









**MICHAEL**

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**CHIARELLO'S**

**LIVE  
FIRE**

125 RECIPES FOR  
COOKING OUTDOORS

**WITH ANN KRUEGER SPIVACK AND CLAUDIA SANSONE**

**PHOTOGRAPHS BY FRANKIE FRANKENY**



**CHRONICLE BOOKS**  
SAN FRANCISCO

## **DEDICATION**

To my "Pops" Fortunato Chiarello, whose love of meat and fire was trumped only by his love for my mother Antoinette and his three boys. Thank you for your constant support and encouragement. I am forever in your debt. You will be deeply missed.

And to my wife and best friend Eileen. The biggest fire cannot equal the warmth and light you bring to my life every day.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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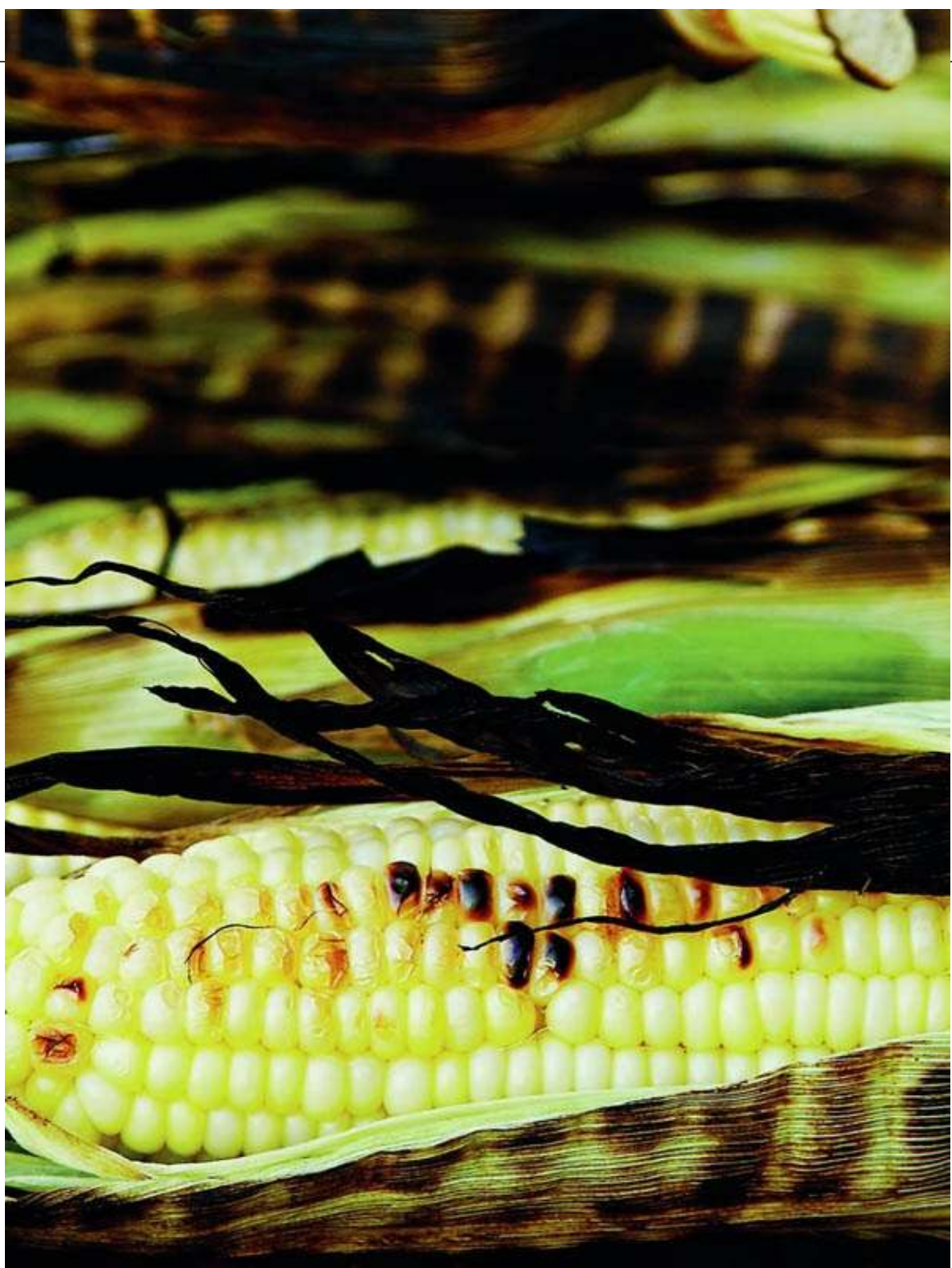
Thanks to Oscar Renteria for allowing us to photograph at the beautiful Pope Valley Beach. Thank you to Rob Hohmann, Michael Glissman, Margaret De Monte, Joel Hoachuck, and Kelly Magna, who are always ready to step in to make an event or a dinner even better.

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A very loving thank you to my wife Eileen, for so very graciously allowing the book team to take over our home, and then making pizza for everyone. Thanks to Roux, Felicia, Giana, and Aidan for giving me the world’s best reasons to cook over fire.

And finally, many thanks to all of you who believe, as I do, that cooking beside the people who love you will change your life. (It sure has changed mine.) I am grateful beyond words for your ongoing support.





# CONTENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

## STAY SAFE

## GRILLING EQUIPMENT AND TOOLS

## STOCKING AN OUTDOOR PANTRY AND AN INDOOR PANTRY

## CHAPTER ONE BUILDING THE FIRE

The Fire and the Cross

Using An Iron Cross

Whole Lamb on an Iron Cross with Mint Pesto and Chile-Fennel Tzatziki

Rosemary Parmesan Flatbread with Burrata and Torn Figs

Strawberry Pazzo Cake with Herbed Crème Fraîche

## HARVEST DINNER

Rosemary Parmesan Flatbread with Burrata and Torn Figs

Oysters on the Half Shell with Grilled Prosciutto and Mignonette

Grilled Vegetable Antipasti Sott'Olio

Heirloom Tomatoes with Whipped Burrata, Basil Oil, Smoked Sea Salt, and Balsamic Reduction

Baba Ghanoush with Toasted Pine Nut Tahini and Socca

Grilled Pasta with Grilled Meatballs

Whole Lamb on an Iron Cross with Mint Pesto and Chile-Fennel Tzatziki

Potato Polpette, Two Ways

Brussels Sprouts with Lemons in a Rotisserie Cage

Strawberry Pazzo Cake with Herbed Crème Fraîche

## CHAPTER TWO FIRE CONTAINED: THE GRILL

Grilled Avocado-Mango Guacamole

Lemon Leaf-Wrapped Goat Cheese with Balsamic Reduction and Grilled Olive Bread

Grilled Vegetable Antipasti Sott'Olio

Oysters on the Half Shell with Grilled Prosciutto and Mignonette

Grilled Crabs with Fresh Herbs

Fideau with Vermicelli, Grilled Shrimp, Chicken, and Calamari

Lemon-Garlic Chicken with Tapenade, Cooked Under a Brick

Grilled Pasta with Grilled Meatballs

Grilled Lemon-Saffron Pound Cake with Lavender and Fresh Berries

## BIG BURGER BASH

Three-Pound Beef Burger for Six on Country Bread

Grilled Bing Cherry-White Balsamic Sauce

Blue Cheese-Stuffed Beef Burgers with Zin-Onion Marmalade

Monterey Jack-Stuffed Turkey Burgers with Grilled Avocado-Mango Guacamole

Lamb Burgers with Ember-Roasted Onion Purée and Grilled Peach-Nectarine Mostarda

Smoky Paprika BBQ Potato Chips

Smoked Olive Oil-Manchego Potato Chips

Roasted Potato Salad with Roasted Garlic Dressing

Simple Lime-Cilantro Slaw

The Condiment Bar:

Pickles alla Presto, Bocce Court Mustard, Smoked Homemade Tomato Ketchup, Griddled Onions

Roasted Strawberry Lemonade with Herb Syrups

## CHAPTER THREE ROMANCING THE FIRE: THE HEARTH

Shrimp Wrapped in Prosciutto  
Clams in a Cataplana with Chicken-Apple Sausages and Crispy Sage  
Skewered Quail with Grape Salad and Citrus-Rosemary Salt  
Leg of Lamb on a String  
Salt-Baked Potatoes with Mascarpone and Prosciutto Bits  
Roasted Strawberries with Panna Cotta

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#### PIZZAS ON THE GRILL

Pizza Dough  
Piadine, Four Ways  
Greek Piadine with Kalamata Tapenade, Grilled Peppers, and Feta  
Caesar Piadine—Romaine, Anchovies, Garlic, and Parmesan  
Heartland Piadine—Red Peppers, Chicken, and Spinach  
Georgia Piadine—Shallots, Peaches, and Blue Cheese  
Pizza with Shallots, Wild Mushrooms, Smoked Olive Oil, and Fontina  
Pizza with Asparagus Pesto, Cambozola, and Insalatina  
Roasted Garlic Pizza with Grilled Tomato Vinaigrette and Arugula  
Dark Chocolate—Cherry Calzones

#### CHAPTER FOUR IRON AND FIRE: THE PLANCHA

Grilled Ahi Tuna with Carrot Caponata and “Broken” Carrot Vinaigrette  
Cauliflower “Steaks” with Parsley Butter Sauce  
Grilled Beef Chili  
Polenta Bread and Balsamic Honey Butter  
Grilled Ceviche-Marinated Calamari and Shrimp with Cancha Popcorn  
Grilled Mushrooms with Sausages, Onions, and Peppers  
Potato Polpette, Two Ways  
Roasted Lemon Granita

#### DINNER AT THE LAKE

Nonna’s Roasted Garlic Bread  
Fresh-Caught Trout Cooked in Foil  
Foil-Wrapped Ember-Roasted Beets with Goat Cheese  
Rosemary-Lemon Bars  
Meyer Lemon Verbena Water

#### CHAPTER FIVE LIVE FIRE: THE FIRE PIT

Grilled Italian Peppers Stuffed with Sausage  
Skewered Mortadella and Provolone  
Grilled Peach-Nectarine Mostarda  
3-Liter OO Can Mussels and Gypsy Peppers  
Costoletta di Bovaro (Italian Cowboy Steaks) with Salsa Verde  
Grilled Chicken Stew and Dumplings  
S’mores with Espresso Marshmallows

#### CHAPTER SIX FIRE IN A BOX: THE HOT BOX

Trifecta of Ribs: Beef, Pork, and Lamb  
Chickens for Twenty  
Pig Pickin’  
Pork Shoulder Cooked Lechón-Style  
Heirloom Tomatoes with Whipped Burrata, Basil Oil, Smoked Sea Salt, and Balsamic Reduction  
Corn on the Cob Roasted in the Husk with Red Pepper Butter  
Apricot Hand Pies

#### CHAPTER SEVEN A SPIN WITH FIRE: THE ROTISSERIE

Baby Goat on a Spitjack  
Turkeys on a Spitjack  
Tuna Loin Tied Prime Rib-Style with Salsa Verde  
Brussels Sprouts with Lemons in a Rotisserie Cage

Torta Strizzare with Maple-Pecan Gray Salt Ice Cream

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## BACKYARD CAMP-OUT BREAKFAST

Pain Perdu (French Toast)

Sausages Cooked on Long Forks

Brown-Bagged Eggs and Bacon

Melon, Two Ways:

Melon Platter (for kids) and Melon Salad with Ricotta Salata and Torn Mint (for grown-ups)

Malted Hot Chocolate with Fire-Toasted Marshmallows

## CHAPTER EIGHT THE LAST OF THE FIRE: COALS AND EMBERS

Ember-Roasted Onion Purée

Purée from Grilled Onions

Purée of Onion Vinaigrette

Ember-Roasted Garlic

Ember-Roasted Eggplant Purée

Baba Ghanoush with Toasted Pine Nut Tahini and Socca

Bruschetta with Coal-Roasted Garlic and Grilled Tomatoes

Smashing Pumpkins with Mint Pesto and Goat Cheese

## CHAPTER NINE FIRE AND ICE: COLD DRINKS

Grilled Zinfandel Sangria

Bloody Matador

Roasted Apricot Purée

Roasted Apricot Bellini

Dan Duckhorn's First-Night Cocktail

Red Beer

Smoked Tequila Margarita

Highwayman's Mojito

Meyer Lemon Verbena Water

Roasted Strawberry Lemonade with Herb Syrups

## CHAPTER TEN OIL, SALT, AND SPICE: SEASONINGS, SAUCES, AND DRESSINGS

Fennel Spice Rub

Toasted Spice Rub

Cocoa Spice Rub

Chef's-Style Balsamic Reduction

Inverted Sugar

Smoked Olive Oil

Smoked Oil Dressing

Smoked Sea Salt

Citrus-Rosemary Salt

Roasted Garlic Paste

Roasted Garlic Dressing

Red Wine Vinaigrette

Honey-Apple Cider Vinegar Dressing

Grilled Red Onion Dressing

Passata

Grilled Tomato Bloody Mary Blend

Tomato Vinegar

Grilled Tomato Sauce

Grilled Tomato Juice

Basil Oil

Beef Stock

Chicken Broth

Crème Fraîche

## RESOURCES





# INTRODUCTION

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**AT THE END OF THE DAY, WHEN THE FOOD HAS ALL BEEN SERVED AND SAVORED, WHAT'S LEFT IS YOUR CONNECTION TO THE PEOPLE AROUND YOUR FIRE.**

A fire adds flavor to your food but it's more than just a method of cooking. A live fire transforms the meal into a gathering, whether you're cooking for two people or two hundred. ❖ Italians know this at a cellular level. Ask any Italian, any time of day, if he would rather cook and eat outdoors or inside, and you'll get a "whaddya kidding me?" kind of look. Outdoors! When I have a great fire going and a gorgeous cut of meat perfectly seasoned and ready to go on that fire, I am a happy man. I can't even explain this; I just know that cooking over a live fire satisfies some deep, primal urge.

## **DRAMATIC FIRES AND EVERYDAY FIRES**

I'll share a few restaurant techniques but this book is really about how I cook over a fire at home. My goal is to make cooking over a fire feel less intimidating, and I've written the recipes so cooks at every skill level can use them. You'll see how I use a fire to mark big occasions but also how fire can elevate a midweek family dinner or transform leftovers into a great meal (like Potato Polpette, Two Ways, [page 114](#)). I'll show you how dramatic a fire can be: Flip through the first chapter and you'll see photographs of my 2011 Harvest Dinner where we cooked two whole lambs on iron crosses—metal frames that hold the lamb over the fire. That's one extreme. To see how I use fire for everyday cooking, flip to [page 93](#) and you'll find a pizza party that couldn't be easier. The prep work is simple: you cook the pizzas on the grill, and stay relaxed enough to visit with your guests.

## **THE MAIN POINT OF COOKING WITH LIVE FIRE**

In this book, I'll teach you how to cook over a big fire, but also show you how to make fire the center of smaller, more intimate gatherings. Yes, the folks at a Harvest Dinner will remember the drama of a whole lamb. But don't underestimate the power of flame to light up a simple Tuesday night dinner. (See The Urban Grill, [page 46](#), which shares where I had one of the best grilled cheese sandwiches I've tasted.)

The Harvest Dinner, pizza party, and rooftop grilled cheese are really about the same thing: using fire to create a community.

We humans have an affinity for fire; we're drawn to it. There's a natural rhythm to a fire that people respond to. When you cook over fire, your food tastes better and your gatherings have more warmth. My favorite part of an evening might be when the embers are dying and it's time to head home but everybody stays seated around the fire, quiet and content in the half-light and unwilling to leave the circle just yet—that's the moment you aim for when you start by building a fire.

## **WHAT DO I MEAN BY LIVE FIRE?**

I don't mean barbecuing. While some of the foods in this book are cooked on a backyard grill, you won't find typical barbecue recipes here. This book is about live fire, which means using different types of fuel—wood, charcoal, gas—with a variety of outdoor cooking techniques and equipment. You'll see how to use a hot box to cook a whole suckling pig or a dozen chickens at one time. You'll learn how to cook a whole baby goat on a revolving spit over a fire. You'll also see how to use flame to add flavor to simple foods you usually cook indoors such as chicken and dumplings or leftover mashed potatoes or even a grilled cheese sandwich.

My friend Bobby Flay and I were discussing grilling and I caught some heat for a comment that I made: I said that grilling is not cooking. (Wait, wait—hear me out.) When I hear the word “grilling,” I think of a guy sitting next to a Weber in a lawn chair, drinking a beer, and holding a spatula—and it's going to take a lot to pry him out of that lawn chair.

That guy in the lawn chair is not the audience for this book. I may cook over a grill but I am not grilling, I am cooking. I'm making sure the beef (or fish or chicken or vegetable) is seasoned perfectly. I'm thinking about the meal as a whole, I'm thinking about my guests and coming up with new ways to use fire to get better flavor. I may be relaxed but I am not dozing in my lawn chair; I'm keeping a close watch so the meal comes off the fire at its peak.

## **CHOOSE WHAT TO COOK BASED ON YOUR EQUIPMENT**

You choose what to cook based on where you'll cook: You cook different foods over a campfire or with a rotisserie than you would at your grill. This book is organized around that idea. Each chapter shows you what I cook over a specific type of equipment: the hearth, a gas grill, a rotisserie, a plancha, or a fire pit. You can absolutely cook a recipe from the fire pit chapter at the hearth; you just have to modify it a little to work for your heat source.

## STAY SAFE

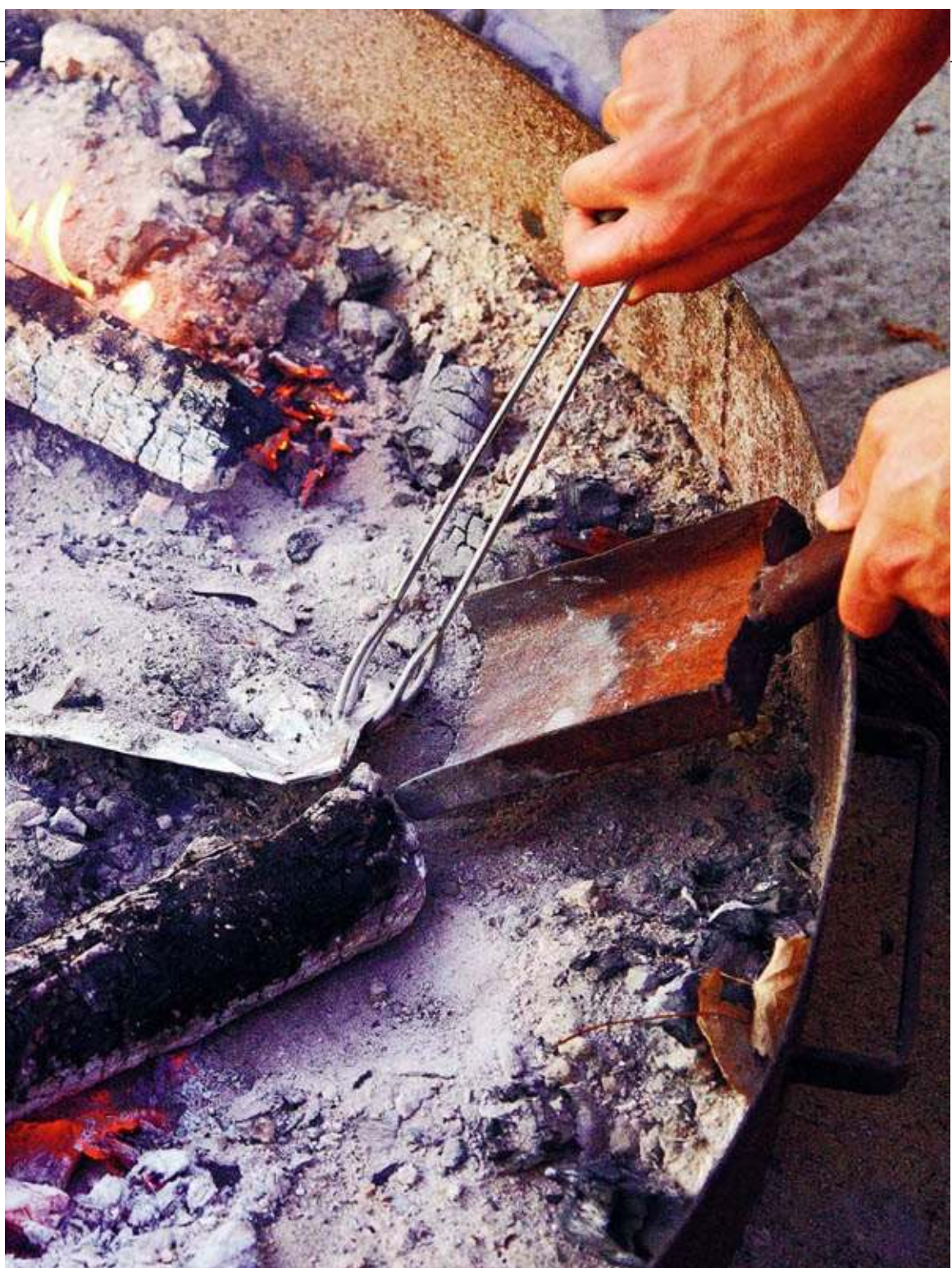
This may be the most important page in this book. I hope you read it more than once. Don't get burned—follow these guidelines for keeping yourself and your family safe while cooking with fire. Look for this banner throughout the book for other safety tips.



- Don't build a fire under tree limbs, patios, awnings, or the eaves of a building. Don't build a fire closer than 30 feet to any other structure, and never build a fire indoors except in a fireplace or a wood-burning oven. (The garage? Forget about it!)
- Use extra caution when children are nearby. At our house we have one designated fire person and one designated kid person so if I'm minding the fire I know my wife, Eileen, has an eye on the kids.
- Before you start the fire, have a safe, cleared space set aside where you can place hot pieces of equipment like the grill rack or the rotisserie bar and know kids can't touch them. Make sure the ground is flat and clear of all brush where you plan to build a fire or place a grill, and check that your grill is sturdy and well-balanced. A live fire on a slant is a bad idea all the way around.
- Use the right size grill for what you're cooking. Make sure your grill and what's on it are completely stable. Don't ever rest a huge pot (like that used for the chicken and dumplings shown on page 140) on a small grill or a kettle grill.
- Don't spray anything flammable onto flames. This includes lighter fluid and even a spray can of olive oil or nonstick cooking spray. You can spray the meat or any food directly when it's not near the fire or spray the grill baskets or grill rack before you start grilling, but don't spray anything (except water in a spray bottle) directly onto flames. Because fire can travel up a stream of flammable liquid, you put yourself at great risk by spraying anything except water onto a live fire. When it's time to oil the grill rack, pour a little olive oil onto a paper towel and hold it with a pair of long tongs.
- Choose the right tools when working with fire. Make sure all your chef's tools—tongs, spatulas, roasting forks—are extra-long with grips made of wood or other material that doesn't melt or conduct heat. Choose high-quality heat-proof gloves with long cuffs. Don't skimp when buying items that keep your hands safe from flame and heat.



- When you are sliding meat or game onto a rotisserie or spit bar, keep both hands on either side of the food. Don't put your hand in a position where it can be hurt by the pointed end of the bar if the roast gives way suddenly.
- With a rotisserie, spit roast, or coal pan for the hot box, keep in mind that all these will be exceptionally hot when they come off the fire. The buddy system works here; have a friend help you lift hot, heavy items off the fire safely. Know where you will rest it before you lift something hot. Always have two pairs of good sturdy fireproof gloves before you start the fire.
- Have a source of water ready; a hose connected to a spigot is best.
- If you have a fire extinguisher, bring it outside and keep it nearby but don't let the kids touch it. Make sure your extinguisher has been inspected in the past six months. (If it doesn't have a tag showing date of inspection, take it in to be checked before you start the fire.) If you have any questions about your fire extinguisher or just fire safety issues in general, talk to the folks at your local fire department; if they can't answer your question, they'll point you in the right direction.





# GRILLING EQUIPMENT AND TOOLS

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You can build a grill out of ten dollars' worth of bricks, and cook a meal that tastes just as good or better than food cooked on a six-thousand-dollar grill that's bigger than your car. (For proof, see the photos on [pages 180](#) and [219](#).) ❖ Where grilling is concerned, the winner isn't the person with the biggest, most expensive grill; the winner is the person who uses smoke and flame to best advantage. ❖ Throughout this book, I'll show you how I aim for flavor on a grill, in a fire pit, with a rotisserie (or a spitjack), in my hearth, in a hot box, on a plancha, and using the coals left over from a fire. ❖ Please don't try to tackle all these methods at once. Choose just one piece of equipment—maybe it's your grill or maybe you want to try cooking on a plancha. Cook on it every week, every day if you can, until you know that piece of equipment and feel confident using it. Then decide which type of grilling equipment you'd like to master next.

## TOOLS

You'll need these every time you cook over fire.

### CHARCOAL STARTER CHIMNEY

A simple, inexpensive metal cylinder with small openings at its base, the chimney is a much better way of starting charcoal than dousing it with lighter fluid. I have two of these, so I can ignite a good amount of charcoal at one time. (See Igniting Charcoal, [page 42](#), for directions on how to use a charcoal starter chimney.)

### CUTTING BOARDS

Big cuts of meat call for oversize cutting boards. Keep your fingers safe by not carving or chopping a leg of lamb or whole pig on a too-small board. Care for your cutting boards by wiping them every 3 to 6 months with an oil specially made for cutting blocks. See Resources, [page 218](#), for sources for cutting boards and cutting block oil.

### FIRE EXTINGUISHER OR A WATER SOURCE NEXT TO THE GRILL

A fire extinguisher is always a good idea. Make sure yours has been tested within six months and keep it where the kids can't get to it. If you don't have an extinguisher, set up a hose attached to a water spigot, and test it to make sure it reaches the grill before you start a fire. If you don't have a water source, fill a five-gallon bucket with water and place it next to the grill. Chances are you won't need it, but better to be prepared. It's also wise to keep a spray bottle filled with water beside the grill to handle small flare-ups.

### FIREPROOF GLOVES

Choose well-made gloves with long cuffs or gauntlets to protect your forearms. Make sure the gloves you buy are well-made and well-padded but still flexible; the gloves that protect your hands from flame are not where you want to save a few pennies. Always have two pairs ready so when you need

a friend to help you, their hands are covered too.

I take good care of my grilling gloves, storing them in a drawer so I know where they are when I need them.

## GRILL BASKETS

When grilling delicate fillets of fish, young asparagus, or even a dozen meatballs, a grill basket can make it easier to flip your food. A grill basket is also the best way to grill pasta (see [page 61](#)). Look for baskets with sturdy hinges and handles and evenly woven mesh when buying.

## GRILL BRUSH

A clean grill rack means better grill marks and less chance for food to stick. The best way to clean the rack is with a sturdy grill brush (see [page 42](#) for tips on cleaning the rack). If you don't have a grill brush, a wadded-up piece of aluminum foil works in a pinch, although a real brush does a better job.



## LARGE, HEAT-PROOF PLATTERS

Before you put food on the grill, have platters ready for it. To keep harmful bacteria away from your cooked food, never use the same plates and platters that held raw meat, fish, or poultry for the final cooked product. I use baking sheets to hold food before grilling and then use platters after grilling so there's never any mistake about where the raw food has been.

## LONG-HANDLED TONGS, FORKS, AND SPATULAS

I invest in sturdy tools with long handles and comfortable heat-proof grips. When you're cooking with fire, flimsy tools are not an option.

## MATCHES

Don't fool around with souvenir matchbooks when you're ready to cook. Buy a box of serious matches that are long enough to light the fire without singeing your fingers.



## METAL ASH BUCKET

Have heat-proof containers ready for ash or hot tools, and make sure they are out of limits and out of reach of any children.

## PIZZA STONE

A pizza stone is usually either earthenware or ceramic, and it gives the bottom of a pizza crust its crisp, even texture. I wouldn't even try to cook a pizza over a fire without a stone.

I have pizza stones that have lasted for years but I've also cracked a few of them. To keep them intact, handle them gently and try not to place a hot stone on a cold surface or a cool stone on a very hot grill. Because a pizza stone is porous, don't ever use detergent to wash it because it will absorb the odor and flavor of the soap. Instead, wait for the stone to cool completely, then scrub with a stiff brush or a damp cloth.

## SMOKING GUN

I add smoke flavor to ketchup, cheese, cocktails, and salt using my smoking gun. (See The Smoking Gun, [page 201](#), for more information about how to use one.) A smoking gun is a handheld battery-operated appliance that generates smoke by burning small wood chips that you set on top of the gun's heating element. It comes with a hose to attach to the gun's nozzle. The hose makes it easy to aim smoke where you need it.

You'll want to create a smoking chamber where the food will sit to absorb the smoke's flavor. If you have a glass bell jar, this is an ideal use for it. If you don't have a bell jar, create a smoke chamber by covering a bowl with plastic wrap. Lift one edge of the wrap, insert the smoking gun's hose, then reseal the plastic wrap around the hose to keep the smoke inside with the food.

## THERMOMETERS

I use a probe thermometer to test that big pieces of meat are done. Laser and instant-read thermometers can be helpful too.

## GRILLS AND GRILL EQUIPMENT

If you don't already own a grill, don't rush out and buy one; you can make your own. Live-fire cooking is about harnessing flame, not firing up your credit card. People cooked over fire thousands of years before the propane tank came along.

Having said that, here are my recommendations for grills, starting with the simplest. For sources for the following equipment, see Resources, [page 218](#).

### THE DIY GRILL

You can make your own grill using a heavy cast-iron grate and heat-proof stones or bricks.



I've cooked at an event where we lined our fire pits with river rocks, started the fire, and put in the pork. When those river rocks started exploding, and our very well-heeled guests were dodging pork leg and river-rock shrapnel, it didn't matter how well I marinated the pig. Err on the side of caution and know for a fact that your rocks or bricks don't contain moisture.

### THE HIBACHI OR URBAN BALCONY GRILL

The hibachi, a simple and inexpensive piece of equipment, lets city dwellers cook over charcoal. See The Urban Grill, [page 46](#). Modern hibachis have some great features, including the ability to fold up for storage.

### THE KETTLE GRILL

The next step up is a kettle grill, most commonly called by the brand name Weber. There's a reason a lot of us have cooked over these iconic grills at one time or another. They are convenient, affordable, and do a great job.

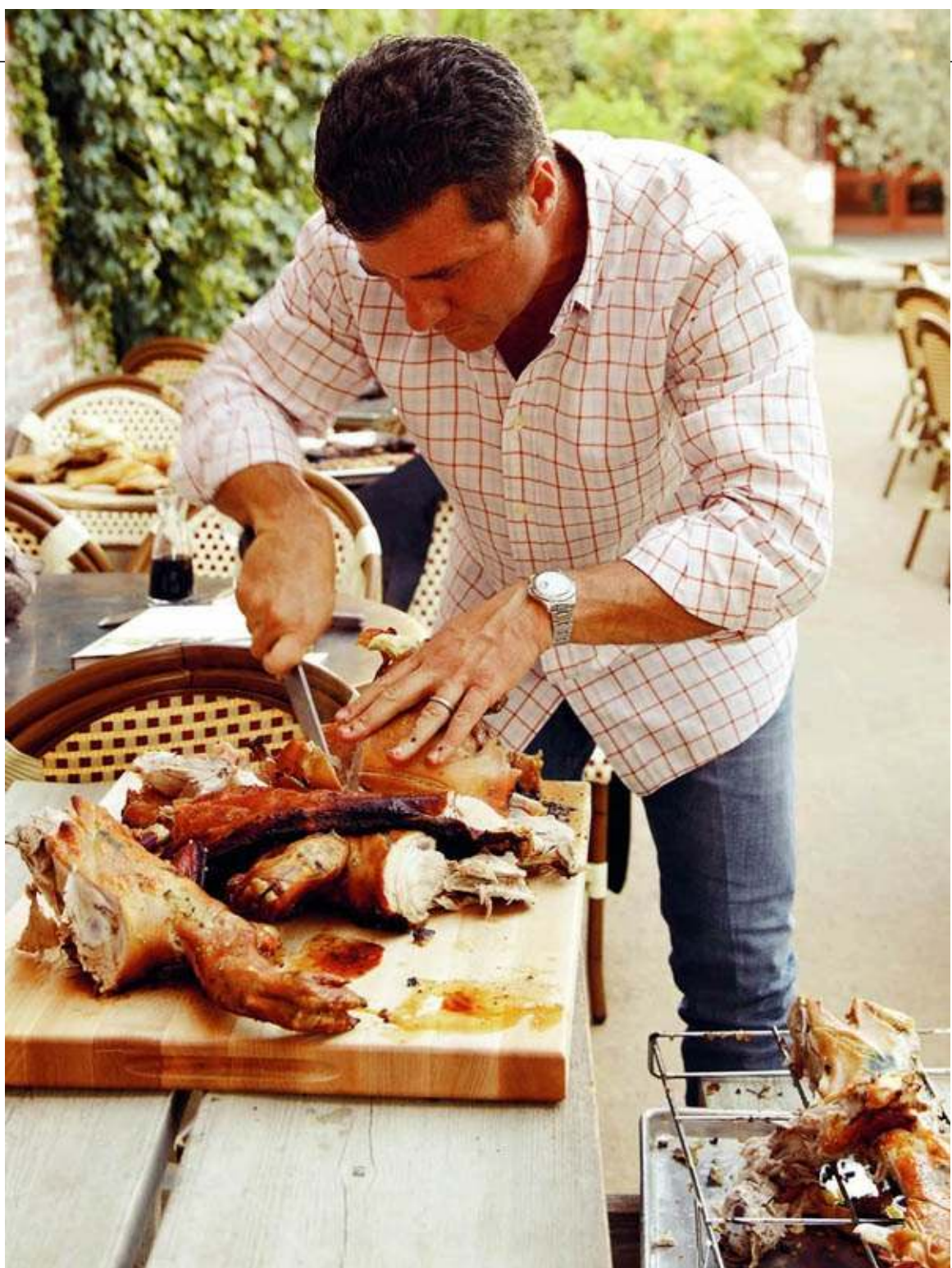
### TOP-OF-THE-LINE WOOD-BURNING GRILL

When you're ready for a beautifully made wood-burning grill, my choice would be the Aztec Grill. The Aztec has an air-flow system that lets you control the radiant heat and burns fuel very efficiently. It reaches higher temperatures than most wood-burning grills, especially good when cooking big cuts of meat.

You'll notice I haven't mentioned propane-fueled grills. If you have one, don't worry; the recipes in this book will do your grill proud. But propane doesn't give you the same flavor as cooking over wood fire. I own a propane grill and find myself using it when I haven't planned ahead. For an immediate fire, you can't beat propane, which is always there, no matter the weather (assuming that you've remembered to fill the propane tank). For the best flavor, you're going to want to light the wood or the charcoal.

## **FIRE PIT**

Fire pits can be simple; the original fire pits were a hole dug in the ground. These days you have lots of fire pit options from portable to permanent and from DIY (dig-it-yourself) to beautifully crafted custom-made fire pits with grates that can be raised or lowered easily to let you move the food closer to or farther from the heat. The most important point is to set up a fire pit so you can cook over it. If you already own a fire pit, you can buy grates that let you cook over it, although in some cases they may have to be custom made. If you don't already own a fire pit and are interested in one, choose a model that has grill racks that can be moved closer to the flame or farther away. Read more about fire pits on [page 128](#).





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