

The Splendid Table®

O AMERICAN PUBLIC MEDIA™

You may burn a few steaks before
you grasp wood+charcoal grilling



iStockphoto

Simple grilled chicken is pretty darn good. But imagine chicken that is not only grilled, but also fragrant with wood smoke -- it's a whole other bird. Grilling season is at full tilt and it's time to take it to a new level.

Tim Byres, the author of *Smoke: New Firewood Cooking* and chef at **Smoke** and **Chicken Scratch**, is not content with a simple grilled steak. His logic is if there is heat, there is smoke, and that smoke needs to be out to work.

Lynne Rossetto Kasper: What is the draw of cooking on fire for you?

Tim Byres: The draw for me is the turn back toward something a little bit simpler. Being in Texas and seeing some of these things in their natural environment, I got hooked by this live fire thing and I was drawn back into it. That's really where I have gone just to cook at the most rustic level with a match and a log.

LRK: A wood-fired oven is one thing; you can have a temperature gauge. When you are cooking with wood on an open fire, it is a completely different ballgame. What kind of wood should you be looking for?

TB: The number one thing with wood is hardwoods, and wherever you are regionally, use what is there. We've got a lot of mesquite, which is a Western flavor, but also hardwoods like apple wood, walnut or fruit trees. You want to steer away from pines and piñon woods -- they have a really sappy, burnt flavor when you cook with them. I always say that hickory is the one that everybody associates with wood cooking; if you

smell smoke and it's hickory, your mind clicks. That's a good workhorse. Oak is always great. But again, use what you have. I always stick with natural charcoal, trying to limit the chemicals, and keeping it as clean and as fresh as I can.



LRK: You use both chunks of wood and charcoal. How do you do that?

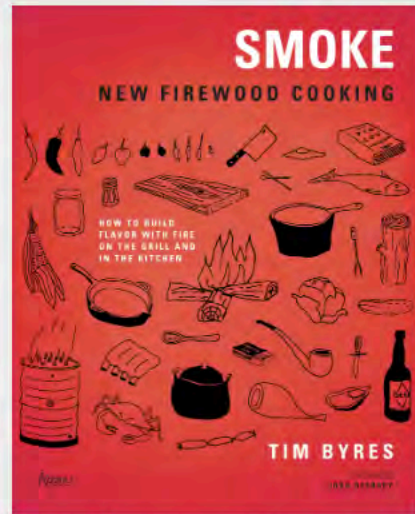
TB: Wood will burn to charcoal. We talk about how to make charcoal in the book. I was in Haiti working on a charity project and I saw what they would do. They would burn these big holes in the ground and cover them with dirt, which snuffs out the fire and makes charcoal.

I cook with logs primarily. We burn these big fires -- you cook a steak directly over the flames, with the flames tickling the meat or licking through the grill. Then it's going to burn down and you can pull those embers over to one side of the grill, which will be a little bit less hot. So it is seared right over the flame, then rests and finishes cooking on the cooler side. Find the sweet spot to grill.

I think that's one cool thing about wood cooking: there is a personal relationship with what you are doing. You will burn a few before you really get the hang of it, but that is the char flavor that everybody loves. You find the groove and you give yourself options.

If you have a pile of charcoal, you nestle a piece of wood and you think about the situation and say, “Well, oxygen is my fuel, so what I want to do is take the oxygen away.” You can close the vent on your barbecue where the oxygen is coming through. Or you could take some ash and cover that log a little bit -- some of the old-time barbecue guys call it banking the coals with wood. The charcoal will keep your temperature at a long, steady rate. A live fire is volatile, it gets extremely hot and then it burns down to coal.

If you add enough coal and you can get it to 250 degrees or whatever you are looking for, at that point nestle in your new log and cover it up with ash so that it doesn't catch on fire, so there's no oxygen to ignite the log. It will just smolder away and you'll have 250 degrees with maximum smoke -- it's going to be the perfect environment for roasting pork or whatever it is that you are up to.



Smoke: New Firewood Cooking

LRR: How would you have the absolute beginner who has never worked with fire -- the gas grill person -- begin? Let's say we are going to do a steak.

TB: We talk about indirect heat, which is smoking, and direct heat, which is grilling. So direct is in the coals or on top of the coals. You get a nice bed of coals and you can grill a steak right there.

I'd say for the first-timer, we talk about the charcoal chimney -- there are a couple of ways to build a fire and that is the easiest. Just fill it up with charcoal, shove a piece of paper underneath, light it and in about 10 minutes you are going to have this awesome, hot, ready-to-go pile of charcoal. If you are daring enough, you might even want to put a piece of wood on there and spread your coals out. I work left to right, so I go all hot on the left and cooler to the right.



Recipe: Tim Byres' Picnic Chicken and BBQ Pit Beans

LRK: So a higher pile of coals on the left and a few coals on the right?

TB: Right. I always say that if you can hold your hand wide open about 6 inches over the grill for a few seconds without feeling, "Wow, that's too hot," that's an appropriate temperature gauge for grilling meats.

In this world there is no thermometer or oven gauge. It's all about searing and developing a char on your meat. Then if you feel like it is starting to burn, move it toward the cooler side of the grill. That gives you control in an environment where you might not feel you have a lot of control.

LRK: Lower heat so it slows down the cooking. But in the meantime, by having that piece of wood in with the charcoal, you are getting all that great wood flavor.

TB: You might even want to put a little English on it and close the lid for a second and smoke the steak for a second. That's the fun -- the more you get involved, you can take it to the next level.



The Splendid Table
Tim Byres on firewood cooking

SOUNDCLOUD



▶ 467

For More Information Contact:

Green Olive Media, LLC.

361 17th Street, Suite 1,
Atlanta, Georgia 30363

404-815-9327

www.greenolivemedia.com

BRANDING + COMMUNICATIONS

GREEN OLIVE

— MEDIA —

