

Adventures in Grilling

EVERYTHING'S BETTER ON THE GRILL.

Laura Muzzi Brennan

IF YOU CAN DREAM IT, YOU CAN GRILL IT. EVERYWHERE you look—from food magazines to under the dome of your neighbor's grill—cooks are pushing the boundaries. When playing with fire, play is the operative word.

At **Restaurant Alba** in Malvern, chef-owner Sean Weinberg's wood-fired grill occupies pride of place in his cooking. "Every element on the menu has a touch of the grill," Weinberg says. One of the pleasures of dining at Restaurant Alba is looking from the main dining room into the kitchen to see Weinberg and his staff use live fire to coax bold flavor from ingredients.

Weinberg rotates between red and white oak and 100% mesquite charcoal from California for food that sings with sweet, oaky and piney notes. He fires up the grill an hour and a half before dinner service. (There are no grilled dishes at lunch.) At night when coals are low, he roasts vegetables like onions and butternut squash directly in the coals.

While whole grilled fish and grass-fed ribeyes are popular dishes, Weinberg loves introducing his guests to grilled vegetables and encourages home grillers to experiment, especially with his favorites: broccoli rabe, endives and radicchio, which he seasons with a house-made sweet vinegar. His description of their crunchy, charred exteriors is enough to tempt even the staunchest carnivore.

Grilling vegetables, like all grilling, is a mix of art of science. But in general, Weinberg recommends keeping vegetables as large as possible—maybe just splitting that head of radicchio or fat leek in half. Large, dense vegetables do best when cooked slowly over low heat. For potatoes, whose undercooked middles are the bane of many a backyard barbecue, Weinberg suggests par-boiling them whole, cooling them without rinsing, cutting into thick slices and giving them a turn on the grates. For more of Weinberg's grilling wisdom, see the sidebar that follows.

One of Weinberg's specialties—and passions—is bruschette. "When bread is grilled on a live fire, the whole dish is elevated," he says. Restaurant Alba offers five bruschette options every night, one more appealing than the next. From garlicky fava beans with aged pecorino to mozzarella burrata and charred leeks to wood-grilled



The grill in the open kitchen at Restaurant Alba



Grilled Fish



Bruschette

pancetta with cippolini onion butter, the only sensible option is to sample all five. For home grillers, Weinberg suggests putting out bowls of toppings and encouraging guests to create their own combinations.

Although there are no grilled desserts on Alba's current menu, Weinberg is not short on ideas: "What about pound cake brushed with maple butter? What about Nutella flatbread? What about grilled Angel food cake?"

Here's hoping we'll see these and more at Alba—and at your next cookout—before too long.

Bruschette with Three Toppings

Chef Sean Weinberg suggests using ¾” slices of Italian-style bread like ciabatta or Pugliese, but he says feel free to experiment with other types like rye or spelt. Simply brush bread with olive oil, salt and pepper, and lightly char for approximately 2 minutes per side. Traditionally toppings are served directly on the bread, but for larger parties, to keep the bread from getting soggy, serve these 3 toppings alongside the bread in bowls. Heirloom tomatoes are ideal for this recipe.

Smashed Avocado

2 ripe avocados
Juice of one lemon
1 Tb. olive oil
2 Tb. crème fraîche
3 chopped peppadew chiles
1 shallot, chopped
1 Tb. basil chiffonade
Salt and pepper to taste

Fork-smash the avocado in a bowl with lemon juice and olive oil. Fold in crème fraîche, peppadews, shallot and basil. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

Makes 4 servings.

Honey Whipped Ricotta

2 C. whole milk ricotta or sheep's milk ricotta
¼ C. heavy cream
2 Tb. honey
1 tsp. sea salt
1 tsp. fresh coarsely ground black pepper
Juice of half a lime
Salt and pepper to taste

Whip ingredients together in a non-reactive bowl. Stainless steel, ceramic and glass are all fine.

Makes 4 servings.

Tomato Relish

Heirloom tomatoes are ideal for this recipe.

3 ripe tomatoes, diced
1 Tb. basil chiffonade
1 tsp. chopped garlic
1 Tb. rinsed capers
Juice of one lemon
4 Tb. extra virgin olive oil
Salt and pepper to taste

Mix all ingredients and let sit 30 minutes before serving. Always serve at room temperature.

Makes 4 servings.

Grilled Onion Relish

“This versatile relish can be used to accompany any seafood or meat dish to add an element of the grill. It can also accompany any bruschetta topping,” says Chef Sean Weinberg.

1 large yellow onion
1 large red onion

Q and A with Sean Weinberg

Between Restaurant Alba and Biga, the wood-fired pizza place he opened in 2016, chef Sean Weinberg knows his way around a grill. Here he answers your common grilling conundrums.

How do you keep flames from getting out of control?

I keep a squirt bottle filled with milk next to the grill. When there's a flare-up, I douse it. *Author's note:* A day after our interview, I took to my grill and when the inevitable flare up occurred, I tried the squirt-of-milk technique. The fire calmed down immediately!

We hear a lot about 'resting' foods after they come off the grill. Is resting really necessary? Do all foods need to rest?

Vegetables and fish don't need to rest, but it's a good idea to take whole fish off the grill a few minutes before it's done. You just don't want to overcook it. Meats do have to rest. The proteins need to relax because they're all freaked out after being on the grill. If you cut into meat too soon, it's like opening a washing machine door in the middle of the spin cycle.

Do you oil the grates, the ingredients or both?

On a gas grill, I would use a rag to oil the grates. For wood grills, brush oil directly onto the ingredients.

It seems like people are throwing anything and everything onto the grill. Are there foods you would recommend NOT grilling?

I'd stay away from flat fish like Dover sole and fluke. I also would not put small, thin vegetables over high heat. That's deadly!

I know you're busy running two restaurants, but when you have time, who do you like to read about grilling? Food in general? Any 'grill-centric' restaurants you like to visit?

I really learned a lot from *Seven Fires* by Francis Mallman. He's like Argentina's Jacques Pepin. I also like Justin Fox [columnist for *Bloomberg News* who covers topics ranging from finance to food and drink] and Dan Barber who wrote *The 3rd Plate: Field Notes on the Future of Food*. He talks about drastically shrinking the protein on our plates. As for restaurants: Peasant in New York City.

At the risk of reinforcing a stereotype, I want to know why men like to be in charge of the grill?

[Smile.] I can't answer that one.

4 scallions
2 Tb. olive oil, divided
Salt and pepper to taste
2 red peppers
1 Tb. balsamic vinegar
1 Tb. champagne vinegar
1 tsp. fresh thyme leaves
4 chopped peppadew chiles
1 Tb. chopped parsley

Slice yellow and red onions into ¼” slices. Toss with scallions, a little olive oil, salt and pepper to taste. Grill on fire until charred, approximately 4 minutes each side.

Roast red peppers in oven or on open flame until they are blistered. Put them in a brown bag for a few minutes, and then peel and cut into strips. The peppers can be roasted in advance and reserved.

In a bowl, mix all ingredients except for the onions and scallions. Rough chop onions and scallions. (They should not be uniform in size.) Mix in with other ingredients.

Makes 4 servings.

Flank Steak

If you're ready for a change from your tried-and-true marinade, try this one from Chef Sean Weinberg.



- 1 Tb. chopped parsley
- 1 Tb. chopped basil
- 1 Tb. fresh thyme leaves
- 1 Tb. red wine vinegar
- 2 Tb. olive oil
- 1 tsp. salt
- 1 tsp. smoked paprika
- 1 tsp. ground black pepper
- 1 Tb. cold water
- Juice of one orange
- 2 lbs. flank steak
- 2 Tb. brown sugar

Put all ingredients except the steak and brown sugar in the blender. Blend until smooth. Stir in brown sugar.

Place flank steak in marinade and marinate, covered, in the refrigerator, for a minimum of 24 hours.

Grill (ideally over wood fire or on a gas grill) over high heat until rare/medium rare is achieved, approximately 2 minutes per side. Rest for at least 5 minutes. Knife slice as thin as possible.

Makes 4 servings.

Grilled Asian Slaw

This recipe is inspired by one my friend Kay makes from Simply Recipes. After talking with Sean Weinberg about grilling large vegetables, I wanted to see how cabbage would do on the grill. The verdict? Delicious. The heat mellows the cabbage's bite and imparts a smokiness to the entire dish. I used a gas grill with all burners set on high.

- 1 head Napa cabbage, cut into 4 wedges, core left intact
- Vegetable oil
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 1 C. edamame beans, shelled and cooked
- 4 scallions (white, light and dark green parts), sliced thinly
- $\frac{2}{3}$ C. chopped cilantro leaves

For the dressing:

Generous $\frac{1}{2}$ C. mayonnaise

- 2 Tb. rice vinegar, more to taste
- 1 tsp. sugar, more to taste
- 1 Tb. soy sauce
- 1 large garlic clove, minced
- $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp. sesame oil, more to taste
- Large pinch of cayenne pepper
- Optional: sunflower or pumpkin seeds, salted or unsalted



Brush oil on all sides of cabbage wedges. Season with salt and pepper. Place cabbage on grill and cover (if using gas grill). Cook each side until slightly charred, about 8–10 minutes total. Place cabbage on platter and tent with foil.

While cabbage cools, whisk together dressing ingredients. When cabbage is cool enough to handle, remove core and any super-charred/burnt leaves. Cut into thin strips or rough chop if you want a more rustic slaw.

Mix in edamame, scallions and cilantro. Toss with dressing. Top with seeds right before serving.

Makes 8–10 servings.

Grilled Shisito Peppers

While everyone is waiting for the main course, put out a platter of these diminutive Japanese peppers. Nine out of ten are sweet, but every once in a while, there's a super spicy one in the batch. They're great as is but would also be delicious with a lemony aioli. Put out a small bowl so guests can discard the tops and stems.

- Shisito peppers (as many as your heart desires)
- Oil
- Kosher salt

Heat grill to medium high and cook, turning peppers, until they start to blister. Eat warm.

Puff Pastry with Peaches and Salted Caramel Ice Cream

Use a charcoal grill for this recipe because a gas grill can impart an off-taste to the delicate pastry. The ideal time to make this recipe is after you've grilled and eaten your main course and the coals are still glowing red and giving off heat.



- 4 ripe peaches
- 1 egg
- 1 Tb. water
- 14 oz. all-butter puff pastry
(I used Dufour brand.)
- 1 pt. salted caramel ice cream

If you did not rake coals to one side before you cooked your main course, do so now. Leave puff pastry in the refrigerator until right before using.

Remove pit from peaches and cut into 1/4"–1/2" slices.

In a small bowl, whisk egg and water together.

Cut pastry into 6 rectangles (about 4" x 5" each) and place on a perforated sheet or pizza pan. (Depending on the size of your pan/grill, you may need to work in batches.) Top with peaches. Brush the edges with egg wash.

Place pan on the side of grill without coals. Close vents on grill lid and place lid on grill.

Cook until pastries are puffed and golden. Cooking times can vary from

9–12 minutes depending on the heat of your grill.

Serve warm with a scoop of ice cream.

Makes 6 servings. ♦

Laura traces her love of all things culinary to the first time she leafed through her mother's Betty Crocker's Cooky Book—which still occupies a place of honor among her 600+ cookbooks. A passionate supporter of local food, she co-founded a farmers market, judges area food contests, and anticipates restaurant openings with the excitement most people reserve for winning a Mega Millions jackpot.



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