

COOKING METHODS

Before we go on to describe different techniques, we want to make one thing clear: Open-fire cooking isn't simply a variation of grilling that uses firewood instead of charcoal or briquettes. Fire can do much more. It can envelop and insulate. Radiant heat can cook gently from a distance. And you can char, smoke, and roast your food. Here, we explain the cooking methods you will encounter in this book and suitable ingredients.

Charring (fire strength 4–5)

As a rule of thumb, if it can be peeled, don't. Fruits and vegetables become sublime when placed directly on the fire until they are completely charred. Their juices prevent the skin from flaking off before they're properly cooked, enabling steam to form and cook them from the inside. At the same time, the fire lightly smokes them and evaporates part of the liquid, intensifying their flavor.

Good for: Beets, butternut squash, leeks, cabbage, large carrots, daikon, celeriac (celery root), potatoes, asparagus, pineapple, pumpkin, onions, bell peppers, and eggplant.

Clinching (fire strength 6)

It's a boxing term, but in this context it means having direct contact between the food and the embers. It's more commonly known as dirty cooking, but that is actually misleading, because it's a much gentler and cleaner way to cook than you might think.

Good for: Kale, carrots, and scallions.

Confiting (fire strength 5–6)

Here is another term we've borrowed from somewhere else—it's actually a technique where you salt and cook food, typically duck legs, in its own fat. Here we use butter; it's a great way to cook vegetables, especially those that require a little more time. It isn't the same as deep-frying, because the temperature is a lot lower, just enough for the water in the vegetables to evaporate so we're left with a denser texture and deeper flavor. After confiting, we typically give the cooked vegetables a good sear on the grill rack so that they also have a crispy crust.

Good for: Carrots, parsley root, beets, parsnips, potatoes, and Jerusalem artichokes.

Hanging (fire strength 1–6)

Hanging is great for juice-filled fruit and vegetables, because it gently dries them out as they are smoked. It intensifies the flavor and gives them a firmer bite.

Good for: Tomatoes, bell peppers, zucchini, pumpkin and other winter squashes, pineapple, and pears.

Grilling (fire strength 5–7)

By its very nature, grilling takes place on a grill rack. Here, distance is key. The closer you position the rack to the embers, the more the food colors and the shorter the cooking time will be. The farther away it is, the longer your vegetables can be cooked without burning. Sliced sweet potato, for example, benefits from a relatively large distance from the embers so that the flesh is cooked through before the cut surface burns. In contrast, a juicy zucchini needs a good sear close to the fire so that it retains some of its texture.

Good for: Pointed cabbage, brussels sprouts, broccoli, kale, avocado, lettuce, mushrooms, grapes, sweet potato, zucchini, and melon.

Grilling in a strainer (fire strength 5–6)

A strainer is suitable for grilling small items with a size that makes them difficult to cook on a grill rack. The strainer enables them to absorb smoke and aromas while cooking gently, preferably with regular shaking.

Good for: Nuts, seeds, berries, and beans.

Flambadou (fire strength 4–5)

This use of a flambadou, or fat baster, is an age-old French cooking method in which hot melted fat is poured over a raw ingredient to gently cook the surface, leaving a thin and tasty coating. It's suitable for juicy vegetables that benefit from a short cooking time while they soak up the fat and absorb its flavor.

Good for: Tomatoes, lettuce, spinach, and other leafy vegetables.

Rotisserie (fire strength 4–5)

A rotating spit enables applying an even, gentle, and consistent source of heat to food, which slowly caramelizes as the heat penetrates into the center. It produces a surface that is crispy and tasty while the inside remains juicy. A rotisserie isn't only good for cooking chicken—it's also ideal for vegetables.

Good for: Mushrooms, pineapple, cauliflower, pumpkin and other winter squashes, pointed cabbage, red cabbage, and celeriac.

Baking (fire strength 4–6)

Use either a salt dough or clay to coat and bake sturdy vegetables of a certain size. Baking is a fantastic cooking method that is both efficient and dramatically impressive. You encase your food in a hard shell of a heavily salted dough or clay, which retains the juices and heat while the food gently cooks. It looks like a prehistoric fossil when taken out of the fire, and it's always a special moment when the "package" is opened to reveal the food inside.

Good for: Celeriac, potatoes, turnips, and parsnips.

Cooking in a pot, Dutch oven, or skillet (fire strength 5–8)

What distinguishes an outdoor Dutch oven from a regular pot is the design of the lid, which lets you place embers on top to create an environment where the heat is more evenly distributed than if it came from only below. In addition, Dutch ovens for outdoor use come with short legs that let oxygen reach the embers, so they won't be suffocated by the pot. A Dutch oven can be used to bake perfectly crisp and fluffy bread that would be hard to make in a conventional oven. However, in terms of taste, you could argue that you might as well cook any bread in a kitchen, because if you use a Dutch oven or other pot or skillet, it will be so insulated from the fire that it won't be able to absorb much of the characteristic flavor of open-fire cooking. For this reason, we usually try to include other ways of cooking with the fire during the process. This could mean grilling, clinching, or charring some ingredients in more direct contact with the fire to infuse it with its flavor.

Good for: Stews and bread.