

All Aboard!

Plank grilling adds robust, woody flavor to almost everything

By Anne Sears Mooney

Recently, a friend brought us a beautiful salmon he caught in the waters off Homer, Alaska—a fishing village on Alaska’s Kenai Peninsula that bills itself as “A Quaint Drinking Village with a Fishing Problem.” He also presented a 15-inch cedar plank. I asked him what I was supposed to do with the plank—he said to cook the fish on it. And the result? One of the best pieces of salmon I had ever tasted. Thus we were introduced to plank grilling—and we’ve been on board ever since.

Plank grilling is yet another bit of wisdom imparted to early European settlers by the indigenous peoples of both the east and west coasts, who had been doing it for centuries. Basically, you soak a wooden plank in water, put the food directly on the plank, put the plank over an open fire—in our case, a charcoal or gas grill—close the grill top and let the food cook. Depending on the type and size of the food, it takes from ten minutes to half an hour. The food does not come into direct contact with the fire, but is infused with a smokey, woody flavor from the smoke generated by the plank.

There is no need to add fat or oil to the food unless you particularly want to, though you can use a marinade or a dry rub if you like. The food does not stick to the grill or fall between the rungs, nor does it stick to the plank. No more blackened kabobs with missing pieces. There is no need to turn the food. It does not char or dry out. And the resulting dish is meltingly moist, with a robust flavor that will have everyone begging for more.

Plank grilling is not just for salmon. There is no limit to the kinds of food you can cook this way. We have plank-grilled fruit, vegetables, shrimp, scallops, steaks, chops, game, cheese—even grits. And those grits were to-die-for good.

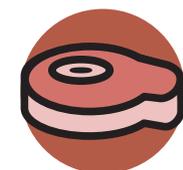
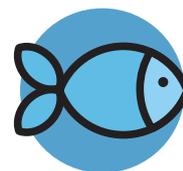
The one proviso is that you cannot use just any old plank. Stay out of the lumber yard! You don’t know what that wood is treated with or what it has been exposed to. More and more companies are offering grilling planks that are specifically designed for use with food and are made from pure organic woods. They are not treated with chemical weather-proofing

materials or wood preservatives, contain no pesticides, and are milled specifically for use on charcoal or gas grills. The Fire & Flavor Grilling Company offers a fine selection of alder, cedar and maple planks milled from wood grown organically in the Pacific Northwest. Their planks are available on the web as well as from nationally recognized retail outlets such as Whole Foods, Lowes, and Linens ‘n Things. Beginning in Even Publix began stocking Fire & Flavor cedar planks in June 2006!

The Fire & Flavor Co. of Athens, GA, was founded by culinary enthusiast Genevieve Knox. Knox, 29, said she had read about planked cooking in a national magazine, but was unable to find the supplies. So, in 2004, she developed a supply of organically grown wood in the Pacific Northwest and began packaging and selling grilling planks. The idea caught fire, and in this, her third year of operation, she expects to sell nearly a million packages of planks. The planks sold by Whole Foods are 15 inches long and come two to a package. Knox’s company recently expanded its product line to include an herb-seasoned salt and a spice-seasoned salt—both to use as dry rubs for planked meats and vegetables. Information about these and other Fire & Flavor products is available on their website at www.fireandflavor.com.

The beauties of this cooking method are in the ease with which it is done, the flair of the presentation and, not least, the flavor of the food. The only time consuming part is soaking the plank. Since the plank must soak for at least an hour and up to a day, it’s best to use a roasting pan for soaking to avoid tying up your sink for an extended period. The wood will float, so you will need to weigh it down. An unopened bottle of wine works well for this. We tried using a can of soup, but it left a dark ring on the wood. If you plan to grill more than one type of food, use more than one plank to ensure the juices of one dish do not mingle with juices from the others.

Some manufacturers suggest adding fruit juice, wine or beer to the soaking water for additional flavor. We roasted a small pork tenderloin on a plank that had been soaked in a mixture of water and apple





juice, and the result was a perfectly moist, tender roast with just a hint of the fruity apple flavor mixed in.

You will notice that each recipe instructs the cook to pre-heat the plank for three minutes before placing the food on it. The purpose is to sanitize the plank and to eliminate any bacteria before the plank comes into contact with the food. This is an important step for food safety and is not one that you will want to skip.

The water absorbed by the plank causes it to smoke when it is placed on the fire. The flavor imparted by the planks is very mild, however, not at all the heavy smoke taste that obscures the flavor of the food. The temperature of the grill should be 350 to 400 degrees. An oven thermometer that you can set directly on the grill is helpful here, but not essential. As they heat up and begin to dry out, the planks

will smolder and can catch fire, so be sure you have a spray bottle handy to douse any flareups. Then adjust the heat down a little. What you want here is smoke, not fire. If, after cooking, the plank is not too badly charred, it can be reused. Simply wash it with soapy water and store it in a dry place. It will be ready for you to soak it again in preparation for your next plank grilled meal. If the plank is too badly charred, break it up into pieces and place it directly in the fire the next time you use your grill to infuse your food with additional smoke flavor.

The recipes provided here as examples of the types of things you can do using grilling planks barely begin to scratch the surface. Imagine pineapple slices, halved peaches, marinated tofu or stuffed mushrooms cooked this way. The possibilities are endless. Enjoy! 

Alder Planked Salmon with Soy Ginger Marinade

Adapted from recipe by Elise Lalor, Issaquah, WA

- 1 alder plank, soaked
- 2 Tablespoons garlic, minced
- 2 Tablespoons soy sauce
- 1 Tablespoon fresh ginger, grated
- 2 Tablespoons fresh parsley, finely chopped
- 1/2 teaspoon sesame oil
- 3 Tablespoons olive or vegetable oil
- 1 1/2 pound salmon fillet, pin bones removed
- 1 orange thinly sliced
- 1 Tablespoon sesame seeds, toasted
- 2 Tablespoons scallions, finely chopped

Method: Soak plank in water to cover for at least one hour. Prepare grill. Combine garlic, soy sauce, ginger, parsley and oils in large plastic zip-lock bag. Shake to combine. With a sharp knife, cut two lengthwise slits, dividing the surface of the salmon into thirds, cutting to the skin but not through it. Add salmon to marinade. Marinate in refrigerator for 30 minutes, turning once. Place soaked alder plank on grill grate over medium heat. Heat for 3 minutes, turn plank, and continue heating for an additional 3 minutes. Remove salmon from marinade. Discard marinade. Place salmon, skin side down, on charred side of plank. Arrange orange slices decoratively on top of salmon. Place plank on grill grate, close grill lid and grill salmon approximately 15 minutes or until fish is medium rare. Sprinkle with sesame seeds and scallions.

Four servings.



Green Beans & Mushrooms with Blue Cheese & Pecans

Courtesy of Jorge Cancel, Mobile, AL

- 1 pound green beans, trimmed and tailed
- 1 maple or alder grilling plank, soaked
- 10 small mushrooms, sauteed in a little butter
- 1/2 Cup pecan halves
- 1/2 Cup blue cheese, crumbled
- salt and pepper to taste

Method: Blanch green beans in boiling water until slightly crisp. Place in ice water bath to stop the cooking. Strain beans and pat dry. Combine beans, mushrooms, melted butter and pecans in a bowl and toss to coat evenly. Place soaked plank on hot grill and heat 2 to 3 minutes on each side. Spread green bean mixture on hot plank and cook at 350 degrees for 15 to 20 minutes, or until beans are tender. Sprinkle with blue cheese before serving.

Four servings.



Peel & Eat Barbeque Shrimp

- 1 pound large shrimp
- 1/2 stick butter (4 Tablespoons) melted
- 1/2 Cup Worcestershire sauce
- 2 Tablespoons Old Bay Seasoning
- 2 teaspoons Kosher salt
- 2 teaspoons black pepper
- 1 teaspoon Ancho chile powder
- lemon wedges for garnish
- 1 cedar plank

Method: Soak plank for at least one hour. Leaving shell and tail intact, run a paring knife down the back of each shrimp to remove the vein. In a shallow dish, combine shrimp with the rest of the ingredients and marinate at room temperature for about 15 minutes. Prepare grill to 350 degrees. Place soaked plank on grill, close lid, and heat plank for two to three minutes. Flip plank and place shrimp in a single layer on the heated plank. Cover grill. Cook for 8-11 minutes, depending on size of shrimp. Remove shrimp and plank from grill and serve immediately with fresh lemon wedges for garnish.

Four servings as an appetizer or two servings as a main dish.



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Planked Mediterranean Vegetables

- 1/4 Cup olive oil
- 3 Tablespoons balsamic vinegar
- 1 Tablespoon Dijon mustard
- 1 Tablespoon honey
- 1 large zucchini, cut into one-inch cubes
- 1 large or 2 small yellow squash, cut into one-inch cubes
- 1 red onion, cut into one-inch pieces
- 8 ounces button mushrooms, halved
- 5 cloves garlic, coarsely chopped
- 10 cherry tomatoes
- 1/4 Cup fresh herbs (basil, rosemary, chives), chopped
- salt and pepper to taste
- 1/2 Cup feta cheese, crumbled

Method: Preheat grill to 350 degrees. Whisk together oil through honey in a small bowl and pour over squash, onion, mushrooms and garlic. Toss gently to combine. Preheat plank for five minutes or until light smoke develops. Spread vegetables on hot plank and grill over indirect heat for approximately 20 minutes, or until vegetables are almost done. Add cherry tomatoes to vegetables and grill 2 to 3 minutes more, until vegetables are tender. Remove vegetables from grill and place in a large bowl. Gently toss with fresh herbs, salt and pepper and feta cheese.

Four to six servings.

Note: If you have one, use a wire basket to cook vegetables over the soaked plank, stirring as needed to ensure even cooking.

