

IT took me years to learn how to grill chicken, and I pretty much had to invent my own technique. Standard advice from standard grilling sources too often left me with badly charred chicken or its equally unpleasant underdone cousin.

My technique is not original, I'm sure, but it isn't intuitive either. I assure you it will result in grilled chicken at its best: smoky, crispy and moist, good right off the grill or the day after. In the waning days of summer, these precious last grilled dinners might as well be done right.

In these recipes, we're talking about chicken with its skin on, preferably thighs, wings or drumsticks, which are far more likely to retain their moist tenderness than breasts.

Skinless chicken is fine cut up for kabobs, but I think that to routinely remove the skin from chicken is to rob it of its flavor, and much of the reason to grill it in the first place. If you want something low in fat, grill zucchini, or halibut.

The key to grilling chicken with its skin on is to allow the solid fat (plenty of that in and under the skin) to render without falling onto coals, wood, metal grates or flames so

A technique for
conquering the twin evils:
meat that's charred or
undercooked.

hot that the fat flares up and sets the chicken on fire.

Therefore, it's essential to begin grilling over rather low heat. A gas grill with one side set on low (or even off) and the other on medium or high works well, as does a charcoal or wood fire built so that one side of the grill remains relatively cool. In either case, you need a cover to keep the heat in and allow it to circulate.

You can create indirect heat with wood, charcoal, briquettes or gas. It doesn't matter much which you use, though if you want a good smoky, woody flavor your best choices are either wood (which can be tricky; you've got to be precise about timing) or hardwood charcoal (which, because it burns hot and fast, may need replenishment).

Gas is all right, too, especially if you sprinkle soaked hardwood chips either on the grates over the hottest part of the fire — the opposite side from where you're grilling — or in a foil tray right above the fire.

I don't like briquettes in general, but they're especially undesirable in a situation where you're covering the grill, because their smoke can flavor the food in an unappetizing fashion.

Put the chicken on the grill skin-side up on the cool side and, after some of the fat has been rendered, turn it; if flames flare up, move the chicken to an even cooler part of the fire (this is where gas is handy; it's so easily adjusted). Or turn it so the skin side is up again — remember to keep the fat away

GRILLED CHICKEN WITH MEDITERRANEAN FLAVORS

Time: 45 minutes

- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 1 teaspoon fresh thyme leaves
- 1 teaspoon chopped fresh rosemary leaves
- ½ teaspoon chopped fresh lavender leaves, optional
- ¼ cup roughly chopped parsley
- Extra virgin olive oil as needed
- 8 bay leaves
- 8 chicken thighs or drumsticks, or a combination
- 2 lemons, cut into quarters.

1. Start a charcoal or wood fire or heat a gas grill. The fire should be only moderately hot, part of the grill should be kept cooler than the rest and the rack should be 4 to 6 inches

from the heat source.

2. In a small bowl, combine salt, pepper, thyme, rosemary, lavender and parsley. Add enough olive oil to make a paste. Loosen skin of chicken and slide a bay leaf between skin and meat, then insert a portion of the mixture. Push skin back onto meat and sprinkle with salt and pepper.

3. Place chicken skin side up on coolest area of grill. When fat has rendered a bit, turn chicken over. After 20 minutes or so, move chicken to hottest part of grill, brush with bit of olive oil and cook until meat is done and skin is nicely browned. Serve with lemons on wedges. (Bay leaf is not edible.)

Yield: 4 servings.



ELEMENTS OF ASIA The marinade on a Japanese-style grilled chicken balances salt, sweetness and spice, and it won't burn if most of the cooking is away from direct heat.

GRILLED CHICKEN, JAPANESE STYLE

Time: 45 minutes, plus at least two hours' marinating

- ¼ cup soy sauce
- 2 tablespoons sake or white wine
- 2 tablespoons mirin (or use 1 tablespoon honey mixed with 1 tablespoon water)
- 3 scallions, trimmed and roughly chopped
- 1 tablespoon minced garlic
- 1 tablespoon minced ginger
- 3 pounds chicken wings, thighs and/or drumsticks.

1. Mix all ingredients together in a large baking dish, casserole or heavy plastic bag.

Cover and refrigerate for at least 2 hours, or as long as overnight, turning occasionally.

2. Start a charcoal or wood fire or heat a gas grill. Fire should be moderately hot, part of grill should be kept cooler than rest and rack should be 4 to 6 inches from heat source.

3. Place chicken skin side up on coolest area of grill. When fat has rendered a bit, turn chicken over. After 20 minutes or so, move chicken to hottest part of grill and cook until meat is done and skin is nicely browned.

Yield: 4 servings.

By then the meat will be mostly cooked through; what you do now is brown it nicely.

tractive presentation, but it's more attractive than bleached chicken. With some...