

Nick's view on barbecues

2 Jul 2004 by JR

Summer brings with it many distinct pleasures. But along with hay fever comes another object of distaste - the barbecue.

I wouldn't go as far as to say I hate the barbecue, because I actually like the slow cooked, smoky, barbecued food of America's Mid West and southern states, but I do intensely dislike the coarse, one- dimensional flavours that come with pieces of meat and fish casually thrown on an open fire. To me this just isn't cooking.

Before discussing flavour let me deal with a philosophical point that seems to me to underpin the folly of the barbecue. Why, when it is hot enough for a barbecue, do barbecue enthusiasts want to make it even hotter by lighting an open fire? Hot days now come as no surprise given the frequency of weather reports in the media and the accuracy of internet weather sites, so isn't it so much more sensible and more comfortable to use the cool of the morning to cook lunch or dinner in the kitchen and then enjoy every hot minute of the rest of the weekend?

And I am a great fan of the long- established, communal barbecue where tradition and experience combine. It is hard, even after a dozen years, to forget the fun and the flavours imparted into salmon cooked over an open pit in Oregon where, as the indigenous Americans used to do, the fish are halved lengthways and then hooked on to large poles which support each other way above the fire.

But as far as I am concerned, nothing that comes straight of the grill can match the flavours of a piece of meat or fish that has been marinated and cooked with equal amounts of care, herbs and the most appropriate liquid, red wine or white wine or olive oil. Not even the most ardent red meat eater could be disappointed by the flavours offered by the grilled fillet of beef recipe in Rose Grey and Ruth Rogers' *River Café Easy Cook Book* (Random House, £20). No need for raging fires, tongs or special equipment (although cool beers or wine are always welcome). Just marinate the meat as directed, slice it, then grill on both sides it for a matter of minutes on the top of your cooker and stay cool.

The keys to adding flavour, whether as a marinade or a sauce, are the crucial foundations for any meal but are invariably in my opinion neglected by the amateur barbecue chef. When I was a restaurateur the only occasion on which I came close to a confrontation with my extremely patient Head Chef (who managed to put up with me six days a week for over eight years) was when, as our food gross profit slipped one month, we looked to make cuts. "I'll do whatever I can, " he replied, "but just don't touch what I spend each week on herbs. That's one of the major differences between a professional and an amateur kitchen. "

Amateur barbecues are invariably a reverse of this process, a return to a too- obvious use of power over subtlety accentuated today by the fact that modern cooking means - gas, electricity and briquettes - make the heat even more fierce and the comparison with how our ancestors used to cook even more far fetched. Surely they would have had to wait until the flames had died down considerably before adding their dinosaur chop?

And I am afraid I don't go for the sauces that usually on offer either. Too coarse mustard, one- dimensional commercial tomato ketchup and hot, mouth- puckering barbecue sauces only add to the rather hollow flavours of the barbecue. Instead, for something that will work equally well with fish or meat that has been marinated for 12 to 24 hours, pick the leaves off a large bunch of coriander and put them into a food processor with sea salt, pine nuts and a couple of cloves of peeled, diced garlic. Process and then start adding an inexpensive olive oil until you have a green sauce of biting freshness. For those with a cast iron palate, add a diced red chilli.

A garlic puree packs as much intense but not overpowering flavour and I am delighted to say that my recipe was even requested by a highly respected British chef for his weekly cookery column. Like so many of the best recipes it is very simple. Peel two to three heads of garlic. Place the cloves in a pan and cover with cold, salted water. Bring to the boil and simmer for about 10 minutes until tender. Drain and place the cloves in a food processor with plenty of freshly ground black pepper. Process and then add single or double cream or crème fraiche until you have a thick, creamy sauce. Chill and serve with any kind of roast or grilled meat and, if there is any left at the end of the meal, finish with a piece of crusty bread.

My contention is that if the main ingredients are correctly marinated and what accompanies them is as thoughtfully prepared, then we amateurs can abandon our barbecues, saving money and making a small contribution to the onset of global warming, and stick to our well- tried grills and ovens.

But I don't want anybody to think I have reached this conclusion without personal experience of all that a barbecue can involve. What follows is in my opinion the most successful recipe for marinated duck breasts from Paula Wolfert's *The Cooking of South West France*(originally published by Dorling Kindersley, currently out of print but due to be reprinted by John Wiley & Sons Inc in 2005). Once, holidaying in that part of the world, I decided to barbecue the ducks and spent at least two hours collecting the souches, the roots of the old vines, making and lighting the barbecue and waiting for the flames to die down. By which time the skies had darkened and the rain came lashing down. I struggled on, as any stubborn Northerner would, with tongs in one hand and an umbrella in the other. Ever since, however, I have cooked this dish in the oven with, I would modestly add, even better results.

Serves 3/4.

2 large whole, boned duck breasts.

Gascon marinade

1 and a half teaspoons coarse salt,

1 and a half teaspoons finely chopped shallots,

1 teaspoon chopped fresh parsley,

Half a teaspoon crumbled bay leaf,

A quarter teaspoon crumbled thyme leaves,

12 black peppercorns, lightly crushed,

1 clove garlic, thinly sliced

Freshly ground pepper.

1. The day before serving, trim off all excess fat from the duck breasts. In a non- corrodible bowl combine the salt, shallots, parsley, bay leaf, thyme, peppercorns and garlic.

2. Roll the duck breasts in the mixture and stack them skin side down in the bowl. Cover bowl with cling film and let stand, refrigerated, 12- 24 hours, turning breasts over once.

3. 30 minutes before serving, wipe or rinse the duck breasts to remove excess seasonings and any liquid that may have exuded. Discard marinade and allow breasts to come to room temperature. Pat ducks dry and score the skin.

5. Here I depart from the original recipe and saute the breasts on both sides in a hot pan for 2/3 minutes until brown (which generates useful duck fat) and then cook in a hot oven for another 15/20 minutes depending on how rare you like your duck.

6. Allow meat to rest 1-2 minutes, then slice the meat thinly crosswise. Sprinkle with fresh ground pepper and serve immediately.