



Campfire Grilling Basics

Why Fire Grill?

Cooking over open fire has been a part of life and our DNA for thousands of years. It's only in the last 120 years or so that urban conveniences and indoor cooking tools have pulled us away from the fire. However, something wonderful is happening all over the world; Chefs and food lovers are re-connecting with their cave man ancestry and re-discovering the wonders of wood fired cuisine. Fire grilling has become trendy (and expensive) in fine restaurants with many chefs embracing this special form of food preparation. Those of us who have always loved grilling and Barbeque over real wood fire can let out a collective "No -Duh" but hey, they may be late to the party but they're doing some amazing things. Here's a cool article highlighting a few of the top fire grilling chefs in the US: [Tasting Table Burn Notice](#). We recently enjoyed a great meal at my favorite local restaurant [Ember](#) and boy they do it right everything was fantastic!

I was born with a fascination with fire so I will naturally look for any reason to cook over fire. The fact is the flavors of wood and the slight char and smoky aromas offer unique flavors that cannot be reproduced in a frying pan or gas grill, they just can't. Various species of wood add their own seasonings that can't come out in a shaker or out of a bottle; they are infused into the item being cooked. Hickory, walnut, almond, oak, cherry, apple, eucalyptus and so many other hardwoods all impart their special flavor profile. Wood is one of the key ingredients that makes a Santa Maria style tri-tip cooked over red oak taste right or southern BBQ taste like southern BBQ. Cooking over pine or charcoal briquettes or gas is just not right.

Let's cover a few basics of grilling over fire:

1. Heat management.
2. Wood Selection
3. Grilling Tools
4. Seasoning
5. How to tell when it's done

Heat Management


This is #1 for a reason, you can burn the S)*t out of something really fast in a fire. Understanding wood, coals, direct and indirect heat can and will make the difference between a delicious meal and one where you have to pick off the burned chunks to get to something salvageable on the inside. A lot of trial and error is one way to figure it out but here are a few tips.



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- **Don't cook directly in the flames** – it seems obvious but really it's not to a lot of people. The flames are dirty and have soot and other stuff that will stick to the food. Cook over the coals or the indirect heat produced by the flames and coals. You must be patient or be disappointed eating a bunch of carbon.
- **Start your fire early** - an hour or more before you want to put your food on. Plan backwards from when you want to eat. Figure 45 min cooking time and 1 hour + for the wood to burn down to coals so light your fire 2 hours before you want to eat.
- **Spread out the coals** Use a chugger¹ to move the coals to where you intend to cook in the fire pit or under the cook surface. Don't keep them all piled up in one place or that will be hot and the sides will be cooler.
- **Use the Hand Thermometer** We all have pain sensors in our hands that let us know when something is hot. This Hand Thermometer chart take from a mid-80's Boy Scout Handbook is really spot on I use this all the time. Basically, put your hand over the cooking surface at the cooking height and see how long you can hold it there and count the number of seconds until you have to pull your hand away. You have a few options to adjust: move the coals or food away or closer, raise or lower the cooking height or add more fuel to the fire to make it hotter. **A good rule of thumb is 5-6 seconds.** It's hot enough to cook and gives you 5-10 minutes before burning starts.

HAND THERMOMETER. Hold palm at place where food will go: over coals for broiling, in front of reflector oven for baking. Count "One-and-one," "Two-and-two," and so on, for seconds you can stand to hold your hand. Move your hand to find the temperature you want.

	Hand removed at count	Heat	Temperature
	6 to 8	Slow	120°C-175°C 250°F-350°F
	4 to 5	Moderate	175°C-200°C 350°F-400°F
	2 to 3	Hot	200°C-230°C 400°F-450°F
	1 or less	Very hot	230°C-260°C 450°F-500°F

¹ A Chugger is a long stick or fire poker. "to Chuggle" is to adjust the fire. My friend Tim wants to get this word in the dictionary. It's a good word and sort of makes sense to "chuggle the fire" is to make it burn better.



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Slow cook - Chicken legs or thighs, ribs , anything with a lot of fat or that you want to smoke

Medium heat – sausage, pork, chicken breast, potatoes just about anything

High heat – veggies. Steak, lamb, game, potatoes

Wood Selection

Most camp grounds use the wood locally available, if you're in the west that's typically pine which burns fast, smokes a lot and the coals don't last too long and it makes a lot of ash. Hardwoods are harder to light but once you get them going they'll burn a long time and burn hot and clean. If you have a choice, bring and use hardwood like oak or hickory which both give great flavors. If that's not an option the second best option is to bring a bag of lump charcoal like mesquite and put that on top of the pine coals. Mesquite burns hot and for a long time had a decent flavor and it'll give you a good long cooking timeframe. A distant 3rd place is regular old charcoal briquettes, the flavor is blah and they're ashy but in a pinch they'll do.

Grilling Tools

Campgrounds have fire rings and usually crusty grills that have had who knows what cooked on them like plastic bags or trash. If you plan on using a public grill then bring a wire brush to scrub the crud off and get it nice and hot to sanitize anything food will touch. I'm of course biased and recommend the [Cowboy Kabob](#) for fire grilling.



I'm not putting my food on that nasty grill !

The [Cowboy Kabob](#) is simply the best campfire cooking tool; they're heavy duty but weigh 1 lb they're easy to load, easy to clean, easy to move when you chuggle the fire and the food stays



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on the skewer and not in the fire. The flat sides of the handle makes for easy $\frac{1}{4}$ turn rotation. Plus you can position a Cowboy Kabob anywhere over the whole fire pit, you're not stuck with moving the coals to the grill area, instead you move the loaded skewer to wherever it is best. If you're cooking on a beach or remote stone ringed fire pit, the Cowboy Kabob only needs 2 points to support the skewer compared to 4 trying to level a traditional grill surface. Use wood logs or stones to raise or lower the loaded Kabobs. (End of commercial)



Other key essential tools include shovel, leather gloves, tongs or spatula, wire brush heavy duty aluminum foil seasonings and beer or other adult beverage of choice.

Seasoning

The wood smoke is one key element but spices are another. I like to have a general purpose seasoning that goes on just about anything including eggs or dinner items. I call it the base coat and it usually contains: Salt, Pepper, Paprika, medium chile powder, garlic and oregano. There's a ton of options available in markets pick one you like. A base coat is great for just about anything, kabobs, meat, chicken, fish, eggs, vegies. You can add other spices or sauces on top of the base coat depending on what you're making. One thing for sure; hold off on adding BBQ sauce or other sugary bastes on whatever you're cooking until the last 15 minutes or so and monitor closely. That way you won't have to worry about it burning for long.



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How to tell when it's done

Veggies are easy to tell, they'll get soft and fall off. Aluminum foil is helpful to wrap them up on a grill or over the veggies on a kabob. Meat on the other hand gets harder the longer it cooks. This is helpful when cooking a large piece of meat like a whole pork tenderloin or steaks. As the meat cooks it gets firmer and this helps to keep it on a [Cowboy Kabob](#) so it doesn't spin and it holds tight to the skewer.

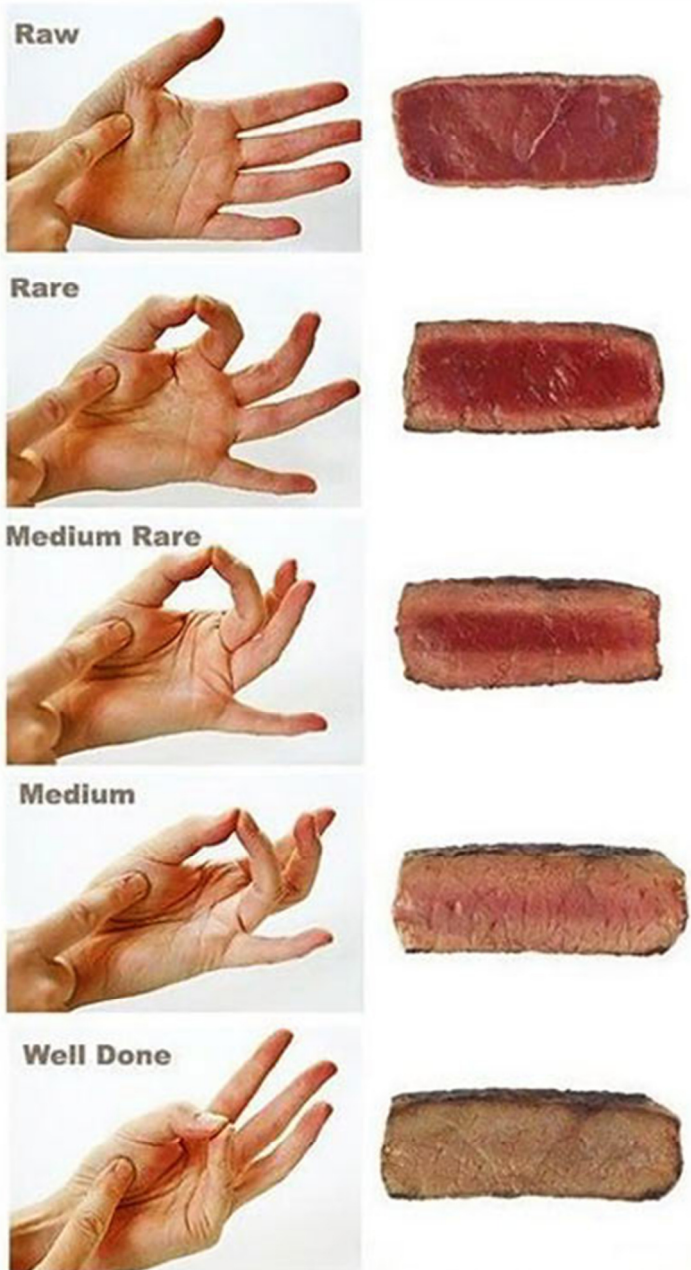


Since meat gets firmer as it cooks it makes it possible to estimate how well done it is without a thermometer or running the risk of eating undercooked meat.

Like the Hand Thermometer, you can use your fingers to estimate when a steak or roast is done by using the pressure test. Use your pointer finger to press on the meat, then press on your thumb palm to estimate how firm or done it is based on the below chart.



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Have fun cooking over fire in your back yard fire pit, BBQ, beach, RV park or back country fire pit. Enjoying great food outside in wild places is truly one of the greatest joys in life. Food just tastes better enjoyed outside, I don't know why but it sure is true.

Happy Camping and Happy Grilling.