

By Steven Slon ■ Photography by Rob Howard ■ Illustrations by Harry Bates

Natural Born GRILLER

How I became my neighborhood barbecue king.
(And how you can, too)

Barbecuing isn't just about cooking. It's about connection, family, smoke, joy, love, and the sacrament of the shared meal. Tending the fire, wearing the apron, roasting the meat and the vegetables, then divvying it all up with one's clan feels primal.

Possibly it *is* primal. When our distant cave-dwelling ancestors, the earliest form of *Homo erectus*, began scavenging the earth for food—still lacking the means to create fire—all their vegetables and meat had to be eaten raw. These early humans spent up to 12 hours a day gnawing on sinewy flesh and coarse plant matter. They were chewing *machines*. (After foraging, chewing was all anyone had time to do.)

Then, fire.

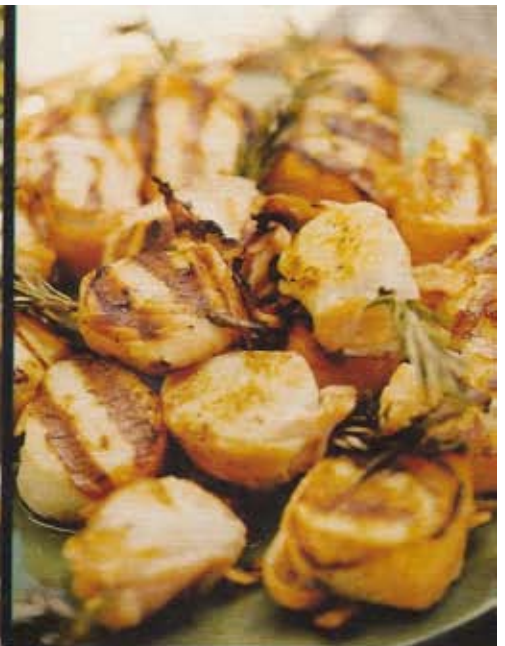
Roasted meat and roots were tender. Chewing declined to 45 minutes per day. And, by some accounts, this may well have produced the evolutionary change that transformed the ape-man—with his tiny brain and powerful jaws—into modern man. Think of all the free time! The brain surged in response to all the nonchewing stimuli we were suddenly exposed to. In an evolutionary blink of the eye, we went from chewing alone

to eating together, which led to dinner conversation, then storytelling, then cave drawing, and then: the pyramids, the printing press, *Sputnik*, Fotomat, GPS, poetry slams, liposuction, and 24-hour Internet shopping.

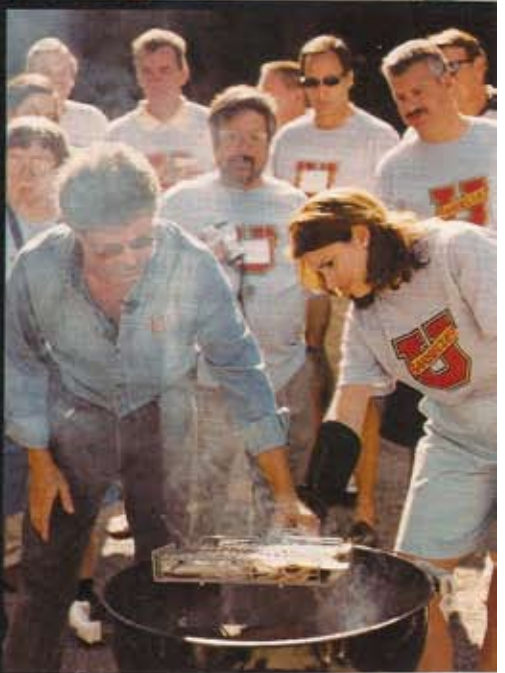
All this I learned in a three-day BBQ University course taught by celebrity chef Steven Raichlen at the lush and perfectly manicured campus of The Greenbrier resort in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia.

So, why grill? Because it takes us from our harried present back through the multitude of generations to that first moment when we sat around the fire, safe and sated, chewing on fresh-cooked meat, while all around us the elements raged, the volcanoes spewed, and the critters lurked. Is it any wonder that so many of us are passionate about open-fire cooking?

Now, at Raichlen's class, assembled on a hillside encampment safely away from the inn, in a blaze of fire and smoke, we are learning about the refinements—the gourmet end of barbecuing. We grill not only chicken, pork, beef, shrimp, and fish but also cabbage, artichokes, corn, pineapples, and plums, searing up five-course meals from start to finish. We discuss and prac-



Fire When Ready A rack of ribs gets a slow, smoky roasting, top left. Later, the author, left, right, above, and below, makes short work of them. Other fare includes scallops with smoked salmon and rosemary, top right. Barbecue guru Steven Raichlen, bottom right, offers pointers. And, yes, wearing those dopey T-shirts is mandatory.

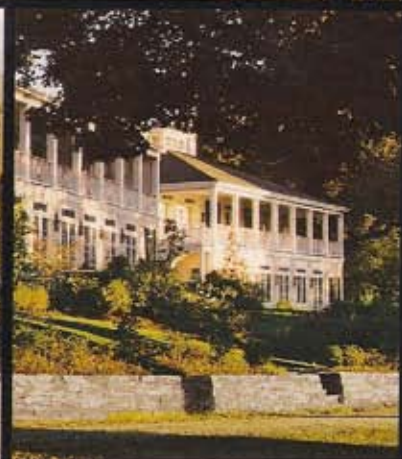
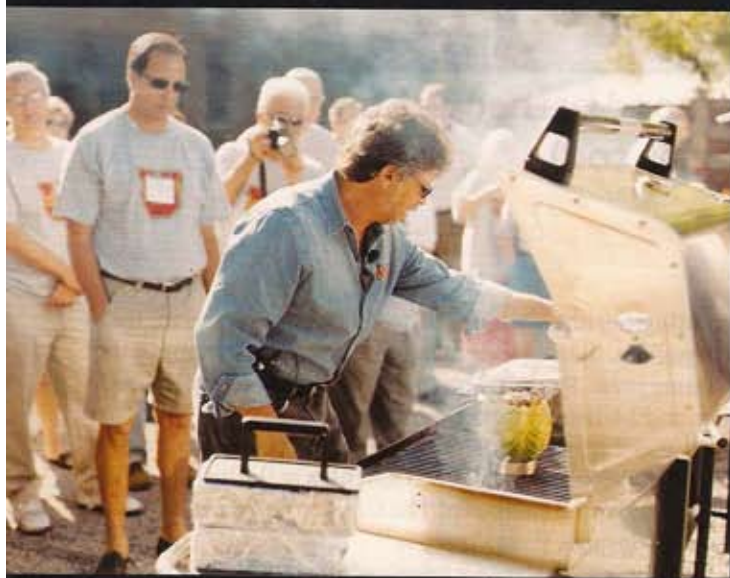


tice our marinades, our sauces, and our rubs. Then we step out of the classroom and fire up a spectacular array of grills, starting with the plain backyard charcoal grill to restaurant-grade gas grills, box-shaped grills, an egg-shaped grill, an infrared grill that cooks at 1,200° F, three types of smokers—19 grills in all.

At the end of the three days it seems we've cooked everything that can be cooked on a grill, which is just about anything you can eat, with the possible exceptions of ceviche and sushi.

But even Raichlen, the P. T. Barnum of open-fire cooking, author of the classic *The Barbecue! Bible* and seven other books on the subject, including the just published *Raichlen on Ribs, Ribs, Outrageous Ribs* (Workman Publishing, 2006), would be the first to tell you that you don't have to barbecue fancy to barbecue well. You can't top the act of throwing a piece of swordfish or a steak—sprinkled with sea salt and some freshly ground pepper—over fiery hot coals. It's always satisfying somehow, even when the result isn't perfect. "Open-fire cooking is more art than science," says Raichlen. "Every time you make a mistake, what you've actually done is come up with a new recipe." Still, there are some core principles he taught us that can vastly improve your technique.

Grill Crazy Raichlen preps a whole stuffed cabbage (recipe, page 68); the huge Weber Ranch Kettle grill is packed with chimney-style fire starters, *bottom left*; the antebellum Greenbrier hotel, *bottom right*.



1 Learn the lingo Many people use the words *grilling* and *barbecuing* interchangeably. But these are actually quite different. Grilling is high-heat cooking, with the food directly over the heat source. Barbecuing, on the other hand, is long, slow cooking that exposes the food to indirect heat and more smoke. (See box, opposite, "Setting Up Your Grill.")

2 Plan ahead Before you even light the fire, make sure you have everything you need at grillside: food, sauces, utensils. If you're cooking with charcoal, you'll need enough to build a big base of coals and still have some extra in case the fire runs down. When cooking with gas, your tank should be at least a third full.

3 Prep your work site You wouldn't think about eating on a dirty plate; likewise, you shouldn't cook on a dirty grill. Use a stiff wire brush to clean the grill before and after grilling.

4 Oil the grate After you've cleaned the grill but before starting the fire, take a paper towel soaked in vegetable oil and swab it across the grate's surface.

5 Get it hot The biggest mistake neophyte grillers make is failing to preheat the grill. Cooking on a cool grill can result in dull, gray, rubbery meat. For direct-heat grilling, you want a surface temperature of at least 500° F. With a gas grill you'll need to preheat to high for at least 10 to 15 minutes to get the firebox hot enough. With a charcoal grill, you can use Raichlen's finger test: hold your bare hand six inches over the grill. If you have to snatch your fingers away after three *Mississippis*, it's hot enough. Five *Mississippis* means "medium."

6 Don't poke Always use tongs or a spatula to turn the meat. If you stab it with a carving fork, you'll drain the precious juices into the coals.

7 Baste safely Most basting sauces can be applied throughout the cooking process. But if you use a marinade that has been exposed to raw meat or seafood (say, prior to cooking), do not apply it within the final three minutes of cooking, as it might contain bacteria from the raw meat. When using a sugar-based barbecue sauce, apply it toward the end of the cooking time, since it may easily burn.

8 Cover up When cooking larger cuts of meat using an indirect-heat method of barbecuing, keep the lid on tight and resist the urge to peek. Raichlen says each peek costs you 5 to 10 minutes of cooking time.

9 Give it a rest When the meat comes off the grill, let it stand for a few minutes before carving. "This allows the juices, which have been driven to the center of a roast or steak by the searing heat, to return to the surface," says Raichlen. "The result is a juicier, tastier piece of meat."

10 Never desert your post Direct-heat grilling means working over a hot fire. Things can and will catch on fire or need turning from moment to moment. Do not: answer the phone, run back to the kitchen for supplies, grab a beer, change the oil in your car, or do anything else to distract yourself from the job at hand. In this, modern man can take a lesson from ape-guy: walk away from the fire and dinner's going to get tough. A person's jaw can start hurting just thinking about it.

Steven Slon is the editor of AARP THE MAGAZINE.

(Setting Up Your Grill)

Some foods taste better when grilled over direct heat, while others benefit from hours of slow roasting. Here's a primer.

■ **Direct grilling** is ideal for tender, lean, thin cuts of meat or fish, such as steaks, pork chops, swordfish, and salmon steaks, or fast-cooking vegetables, such as zucchini, broccoli, and corn. The searing heat quickly causes the surface to become crispy and caramelized, producing a flavor and texture that's impossible to duplicate in an oven.

■ **Two-zone direct grilling** When you build the fire, spread one layer of coals evenly across the bottom of the grill and a second layer of coals across half the first layer. Also leave a small area coal-free. This allows you to move items from high to medium or low heat as they become done.

■ **Indirect grilling** (or barbecuing) is for thick, fatty, or tough pieces of meat, such as pork shoulder, leg of lamb, whole chicken, and brisket. Classic barbecue is quite slow (225°F to 275°F for 10 to 12 hours in the case of an 18-pound brisket) and requires either a barbecue pit or a special smoker to maintain the steady low temperature. Most people don't have either of these. Nor, frankly, the patience to cook all day. Fortunately, Raichlen teaches a less time-consuming method of barbecuing that can be accomplished on a basic kettle-style charcoal grill (see illustration at right). First, carefully push the hot coals away from the center so they're piled on either side of the firebox. (Add wet wood chips for added smoke.) Next, place a pan in the center to catch dripping fat. Finally, set the food on the grate and cover the grill. It will now function as a roasting oven, with all the heat and smoke swirling up and around the food. The ideal cooking temperature for this kind of barbecue is 325°F to 350°F. You'll cook a whole brisket in 5 to 6 hours, a leg of lamb in 1½ to 2 hours, and a chicken in about 1½ hours. You can wait that long, can't you?



Direct Grilling



Two-Zone Direct Grilling



Indirect Grilling

(Gas Versus Charcoal)

If you're serious about grilling, you'll want a charcoal grill. That's not to say you can't make a good steak on a gas grill. And gas grills are convenient on a drizzly day, not to mention in winter. But gas grills are incapable of re-creating quite the same burned-edge, charcoal, wood-smoky flavor. For the record, Steven Raichlen never knocks gas. Instead, he very diplomatically says everyone should have both kinds of grills. The classic charcoal grill is the Weber Kettle. If you have the space for it in your back yard, Raichlen likes the humongous Weber Ranch Kettle model, which is practically big enough to pitch a tent in. The best charcoal is the hardwood-lump kind. You'll light it using a chimney-style fire starter, never lighter fluid.



Taking a Ribbing The delectable finished product awaits demolition.

Dry-Rub Beef Ribs With Smoky Honey-Mustard Barbecue Sauce

Adapted from Steven Raichlen's *BBQ USA* (Workman Publishing, 2003)

Method: indirect grilling

SERVES 4 TO 6

- 2 racks of beef ribs (5 to 7 pounds, total)
Basic Barbecue Rub (recipe follows)
- 3 cups wood chips or chunks (preferably apple or hickory), soaked for 1 hour in water to cover, then drained
Smoky Honey-Mustard Barbecue Sauce (recipe follows)

1. Generously season the beef ribs on both sides with the Basic Barbecue Rub.
2. Set up the grill for indirect grilling. If using a gas grill, place all the wood chips in the smoker box or in a smoker pouch. Pre-heat the grill on high until you see smoke, then reduce the heat to medium low. If using a charcoal grill, set up for indirect grilling, then toss 1½ cups of the wood chips on the coals.
3. Place the ribs in the center of the hot grate, meat side up, over the drip pan and away from the heat. Cover the grill and cook the ribs until dark brown, very crisp on the outside, and tender enough to pull apart with your fingers, 2 to 2½ hours. If using a charcoal grill, every hour add 12 fresh coals and ¾ cup of the wood chips or chunks to each side.
4. Transfer the ribs to a cutting board and cut the rack into individual ribs. Serve with Smoky Honey-Mustard Barbecue Sauce.