

How To Master the Art of Grilling

By Curt Hagedorn

If you have any questions about whether grilling really is an art, just take a look at how seriously people take their barbecue. There are at least 7 professional organizations (according to “The National Barbecue News”) from the New England Barbecue Society to the International Barbecue Cookers Association. There are television shows and cookbooks and websites and recipes galore, not to mention the amount of equipment available from the classic kettle charcoal grill (still a favorite) to outdoor kitchens costing tens of thousands of dollars. And don’t even get started talking about sauce, which are as varied as the cooks themselves. So how can you become a Master Griller? Like getting to Carnegie Hall, the answer is “practice,” plus a few tips:

- 1) **Push the envelope.** While you can get a lot of pleasure out of balling up and flattening out some ground turkey, slapping it on a \$25 hibachi and dousing it with a bottled sauce, you’ve basically just scratched the surface of grilling. For true grill fanatics, just about everything tastes better grilled. Imagine a mix of summer vegetables just at the point of freshness, from zucchini to red, yellow and green peppers to sweet onions and asparagus, tossed in olive oil, fresh rosemary and thyme and a little balsamic vinegar. Spread them out over a carefully tended fire of wood charcoal until they’re caramelized and grill-marked. Then toss them with angel hair pasta you’ve boiled up al dente and top with a generous amount of parmesano reggiano. That’s the beauty and simplicity of grilling taken to the next level. Whether you’re grilling meat or vegetables or even fruit, choose the best ingredients you can afford and treat them respectfully. It’s not so much about price as it is knowing what to do with what you have. For that, consult the masters through their cookbooks at your local bookstore, on cable, or on the web or take a class.
- 2) **Choose your fire.** A kettle style charcoal grill offers what many consider the most important part of a grilling... a real fire. Veer off in that direction and you’ll be discussing variations in briquettes from self-starting (never) to real hardwood charcoal. (expensive but worth it.) The best way to start a fire? Buy one of those fire-starting chimneys. Put your charcoal in the top, a few sheets of newspaper in the bottom, light the paper and in just a few minutes you have a bunch of perfect coals with no flavor of starter fluid. Another tip: when your first batch is done, set up for a second round of coals. Then you’ll have a consistent fire as your coals burn down. It’s also a good idea to have a “hot” side and a “warm” side of the grill so you can move things around and avoid overcooking.

- 3) **Choose your fire, Part 2:** Some grillers find nothing wrong with gas, and in terms of convenience and cleanliness it has a lot to recommend it. Most gas grills have some sort of holder where you can put wet wood chips (like mesquite or hickory) to add that smoky flavor. Gas grills range from portable propane varieties perfect for tailgate parties to backyard installations including side burners, rotisseries, and outdoor kitchens in some cases include coal fired ovens or grills in addition to gas. Your local dealer or home store will be able to walk you through the many types, sizes and prices of grills and accessories available to you.
- 4) **Prepare yourself.** Some meats will benefit by an overnight marinade. Others need long, slow cooking to infuse them with flavor and make them falling off the bone tender. Others require a quick sear to seal in juices while leaving the inside rare. You can grill a whole turkey in a few hours, or a few pounds of shrimp in a few seconds. Whether you marinate, rub or sauce, or all three, or whether you keep it simple and let the flavors of your ingredients shine through, is completely up to you. If the prospect of learning about how to make the best barbecue brisket in the world makes your mouth water, and if you've already started thinking about how you're going to give it your own special twist, you probably have it in you to become a master griller.