

# Esquire

## FIVE TIPS FOR HOW TO COOK AN ANIMAL (WHOLE)

Where do you even get a whole animal? And other burning questions, answered.

By **Josh Ozersky** on July 14, 2014 [Follow @OzerskyTV](#) 14.1K followers

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### The Question:

*Every other week during summer, my buddies and I head up to a nearby national park for three days of camping. We're all really into food, and we've been coming up with some really amazing meals. We used Francis Mallmann's book *Seven Fires* and Tim Byres's *Smoke* as guides, and every trip we get better. Now it's time to do a whole animal, and we have some questions that we want to put in front of you:*



1. *Should we do a pig first, or a lamb?*
2. *Where do we get a whole animal? None of our local butchers sell them.*
3. *How can we make sure we don't get sick? We typically put the meat in an Igloo cooler, but there isn't one big enough to hold a whole animal.*
4. *We have invested in a spit and turning jack, and we have a kerosene engine to power it. Are there any major fire issues we need to worry about?*
5. *Any general advice for getting this right the first time?*

—Tommy Walker, *Phoenicia, New York*

## **The Answer:**

**First of all: You and your buddies are true heroes.** You deserve credit just for leaving the Freon Fortress and heading out into the heat—fighting with greasy meats and open fires takes you to a plane occupied only by Primal Men. I have nothing but admiration for your whole-animal plan. It is totally doable, even if it's almost guaranteed to be harder than you and your buddies think. But so what? If you wanted to take it easy, you could order egg foo yong and eat it on your couch.

The answers to your specific questions are below. But before, a word of advice on cooking whole animals: You're used to cooking specific muscles—the leg of a lamb, say, or the butt shoulder of a pig. Generally speaking, you can control the temperature and texture of those cuts, because they're not big and they are all of a piece (so to speak) in terms of their physiology. A whole animal is a different story. Think of a chicken: How often have you gotten the dark meat just right without overcooking the breast? I bet the answer is never. And a chicken weighs four pounds and has a carcass that you can wear like a boxing glove. When you are talking about a fifty-pound lamb or goat, or an eighty-five-pound pig, the problem is multiplied many times over—especially given that you are basically just sticking it over some coals (as opposed to cooking in a controlled, evenly heated environment, like your oven). So, don't expect this to be the greatest thing you ever ate. Maybe bring along some steaks as backup. That said...

**1. Do a lamb.** Lambs are smaller, more delicate, cook faster, and taste better for the reason I like to call the Sizzle Factor. A typical lamb has almost no meat more than an inch or two deep; that guarantees that the wood's smoke will flavor it all the way through. Smoke doesn't go very far into a pig, especially an older pig that has a layer of fat so tough and chewy that most people can't even eat it.

**2. If you have a butcher, you can get a whole lamb or pig—you just need to order it way ahead of time.** A better move, though, is to buy it directly from a local farm. It will be fresher and taste better, and the farmer definitely needs the money more. If you want to be a real meat hero, consider getting a cull animal from a local dairy or wool farm.

**3. A small animal actually can be crammed into an igloo cooler,** but whatever. I feel you. I've carried a lot of whole animals around in the trunk of my car, and my method is not much different from that of a Mafia hit man: I wrap the thing up in heavy nylon—often a shower curtain from the dollar store—and lay it on top of bags of ice. I throw some bags of ice on top and put a couple around it, and voilà! Your trunk is now a cooler. (If you're traveling a long way and the ice might melt, put the ice itself inside kitchen garbage bags.) Will you get sick? I don't know—maybe? I'm a meat guru, not a doctor. But I can tell you I've done it many times, and I'm not dead yet.

**4. Do yourself a favor and keep things with gasoline away from open fires.** There is no bigger buzzkill than sitting down to barbecue a pig and ending up with charred eyebrows or without other body parts. Just turn the spit yourself. Or, if you are too lazy to do it the right way, get a battery-powered spit. (I will say that the Primal Man uses elbow grease to turn his animals—or cooks them upright in the asado style.)

**5. Cooking a whole animal outdoors is one of the hardest things you will ever do as a cook,** so make sure you have all the odds in your favor. Follow Mallmann's or Byres's instructions exactly—this is not the time to cut corners. Get the right tools: a long carving knife; a shovel to put out coals with; a long brush to mop liquid on the meat and knock off ash; heavy fireproof gloves (preferably ones that go far up toward your elbow); a small hatchet to take off the feet and head when the times comes; and a large bottle of high-quality Kentucky bourbon to shore up your courage and kill time. You probably will screw it up, likely by undercooking all or part of it, but that's okay. You can always throw the pieces onto a grill, or even onto the coals themselves. You can't go too far wrong if you have fire, steel, and a whole animal. And salt. Make sure you have lot and lots of kosher salt.

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