

# Ratatouille on the Grill

Grilling the vegetables  
enlivens a traditional  
Mediterranean dish

BY A. CORT SINNES

**A**s good as ratatouille is when it's cooked on top of the stove or baked in an earthenware pot, it just doesn't compare to the taste of ratatouille grilled over live coals. Imagine a mix of whatever fresh summer vegetables you have on hand, combined with the rustic, slightly smoky taste imparted by the coals. It's one of those great flavor combinations that goes straight to the heart of good eating.

Save for the occasional ear of corn, most American home cooks are surprisingly reluctant to grill vegetables over coals. By learning to make ratatouille on the grill, you'll learn how to grill at least five different vegetables in one shot. In the future, whether you grill them singly or in concert is up to you. But I'll bet my first ripe tomato that once you've tried any grilled vegetable, you'll be back for more.

A dish from the French region of Provence, ratatouille is a combination of cooked vegetables—traditionally tomatoes, zucchini, and eggplant—well seasoned with garlic and herbs. There are a number of acceptable cooking methods, so ratatouille is best described as a dish rather than as a “recipe.” This is especially true when it comes to making ratatouille on the grill.

The ingredients I suggest are those that appear in traditional versions of ratatouille. However, if you want to add mushrooms, add mushrooms. If you want a lot of bell peppers and squash, but very little eggplant, so be it. No matter the particular ingredients, or the exact proportions, ratatouille will have the taste of summer sunshine and the aromatic blessing of the grill.

The procedure I describe has all the guidelines you'll need, but lacks specific temperatures, measurements, and amounts. This is intentional. Like appreciating the outdoors itself, cooking vegetables on the grill is best done with all senses engaged. How

*To get the most out of grilling vegetables, organize your outdoor workspace. You can enjoy the sun and keep an eye on the grill. All the ingredients Sinnes will need for the ratatouille are on the table.*

Photos: Ruth Lively

much garlic and olive oil do you like? Taste. Are the vegetables soft enough? Touch. Are they getting good grill marks, or burning? See and smell.

Start by lighting the charcoal (about 60 briquettes or an equal amount of lump charcoal). Gather your skewers. If you're using bamboo skewers, soak them in warm water for 20 minutes to keep them from burning on the grill.

Prepare the vegetables as follows:

**Onions**—Peel, cut off the ends, and cut into six even wedges. Try to keep the wedges intact, as this makes for easier skewering.

**Squash**—For zucchini and crookneck varieties, slice into  $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch-thick rounds. For small squashes, such as the pattypan variety, slice off the ends and cut into six even wedges.

**Bell peppers**—Core, seed, and cut into 1-inch squares. Use any colors you like, but note that exotic (and expensive) purple peppers turn a normal green when heated.

**Eggplant**—Peel (optional, but the skin can get a little tough in the grilling process) and cut into 1-inch cubes.

**Tomatoes**—Large beefsteak tomatoes can be grilled whole, or cut in half horizontally. In either case, there's no need to put beefsteak tomatoes on skewers. Roma, pear, and cherry tomatoes can be skewered.

Once the vegetables have been prepared, thread each type on the skewers, packing the pieces as densely as possible. Never mix-and-match the vegetables; each has its own cooking time, and combining different types on one skewer confuses the issue, not to mention the cook. Brush the skewered vegetables in olive oil (or roll them in it) and put them on a large platter. Admire.

Approximately 30 minutes after lighting the charcoal (about the same time it takes to prepare the vegetables), the coals should be completely covered with a light gray ash, just right for grilling.

Bring out the platterful of vegetables, along with the following: a pair of long-handled tongs, a bottle of your best olive oil, salt, a pepper mill, a head of garlic, a bunch of fresh basil or parsley (or both), a nice bowl to hold the cooked vegetables (one that will do the finished product justice), a wooden spoon, a small cutting board, and a sharp knife. If you're of a mind for it, don't forget a glass of wine for the cook.

Push the coals to one side of the grill. Why? Be-

cause (and here's where I disagree with many outdoor chefs) indirect cooking allows you the maximum flexibility with cooking times, keeps heat off the cook, and provides the least opportunity for charring the vegetables. To my taste, vegetables are not made to be charred.

For the record, here's how long the vegetables will take to cook—not in exact minutes, but in order of longest cooking time to least: onions; squash; peppers; mushrooms (if you choose to include them); eggplant; and tomatoes.

The procedure for grilling the vegetables is a little like orchestrating a ballroom dancing contest. It isn't particularly difficult, but you have to keep your eye on what's where and how well it's doing.

I put the longest-to-cook vegetables (onions and squash) nearest the fire, but not directly over it. If you run out of room on the grill, you can double-decker the skewers. The top layer will receive at least second-



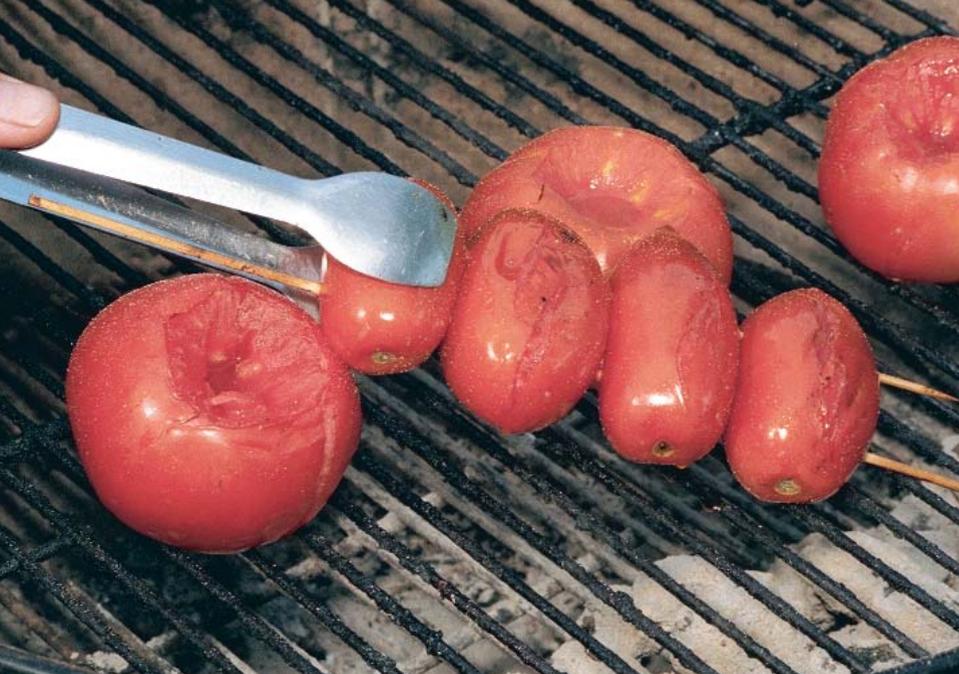
*For even cooking, grill only one type of vegetable per skewer. Here, zucchini and green peppers sit on the center of the grill, receiving indirect heat from the white-hot coals that have been scraped to one side.*



*Perfectly grilled eggplant chunks will be browned and slightly wilted from the heat, but have only a few scattered char markings. Too much charring would mask the flavor of the vegetables.*



*To avoid burned fingers, use tongs to gently push the vegetables off each skewer. Add them to the marinade while they're warm so they soak up lots of flavor.*

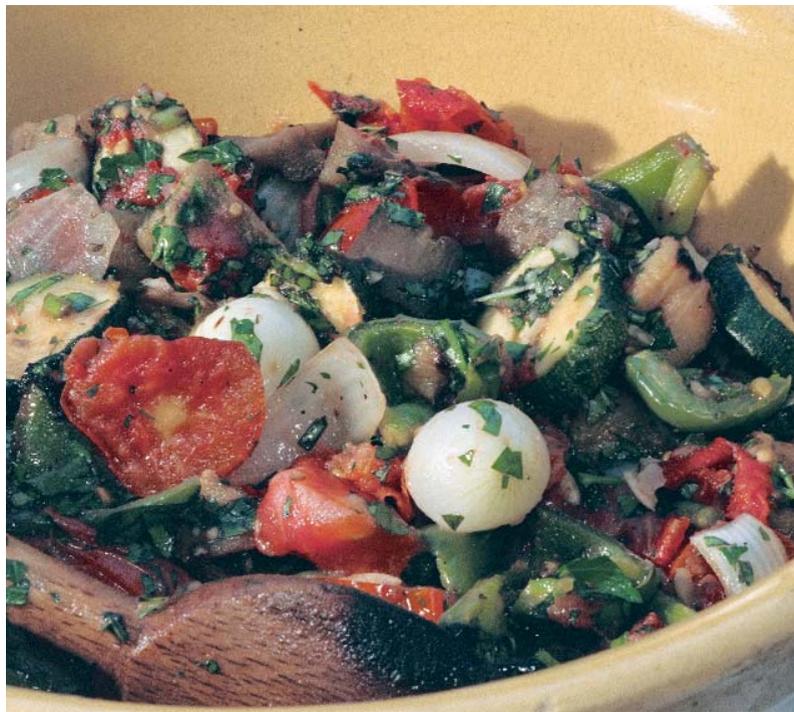


**Skewer small tomatoes; place large ones right on the grill.**

Slipping two skewers through small varieties, like these Romas, keeps them from spinning on the skewer. Large tomatoes, like these beefsteaks, should be cored. The heat of the grill will split the skins of all tomatoes.

**The author's grilled ratatouille displays the distinct shapes and jewel tones of all the vegetables.**

Use a wooden spoon to gently combine the vegetables, herbs, and marinade. The vegetables taste great at room temperature, and the cooling time gives the flavors a chance to meld.



hand benefits of the grill, which is better than none.

If you have a covered kettle type of grill, so much the better. Mine is a covered grill, and I cook the vegetables with the lid in place. It isn't necessary, but it does speed the cooking time. Keep the top and bottom vents completely open so that oxygen feeds the burning coals.

After you have the first batch of vegetables in position on the grill, pour a healthy soupçon of olive oil into the ratatouille bowl and add as much pressed or chopped fresh garlic as you desire. (If you're grilling sixteen vegetable skewers, I wouldn't consider six to eight cloves indecent.) Mix slightly with the wooden spoon.

Just as each group of vegetables starts to achieve "doneness," move it directly over the fire and watch it like a hawk; this is when the vegetables can burn

in an instant. Sure, you want those nice grill marks with the attendant flavors of fire, smoke, and caramelized sugars—but please, don't let them burn. You'll be much happier with the final product if you pay strict attention to the skewers when they're in this final stage of grilling.

As one group of vegetables gets done, keep moving the others closer to the fire until, at the very end, just before they're done, they're positioned directly over the coals for those final telltale grill marks. As each group is done, push them off the skewers into the bowl and mix them with the olive oil and garlic.

If you've arranged the vegetables over the fire from the least to the longest amount of cooking time, the tomatoes will be the last to come off the grill. In all honesty, by the time the eggplant is done, some toma-

atoes will be so soft that they can't handle one more move, let alone being seated directly over the coals, so the final phase of grilling is optional for tomatoes. If the tomatoes are large, or still whole, put them on the platter until they're cool enough to handle and cut them into large chunks before scooping them into the bowl.

Finally, chop the basil or parsley (or both) fine and add it to the mixture in the bowl. Add plenty of salt and pepper. This should be done to taste, but don't skimp on the salt. It plays an important role in accentuating the flavors of the ratatouille, especially if it will be served at room temperature or cold. Capers also make an excellent salty addition.

The dish improves if left to sit for any length of time; this allows flavors to "marry." The ratatouille can be served hot, cold, or (my preference) room temperature. The dish makes a great partner to grilled meat, or it can be tossed with feta or pasta, or both, to create a vegetarian main course. Lightly chill a good-quality dry rosé (such as a French Tavel) or a fruity Beaujolais Villages for an excellent wine pairing with your grilled ratatouille.

If there are any leftovers, you'd better get to the refrigerator early. The line forms at the left.

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