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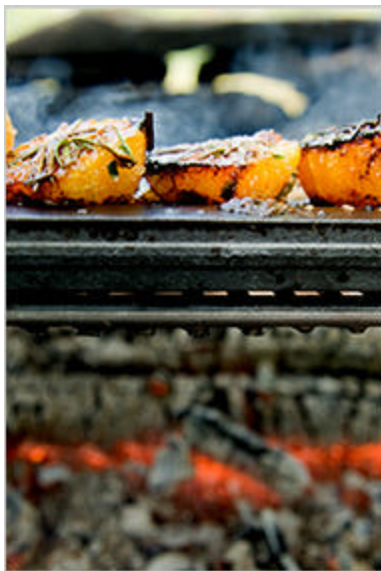
Grilling Over Wood as a Sweaty, Smoky Sport



Jennifer May for The New York Times

By **OLIVER SCHWANER-ALBRIGHT**
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GRILLING over a wood fire is as much a sport as an art — it's more instinctive than cooking with a gas grill, more nuanced than cooking with charcoal, and more athletic than both.



Jennifer May for The New York Times

In my experience it's also more satisfying, and not just when a platter of grilled lamb or a slab of crispy glazed pork belly is brought to the table still smelling of oak and apple wood. It's the theater of building a fire out of split logs, and cooking over it. It's steaming open clams in a caldron set directly on the flames, or charring fennel on a cast-iron griddle, or lowering a grill over a shallow pile of glowing coals for a steak gently seared to medium-rare. Grilling over hardwood is sweaty, smoky, eye-stinging work, but it's fun.

Oranges grilled with rosemary and sugar.

***The New York Times* - Grilling Over Wood as a Sweaty, Smoky Sport**

May 19, 2009

Page 2

Every Memorial Day, when I grill in a primitive fire pit made out of stacked rocks, one friend repeats the same awed phrase: “Dude, this is like Argentina.”

Not quite. If we were in Argentina, I would draft my friends to help me grill a whole cow, which is one of the recipes in “Seven Fires: Grilling the Argentine Way” (Artisan, 2009) by Francis Mallmann, the chef and owner of Patagonia Sur, the celebrated Buenos Aires restaurant, and Peter Kaminsky, the Brooklyn-based writer. (The first ingredient is “1 medium cow, about 1,400 pounds, butterflied, skin removed.”)

Not all of the recipes in “Seven Fires” call for a pulley. While some of the dishes are the sort of gonzo cooking sure to be documented, mid-flame, on [Twitter](#) (pork leg buried in salt, lamb roasted in a wheelbarrow), most of what’s in this captivating book about cooking over wood is as straightforward as it is appealing. Take the oranges and rosemary sprinkled with sugar and caramelized on a cast-iron skillet. The charred, sugary rosemary is both rough and refined, a gratifying end to a grilled meal.

A wide cast-iron griddle, like the ones from Lodge ([lodgemfg.com](#)), heats exceptionally well over an open flame. Along with long-handled tongs, fire-resistant gloves, an instant-read thermometer and a broad stainless steel spackle knife from a hardware store (narrower and stronger than most spatulas), it’s one of the basic tools for grilling over wood.

But the most essential piece of equipment is an adjustable cast-iron grill. The grill fits into a freestanding bracket, and can be raised well above the flames or lowered until it kisses the coals.

Mr. Kaminsky, who has written about food and the outdoors for The New York Times, has a fairly elaborate setup in the yard of his Cobble Hill brownstone. In addition to an adjustable grill, he has two Tuscan grills (like the adjustable grills, these are available at [spitjack.com](#)), heavy cast-iron grates on four-inch legs. He also had a local wrought-iron shop fabricate an Argentine infiernillo, which looks like a pair of stacked metal coffee tables and works like an open-air oven: you start a fire under one and on top of the other, and roast food between the two.

But to cook Mr. Mallmann’s trademark rib-eye, modestly called “A Perfect Steak,” all you need is medium-high heat, with a grill set about two inches above the embers. I joined Mr. Kaminsky

***The New York Times* - Grilling Over Wood as a Sweaty, Smoky Sport**

May 19, 2009

Page 3

in his backyard, where he explained the technique: patience. The one-and-a-half-inch-thick rib-eye was cooked for nine minutes on one side, then seven minutes on the other, timed on an [iPhone](#). Mr. Kaminsky hardly touched it, rotating it 45 degrees on each side, and flipping it only once.

“You want to get that nice crust, so you want it hot, and you don’t want to mess with it,” Mr. Kaminsky said. “The idea is to get it pink all the way through, with none of that well-done gray part around the edge.”

IT seemed like a long time to cook a steak, but when he cut it open it was rosé-red, juicy and delicious. Indeed, it was a perfect steak.

And Mr. Kaminsky demonstrated perfect technique. He stacked split pieces of well-seasoned, thoroughly dry oak, and started a fire using some newspaper and fatwood, a resinous pinewood that flames easily. (Pine is fine for starting fires, but because it burns quickly and imparts an acrid flavor it should never be used for cooking.) Mr. Kaminsky used a fireplace shovel and a poker modified so that it looked like a croupier’s rake to gather the hot embers, carefully placing them under the grill, adding more oak to the fire as the wood turned into embers.

But at its most basic, grilling over hardwood is campfire cooking. My backyard cooking falls somewhere between Mr. Kaminsky’s control and a campfire’s chaos. I’ll ignite oak and apple wood in a fire pit, and while the flames are still burning I’ll heat a griddle for searing vegetables for a salad (sliced fennel, tomato halves and wedges of radicchio all char nicely). Or I’ll put clams, white wine and herbs in a cast iron caldron and set it directly on the burning wood, then toast some bread for a simple appetizer. Once the wood turns into hot embers — between 20 and 30 minutes — it’s ready for grilling.

Because a wood fire can be much hotter than what you’ll get from charcoal or gas, you should use canola oil or another neutral-flavored oil with a high smoke point for seasoning the grill and griddle or for brushing meat, fish and vegetables. Olive oil, which breaks down over high heat, can be drizzled on later, for flavor.

***The New York Times* - Grilling Over Wood as a Sweaty, Smoky Sport**

May 19, 2009

Page 4



Evan Sung for The New York Times



Flavored With Smoke



Char with rosti.



Evan Sung for The New York Times

FIRED UP Peter Kaminsky grills on a wood fire outside his Brooklyn home.

Wood fire might seem to have a greater environmental impact than charcoal or gas, but it's not so easily assessed. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, a wood fire emits more gases and particulate matter than clean-burning propane, but it also has a smaller carbon footprint. The E.P.A. does not endorse one form of grilling over another.

THAT smoke is a guilty pleasure. It gives so much flavor, it makes most marinades and rubs unnecessary. But a bright and balanced sauce, like the honey-sweetened gremolata in "Seven Fires," adds a note of sophistication.

So does the fresh dried chili oil from Russell Moore, the chef and an owner of Camino, in Oakland, Calif., a restaurant where almost everything is cooked with a wood fire. This time of year Mr. Moore grills asparagus and spring onions, then tops them with a chili oil he makes from mild dried New Mexican chilies, pounded garlic and chopped mint. The result has so much body and flavor it's more salsa than sauce. Mr. Moore describes it as "a super-rough harissa."

The recipe is really a template — you can use any mild chili, such as chihuacle or mulatto, and any herb — and drizzle it over whatever vegetable looks good that week, from artichokes to new potatoes to escarole to summer chanterelles. "You want all the freshness of the seasons in there, and three strong flavors," Mr. Moore said.

***The New York Times* - Grilling Over Wood as a Sweaty, Smoky Sport**

May 19, 2009

Page 5

Many of the dishes in Adam Perry Lang's "Serious Barbecue" (Hyperion, 2009) call for indirect heat — this could become a bible for disciples of the ceramic outdoor cooker known as the Big Green Egg — but some dishes, like his Crisp and Unctuous Pork Belly, do just as well when braised in a conventional oven and finished on the grill. Mr. Lang, the chef and owner of Daisy May's BBQ in Manhattan, builds flavor whenever possible, and the pork belly calls for a marinade, a bourbon glaze (preferably applied with a bundle of herbs), and a dressing applied directly to the cutting board: you squeeze lemon on the board and add olive oil, chives and pepper, so that the resting slab of pork draws in even more flavor.

Mr. Lang suggests serving slices of the belly in a bun with applesauce and mustard, the latest iteration of the pork bun. It's also good on watercress or arugula, tossed with a sharp dressing.

For all the technique he details in the book, when I spoke to Mr. Lang he drove home one point: Never use a spray bottle to douse flares from dripping fat. Instead, he suggests moving the food to a cooler corner of the grill, or stacking meat so that it's exposed to less heat. "A lot of people fear the flame," Mr. Lang said. "I tell them: Don't. Because when you're cooking on wood the flavor is like nothing else."

Crisp and Unctuous Pork Belly

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Adapted from “Serious Barbecue,” by Adam Perry Lang (Hyperion, 2009)

Time: 6 1/2 hours, plus at least 12 hours’ marinating and 2 hours’ resting

For the Marina de:

1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil

1/4 cup fresh lemon juice

1/4 cup cider vinegar

10 cloves garlic, peeled and halved

2 tablespoons fresh rosemary

2 tablespoons fresh thyme

2 tablespoons sliced serrano pepper

2 tablespoons kosher salt

1 tablespoon coarsely ground black pepper

For the pork:

1 4-pound piece of pork belly, skin-on

2 tablespoons unsalted butter

1/4 cup bourbon

1/4 cup packed brown sugar

2 tablespoons flat-leaf parsley, roughly chopped

1 tablespoon cider vinegar

1/2 teaspoon red pepper flakes

***The New York Times* - Grilling Over Wood as a Sweaty, Smoky Sport**

May 19, 2009

Page 7

1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil

1 tablespoon lemon juice

2 tablespoons chives, chopped

Salt and freshly ground pepper.

1. In a blender, pulse marinade ingredients until roughly chopped. Transfer to a 1-gallon freezer bag and add pork belly and 1 cup water. Squeeze to remove air, then seal and refrigerate at least 12 hours.

2. When ready to cook, heat oven to 275 degrees. Place pork in a 13-by-9-inch baking dish with marinade, butter and water to cover. Cover with heavy-duty foil, crimping edges tightly. Braise in oven 5 1/2 hours; let rest in pan, covered, 2 hours.

3. Meanwhile, simmer bourbon in a small pan over medium heat until alcohol aroma fades. Stir in sugar, parsley, vinegar and pepper flakes. Cover and set aside.

4. Heat a grill. Carefully remove pork from pan and place in a grilling basket. Grill skin-side down over medium-low heat for 15 to 20 minutes, until skin is crisp and golden. Remove from heat and brush skin side with 1/4 of the bourbon glaze, then return to heat, skin-side up, for another 5 minutes. Remove pork from heat once more and brush meat side with 1/4 of the glaze, then return to heat, meat-side up, for another 5 minutes. Repeat with remaining glaze on both sides.

5. Dress a cutting board with half the olive oil, lemon juice and chives, and salt and pepper. Place pork skin side up on cutting board and let rest for 10 minutes. Sprinkle with remaining olive oil, lemon juice and chives, and salt and pepper. Cut into 1-by-4-inch pieces and serve.

Yield: 8 servings.

Fresh Dried Chili Oil

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2 medium-hot dried chili peppers, like a New Mexican red or other Southwestern chili

1 small clove garlic, pounded into a paste in a mortar and pestle

1/4 cup chopped fresh mint leaves

1/2 cup extra virgin olive oil

Salt.

1. Crush chilies with fingers into pieces no bigger than 1/4 inch across. Place in small bowl and add just enough boiling water to cover, about 1 tablespoon; let sit until chili is hydrated, 10 minutes.

2. Add garlic and mint, and mix while slowly adding olive oil. Taste and season with salt. For best flavor, make several hours before using.

Yield: 3/4 cup.

Burnt Oranges With Rosemary

4 oranges, halved, peeled, pith removed

2 tablespoons fresh rosemary

1/2 cup sugar

1 cup plain thick Greek yogurt.

1. Place oranges cut-side up on a plate and sprinkle rosemary on top, pressing it into oranges so it adheres. Sprinkle with

1/4 cup sugar.

2. On a grill or stovetop, put a 12-inch cast iron skillet over medium heat until a drop of water sizzles on surface. Spread remaining 1/4 cup sugar in skillet and when it starts to caramelize place oranges, cut-side down, on sugar. Let cook for 3 to 4 minutes, not moving oranges, so cut side burns nicely and oranges soften.

3. To serve, place 2 orange halves in bowl with 1/4 cup Greek yogurt, and drizzle with burnt sugar juices from skillet.

Yield: 4 servings.

Honey Gremolata

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1 cup fresh flat-leaf parsley, chopped

1/2 cup fresh oregano, chopped

1 teaspoon minced garlic

3/4 teaspoon grated lemon zest

1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice

1 tablespoon honey

1 cup extra virgin olive oil

Salt and freshly ground black pepper.

In a bowl, mix together 1/2 cup parsley and remaining ingredients. Season to taste. Cover and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes and up to 24 hours. Just before serving, mix in remaining 1/2 cup parsley.

Yield: 1 1/2 cups.

Smashed Potatoes With Tapenade

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Adapted from “Seven Fires: Grilling the Argentine Way,” by Francis Mallmann with Peter Kaminsky (Artisan, 2009)

Time: 45 minutes

For the Tapenade:

1 cup Kalamata olives, minced

2 tablespoons capers, rinsed and minced

1 teaspoon grated lemon zest

1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice

1 1/2 teaspoons fresh thyme, chopped

1/2 cup extra virgin olive oil

Freshly ground black pepper

For the potatoes:

4 red or white potatoes, about 5 ounces each, well-scrubbed

2 tablespoons red wine vinegar

1 bay leaf

6 black peppercorns

Salt.

1. In a bowl, combine all ingredients for tapenade. May be refrigerated up to one week in a tightly sealed container.

***The New York Times* - Grilling Over Wood as a Sweaty, Smoky Sport**

May 19, 2009

Page 12

2. Put potatoes in a saucepan with vinegar, bay leaf, peppercorns, salt and water to cover. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat and continue to cook for 12 to 15 minutes, until potatoes are soft. Drain. While still warm, place potatoes in a dishtowel and gently crush with the flat of your hand on a hard surface.

3. Heat a seasoned griddle over medium-low grill or stovetop until a drop of water sizzles on surface. Place potatoes on griddle and cook without moving until golden brown, about 5 minutes. Remove potatoes to a plate with a wide spatula. Top uncooked side with 2 tablespoons tapenade, pressing it into potato. Put potatoes back on griddle, tapenade side down, and cook another 5 minutes. Serve immediately.

Yield: 4 servings.