



top ten

GRILLING DOS AND DON'TS



Do preheat the grill. If your cooking grates aren't hot enough, some food will stick and will never have a decent chance of searing properly or developing handsome grill marks. Even if a recipe calls for medium or low heat, you should preheat the grill on high first. Open the grill's lid, fire up the charcoal or the gas burners, close the lid, and then let the cooking grates get screaming hot for about ten minutes. The grill temperature should reach at least 500°F.

Don't start with dirty grates. Tossing food onto the cooking grates before they have been cleaned is a great way to experience dinner déjà vu—if you're into that sort of thing. Leftover “stuff” on the grates acts like glue, binding both your new food to the old and all of it to the grates. After you have preheated the grill for about ten minutes, brush that stuff off entirely so that whatever you are grilling now has a clean, smooth surface to brown evenly. The best tool for the job is a sturdy, long-handled brush with stiff, stainless steel bristles.

Do get your act together. Bring everything you need near the grill before you actually grill. If you have to run back into the kitchen while your food is cooking, you might miss (that is, overcook or burn) something important. So bring your tools, bring your food that is already oiled and seasoned, bring your glaze or sauce or whatever. Don't forget clean platters for the cooked food. French chefs call this *mise en place* (meaning, “put in place”). We call it getting your act together.

Do give yourself at least two heat zones. If you set up your grill for one type of heat only, your options are limited. What if something is cooking too fast? What if your food is flaring up? What if you are grilling two very different foods at the same time? You should have at least two heat zones: one for direct heat (where the fire is right under the food) and one for indirect heat (where the fire is off to the side of the food). That way, you can move your food from one zone to another whenever you like.

Don't overcrowd the grill. Packing too much food into a tight space on the grill restricts your flexibility. You should leave at least one-quarter of the cooking grates clear, with plenty of space between each food item so that you can get your tongs in there and easily move them around. Sometimes grilling involves split-second decisions and the ability to jockey food from one area to another. So give yourself enough room to work.



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Do use the lid. Believe it or not, a grill's lid is for much more than just keeping the rain out. Its more important job is preventing too much air from getting in and too much heat and smoke from getting out. When the lid is closed, the cooking grates are hotter, the grilling times are faster, the smoky tastes are stronger, and the flare-ups are fewer. So put a lid on it. Having said that, don't forget to open the charcoal grill's lid vent at least halfway. Every fire needs a little air to keep on burning.

Don't touch the food so much. We all like food when it is seared to a deep brown color with plenty of beautifully charred bits. The trouble is, many people move their food so often that it doesn't get enough time in one place to reach that desirable level of color and flavor. In nearly all cases, you should turn food just once or twice. If you're fiddling with it more than that, you are probably also opening the lid too much, which causes its own set of problems. Step back and trust the process.

Do take charge of the fire. On its own, a charcoal fire climbs to its hottest temperatures first and then loses heat either quickly or slowly, depending on your type of charcoal and, more importantly, on you. So make some proactive moves like refueling the fire before you lose too much heat, rearranging coals to suit your needs, sweeping away the ashes that could clog the bottom vents, and adjusting the vents on the lid for ideal airflow. A grill master is always in charge.

Don't serve rubbery chicken. When grilling, sometimes the most important thing is knowing when to stop. If you specialize in chicken breasts so overcooked that they bounce, it's time to learn some doneness clues, as in the gently yielding firmness of perfectly grilled chicken when you press the surface with a fingertip. If you want an even more reliable test of doneness, get an instant-read thermometer. This slim little gem will help you pinpoint that critical moment when your food is at its best.

Do use the grill for more than grilling. Back in the 1950s, grilling meant one thing: meat (and only meat) charred over open flames. A true measure of a griller today is the depth and breadth of the menu. That means appetizers through desserts cooked on the grill and, in some cases, that means learning how to braise, roast, smoke, simmer, and even sauté or stir-fry. When you have learned how to harness the heat of the grill to do all this and more, you're officially a master of new American grilling.

GETTING STARTED