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The Grill Master: Side Dishes

Summer's best meals revolve around fresh ingredients, simply prepared to let the natural flavors shine. Here you'll find some delicious seasonal side dishes that are great for leisurely weekend meals as well as weeknight dinners.

Secrets to Grilling Great Vegetables

The high heat of the fire brings out the natural sugars in vegetables so they actually retain more of their flavor, vitamins and minerals than they do when cooked in water.

Shopping for Vegetables

In-season vegetables grown close to home are best. Look for vegetables that are plump, moist and unwrinkled. Follow these guidelines when buying produce.



Asparagus: Medium-sized and fat stalks grill better than very thin spears, which can be bitter. Peeling the bottom third of the spears with a vegetable peeler will help them cook evenly.

Corn: Look for firm ears with plump kernels and a lot of creamy colored silk; avoid ears with heavily soiled or slimy fringe. The husks should be bright green and appear moist, not dried out.

Eggplant: Look for evenly colored eggplant with shiny skin. Cut globe eggplant into slices for the grill; cook Asian eggplant whole or halved.

Fennel: Choose fresh bulbs that are smooth and tightly layered with no cracks or bruises. White and pale green, rounded bulbs tend to be more succulent than yellow or thin ones. Grocers sometimes incorrectly label fennel as sweet anise.

Mushrooms: Look for mushrooms with relatively clean, firm caps. For portobellos, choose those that are evenly sized and have gills that appear clean, dry and distinct.



Onions: Look for onions that are firm with smooth, dry skins. Avoid any with soft spots, particularly at the stem end; green shoots; moldy areas; or moist, wrinkled skins. In the spring, seek out sweet onions such as Maui, Vidalia or Walla Walla.

Peppers: Look for peppers and chilies with smooth skin, as they will be easier to char on the grill than gnarled or grooved peppers. Thin-skinned varieties need a gentler touch so that they don't develop holes while grilling from too-high heat.

Summer Squashes: Select zucchini, yellow crooknecks, pattypan and other summer squashes that are mature enough to have full flavor yet small enough to be tender and free of large seeds.

Tomatoes: Buy tomatoes only in season, and make sure they are firm but ripe. Heirloom varieties are particularly flavorful. Never store tomatoes in the refrigerator or they will become mealy. A sunny windowsill is a good place to store underripe tomatoes.



6 sweet potatoes, peeled and cut crosswise into slices ½ inch thick

Melted unsalted butter for brushing, plus 2 Tbs. butter

½ cup honey, at room temperature

¼ cup fresh lime juice

Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

Honey-Lime Sweet Potatoes

Often labeled yam in markets, the best sweet potato to use for this dish has dark reddish orange skin and vibrant orange, moist flesh. The smoke from the grill will permeate the flesh of the potato, while the heat will caramelize its natural sugars.

Bring a saucepan three-fourths full of water to a boil over high heat. Add the sweet potato slices and boil for 10 minutes. Drain and let cool.

Prepare a medium-hot fire in a grill. Brush the potato slices with the melted butter.

Grill the potato slices over the hottest part of a charcoal fire or directly over the heat elements of a gas grill, turning once, until fork-tender, 4 to 5 minutes per side.

Meanwhile, in a small saucepan over low heat, mix the honey and lime juice until smooth. Add the 2 Tbs. butter and stir until melted. Season with salt and pepper. Brush the sweet potatoes on both sides with the glaze and grill them briefly, turning once, about 30 seconds per side. Serve hot.

Serves 6.

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma *Essentials of Grilling*, by Denis Kelly, Melanie Barnard, Barbara Grunes & Michael McLaughlin (Oxmoor House, 2003).

Kosher salt, to taste

2½ lb. Yukon Gold potatoes, peeled and sliced ¾ inch thick on a mandoline

2 garlic cloves

8 Tbs. (1 stick) unsalted butter

1 Tbs. chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley

1 tsp. chopped fresh thyme

Freshly ground pepper, to taste

Smoky Potato Gratin

Here, thinly sliced potatoes are partially cooked on the stovetop, then layered in a perforated or mesh grill pan and cooked on an outdoor grill, which infuses them with enticing smoky flavor.

Bring a large pot of water to a boil over high heat. Salt the water, add the potato slices and cook until they are slightly softened but not completely tender, about 8 minutes. Drain the potatoes well and let cool.

Prepare a grill for indirect grilling over medium-high heat.

Using the side of a chef's knife, smash the garlic cloves and sprinkle with a generous pinch of salt. Continue smashing and scraping the garlic into a paste.

In a small saucepan over medium heat, melt the butter. Stir in the garlic paste, parsley and thyme, and season with salt and pepper.

Spray a perforated or mesh grill pan with nonstick cooking spray. Place 2 potato slices in the center of the grill pan, then create 2 separate rings of potato slices: Starting with the inner ring, arrange the slices, slightly overlapping the center slices as well as the previous slice, to create a fanned effect. Then form an outer ring of potato slices, slightly overlapping the inner ring. Brush the first layer of potatoes with some of the garlic-herb butter and season with salt and pepper. Repeat to create a second layer on top of the first one. Brush the top layer with garlic-herb butter and season with salt and pepper.

Transfer the grill pan to the center of the grill and cover the grill. Cook, basting the potatoes with garlic-herb butter every 10 minutes, until they are tender and browned on top, 35 to 45 minutes. Serves 6 to 8.

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Preparing Vegetables for Grilling

Prevent vegetables from sticking to the rack by coating both the rack and the vegetables with oil before grilling. A grilling basket or grill screen is handy for cooking small vegetables that may fall through the spaces in the rack.

Testing Vegetables for Doneness

Piercing a vegetable with a skewer or the tip of a knife will give you some idea of whether or not they are done. However, the best way to test a vegetable for doneness is to cut off a piece and eat it. Some vegetables, such as asparagus and fennel, are most satisfying when tender-crisp, which means tender when you first bite into them and crunchy at the center. Other vegetables, such as eggplants and mushrooms, should be cooked until soft throughout.



Grilled Eggplant, Corn and Bread Salad with Tomato-Basil Vinaigrette

In this nontraditional take on classic Italian bread salad, basil is a fitting flavoring for a fresh tomato vinaigrette. More surprisingly, basil's sweet anise-like hints perfectly accent the smokiness of the grilled eggplant and toasty flavor of the charred corn.

Bring a saucepan two-thirds full with water to a boil over high heat. Fill a bowl two-thirds full with ice water. Using a paring knife, score an X on the bottom of each tomato. Drop the tomatoes into the boiling water and heat until the skins loosen, 15 to 30 seconds. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the tomatoes to the ice water and let stand until cool. Remove the tomatoes from the ice water and pull off the skins. Core the tomatoes and halve them crosswise. Gently squeeze each half to ease out the seeds, then coarsely chop the flesh. You should have about 1½ cups chopped tomatoes.

Transfer the chopped tomatoes to a nonreactive bowl. Add 2 Tbs. of the basil, the vinegar, 1 Tbs. of the olive oil, the garlic, the ½ tsp. salt and several grinds of pepper. Using an immersion blender, process until a chunky vinaigrette forms. (Or, pulse the ingredients in a standing blender.) Adjust the seasonings with salt and pepper. Set aside.

Prepare a medium-hot fire in a grill.

Brush the ears of corn on all sides with 1 Tbs. of the olive oil and season with salt and pepper. Brush the eggplant slices on both sides with the remaining 6 Tbs. olive oil and season both sides with salt and pepper.

Grill the eggplant slices, turning once, until softened and grill-marked on both sides, about 12 minutes total. Transfer to a cutting board. Grill the corn, turning frequently, until charred in spots, 10 to 12 minutes. Transfer to the cutting board. Cut the eggplant slices into ¾-inch pieces. Using a chef's knife, cut the ears of corn in half crosswise. Stand each half, flat end down, on a cutting board and cut the kernels from the cob. Alternatively, remove the kernels using a kernel cutter.

In a large bowl, combine the eggplant, corn kernels, the remaining 4 Tbs. basil and the bread cubes. Pour in the tomato vinaigrette and stir well. Transfer to a platter or serving bowl and serve immediately. Serves 6 to 8.

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma *New Flavors for Salads*, by Dina Cheney (Oxmoor House, 2009).

2 large ripe tomatoes, about 1 lb. total

6 Tbs. thinly sliced fresh basil

2 Tbs. balsamic vinegar

8 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil

2 large garlic cloves, minced

½ tsp. sea salt, plus more, to taste

Freshly ground pepper, to taste

3 ears of corn, husks and silk removed

2 large eggplant, about 2½ lb. total, cut crosswise into slices ½ inch thick

1 loaf (¾ lb.) *pane pugliese* or other coarse country bread, cut into 1-inch cubes (about 4 cups)



18 large jalapeño peppers

1¼ cups finely grated sharp cheddar cheese

¾ cup chopped corn kernels

2 Tbs. minced green onion, white and green portions

Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

Cheddar and Corn Jalapeño Poppers

Filled with cheddar cheese, corn kernels and other savory ingredients, our fire-roasted peppers are the perfect appetizer or side dish for outdoor gatherings.

Cut ¼ inch off the top of each jalapeño pepper; reserve the tops. Using a pepper corer or a thin knife, hollow out the centers of the peppers, removing the seeds and ribs; do not cut through the flesh.

Prepare a grill for indirect grilling over medium-high heat.

In a bowl, stir together the cheese, corn and green onion, and season with salt and pepper. Stuff the center of each pepper with 1 to 2 Tbs. of the cheese mixture, filling to within ⅛ inch of the top of the pepper. Place the filled peppers upright in a jalapeño pepper roaster and set the cut tops back on top of the peppers.

Place the pepper roaster on the grill over indirect heat and cover the grill. Roast until the peppers are tender and the cheese is melted, about 25 minutes.

Transfer the jalapeño poppers to a platter and serve immediately. Makes 18 jalapeño poppers.

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Grilled Vegetable Antipasto with Red Onion Vinaigrette

If you have a favorite vegetable, add it to the mix.

Trim the eggplant, zucchini and yellow squash and slice lengthwise ¼ inch thick. Seed and stem the bell peppers, trim away the ribs and cut lengthwise into strips about 1 inch wide. Trim off the stems from the mushrooms and, using a small spoon, scrape out and discard the black gills. Quarter the caps. Peel and trim the red onions, then slice them into thick wedges.

Combine all of the vegetables in a large bowl, drizzle with the olive oil, add the thyme and season with sea salt and pepper. Toss to coat the vegetables evenly. Let stand for 15 to 20 minutes to allow the vegetables to release some of their juices. Toss again just before grilling.

Meanwhile, prepare a medium-hot fire in a grill and oil the grill rack.

To prepare the red onion vinaigrette, grill the red onion slices. Chop finely, place in a small bowl and stir in the vinegar, the ½ tsp. kosher salt and the sugar. Add a few grindings of pepper and let stand for 10 minutes. Whisk in the olive oil and adjust the seasonings with salt and pepper.

Working in batches, place the vegetables on the grill rack and cook, turning once, until golden and tender, 2 to 3 minutes per side. Transfer to a platter. When all of the vegetables are cooked, drizzle with the red onion vinaigrette and serve. Serves 4 to 6.

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma *Family Meals*, by Maria Helm Sinskey (Oxmoor House, 2008).

For the grilled red onion vinaigrette:

2 red onion slices, each ½ inch thick

3 Tbs. red wine vinegar

½ tsp. kosher salt, plus more, to taste

¼ tsp. sugar

Freshly ground pepper, to taste

¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil, plus more as needed