

Fire It Up!

Local grillers share some of their culinary secrets

by Jennie Orvino

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When the clocks have sprung forward and there are more hours of daylight to eat—or at least cook—outside, people start dreaming of BBQ. Who among us has turned down an invitation to a Sonoma County outdoor party, whether it holds the promise of grilled Spring lamb and a glass of Cabernet Sauvignon, a toasty Chardonnay with salmon fillet, or tofu-portobello kabobs with a stein of micro-brew?

The following Petaluma fans of grilling each have a unique perspective on this activity, which is part science, part art.

Adrian and John McNaught's backyard expanse of lawn, volleyball court, and barbecue patio reflect congeniality and an emphasis on relaxed gatherings. They barbecue all year round on an L-shaped station that includes a charcoal grill, a propane grill, a sink, refrigerator, counter space, bar area with stools, and a sun umbrella. John said, "I designed it, my cousin built it, and my son Miles did all the tile work."

Wearing an apron over his baggy black shorts and logo T-shirt from the entertainment production company for which he works, 35-year-old Miles said, "On my days off, I'll be out there at eight in the morning, listening to music and firing up the 'cue.'" He loaded the grate with chunks of charcoal from an industrial-sized bag, and added, "I know that a lot of women barbecue, but it's thought of as more of a man's thing because it's a PROJECT. You have to get your mesquite going, you have to get your marinades made hours before..."

The McNaught's youngest son Ryan, their just-married daughter Anaise, and Adrian's mother whom everyone calls "Bum Bum" were among those waiting for the evening's feast. When asked the biggest crowd he ever cooked for, Miles said they had more than fifty guests at a recent birthday party and 300 barbecued oysters were consumed.

The McNaughts purchase Hog Island Oysters, extra small, figuring 10 per person. "We throw whole oysters on the gas grill," he explained. "If you wait a few minutes, they open by themselves. At that point you take 'em off the grill, pop 'em open the rest of the way, knife 'em out a little bit so they're not stuck to the shell any more, and then put the sauce in the shell. Put the top shell on as well as you can, then back on the grill for a minute or so more. It's about 7-10 minutes start to finish."

His parents bought him a set of contemporary-styled, stainless steel Hoffritz tools, but Miles claimed he's a very "hands on" cook, and has never burned his fingers.

"For good cuts of steak, I massage in olive oil and sprinkle on Montreal Steak Seasoning. For cheaper cuts of meat, like Tri-tip or London Broil, I do a 'Rocky thing' for about ten minutes, tenderize it with my fists a little bit. It really does help out."

When asked for his special tips, Miles offered, "You know beef is done perfectly medium when blood comes through the steak [after it's turned], and starts to coagulate on top. If you cut it, you'll see it's pink in the center."

Amanda Ward's husband Brant says the key to her expertise is her "innate ability" to know precisely when the meat or fish is done. "I don't have to use a timer or meat thermometer, Amanda said. "Even if I start the dinner late and it's dark when I'm taking it off the grill."

Now that their son Aidan is a teen-ager, the grassy yard where he used to play has been redesigned into a lovely raised-bed garden with stone paths and benches, ideal for entertaining. Here, the health-conscious Wards raise the herbs and vegetables that figure so prominently in their marinades and barbecue supper menus..

They use a starter chimney rather than charcoal lighter fluid, which "trashes the environment."

“Yeah,” said Brant, a former photographer for the ARGUS COURIER who now works for the SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE. “We stuff the bottom of it with a certain Petaluma weekly newspaper, put the coals on top and light it.”

When asked for special tips, Amanda had these suggestions:

“At the beginning of the year, I clean the grill really well with a pumice stone, then I spray it with oil, and spray whatever I’m cooking with oil for the first two barbecues. Then I never clean it again, except to take a wire brush to it. Don’t use soap. The grill gets seasoned and nothing sticks to it. And, always let it get very hot before you put anything on it.

“I love fish, but I despise it cooked in the oven. It has to have the grill marks on it and be dry and flakey. We cook firm fish like salmon, halibut, swordfish. Don’t use foil; put the fish, brushed with olive oil and garlic, right on the grill, and, turn it only once, just like a pancake.”

Eris Weaver is big on the fun factor of barbecue. “Somehow it evokes memories of camping and picnics. Even if all the other parts of the dinner are made in the kitchen, barbecuing a couple of burgers makes an ordinary weekday feel like a vacation day. I relax out in the yard with my magazine and a glass of wine while minding the grill.”

A medical librarian at the Redwood Health Library, Eris noted that research on nutritional advantages or disadvantages of barbecuing is hard to find. “The health issues around grilling have to do with what happens to fat and proteins at very high temperatures. Chemical compounds found in the burnt stuff are not very good for you. Of course, cooking outdoors with gas contributes less to air pollution than burning wood or charcoal.”

Condo living with small amounts of storage space prompted Eris to pick up the compact Tool Box Grill.™ (see sidebar) “I read an article about it because a Petaluman invented it; got it for \$49.99 at the hardware store around the corner. It looks like an old-fashioned workman’s tool box with a handle on top and snaps to close it. You can carry it to the beach or a sports event, it is self-contained, doesn’t spill ashes. The size is perfect because I usually cook for only two or three people anyway.”

Eris makes her own teriyaki marinade, so she can avoid the high-salt, high-sugar content of commercial brands. However, she confesses that one of her culinary secrets is to add Lipton onion soup mix to flavor the organic, grass-fed beef she buys specifically because it is higher in beneficial omega three fats. “I realize that doesn’t jibe with all my health concerns, but contradictions are part of what make us interesting!”

Herb Morris has been barbecuing for many of his 75 years. According to his wife, Dorothy, he is “very particular” about his process and an expert in preparing meat. So expert, in fact, that he’s the chef a local tour company calls upon each year to barbecue for a special outing for seniors. “Up to 120 people—mostly ladies, but some men—come in a bus from San Francisco to Finley Park in Santa Rosa. I make ribs and chicken for the picnic, they play Bingo and have a great day out,” Herb said. “These seniors have been eating for a long time, so you know, the food has to be good!”

He makes the same preparations for a family meal as he does for a big event. It’s just a matter of scale, and asking the right questions:

“First I figure out who we’re going to be feeding. If there are children, they like hot dogs. Older folks like chicken or beef. And then, how many people? I figure two bones per person on ribs. All pigs have ten ribs, so each slab serves five.”

Herb uses simple seasoning. “Go light on the salt, then add pepper, garlic powder or whatever seasonings you want to use.” If he’s doing a roast, he scores the fat and then sprays it with white wine in a spray bottle. He puts the seasoned meat in two-gallon ziplock bags and refrigerates it for a day or two prior to grilling.

When Herb cooks chicken indirectly, he puts chicken thighs, skin down, on one side of the grill and sets up the fire on the other. He recommends using hickory smoke wood chips (soaked overnight) on top

of the coals. “If you fan the fire and get it too hot, the meat will dry out. And use tongs, not a fork, because that puts holes in the meat and you lose the juice to the fire.”

Herb’s final words of advice?

If you need to knock down flames, add some Worcestershire sauce to the water in the spray bottle—only enough to give it a light color. That way, you’ll be adding a little seasoning instead of washing it off!”

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BBQ Equipment Sidebar (word count 420)

“Our basic equipment? An old, slightly rusted out Weber,” said Amanda Ward, who was a technical editor/proofreader for 25 years and is now a basket weaver. She lives on the east side of Petaluma with her husband and 15-year-old son. “There are three appliances that have really changed my life: the Sonicare tooth brush, The Boss Eureka vacuum, and the George Forman Grill..”

In winter, the Wards use the Forman grilling machine because it’s energy-saving, easy to clean, non-stick and low fat. It makes everything from grilled cheese sandwiches and hamburgers to fish and vegetables, complete with the requisite grill marks.

Eris Weaver says she is a “living commercial” for the Tool Box Grill™. Developed and sold through Hans Plads consumer products of Petaluma this easy-to-transport item is available in charcoal and gas versions. [www.ToolBoxGrill.com or (866) BBQ-FUN-1]

“It fits in the trunk or back seat of the car. It lights immediately no matter how much wind there is and cooks fast. It has a cute little insert (just like a regular tool box) to hold cute little barbecue tools. When you’re finished, you close the lid and the fire goes out. It is, in my opinion, the most superlatively superior grill ever to exist on the face of the planet, if not the universe.”

When Herb Morris cooks for a crowd, he uses a 55 gallon drum, cut at three-quarter size instead of one-half. Similar drum-type equipment can be seen in action at Lombardi’s on the corner of Skillman Lane and Petaluma Blvd. According to a staffer at the deli, they have been using the same hefty BBQs to make succulent tri-tip, ribs and chicken, nearly non-stop for more than 3 years.

The big box and local hardware stores are replete with gas grills in styles from simple to sublime. The basic Weber kettle has evolved in two directions: upward to a large-circumference “Ranch” model, and downward to a “Go Anywhere” portable, in charcoal or gas models. For those who want “the function of a BBQ and the experience of an open fire,” the low, round California Firepit comes in two sizes, depending on how many marshmallows you want to roast.

To give your grilled items that smokey taste, pick up a bag of mesquite or hickory, soak the wood chunks in water, then throw them on top of a charcoal fire. Or purchase “smoking pellets” in those traditional “flavors” as well as some that are more unusual: apple, sugar maple, orange and (yes) Jack Daniels.