

GRILLING: FRESHNESS MAKES THE DIFFERENCE

by Costas Spiliadis

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Nothing captures the essence of summer and Indian summer days like fresh food prepared and eaten outdoors. In Greece, people have been cooking on the open grill for thousands of years. This ancient cooking technique remains today the best way to enjoy the country's cuisine— simple, virtually unadorned, and full of natural flavor.

My cooking philosophy has always been: find the finest nature has to offer and alter it as little as possible. This belief, derived from Greek food traditions, finds its ideal method in grilling. A hot grill cooks food quickly, thereby preserving the original taste and quality. I have introduced the idea of simple grilling at the Milos restaurants in Montreal and New York City. Fresh fish, seafood, and vegetables are grilled, then simply drizzled with extra virgin olive oil, lemon juice, and herbs. For me this is the ultimate way to really taste what the land and sea have provided.

Grilling is an uncomplicated process that yields amazing results, provided a few basic tenets are followed. While many of us are familiar with steaks, hamburgers and salmon steaks on the grill, many other foods can be enjoyed this way. Innovative grill and barbecue recipes of all kinds abound in many of the new cook-books out this summer, including

The Barbecue! Bible, Steven Raichlen's compendium.

However, a slightly different set of rules governs fish, seafood, and vegetable grilling.

QUALITY COUNTS

The first secret of great grilling is using top-quality ingredients at the peak of freshness. More than any other cooking technique, grilling draws on and accentuates the flavor already present in food. Braising can make a tasty dish out of an ordinary cut of meat, but items for the grill need to be of premium quality. Then only the most basic of preparations is needed to bring out their best.

GRILLED GARDEN VEGETABLES

During the summer, home gardens overflow with colorful tomatoes, zucchini, eggplants, onions, peppers and herbs. Grilling is the perfect way to capture the flavor of fresh produce. A lemon juice and olive oil mixture makes an exceptional marinade to season and moisten vegetables before grilling. To ensure that vegetables cook evenly, it is best to chop them the same size, then place them on a skewer. Larger vegetables like zucchini and eggplant may be sliced lengthwise and placed directly on the grates of the grill. Watch carefully for doneness as vegetables cook very quickly.

MINIMAL SEASONING

While marinades, spice rubs and the like are great ways to add flavor to foods before cooking, they are often overwhelming for delicate fish and seafood. Strong tastes like garlic, chiles, or oil can mask the sweet, subtle taste of the sea that suffuses fresh fish. For this reason, I recommend grilling fish and seafood plain and adding just a bit of seasoning—extra virgin olive oil, lemon juice and herbs to your taste—after cooking.

FISH AND SEAFOOD ON THE GRILL

Grilled whole fish is a long-standing Greek tradition; a whole fish will retain more of the flavor than steaks or fillets. Best for whole fish grilling are white-fleshed varieties, such as pompano, red snapper, striped bass, dorade, pageot, and loup de mer. Or try your own catch of the day. The ideal weight is one to three pounds.

Here's how I tell when the fish is done: Before cooking I put a few insertions by the side of the fin. While it's on the grill, I periodically tug on the fin. If it resists, I know the fish needs more cooking. If the fin pulls off, I know it's done. Again, the natural flavor is such that little or no marination or seasoning is needed prior to grilling. Other savories from the sea like shrimp, scallops, squid, and cuttlefish are also tasty on the

grill. However, they generally benefit from a light marinade of lemon juice and olive oil before cooking.

GAS GRILLS BEST FOR FISH

Charcoal grilling is the perfect complement for meats and other traditional barbecue items. For fresh fish, however, gas grills are ideal in order to retain their natural taste. The idea is to cook the fish quickly with a neutral heat source that does not impart strong flavors. One wants to experience the intrinsic goodness of the plump sardines being grilled, not the overpowering taste of charcoal. Also, gas provides a more consistent heat source, cooking foods more evenly.

THE HINGED GRILL

For cooking fish whole, a device called the hinged grill is helpful. Though there are various designs available, the hinged grill is basically two metal grates that are joined on one side, coming together like a waffle iron. The whole fish is placed between the grates, protecting the delicate skin and flesh from the intense heat of direct fire. The hinged grill also allows you to keep the fish in one piece while turning it. Yet another benefit is that it prevents the fish from sticking to the grill by keeping it moist. Usually, however, a fish clinging to the grill is a sign of

a less than fresh specimen as opposed to poor grilling technique.

Summer and early fall present a bounty of fresh foods for grilling; if you enjoy vegetable gardening and fishing yourself, you can be your own best source for ingredients. You can't go wrong if you stick with the recipe passed on through centuries of Greek cooks: freshness and simplicity.

Costas Spiliadis is Chef-Owner of Estiatorio Milos in Montreal and New York City.

