



What to actually put on the grill this summer

Grilling season is here, and so is the tired lineup of burgers, dogs, and chicken that has anchored the American backyard cookout for decades. None of that is going away anytime soon, but the average backyard grill sees the same ten ingredients every summer and calls it a season.

The case against the usual cookout staples is not just nutritional. Red and processed meats are classified as Group 1 carcinogens by the World Health Organization, meaning the evidence linking them to colorectal cancer is considered sufficient, not theoretical. That classification applies to the meat itself, independent of cooking method, but charring any animal flesh on a grill adds its own layer of concern: high heat applied to muscle meat, whether it is a burger, a hot dog, or a chicken thigh, produces compounds called heterocyclic amines and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, both of which are associated with increased cancer risk.

Fish might seem like the cleaner alternative, but the toxic burden (from mercury and other pollutants) and ecological reality are hard to ignore. Overfishing has contributed to the extinction of numerous species and the destabilization of marine ecosystems, and commercial fishing operations result in substantial bycatch, the incidental capture and death of dolphins, sea turtles, and seabirds. Farmed fish comes with its own environmental costs and health risks.

The grill is not the problem; it's what goes on it.

Vegetables fresh off the grill are a treat to behold. Oven roasting never quite matches the magic of the grill: the grill's high heat drives off moisture fast, concentrates sugars, and creates char at the edges while keeping the interior tender, all while adding a smokiness that changes the character of the vegetable entirely. Eggplant, which can be spongy and bitter when undercooked, turns silky and rich with proper grill time. Broccoli, which most people only steam or roast, blisters and chars on a hot grill in a way that will change how you think about it. Corn needs almost nothing done to it. Cabbage, halved or quartered and left on the grill long enough to char at the edges, is one of the most underused possibilities on the list.

Good technique is what separates a limp, sorry pile of zucchini from mouth-watering, caramelized, smoky slices that result in crispy-chewy perfection.

Vegetables need high heat and enough oil to prevent sticking and promote browning, and they need to be left alone long enough to develop color rather than moved around constantly. Cut size matters too. Pieces that are too small fall through the grates or cook unevenly. Larger cuts hold together and give the grill something to work with, like halved heads of radicchio, thick slabs of cauliflower, or whole scallions. A simple marinade or a good finishing sauce creates a charred surface that holds onto flavor in a way that steamed or boiled vegetables simply cannot.

Have you tried grilled fruit? Grilling caramelizes the natural sugars and softens the texture beautifully. Try them alongside savory dishes or sliced over a crunchy salad dressed with herbs and a sharp vinaigrette. Peaches, plums, pineapple, and watermelon are perfect summertime candidates.

What to Grill (and How to Prep It)

- **Tofu:** Slice firm or extra-firm tofu into 3/4-inch slabs, and drain out most of its water by "pressing", or keeping under a weighted pot for at least 30 minutes. Once pressed, marinate for at least 30 minutes in your favorite homemade or jarred marinade. Give it high heat, a well-oiled grate, and enough patience to let a crust form before flipping.
- **Tempeh:** denser and nuttier than tofu, and it takes a marinade even better. No pressing needed. Slice into planks or triangles, same marinade approach as tofu.
- **Potatoes and sweet potatoes:** parboil bite-sized chunks until just tender before they go on the grill, or you will end up with raw spots. Once parboiled, toss with olive oil, salt, smoked paprika, and garlic powder, then grill over high heat until the edges crisp and char. Sweet potatoes are arguably even better this way.
- **Peppers and onions:** grill peppers whole over high heat, turning until charred on all sides, then cover and let them steam for 10 minutes before peeling. The silky and sweet result has nothing in common with a raw pepper. Onions need more time than they usually get: grill thick rounds or halves over medium heat for 8 to 10 minutes per side, until soft all the way through and caramelized at the edges.
- **Avocados:** halve, pit, brush the cut side with oil, and grill cut-side down for 3 to 4 minutes. Finish with salt and lime or use them anywhere you would use a regular avocado.
- **Portobello caps:** marinate gill-side up, and grill gill-side down first. They release a lot of liquid, so give them space.
- **Asparagus, scallions, and shishito peppers:** straight onto the grates with oil and salt, no basket needed. Done in minutes.
- **Romaine halves:** brush with oil, cut-side down for 2 to 3 minutes. You read that right - grilled lettuce! Try it!

Grilled Cabbage Steaks with Miso-Tahini Drizzle and Pickled Onions



Cabbage is one of the most underestimated vegetables on the grill. Cut into thick steaks, it holds together beautifully over high heat, developing deep char at the edges while the inner layers turn tender and almost sweet.

The quick-pickled onions cut through it with just enough acidity to balance the richness of the sauce. Green cabbage works best here for its sturdiness, but red cabbage is a beautiful option if you want more color on the plate. Savoy cabbage is more delicate and may fall apart on the grill, so save that one for another use.

Ingredients (serves 4):

For the cabbage:

- 1 medium head green or red cabbage, cut into 1-inch steaks through the core (the core holds each steak together, so don't trim it)
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- Salt and black pepper (omit salt if you're on a low-sodium diet)

For the miso-tahini drizzle:

- 3 tablespoons tahini
- 1 tablespoon white miso
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- 1 small clove garlic, finely grated
- 2 to 4 tablespoons warm water, to thin
- Salt to taste (omit if you're on a low-sodium diet)

For the quick-pickled onions:

- 1 small red onion, thinly sliced
- 3 tablespoons red wine vinegar
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- Pinch of salt (omit if you're on a low-sodium diet)

To finish:

- Fresh herbs, roughly chopped: parsley, cilantro, or dill
- Red pepper flakes or Aleppo pepper
- Toasted sesame seeds

Instructions:

1. Make the pickled onions first, since they need at least 20 minutes to do their thing. Combine the vinegar, sugar, and salt in a small bowl, add the onion, and press it down so it is submerged. Set aside while you prepare everything else.
2. Whisk together the tahini, miso, lemon juice, and garlic, then thin with warm water a tablespoon at a time until it pours easily. Taste and adjust for salt and acidity.
3. Heat the grill to high. Brush the cabbage steaks generously on both sides with olive oil and season with salt and pepper. Grill without moving for 4 to 5 minutes until charred on the bottom, then flip carefully and grill another 4 to 5 minutes on the other side. The outer leaves will char and the center should be tender when pierced with a knife.
4. Transfer to a platter, drizzle generously with the miso-tahini sauce, and top with the pickled onions, fresh herbs, sesame seeds, and a pinch of red pepper flakes.

Tools of the Trade

Grill basket: essential for anything that would fall through the grates. Look for small perforations and a flat base.

Long-handled metal tongs and wide spatula: for control and clean flips. (The handle can be coated for safety, but metal is best for contact with hot food)

Silicone brush: for oiling grates and applying marinades. Skewers: metal or soaked wooden ones, for cherry tomatoes, mushrooms, and small pieces that won't sit well in a basket.

Cast iron grill pan: for stovetop grilling when the weather does not cooperate.