

AROUND THE FIRE

Greg Denton and Gabrielle Quiñónez Denton, with Stacy Adimando



RECIPES FOR INSPIRED GRILLING
AND SEASONAL FEASTING
FROM OX RESTAURANT





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PHOTOGRAPHY BY EVAN SUNG



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COAUTHOR'S NOTE

Dinner and a Pescatarian

I had only one night in Portland to find and eat the most incredible meal possible. One single dinner in this city my food-industry peers had for months been calling the new culinary capital of the country. And there I was, stuck dining with a pescatarian.

Out of the many restaurants that had been recommended to me, I had chosen this place called Ox upon a friend's insistence. And with its particularly carnivorous-sounding name and Argentinian grill concept in mind, I arrived ready to eat some meat.

When I walked through the doors at Ox, I felt a rush of warmth from the wood-fired grill, a 16-square-foot behemoth crackling and hissing away in the center of the room—not hidden in the kitchen like in most restaurants. And as the smoky scents and the buzz of the diners spiraled through the dining room, sparks flew around me in more ways than one.

Then I remembered my dining companion.

Don't get me wrong: I have nothing but love for you, non-meat-eating friend I speak of. But surely, I thought, the fire-cooked rib-eye and the onion-marinated skirt steak and the list of other grilled meats that ran down the center of this restaurant's menu must be the best dishes they offer. In this age of share-everything dining, I silently panicked.

It was partly through this "mishap" that I discovered the true genius of Greg and Gabi, the chefs and owners of Ox Restaurant and my coauthors of this book. That night, as our somewhat reluctant order of dishes like grilled halibut, mushrooms, and artichokes rolled out, I was floored by the magic these two chefs could work atop the fire with not just meat (though, of course, I snuck in a skirt steak...and a lamb shoulder chop) but these other foods as well. A heap of maitakes came off the flames glistening, chewy, and kissed with char plus a sprinkling of smoked sea salt and a brushstroke of a fruity extra-virgin olive oil. A deeply caramelized grilled onion tasted candylike beside rich and buttery diced beets. And a drippingly juicy fish "steak" was served thickly sliced, bone-in and skin on, smeared with toasted garlic oil and doused with a bright, citrusy sprinkling of chives. It lit up something inside me: an entirely new way of thinking about the grill.

Many of us likely grew up under the impression that "throwing something on the grill" meant applying the most minimal, summer-appropriate effort possible. While it may be true that it doesn't take much to make grilled food taste good, for better or for worse, we grew up lazy as a grilling culture—the easier, faster, and more straightforward grilled food could be, the better. And at my house, it all tasted the same: usually either slightly overcooked or totally overcooked (still love you, Dad), and slathered with bottled barbecue sauce. But we loved it anyway, for the ritual of eating in the backyard with family, and those familiar, somehow comforting charred flavors. Only now do I realize how far I was from understanding the grill's

potential.



I wasn't much of a dedicated griller before working on this book, probably for the reasons I just mentioned. But to witness grilling the way Greg and Gabi do it rendered the parts of grilling I once admittedly thought of as a hassle—the sometimes tedious process of lighting charcoal, the likelihood of going to sleep with smoke in my hair, and the rosy cheeks I acquire while tending a hot grill—worthwhile. Their food has proven to me that there is far more to grilling than convenience cookery, medium-rare meat and cover-up saucing. And once I was privy to their secrets, I looked at all food differently, wanting to take contrasts in ingredients to the extremes, pair dishes and plan grilled meals more deliberately, and surprise myself and my family and friends at every meal. Nowadays, I'd rather eat the food made from the recipes in this book than almost any food on the planet, and I look forward to any opportunity to light the grill.

Although part of what is romantic about grilled food is its rusticity, in reality, making grilled food as humbly delicious as Greg and Gabi's takes an impressive amount of know-how. With their creative flavor pairings and perfectly honed fire-cooking techniques gleaned from years of cooking and traveling, they have taken the art of fire cookery to a level I had not realized existed.

As you will see, under Greg and Gabi's guidance, the grill's potential to transform ingredients does not just apply to meat. Pescatarians (and vegetarians) welcome.

—STACY ADIMANDO



INTRODUCTION

Igniting a Passion

A great grilled meal stays with you, as does the experience of cooking one around a fire. Some of the happiest times of our lives have been celebrated around a grill. The two of us—now the husband-and-wife chef-owners of Ox Restaurant in Portland, Oregon—fell in love while cooking over a wood-fired grill in Napa Valley. That was in 1999, and you might say we've been on a quest to share our passion for the grill ever since. Maybe our story makes us a little biased toward this style of cooking. But we have a strong feeling that you, too, have some good memories tied to gathering around a fire and grilling.

That first grill where we worked together was at chefs Hiro Sone and Lissa Doumani's restaurant Terra in St. Helena, California. This Michelin-starred wine country restaurant was also where we first met, and where we both cooked professionally for the first time over a mesquite-fueled fire. Our job was smoky, it was sweaty, and it was flat-out the most inspiring way either of us had ever prepared food. Any chance we had, we would daydream about and make plans for opening a restaurant with a wood-fired grill of our own someday.

In between our jobs at Terra, getting married, and opening Ox thirteen years later, the two of us cooked and ate in various parts of the world, Hawaii, Italy, and Spain among them. When creating our plans for our restaurant, Ox, we knew that—in addition to the influences we took home from these regions—we also wanted to incorporate flavors and inspirations from Gabi's Latin American roots. She spent almost every summer of her youth at her family's home in the Andean highlands of Quito, Ecuador, developing a love for local flavors and traditions while watching her grandmother cook foods like empanadas, hominy stew, and all kinds of seafood ceviches. We also knew we would build our menu around what's in season, as well as make sure we offered something for everybody—vegetarians, food-sensitive diners, everybody.

With our grill goals in mind, we studied the flavors and techniques of one of the best grilling regions in the world: Argentina. There, a simple grill grate propped over a fire and a dedication to using all parts of an animal yield dramatic, meaty masterpieces. Meals last hours, platters are always heaping, and dining companions are generous and hospitable. There is an idea among Argentinians that what comes from their own land is the best there is—and that it is all you need for a meal.

At Ox, we do Argentinian-style grilling with a Pacific Northwest approach. We cook over an open-fire Argentinian grill, known traditionally as a *parrilla* (pronounced pah-ree-sha), and much of our menu celebrates the bounty—vegetable, seafood, and meat—of the area surrounding Portland, our home since 2008. When we moved here, something about the community told us instantly it was the right place to open our restaurant. In this part of the country, people are passionate about ingredients and open-minded about cuisine. We are forever flattered and grateful that they embraced our concept with open arms—a South American-style grill with a Portland-esque respect for local ingredients and eating by the seasons.

While Portland and Ox are very special to us, we believe that what we do at Ox—and everything we have learned from our travels to South America and Europe—can be more or less replicated wherever you are. The pages of this book are designed to inspire you to have an affair with your own grill—be it wood-fired, charcoal-fueled or, yes, even gas—and bring people together around it. (In our [Grilling Basics](#) section, there are tips for maximizing the potential of whatever style of grill you have.)

Of course, there's a reason a gorgeous crackling fire often lures people to gather around and stay awhile. Besides being warm and giving nourishment, it's relaxing and enchanting, something that can intrigue and mesmerize you for hours. We hope that the ideas and recipes inside this book will tickle the same elemental urges and instincts as fire itself does, and ignite some adventure in both your backyard and kitchen cooking.

When we visited Argentina and Uruguay together, we were so moved by the resourcefulness and cleverness of the chefs and hosts we met. They can make a grill out of anything, and they apply the fire's magic to the most unlikely cuts of meat. Drawing inspiration from these traditions, we've taken a leap in using some lesser-known cuts and ingredients in this book. We promise they are worth your while to seek out. But even if you don't, there is plenty in these pages to suit and surprise you.

As for steaks, oh yes, they are here, and they are divine. But we've picked other proteins that we are almost more excited for you to try, like shoulder chops instead of rack of lamb, fish tails instead of fillets, and spiced morcilla sausages instead of spicy Italian. We are convinced these other types of protein will not only encourage you to think outside your grill routines but also might save you some cash and probably become why-didn't-I-think-of-that favorites. We don't like to be stuck in ruts as chefs, and we believe no home cook or host should suffer that fate either.

Of course, extraordinary grilling is not just about meat. At Ox, the grill grate is just as often covered with stunning seasonal vegetables—like enormous artichokes tenderizing to perfection and singeing on the ends, or halves of golden spaghetti squash or summer cantaloupes sliced down the center and left to soften and caramelize over the embers. These are the dishes that surprise many of our first-time restaurant diners because we are not a traditional steak house, and these are not your traditional North American grill recipes.

Regarding the barbecue sauces and bottled condiments that are strategically missing from these pages, here's our take: grilled foods create their own natural, succulent, and luscious juices, so why waste them? We harness those drippings and season them with fresh, pungent herbs and spices, like bundles of rosemary and cloves of garlic; then we use these newly seasoned drippings to baste our grilled foods in their own amped-up natural juices. And when we need a condiment, we turn to the Argentinian classic: glistening, pungent chimichurri.

More than just give ideas, we'll teach you how to break down and prepare more flavorful cuts of protein, and provide seasonings, bastes, flavorings, and techniques that will hopefully allow you to expand the list of foods—not just familiar cuts of meat but also veggies, fruit, seafood, and offal—you get inspired to grill. We'll also share some fun finishing touches to try. We take pleasure in the look on diners' faces when they see fresh truffle shaved over their grilled leg of goat, or when they dip their spoon into the jalapeño-laced smoked marrow bone that sits atop our clam chowder. These flourishes can be omitted, but we urge you to try them since it is worth it to go the extra mile. This book is about sharing craft and creativity, inspiring

new menus, and helping to create new associations with the grill and new memories around it.

A very important distinction we'd like to make—and one we think sets our book apart from other grilling books out there—is that not every dish that follows is cooked on the grill. To us, sautéed side dishes, crisp salads, creamy soups, chilled ceviches, and roasted and toasted elements of all kinds are essential accents that help bring balance to every meal, including grill-centric ones. We do not expect man to live off the grill alone. Though that would not be a tragic fate.

Our vision is that these recipes will help promote more than just cooking seriously good food but also the joy of sharing it, hosting with ease, and spending relaxed hours around the table. This kind of cooking and eating harkens back to our travel experiences in South America and Europe—some of our best memories ever of eating—where family-style feasts are everyday occurrences and where it seems the simpler the food, the more awe it inspires. It mirrors the technique, flavors, and heart of places where we have found so much inspiration: Argentina, Uruguay, and Ecuador. Their cooking is the epitome of simplicity and soul, and like the Europeans, they know how to execute and enjoy a long, lovely meal like the best of them. As the world gets closer and smaller—communication and travel are easier, and people are taking trips near and far to expand their food experiences—everybody seems to be on a quest to find and re-create that same feeling these far-flung places foster. Here's the secret we want to share: it's right in your own backyard.

—GREG AND GABI



sample content of Around the Fire: Recipes for Inspired Grilling and Seasonal Feasting from Ox Restaurant

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