



Grilling Year Round

It is a real treat to get a bunch of family and friends together for a cook out. With the proper equipment, and lots of fire, this can take place at any time of the year. With a few simple additions to a barbeque menu, this party can turn into a gourmet delight for all.

Now, let me preface this by saying that this is not Barbeque. Barbeque by the current definition is a slow braising technique for several kinds of meat, which renders tough product, like pork ribs, or beef brisket, into a highly flavored, moist and tender product. This is grilling. Grilling is cooking any kind of product on top of, or over to the side of direct heat. It is actually a little more difficult to do well, as the temperature of the grill surface is critical, and difficult to control. A little work and experience, however, can make you an expert, and by adding a few additions, can turn your menu from just burgers and dogs, to burgers and dogs with all sorts of tasty additions. These tasty additions are what folks'll remember, while you're grilling at your family Barbeque.

There are three types of heat that are available to the average Citizen. Propane, Charcoal, and Wood. Propane is the easiest, and by far the most widely used heat source. All that is needed is a gas grill in good condition, a full propane tank, with a back up maybe, and some cooking tools. The main problem I see that folks have is cleaning the grill itself. It isn't widely known that the only effective way to clean a grill is with heat. Pretty much, turn the grill on, close it up, and let it go for 15 minutes or so. At this point, attack it with a wire brush for the grates, some soap and hot water for the outside, and some elbow grease. Clean it, let it get hot again, and repeat the process. The heat will do most of the work. It is best to burn and clean a grill right after it's been used, but if not done then, an hour before a party is good enough.

Charcoal is a great medium, and provides maximum flavor, and great heat control. Use good hardwood charcoal, and light it with either paper, or a minimum of lighter fluid. Those tube canister charcoal starters work very well. After the charcoal has got good temperature, it should be pushed to one side of the grill, so that the heat will be concentrated on that side. Fresh charcoal can be added at any time, to the sides of the burning charcoal, but it will be 15 minutes at least before it is useful to cook on. You can buy mesquite or hickory wood chips at a hardware store, soak them, and place on the side of the burning charcoal, if you want a smoky flavor.

Wood is my preferred heat source. To grill on wood effectively, you need two separate grills, one to cook on, and one to pre burn the next

set of logs. In this way you are adding split wood that is already on fire, to the cooking grill, and the heat will keep to a useable temperature. Now this second fire has its uses, also. If you are grilling while it is snowing, for instance, it is a great place to stand around and drink beer, while you are nice and toasty warm. Use only well dried hardwood, if available, like oak, or maple, or ash, and keep the wood to one side of the grill. In this way you have several heating surfaces to work with, direct flames, high heat with no flames, and low heat away from the flames.



Tools are simple, yet critical. Very long tongs come in handy, both for moving food products, and for moving burning logs from place to place, and grill to grill. A good clean wire brush is needed for the grill itself, used best when the grill is very very hot. A couple of cloths are needed since it does get kind of hot over there. A hose is needed, for hand washing, and safety, and for spraying off the just brushed grill rack. A spray bottle with water is very handy, in case you need to cool down the flames a little for a certain product. A good cutting board and knife, plus a carving fork, should be outside and ready, if you are grilling beef. You will need plenty of trays for each part of the menu, both the raw side, and trays for after they've been cooked. And you can never have enough ice.

Now for the menu. I try to start to buy products to cook with long ahead of a barbeque. In this way the menu becomes extensive, and you don't have to put up a bunch of money all at once. So, I keep Italian Rope Sausage in the freezer, just in case. Tuna

steaks can be kept frozen for some time, if well wrapped. Beef to grill can be of all sorts of cuts, pieces of the chuck, like Flat Iron steaks, Sirloin pieces from the strip, or Top Butt. London Broil from the Top Round, Flank Steak, or anything that says Ribeye. Pick out what you think you can afford, and keep well wrapped. Any of these items will just need to be pulled from the freezer the day before the party, or even that morning. The steaks will need to be marinated, in some sort of dressing, or a good marination of your own recipe. It is good to rub them just a little salt and some dry seasonings. This can be done with the frozen meat, and just turn them once in a while as they begin to thaw. In this way they'll be seasoned, tenderized, and thawed in one process, in the refrigerator.

Food safety cannot be overemphasized in grilling. Thaw stuff only in the refrigerator, and be very very conscious of cross contamination. Do not let any raw product touch cooked food, or sit over cooked food in the cooler. Keep salads in their original containers, and always keep refrigerated. Make sure that you have clean utensils, separate, for cooked product, and for raw product. There also has to be a

good source of water, and maybe a little bottle of soap, for those who are handling food. A nearby hose will help to keep your hands clean. If you want to grill chicken, I'd suggest roasting the chicken fully the day before, and cooling well. In this way you are really only reheating roast chicken, with barbeque sauce, for heat and flavor. If done well, it is very good flavor, and there is no chance of undercooked chicken, or raw chicken sitting around on a hot day. It is more difficult to be careful and safe with food when cooking outside, so take extra precautions.

Now the part I like best. Additions to the menu. Any good salad will be a colorful addition to a table. Fresh flowers help, too. Corn on the cob is mandatory in most states. Corn is just grilled on slow heat for an hour or so, in the husk, before the guests begin to arrive. They stay very hot, and need no other work, except for some place to throw the cobs, a little salt, and some butter. There is always need for some sort of dessert, and you ought to include some chocolate, for a complete meal.

There are lots of little things you can buy at any grocery store, to turn a plain burger and dog barbeque into a gourmet experience. A lot of vegetables can be grilled, for instance. Zucchini, yellow squash, eggplant, red onions, peppers, and tomatoes can all be thick sliced, and marinated for a day or a morning. They can then have a quick sear on the grill for heat and color, and many people will enjoy them. My favorite, however, is to pick up some varied hot peppers, Serrano, Jalapeno, Habenero, and whatever else the store's got, plus one little package of Crimini Mushrooms. Simply season these liberally with salt and pepper, and coat generously with olive oil for a few hours. These can be blackened quite nicely on a hot grill, and make for great conversation. Especially the really really hot peppers.

Shellfish are a great addition to any Cook Out. Little Neck Clams, Blue Point Oysters, fresh Lobsters, anything can be successfully grilled with a little thought and preparation. For clams and oysters, for instance, clean them very well in a lot of water. Then place them on the grill, either on a fireproof pan, or directly on the grates. They will open by themselves, saving you the effort. If you like them raw, pull them quickly. Or let them cook longer. Steam them in a pot with a little water, if you wish. Not everyone at your party will appreciate fresh shellfish, but those that do will remember the day. Note that this can sort of resemble a New England Clam Bake, but that is a completely different chapter in Cook Out History.

Then comes a truly personal piece of the menu. BBQ Sauce. Just about any sauce can be used, with a brush, to coat the meat products as they finish on the grill. You don't want to put BBQ Sauce on too early, or it will burn, so this is for product that has almost finished, and is on the cooler side of the grill, away from direct flame. If you wish, buy some good commercial BBQ sauce, and put it in another container, so that it looks homemade. While you're at it, you may as well add some extra flavorings, to make it your own. Garlic powder, mustard, hot sauce, Dr. Pepper, these and much else can be added in any amounts to personalize the sauce. Or take my advice:

*1 Can Dr. Pepper (I'm from Oklahoma, it is illegal to substitute)
2 diced onions
4 Tbsp. minced garlic
½ cup good mustard
½ cup good red wine vinegar
½ cup sherry wine
1 Tbs. Chili Powder
1 Tbsp. Ground Cumin
4 cups ketchup*

Mix the soda, onions, garlic, and everything but the ketchup in a sauce pan. Bring to a boil, and allow to cook slowly for about 15 minutes. Add the ketchup, and stir very well with a whisk. Adjust the thickness of the sauce with some water, to your preference. I think it should be thinner than that. Strain into a plastic or stainless steel container. Cool, cover, and keep refrigerated for up to 2 weeks, before using it cold. Use this sauce as a final mop and flavoring to any grilled product. It is best to use it only on one or two items out of the menu, so to create varied flavors combinations for the day.

If you are having a lot of guests, you may want to set up some food the day before that will not need any work on the day of the party. Here are two examples of a method that works very well.

GRILLED BLUEFISH WITH ROSEMARY AND FRESH TOMATO FOR 8 GUESTS

*2 pounds Fresh Long Island Bluefish (not Boston)
¼ cup olive oil
8 each plum tomatoes
8 sprigs fresh Rosemary
2 Tbsp. chopped garlic
To season salt and pepper*

Cut the bluefish into 8 portions as best you can, skin on. Lay each one skin side down on a square piece of 12" aluminum foil. Season a little, and smear with a little chopped garlic. You may sprinkle with garlic powder if you want, instead. Slice the plum tomatoes from top to bottom, and lay on top of the fish decoratively. Place a long Rosemary sprig on each filet, and pour on some Olive Oil. Bring the sides of the foil up, and fold so it is rather tight. Bring up the ends of the foil, and fold together, and up, so that no liquid would leak out during the grilling. Place in the refrigerator for up to 24 hours before grilling. Grill on low heat for about 20 minutes, and serve in the foil.

CHICKEN BREAST GRILLED WITH TARRAGON BUTTER

For 8 guests

*8 each chicken breast, bone in, skin on, single side
½ pound butter
2 oz fresh tarragon
2 oz fresh parsley
1 Tbsp. good red wine vinegar*

Allow the butter to soften in a large bowl. Chop the tarragon, and the parsley, and mix into the butter well. Add the vinegar, or lemon juice if you will, and mix into the butter. Using a spatula, form into 8 small portions, and set in the cooler. Prepare the chicken breast by seasoning lightly, and then separating a small portion of the skin from the meat, creating a pocket. Insert a single one ounce portion of tarragon butter in between the meat and the skin. Set each chicken breast on a single 12" square piece of aluminum foil. Bring the sides of the foil up, and fold so it is rather tight. Bring up the ends of the foil, and fold together, and up, so that no liquid would leak out during the grilling. Place in the refrigerator for up to 24 hours before grilling. Grill on low heat for about 30 minutes, and serve in the foil.

The best cook out will have just enough people so that you don't have to talk with everyone. Too big and you spend your time cooking, not socializing. Too small and you have to talk with that weird uncle of your wife's brother's neighbor. I think 20-30 people is a great party. More than that takes planning, but is not really that hard. Make sure you have a garage cleared and open, in case of rain, and plenty of chairs. Your guests will gladly entertain themselves if you provide the food.

John Griffin