GRILLING ON A HIBACHI: STEAK, LAMB CHOPS, AND CHICKEN

Chef Thomas Keller / Chapter Fourteen

MASTERCLASS

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"When summer rolls around, what do we start to think about when we think about food? We think about grilling. So what can you grill and what can't you grill? You can grill almost anything."

CHAPTER REVIEW

Backyard cookouts are a summertime staple. But Chef Keller enjoys grilling throughout the year—and not just steaks and burgers. Chef Keller teaches you how to grill all kinds of ingredients indoors, using a stovetop hibachi.

What you use as fuel is a matter of personal preference. Chef Keller runs through several options, including aged hardwood, such as oak, and any number of fruit tree woods. Different fuels burn at different temperatures and impart different flavors. Go with what appeals to you, though Chef Keller urges you to shy away from the cheap charcoal briquettes of his childhood, which are made of compressed scraps of wood and sawdust. Chef Keller's personal preference is for binchotan, a Japanese charcoal that burns at a lower temperature than hardwood charcoal but lasts much longer. Chef Keller tests the charcoal's readiness by holding his hand six inches above the grill; the heat should be intense enough that he has to pull his hand away in two seconds or less.

As with so much cooking, patience and attentiveness are key to grilling; keep a close watch on your ingredients as they grill. Safety is also crucial. Although grilling shouldn't produce more smoke than other techniques, such as sautéing, it pays to take precautions. Make sure you're working directly beneath a hood in a well-ventilated kitchen. Chef Keller always keeps a spray bottle of water nearby, which he uses in case of flareups.

The small grates of a hibachi will not leave grill marks on your food (those are more common when you're cooking on a covered grill with larger grates), but the binchotan will impart a wonderful woodsy flavor. Chef Keller seasons these mixed grills lightly, finishing them with salt, olive oil, and lemon.

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FOR THE GRILL

Mise en place

Ingredients

Yellow and red onions
Lamb chops, single bone chop, about 4 to 5 ounces
Boneless chicken breast, skin on, 6 to 7 ounces
Chicken tender
Chicken drumstick
Beef sirloin, 5 to 6-ounce pieces, about 1 inch thick
Eggplant and garlic confit (recipe below)
Canola oil
Kosher salt
Olive oil
Lemon
Sel gris

Equipment

Hibachi grill
Tongs*
Flexible spatula
Spray bottle
Platter
Large serving spoon

****Equipment note:*** Use whatever tongs you feel comfortable with that won't damage the product—the smallest size possible that will protect you from the heat and hold the meat securely without damaging it.

METHOD

TO START THE COALS:

Chef Keller uses binchotan charcoal from Japan. Use a chimney starter and follow the instructions from the manufacturer.

FOR THE MIXED GRILL:

Add the binchotan to the base of the hibachi and cover with grates. The air vents should be open about halfway.

Drizzle the onions with oil and season with salt. Arrange on the grill top.

Brush the meats with oil and season with salt. Arrange on the grill top. Since the meat proteins have more fat than the vegetables, flare ups are more likely so keep your spray bottle handy.

Each ingredient will have a slightly different cook time and you won't see grill marks cooking over open fire like you would with a closed grill. Look for browning and flip each vegetable and meat to brown both sides. Test the resistance to test for doneness.

Using tongs, transfer each ingredient to a serving platter as it finishes. Drizzle with olive oil and a squeeze of lemon, sprinkle with sel gris, and top with the charred onions.

To serve with the eggplant and garlic confit as Chef Keller does, follow the accompanying recipe on the following page.

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ACCOMPANIMENTS

FOR THE CONFIT:

Note: Chef Keller demonstrates how to make this confit in Chapter 14: Confit: Eggplant & Garlic of his first MasterClass.

Mise en place

Ingredients

3 Chinese eggplants
12 garlic cloves, peeled, stems trimmed
2 liters neutral-flavored, plant-based oil
1 bouquet garni (recipe below)
Aged balsamic vinegar
Fresh oregano
Kosher salt
Maldon sea salt

Equipment

Cutting board
Chef's knife
Baking dish
Thermometer
4-quart saucepot for heating oil
Ladle
Nogent fish spatula
Sheet pan lined with paper towels
Wire cake rack (optional)

FOR THE BOUQUET GARNI:

Ingredients

3 leek leaves
5 sprigs Italian parsley
5 sprigs thyme
2 bay leaves

Equipment

Kitchen shears
Butcher's twine
Cheesecloth

METHOD

Make the bouquet garni by wrapping leek leaves, Italian parsley sprigs, thyme sprigs, and bay leaves in cheesecloth and tie as you tied the asparagus bundles (in Chapter Eight).

Remove the tops and bottoms of the eggplants and cut them in half lengthwise. Score their flesh in a crosshatch pattern and lightly salt them so that the salt can penetrate the flesh and draw out moisture and bitterness. Rest flesh side down 25 minutes on a paper towel–lined sheet pan. then, lay eggplants flesh side down in the baking dish and add the garlic and bouquet garni. Heat oil to 250°F then carefully ladle the oil over the eggplants. If the eggplants float, you may add a wire cake rack over the eggplants to keep them submerged. Put the baking dish into a 300°F oven and check for tenderness after 45 minutes. The ideal texture of the eggplant should be creamy and have no resistance. For prolonged storage up to 1 week, keep the eggplant submerged in the oil in an airtight container inside the refrigerator.

If serving right away, remove the eggplants and garlic and allow them to drain on a paper towel–lined sheet pan. Chef Keller suggests using the remaining oil in vinaigrettes or in sautéing since it hasn't reached its smoke point and is still useable. Arrange the eggplants on a serving platter along with the confit garlic. Finish with a drizzle of balsamic vinegar, herbs of your choice, and a sprinkling of Maldon salt.

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You are probably familiar with charcoal briquettes—they're the least expensive and most common charcoal to use. They're made of sawdust and other ingredients compressed into the briquette shape. They're easy to use but offer poor cooking characteristics and potential for off flavors. Chef Keller doesn't recommend them. Hardwood charcoal, also known as lump charcoal, chunk charcoal, and char wood, is made out of solid pieces of wood that are heated at a high temperature in an oxygen-starved environment, sometimes for as long as several days. Hickory, oak, and mesquite are three of the most common hardwoods used for charcoal, but fruit tree woods, such as apple and cherry, are also popular. While hardwood charcoal costs more than charcoal briquettes, the extra expense gives you a hotter burning fuel that is better for direct grilling and free of any unnatural flavors. Binchotan, the Japanese hardwood charcoal that Chef Keller prefers, is made from ubame oak, a tree native to the Wakayama Prefecture. Its distinctive hard and smooth texture derives from a process of steaming the oak at an extremely high temperature. While the term binchotan is now widely applied to a range of hardwood charcoals, including some produced outside Japan, a movement is afoot to protect the designation by limiting it to charcoals from the Wakayama Prefecture.