING EXCITES APPETITES LIKE THE SIZZLE AND AROMA OF FOOD MEETING AN OPEN FLAME.

GRILLING GREENS

The salad category provides a great opportunity for leveraging the grill to develop healthful options. Classic salads like the Cobb take on a contemporary spin when the chicken is grilled and served with quick-seared Romaine and a smoked chile-buttermilk dressing. A grilled Moroccan-root-vegetable salad with mint vinaigrette appeals to those looking to eat a lighter but still hearty entrée and also pleases vegetarians.

While the idea of a steak salad is not new, it's a menu item that can move beyond the usual blue-cheese topping to be embellished with plenty of ethnic variations on a theme. For a Latin inspiration, consider a grilled churrasco steak salad with chimichurri vinaigrette or a mojo-dressed hangar-steak-salad over grilled rainbow chard. Two of our favorite salads from the grill are Yard House's grilled Romaine salad with red onions, candied walnuts and Gorgonzola and a

grilled radicchio salad with sweet balsamic drizzle found on a specials menu at the independent Italian eatery Mangia Bene in Laguna Niguel, Calif.

GRILLED CLASSICS, REVISITED

Hamburgers, steaks and chops will always be classic candidates for the grill, but that doesn't mean they have to taste the same as they have since prehistoric times.

Savvy operators are looking at new ways to improve both the flavor and plate presentation of the meaty standards by making these items more distinctive and adding signature embellishments. By now, we have all heard about the high-ticket, truffle-stuffed burgers that heralded the upscaling of the humble dish. The idea inspired many operators to take their hamburgers to the next level with extra steps like seasoning patties with ethnic spice blends, stuffing the centers with soft cheeses or adding flavorful toppings such as apple-smoked bacon and grilled Vidalia onions.

And sometimes inspiration is simple. For instance, there is nothing better than sitting in a little trattoria in Italy and sinking your teeth into a Bistecca Fiorentina, a porterhouse steak simply prepared with sea salt and freshly ground course black pepper. One of the secrets to this classic rustic dish is to drizzle some fruity olive oil over the steak just before service. This finishing touch can be borrowed for other ideas — different flavored oils, a squeeze of lemon or a pat of citrus-infused butters, to name just a few.

BEYOND THE BEEF

With beef prices hitting record highs, operators in all dining segments are seeking alternative proteins to add to the menu. Many operators opt for grilled pork and lamb. Pork can become a high-preference menu item if dressed up in new ways. Consider chile-rubbing pork tenderloin, stuffing it with a combination of andouille sausage, grilled vegetables, spinach and a spicy cheese blend, grilling it and serving it with an ancho-chipotle demi-glace to move guests to choose a more profitable menu item.

TAKE-AWAY TIPS

- **IT'S ALL FAIR GAME:** There's more to grilling than just beef and poultry. From salad and bread to fruits and dessert, every menu part has a place on the grill
- **PUT IT ON A STICK:** Skewering and grilling tasty bites is a way to use trim and create flavorful, economical appetizers

Grilled lamb offers operators numerous beef-replacement possibilities, from chops, which are relatively easy to prepare, to leg sections with unique ethnic spins. Crusting lamb chops with a five-spice powder is an exciting way to make the ordinary extraordinary. Also, a leg of lamb it is not difficult to grill and can stand up to creative embellishments like a Moroccan spice-rub or garam masala.

Firm-fleshed fish such as tuna, salmon, swordfish or sea bass can be prepared in thick cuts that hold up to grilled heat and lend themselves to a wide variety of ethnic influences, toppings and accompaniments, like herb sauces, grilled tropical fruit salsas and tapenades. Another big idea in fish grilling is to take a less-expensive thinly fileted fish and wrap it in fig, banana or olive leaves. These steaming packets can be both grilled and served in the leaves, creating not only a wow presentation but allowing the operator to use more delicately fleshed fish on the grill at a favorable food cost.

A FIERY FINALE

Don't let the endless possibilities of the grill stop at dessert. Grilled bananas with rum ice cream and Mexican hot chocolate are but one of the grilled dessert items we experienced during our travels. And we would be remiss if we failed to mention that S'mores, those campfire classics, are popping up on menus throughout the country, often upscaled with boutique bittersweet slabs of chocolate and handmade marshmallows.

For healthier indulgences, many fruits can be tossed on the grill, and the extra caramelization makes for an instant dessert topping that can be enhanced by an easy dollop of whipped cream or crème fraiche.

From starters to finishing touches, the grill can be one of the most profitable pieces of equipment in the kitchen, and the more you know about using the grill, the greater its possibilities for firing up your menu. ☺

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