



Try classic potato salad with a twist. Cook the potatoes directly on the grill for a crisp-smoky note before dressing them with fresh herbs and vinaigrette.

Smoky-Sweet Grilled Vegetables

Almost any vegetable tastes great hot off the fire. Try them in appetizers, side dishes, or with pasta as a main dish.

BY MOLLY STEVENS

If it weren't for outdoor grilling, we'd rarely eat dinner at our house during the summer. When daylight lasts well into the evening, it's almost impossible for me to come inside to the kitchen to cook. Besides, food always tastes better on the grill. Sometimes all I can manage is to brush some onion slices with oil and throw them on the fire. Other times, I'm more energetic—I'll grill an assortment of vegetables and make a colorful antipasto, or make mixed vegetable kebabs, which become a whole meal if I serve them with thick slices of lightly grilled country bread. I also like to grill vegetables to add to other ingredients, such as pasta, couscous, or rice.

PICK YOUR FAVORITE PRODUCE; ALMOST ANY VEGETABLE WILL WORK

There's wide room for improvisation when cooking vegetables on the grill—just pick what looks best in your garden or at the farmstand. Tender, quick-cooking vegetables are the easiest to work with, and they yield the most satisfying results because you can be sure they'll cook thoroughly. Some of my favorites are bell peppers, eggplant, and mushrooms, but the real winner for me is any type of onion. Leeks develop wonderful pink colors and sweet flavors, baby onions lined up on a skewer explode and caramelize, and red



Onion slices get skewered for security. The rings stay together so it's easier to turn the slices on the grill.

onion rings tossed with olive oil and rosemary are a delicious accompaniment to grilled chicken.

OIL YOUR VEGETABLES FOR FLAVOR AND FUSS-FREE GRILLING

Since vegetables are virtually fat-free, they need to be brushed with oil to prevent them from sticking to the grill. I like to use a good-quality olive oil, along with a handful of fresh thyme, rosemary, or oregano, and plenty of salt and freshly ground black pepper. A squeeze of lemon can add a bright note, too. Sometimes it's fun to combine an intense oil, such as toasted sesame or chile oil, with a neutral oil and throw in some minced garlic, ginger, chiles, or dried spices, such as ground cumin or coriander. But be careful not to overpower the vegetables with too much strong spice.

I use three methods of coating vegetables with oil:

- ◆ The simplest and neatest is to put the vegetables in a bowl, drizzle with oil, season, and toss to coat.
- ◆ You can also put the vegetables on a tray and brush them lightly with oil that's already seasoned.
- ◆ For long, thin vegetables, such as asparagus and scallions, pour a bit of oil into the palms of your

TURN PLAIN GRILLED VEGETABLES INTO STAR DISHES

While summer vegetables straight off the grill need no further fiddling, I often add accents to brighten flavors and make the simple vegetables feel like full-fledged main or side dishes.

◆ Add a splash of balsamic vinegar and a few chopped chives.

◆ Squeeze on some fresh lemon juice and sprinkle with a handful of chopped fresh herbs, such as parsley, tarragon, and basil.

◆ Drizzle with super-fruity extra-virgin olive oil or an oil infused with citrus, herbs, or chiles.

◆ Dress with a loose pesto sauce of basil, olive oil, and Parmesan.

◆ Serve with pungent garlic mayonnaise or olive paste.

◆ Sprinkle with grated pecorino romano, Parmesan, or crumbled feta or goat cheese.

◆ Top with toasted chopped walnuts and a bit of walnut oil.

hands and rub each stalk to lightly coat it.

If I'm planning ahead, I let the vegetables marinate in seasoned oil for a few hours before grilling.

A WELL-PLACED SKEWER MAKES HANDLING MUCH EASIER

Skewering vegetables in some manner makes it much easier to move them around and turn them on the grill. Also, small vegetables won't fall through the grill bars and into the fire if they're bound together on a skewer. Bamboo skewers are my favorites, since they're slender and don't make big holes in the vegetables, but you should first soak them in water for about 20 minutes to keep the tips from burning.

When constructing kebabs, keep in mind the cooking times of the different vegetables. I think it's best to put only one type of vegetable on each skewer and serve each person two or three small kebabs. For round vegetables, like button mushrooms or small onions, try inserting two thin parallel skewers so the vegetables won't spin when you turn them. A good tip for onion rounds is to insert a toothpick or short skewer through the center to keep the rings together during cooking.

GRILL POSITION MEANS CONTROLLING THE COOKING TIME

Your fire should be medium hot; the coals should be covered with gray ash but still have a red glow. Cook vegetables over direct heat, but don't crowd them or they'll cook unevenly. You can use crowding to your advantage, however, if the vegetables are done too soon. Push them off to the side and bunch them together. This slows the cooking but keeps the vegetables moist and warm.

VEGETABLES ARE DONE WHEN THEY'RE TENDER AND LIGHTLY CHARRED

Cooking times will vary quite a bit, depending on your grill, the weather, and the size of the vegetables, so you need to develop a good sense of when each one is done. Vegetables are cooked properly when they're soft enough to be pierced easily with a fork or the tip of a knife but they still have some "bite" to them. And of course you can always take something off the grill, blow on it to cool, and do a taste-test.

While you want a little smoke and char to flavor the vegetables, it's easy to overchar them if the grill is too hot. This develops bitter flavors and also makes it difficult to cook the vegetables all the way through, since the heavy char creates a heat barrier.

The most important thing about grilling anything is to watch the grill closely. Each grill has its quirks, and every fire is slightly different. Only by careful tending and by responding to hot spots or flare-ups will you know the pleasure of a plateful of moist, smoky-sweet, warm-from-the-fire grilled vegetables—the perfect summer meal.



Grilling stuffed mushrooms is an unusual technique—and the results are unusually delicious. Serve the mushrooms alone as an hors d'oeuvre or with mixed greens as a first course.

Vegetables go straight from the grill to the serving bowl in this hearty pasta recipe, with just a quick chop on the way.





Grilled Potato Salad

This salad is best made with truly new potatoes, but if you can't find the babies, use larger red-skinned potatoes: just blanch them first in boiling water for a few minutes until barely fork-tender. *Serves four to six.*

3 small red onions (about 1 lb. total), cut into 1/2-inch rounds
2 Tbs. olive oil, more as needed
1 1/2 lb. baby new potatoes, halved (unless tiny)
2 tsp. fresh thyme leaves
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
1/4 cup mixed chopped fresh herbs (choose from parsley, tarragon, dill, chervil, basil, chives)

FOR THE VINAIGRETTE:

1 tsp. Dijon mustard
3 Tbs. white-wine vinegar
6 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil

Skewer the onion rounds with toothpicks to secure them. Brush the onions with olive oil and toss the potatoes with more oil, thyme, salt, and pepper. If your potatoes are very small, slide them onto skewers. Grill over medium-low heat for 15 to 20 min., turning occasionally, until browned on the outside and very tender inside.

Meanwhile, whisk together the mustard, vinegar, salt, and pepper. Slowly whisk in the olive oil; taste and adjust seasonings.

When the vegetables are done, remove the toothpicks and toss the onions and potatoes with the vinaigrette until coated, and then toss with the herbs. Taste and add more salt and pepper if necessary; serve warm.

Grilled Mushrooms with Sage, Parmesan & Prosciutto

Portobellos or large shiitakes are ideal for this recipe, but good-size button mushrooms will work just as well. *Serves four to six as an appetizer.*

1/4 cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese
3 oz. prosciutto, sliced and chopped fine
1 tsp. minced fresh sage, or 1/2 tsp. crumbled dry sage
1/3 cup olive oil
Juice of 1 lemon
1 lb. small portobello, large shiitake, or large button mushrooms (or a combination), stemmed and wiped clean
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
Mixed salad greens (optional)

(Continued)

Turn grilled vegetables into a robust sauce for penne pasta. Grill the vegetables until tender and full-flavored, and then toss with fragrant herbs, olive oil, and cooked pasta.

Any grill is fine (as long as it's clean)

You don't need any special equipment to grill vegetables—any grill will do. The most important thing is to be sure that your grill isn't caked with greasy buildup from previous barbecues, since vegetables easily pick up flavors.

Hardwood charcoal produces the hottest fire and the cleanest flavor,

but briquettes or gas work fine, too. Smoking or flavor chips can be pleasant when used in moderation, but I generally reserve these for grilled meats and poultry. Branches of fresh herbs give off wonderful aromas on your patio, but they'll add little to the flavor of the vegetables

themselves. Most vegetables are best grilled uncovered, but some of the slower-cooking ones, such as whole eggplant or larger potatoes, do best with a cover. A good pair of long tongs and a spatula are essential grilling tools.



These slender eggplant are oiled, seasoned, and ready to be grilled. They'll be brushed with a sesame-ginger glaze during cooking. All vegetables benefit from a light coat of oil, which both adds flavor and prevents them from sticking to the grill.

Combine the Parmesan, prosciutto, sage, and 2 Tbs. of the olive oil. Set aside. Combine the rest of the oil with the lemon juice and brush it on the mushrooms. Season them with salt and pepper.

Put the mushrooms, gill side down, on the grill over medium heat. Turn after about 3 to 4 min. Grill another 3 to 4 min. until the juices begin to run and the mushrooms begin to soften. Move the mushrooms to the side of the grill. Spoon some of the Parmesan mixture into each mushroom. Cover the grill and let the mushrooms cook slowly for another 4 to 5 min. until the cheese has melted slightly. Serve warm, alone as an hors d'oeuvre or on mixed greens as a first course.

Japanese Eggplant with Sesame-Ginger Glaze

Slender Japanese eggplant work beautifully for this recipe, and they don't need to be salted in advance to remove bitterness. If you can't find them, cut a regular eggplant into half-inch rounds, salt generously, and let sit in a colander for half an hour. Pat dry and continue with the recipe. *Serves four to six.*

- 1 Tbs. rice-wine or cider vinegar
- 1 Tbs. soy sauce
- 1 Tbs. hoisin sauce (optional)
- 3 Tbs. toasted sesame oil
- 1 tsp. sugar
- 2 tsp. minced fresh ginger
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 8 small Japanese eggplant (about 4 oz. each), halved lengthwise
- 2 Tbs. oil
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
- 2 scallions, minced

A guide to grilling vegetables

Here's a guide to preparing your vegetables for the grill. The entries are ranked from quickest- to slowest-cooking. All vegetables should be brushed with a light coat of oil.

QUICKEST COOKING TIMES

Asparagus	Trim off tough stems
Bell pepper slices	Core, seed, cut into strips
Corn	Peel back husk, remove silk, tie husk back together, soak in water 30 min.; or remove husk and silk entirely, brush with oil or butter, and grill directly
Mushrooms	Wipe clean and remove stem
Onion slices	Secure with toothpick
Scallions	Cut off root ends
Zucchini and summer squash	Slice lengthwise

MODERATE COOKING TIMES

Baby carrots	Wash but don't peel
Beets	Scrub and cut into small wedges
Eggplant	Cut half-inch slices; for Japanese eggplant, slice lengthwise
Fennel	Remove feathery tops, peel fibrous strings, cut in wedges
Leeks	Cut off root end, remove green and tough outer leaves, split in half lengthwise, rinse thoroughly; large leeks can be blanched for a few minutes first
New potatoes	Halve or quarter
Whole bell peppers	Grill until skin is charred, transfer to a bowl and cover until cool enough to handle, slip off skin

LONGEST COOKING TIMES

Artichokes	Parboil before grilling
Garlic heads	Cut off top of head
Whole eggplant	Prick with fork



Mix the vinegar, soy sauce, hoisin sauce, sesame oil, sugar, ginger, and garlic together in a small bowl. Brush the eggplant with oil and season with salt and pepper. Grill over medium heat, cut side down, about 5 min. Flip the eggplant and baste with some of the sesame-ginger glaze. Continue grilling until the flesh is quite soft and the eggplant is just starting to collapse. Remove from the grill and drizzle with more glaze. Top with the minced scallions and serve warm.

Penne with Peppers, Fennel & Basil

I don't bother peeling the peppers for this recipe because I like the way they retain their juices and some crunch, but if you like, slip off their charred skins before chopping. *Serves six.*

½ cup olive oil, more as needed
4 red bell peppers, cored, seeded, and quartered
1 head fennel, cut into 6 or 8 wedges
1 lb. small zucchini, halved lengthwise
6 Roma or 3 larger tomatoes, cored
6 large scallions, trimmed to leave 3 inches green
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
6 slices crusty Italian bread, 1 inch thick
2 cloves garlic, halved
1 lb. penne pasta
1 medium bunch fresh basil, leaves washed, dried, and sliced
Juice of ½ lemon
⅓ cup freshly grated Parmesan or ricotta salata cheese

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil for the pasta. Lightly oil the vegetables and season with salt and pepper. Grill all the vegetables, turning occasionally, until soft and slightly charred (see chart opposite for cooking times). As the vegetables are done, transfer them to a cutting board, chop into chunks, and tip into a large bowl, including any juices. Keep warm.

Meanwhile, lightly brush the bread with more olive oil and grill for a few minutes on each side. Rub with the cut garlic cloves.

Boil the pasta until tender (this should take about 10 min.), drain, and drizzle lightly with olive oil to prevent sticking. Combine the pasta, vegetables, and basil in the bowl and toss to mix. Squeeze in some lemon juice, drizzle on a few more tablespoons of olive oil, and season to taste with salt and pepper. Toss again and serve with the grilled garlic bread and grated cheese on the side.

Molly Stevens is a chef/instructor at the New England Culinary Institute in Essex, Vermont, and a contributing editor to Fine Cooking. She didn't learn about grilling at La Varenne cooking school in Paris, where she earned a grand diplôme, but rather at her home in Vermont, where she makes every summer day last as long as possible. ♦

Grilled eggplant with Asian seasonings makes an easy and appealing side dish. Slim Japanese eggplant isn't bitter, but you can use regular eggplant as long as it isn't too seedy.