

Grilling Steak, Tuscan Style

Transform the ordinary T-bone steak with peppery olive oil, fresh-squeezed lemon juice, and a two-level fire.

≧ BY ADAM RIED ≦

When Americans garnish a steak, it's often with A.I. sauce. The French use a flavored compound butter. But the Italians have something even better (and arguably easier, too)—olive oil and lemon. *Bistecca alla Fiorentina*, as it is called in Tuscany, couldn't be simpler: a thick juicy steak grilled rare, sliced, and served with a drizzle of extra-virgin olive oil and a squeeze of lemon. For most of us here in the test kitchen, this unexpected combination was a revelation, and I expect that any steak lover who gives it a whirl will become a convert, too. The fruity, peppery olive oil amplifies the savory nature of the beef, while the lemon provides a bright counterpoint that cuts right through the richness to sharpen the other flavors.

In a dish this direct, good technique can mean the difference between mediocre and magical. So I recently grilled my way through more than 30 pounds of steak to perfect both the grilling technique and the details of the olive oil and lemon garnish—that is, when and how to introduce it.

Grill Right

Thick T-bone and porterhouse are the steaks recommended most often for *bistecca alla Fiorentina*. Both steaks feature a T-shaped bone with meat from the top loin (also known as the strip) on one side and from the tenderloin on the other side. The primary difference between the two is the size of the tenderloin piece, which is larger on the porterhouse. Of course I sampled both steaks and found them to be equally appealing—tender, with a robust, well-balanced flavor. There was no reason to test additional cuts. The suggested thickness, around 1¼ to 1½ inches, also worked out well, allowing for an appealing textural contrast between the smoky crust that formed on the outside of the steak and the rare, tender interior.

The flavor of that smoky, crisp, brown, caramelized crust is a primary reason to cook over a charcoal fire. A few rounds at the grill quickly



Steak Fiorentina is simply a perfectly grilled T-bone or porterhouse steak sliced, drizzled with olive oil, and served with lemon wedges.

proved that plenty of heat was necessary to achieve a sufficient crust. Anything cooler than medium-hot would not get the job done. But there was a problem: The interior had not cooked enough by the time the crust was perfectly done. Leaving the steak in place until the interior reached 120 degrees on an instant-read thermometer (rare) torched the exterior. Obviously, I needed a more reliable method.

A little pyro-experimentation helped solve the problem. I needed a two-level fire, with more coals on one side of the grill than on the other to create hotter and cooler areas. Starting the steaks over the hotter part of the fire allowed the exterior to sear deeply, and finishing them over the cooler area allowed the inside to cook through without charring the outside.

Garnish Right

The recipes I turned up in my research shared an odd sense of voodoo when it came to seasoning the steaks. Several recommended using the olive oil to marinate the raw steaks, a few more suggested rubbing the steaks with olive oil just before

grilling them, while one passionately declared that oiling the meat before cooking would cause it to “taste greasy and be nauseating.” Another recipe insisted that the steaks be both salted and drizzled with olive oil after they had been cooked but before they were removed from the grill.

To see if any of these techniques could really work magic, I designed several tests. My tasting team and I evaluated steaks treated with oil in five different manners: marinated before grilling, brushed on the meat before grilling, brushed on the meat during grilling, drizzled on the whole cooked steaks before slicing, and drizzled over the sliced steak at serving time.

We preferred drizzling the oil over the sliced steak for a few reasons. It was the easiest, least fussy method; it flavored the meat more effectively, bringing the full fruity, peppery impact of the raw oil to the fore; and it guaranteed a hit of oil with each bite of steak. Although the steaks that had been oiled prior to or during grilling were not nauseating, as that one author had predicted, the heat of the grill did mitigate the nuances of the oil, in a sense deadening its flavor. The oiled steaks also caused more flare-ups on the grill. I tried both pure and extra-virgin olive oils, and the extra-virgin was far and away the best for its distinctive character and bold flavor. I went on to try a few different brands of extra-virgin oil and preferred those with bolder, fuller-bodied flavor over the milder oils. We also experimented with the lemon and found it easiest and best to squeeze it over the sliced steak at the last minute. Juicing the lemon and brushing the juice on the steaks any earlier relieved the lemon of some of its freshness and tang.

The use of garlic was a matter of some debate in the original recipes. Some included it, while others decried it as untraditional. The idea appealed to us nonetheless, so I tried four ways of working it into the program. I made a sauce with pureed fresh garlic, olive oil, and lemon juice and poured it over the sliced steak, but the garlic was overpowering. I tried rubbing both fresh and toasted garlic cloves over the cooked steak, but tasters were not impressed. Last, I rubbed a fresh-cut garlic clove over the bone, and then the meat, of the raw steak. The bone scraped up the garlic's surface, allowing small bits to cling to the meat. Once this steak was grilled, it had a faint suggestion of toasted garlic flavor that was a hit with the tasters. This became a variation on the basic recipe.

So next time you grill a steak, leave the A.1. sauce on the shelf and forget about the hassle of making a flavored butter. Garnishing a steak the Tuscan way is quick, easy, fresh, and more interesting by light years.

CHARCOAL-GRILLED TUSCAN STEAK WITH OLIVE OIL AND LEMON

(Bistecca alla Fiorentina)

SERVES 4

T-Bone and porterhouse steaks are large enough to serve two. We prefer to season the steaks with kosher salt because its coarse grains are easier to sprinkle evenly onto the meat than fine table salt. If you use charcoal briquettes instead of hardwood charcoal, one chimney-full will weigh close to 6 pounds. Also, you may have to increase the searing time by about 30 seconds on each side. There is no need to build a two-level fire if you can adjust the level of the charcoal rack on your grill; crank the rack up high to sear the steaks, then drop it down a couple of levels for less intense heat to finish cooking them.

- 2 T-bone or porterhouse steaks, each 1 1/2 inches thick (about 3 1/2 pounds total), patted dry
- 2 teaspoons kosher salt
- 1 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- Lemon wedges for serving

1. Light large chimney starter filled with hardwood charcoal (about 2 1/2 pounds) and burn until covered with layer of fine gray ash. Build two-level fire by stacking most of the coals on one side of grill and arranging remaining coals in single layer on other side. Set cooking grate in place,

cover grill with lid, and let grate heat up, about 5 minutes. Use wire brush to scrape grate clean. Grill is ready when thicker layer of coals is medium-hot (you can hold your hand 5 inches above cooking grate for 3 to 4 seconds).

2. Meanwhile, sprinkle each side of steaks with 1/2 teaspoon salt and 1/4 teaspoon pepper. Cook steaks, uncovered, over hotter part of grill until well-browned on each side, about 2 1/2 minutes per side. (If steaks start to flame, move them to cooler side of fire and/or extinguish flames with squirt bottle). Move steaks to cooler side of grill and continue cooking, turning once, to desired doneness, 5 to 6 minutes more for rare (120 degrees on instant-read thermometer), 6 to 7 minutes for rare medium-rare (125 degrees), 7 to 8 minutes for medium-rare (130 degrees), or 8 to 9 minutes for medium (135 to 140 degrees).

3. Transfer steaks to cutting board and let rest 5 minutes. Following illustrations 1 through 3 (above), cut strip and tenderloin pieces off bones and slice crosswise about 1/2 inch thick. Arrange

slices on platter, drizzle with olive oil, and serve immediately with lemon wedges.

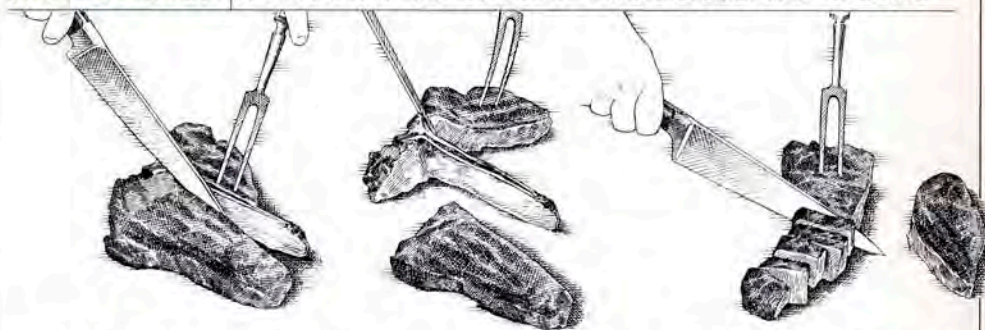
GAS-GRILLED TUSCAN STEAK WITH OLIVE OIL AND LEMON

Turn all burners on gas grill to high, close lid, and heat until very hot, about 15 minutes. Scrape cooking grate clean with wire brush; leave one burner on high and turn other burner(s) down to medium. Follow recipe for Charcoal-Grilled Tuscan Steak with Olive Oil and Lemon, beginning with step 2.

GRILLED TUSCAN STEAK WITH GARLIC ESSENCE

Follow recipe for Charcoal- or Gas-Grilled Tuscan Steak with Olive Oil and Lemon, rubbing halved garlic clove over bone and meat on each side of steaks before seasoning with salt and pepper.

STEP-BY-STEP SLICING T-BONE AND PORTERHOUSE STEAKS



1. Cut along bone to remove large top loin, or strip, section.
2. Cut smaller tenderloin section off bone.
3. Cut each large piece crosswise into 1/2-inch-thick slices for serving.

Choosing Charcoal

Charcoal is the carbonized remains of wood that has been burned in the absence of oxygen. Without oxygen, resins and moisture in the wood evaporate, leaving behind light, easily lit, combustible charcoal. Three types of charcoal dominate the market. They are hardwood charcoal (also called lump hardwood), which, like the wood used to make it, consists of irregularly shaped pieces and is additive-free; square, pillow-shaped briquettes made from scrap wood and sawdust that is burned and then compacted along with chemicals and other binders that help them both ignite and burn evenly; and a Kingsford product called Match Light, which consists of briquettes that have been permeated with lighter fluid and thereby promise to ignite with the touch of a lit match.

We were anxious to test the common assertion that hardwood charcoal burns hotter and faster than briquettes, so we hooked up a sophisticated, high-range temperature sensor to the cooking grate above fires made from each of the three types of charcoal. We recorded temperatures after five minutes, 15 minutes, and 25 minutes to gauge the drop-off in heat. Sure enough, the hardwood fire was the hottest initially at just above 700 degrees, compared with 660 degrees for the briquettes and 550 degrees for the Match Light; the hardwood also dropped off the most dramatically—by almost 450 degrees—after 25 minutes.

We were also curious to see if we could detect flavor differences in foods grilled with the three types of charcoal, so we sampled steak (because it's hearty) and zucchini (because it's delicate). Though the hardwood charcoal fire formed the thickest, most deeply brown crust on the steaks, tasters did not detect any significant flavor differences in the three steaks. It was another story, however, with the zucchini. The zucchini grilled over hardwood charcoal colored the fastest and tasted smokier than the others. The briquette-grilled zucchini had the lightest grilled flavor (but no off flavors), and the Match Light-grilled sample demonstrated a faint but odd bitterness.

So where does this leave us? We'd just as soon avoid any off flavors in delicate foods, so we'll pass on the Match Light. For grill-roasting over a longer time period at a lower temperature, we'd opt for briquettes because they burn a little cooler and a lot longer than hardwood. But for straight-ahead grilling applications, especially when there's meat on the menu that cries out for a deep sear, we'll take hardwood. Grilling is all about high heat, and we'll take every extra degree that we can get. —A.R.



MATCH LIGHT

HARDWOOD

BRIQUETTE

Match Light charcoal (left) can impart a faint bitterness to delicate foods. Hardwood charcoal (center) burns a bit hotter than regular briquettes (right), making it the best choice for high-heat grilling.