

FOODS

Reel in a summer meal: Use these tips, recipes to tackle your fear of grilling seafood



12 HOURS AGO • BY ANDREA WEIGL RALEIGH, N.C. NEWS & OBSERVER

Grilling fish and seafood can be intimidating.

Many of us either overcook the fish or undercook the fish or can't pry the fish off the grill in one piece. We try special seafood grill baskets and every spatula in our kitchens with little improvement. We end up sacrificing more fillets and shellfish to the flames than we have eaten for dinner.

So we reached out to a handful of experts. They included: Katherine Alford, vice president of the test kitchen at Food Network Magazine; Barton Seaver, chef and author of "Where There's Smoke," and "For Cod and Country;" Jason Smith, chef and owner of 18 Seaboard and Cantina 18, both in Raleigh, N.C.; and Gene Briggs, chef and partner of Blue Restaurant & Bar and the chef at Osso Restaurant & Lounge, both in Charlotte, N.C.

All have their own techniques, and trial and error will determine the best approach. Here are a few key tips they agree on:

The grill must be clean. Preheat the grill and then scrub off any food particles.

The grill should be oiled. Dip a folded square of paper towel into a cooking oil. (Try an olive oil blended with canola oil, which has a good flavor but can handle higher temperatures.) Use tongs to rub the oiled paper towel along the grill grates. Do not spray a cooking oil, like Pam, on the grill when it's heating. It will cause flames to flare up.

Start with good seafood. Find a market that sells fresh seafood. "There's no trick for recovering from bad seafood," Seaver said.

Here are more tips from our experts:

Gene Briggs: Be patient

Oil the fish or shellfish, which will help prevent it from sticking.

Once the seafood or fish is placed on the grill, Briggs said, "Don't touch it." Our instinct is to fuss with it, to move it, to feel like we're cooking. And don't panic. Fish will initially stick but will

release once a crust develops. If you move the fish, the grate cools down and that process starts over again — increasing the likelihood that the fillet will fall apart.

Katherine Alford: One step a time

Start with shrimp and scallop kebabs, then graduate to fish steaks, like swordfish or tuna, then try foil packets for delicate fish. Food Network magazine ran a story last summer, “50 Things to Grill in Foil.”

Cook the seafood 75 percent of the way on one side, and then flip it to finish cooking the remaining 25 percent.

Barton Seaver: Try brining

Keep the fish skin on for grilling. It helps the fillet stay together and helps keep the fish from drying out.

Unlike our other experts, Seaver advocates a low-and-slow approach. He uses low heat on a gas grill or a small charcoal fire and places the seafood away from the flames. Then close the lid to create an oven-like effect.

Fish is done when it is opaque, the top of the fillet starts to flake and moisture can be seen pushing up through the fish. Seaver cooks fish until the internal temperature is 120-125 degrees. (Note: this differs from the federal government’s recommendation of cooking finfish to 145 degrees.)

Brine the fish. In his cookbook, Seaver offers a recipe for fish brine (see below). Brining, Seaver said, helps season the fish throughout, strengthen the proteins before cooking and retain moisture.

Jason Smith: Use fresh herb oil

Baste the seafood. For fish, Smith uses a fresh herb oil, which is made by steeping flat-leaf parsley and basil stems in an olive oil blend. For shellfish, Smith uses butter because the shellfish is lean and can handle some fat. Smith even dips his spatula in the herb oil or butter before trying to remove the seafood from the grill.

Watch the heat. A more delicate fish, like trout or catfish, needs high heat. A meatier fish, like swordfish or tuna, can cook over medium heat.

TIPS FOR COOKING VARIOUS FISH

Chef Barton Seaver shares these tips for how to prepare various species of fish:

Bluefish: Roast them slowly over a smoky fire and serve them with something acidic to mellow out the richness.

Catfish: Most fillets are sold without the skin on, which can make grilling difficult with this delicate, flaky fish. Use care and restraint when grilling catfish. Do not fuss with them.

Mahi Mahi: Choose fresh fillets instead of frozen whenever possible.

Snapper: The skin is key to holding this flaky, fragile fish together. Always grill skin side down.

Trout: This fish is easy to grill, but the flesh cooks quickly, so take care. Consider stuffing the cavity of a whole trout with citrus and herbs.

Tuna: Tuna should be cooked to medium rare. When cooked beyond that point, it tends to dry out quickly.

From "Where There's Smoke: Simple Sustainable Delicious Grilling," by Barton Seaver, (Sterling Epicure, 2013)

WHERE TO BUY?

Consider shopping at a store that specializes in fresh fish and seafood.

DO YOU NEED ANY SPECIAL EQUIPMENT?

Our experts agree that a fish spatula is a good investment. Its thin, flexible blade helps remove the fish or seafood from a hot grill without sticking.

Most of our experts agree that a fish basket shouldn't be used for fish fillets, which increases the chances it will stick. If you already have one, use it to cook kebabs or small shrimp to avoid food dropping into the fire. Oil it and preheat it before you place the fish or seafood on it to prevent sticking.

Smoky Catfish and Trinity Black-Eyed Pea Salad

1 pound U.S. catfish fillets, soaked in Fish Brine (see recipe below)

Juice of 1/2 orange or lemon

Handful of wood chips, such as hickory or mesquite, soaked in water for 15 minutes or so

1 (15-ounce) can black-eyed peas, drained and rinsed under cold running water

1 red bell pepper, seeded and cut into thin strips

1 small red onion, peeled sliced super thin

3 stalks celery, thinly sliced

1 tablespoon white balsamic vinegar or good quality white wine vinegar

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

Kosher salt

Leaves from 4 sprigs fresh mint, torn

Prepare fish brine (see recipe below) with the addition of juice from half a lemon or orange. Soak catfish fillets in the brine for 20 minutes.

Mix black-eyed peas with pepper strips, onion, celery, vinegar and olive oil in a medium bowl. Season to taste with salt and sprinkle with the mint. Toss to combine and let sit at least 15 minutes.

Preheat grill to a medium heat. (You should be able to hold your hand over the heat for only 2 to 3 seconds.) For a charcoal grill, add a handful of wood chunks to the coals. For a gas grill, place presoaked woodchips in a pouch made from heavy duty aluminum foil and poke holes in the pouch. Place wood chip pouch below the grate but above the burner.

Place catfish on the grill for indirect heat so that the fish is not directly over the heat source. Cover the grill and cook for 12 to 15 minutes, depending on the thickness. The fish is done when it flakes under gentle pressure.

Serve catfish hot off the grill on a bed of the salad. Any leftover fish can be flaked into the salad, refrigerated and served the next day.

- Makes 4 servings

Adapted from "Where There's Smoke: Simple Sustainable Delicious Grilling," by Barton Seaver, (Sterling Epicure, 2013)

Fish Brine

2 cups warm water

1 tablespoon kosher salt

1 tablespoon sugar

Mix water, salt and sugar and stir until the sugar and salt are dissolved. Submerge the fish in the brine, weighing it down with a plate if need be, and brine according to these guidelines:

- Trout, shrimp, sardines and other delicate seafood: 15 minutes
- Bass, barramundi, sablefish and other flaky fillets: 20 minutes
- Halibut, mahi mahi, blue fish and other flaky, meaty fillets: 30 minutes
- Salmon, mackerel, Arctic char and other meaty, full-flavored fish: 35 minutes
- Amberjack, cobia, swordfish and other dense, steak-like fish: 40 minutes

From "Where There's Smoke: Simple Sustainable Delicious Grilling," by Barton Seaver, (Sterling Epicure, 2013)

Salmon with Citrus-Spice Glaze

3 tablespoons packed dark brown sugar

2 tablespoons orange juice

1 1/2 teaspoons smoked paprika

1/4 teaspoon ground cumin

1/4 teaspoon crushed red pepper

1/4 teaspoon salt

1/8 teaspoon ground black pepper

4 center-cut skin-on salmon fillets (6 ounces each)

Prepare outdoor grill for direct grilling over medium heat.

Stir sugar, orange juice, paprika, cumin and crushed red pepper in a small bowl until the sugar dissolves.

Sprinkle salt and pepper on flesh side of salmon.

Grill salmon, skin side up, 4 minutes, then carefully turn salmon over. Brush sugar mixture over salmon. Cook 4 to 5 minutes longer or until just opaque throughout, continuously brushing sugar mixture over salmon. (Instant-read thermometer inserted horizontally into center of fillets should register 145 degrees.)

Carefully remove salmon from grill by sliding long, thin spatula between fish and grill grate. Discard skin.

- Makes 4 servings

From "The Good Housekeeping Test Kitchen Grilling Cookbook: 225 Sizzling Recipes for Every Season," (Hearst Books, 2013)

Grilled Trout Salad with Ramp Ranch Dressing

If you cannot find ramps, use green onions or garlic scapes, the green part of garlic bulbs that grow above ground.

2 cups sour cream

4 cups buttermilk

1 tablespoon onion powder

1 tablespoon garlic powder

6 ramps, chopped

2 sprigs of lemon thyme, stem removed, chopped

2 sprigs of marjoram, chopped

Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

1 large head of romaine lettuce, chopped into bite-size pieces

4 radishes, thinly sliced

1 cup sweet peas

1 cucumber, thinly sliced

4 trout fillets

Olive oil blend

Combine sour cream, buttermilk, onion powder, garlic powder, ramps, lemon thyme and marjoram in a small bowl. Stir to combine. Add salt and pepper to taste.

Place lettuce, radishes, sweet peas and cucumber slices in a large bowl. Pour 1 cup of dressing over the salad and toss. Save remaining dressing for another use. It will keep in the refrigerator for five days.

Preheat grill to high heat. Season trout fillets with salt and pepper. Brush skin side of each fillet with an olive oil blend. Place trout, skin side down, on grill and cook for 1 1/2 minutes and then flip and grill for about 30 seconds. Fish should be opaque and cooked throughout.

Divide salad among four plates. Place a trout fillet on top of each salad.

- Makes 4 servings

From chef Jason Smith of 18 Seaboard and Cantina 18 in Raleigh.