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WORDOFMOUTH BLOG



Fire your imagination

Cooking outdoors allows you to make messy, adventurous meals that you wouldn't attempt in the kitchen. What are your favourites?



Mat Follas cooks over on an open fire. Photograph: David Mansell

I used to go camping in a serious way, with nothing more than a backpack and freeze-dried meals to sustain me. Now, however (I'm not sure whether it is because I'm wiser, or just older), I like a little more comfort, and I want my food to have flavour. Some of the old campfire favourites – bacon, eggs, sausages, beans – are fine, but you don't want them every day, and they tend to be heavy with fat and salt.

To get more variety, the key is to go for different flavours and, while you are at it, why not try some dishes that are not that practical to make at home? Cooking on an open fire is the ideal opportunity for messy cooking: charred jacket potatoes, fish cooked in clay, or an American-style rack of ribs with a dry, spicy rub. This is the sort of cooking that, if attempted in suburbia, would have the neighbours complaining about the smoke or phoning the fire brigade.

When you are camping, you don't take your kitchen scales; you do everything by eye and instinct. All you need is some basic equipment (a good knife, a grater, strong plastic bags that seal, and, if you're not backpacking, a heavy casserole dish), essential flavours (salt, pepper, powdered chilli, allspice, garlic, sugar, ginger, thyme, lemongrass, fresh limes, soy sauce) and some sunflower oil. Here are some of my favourite ideas for meals; use them as a starting point for your own dishes.

Kebabs

Put some prawns in a plastic bag with chilli, oil and lemon. Shake it about, leave for an hour or so, then skewer the prawns and cook them over the fire.

If you prefer meat, mix up some peanut butter with oil and chilli to make a satay sauce. Chop pork, beef or lamb into small cubes and place in a bag with the sauce. To marinate the meat more deeply, add a teaspoon of plain yoghurt if you have some, shake and leave for a couple of hours before cooking.

Wild salads

If you put salad leaves in a sealed plastic bag with a dribble of water, they will keep for a few days. Supplement with foraged wild garlic, dandelions and primrose flowers (assuming you can find these in a dog-and-pesticide-free area). Drain the excess water from the salad leaves.

Chuck some oil, a little lemon juice, a few drops of vinegar (if you have it) and a pinch of salt into a new bag. Shake, then add your salad leaves and wild leaves. Shake again and serve.

Charred jacket potatoes

Wrap the potatoes in foil and chuck them in the ashes for at least half an hour. They should end up black on the outside. Hold them in a thick cloth to prise them open and scoop out the middle. They will be steamy, and delicious with butter.

Clay-baked fish

There are two schools of thought on cooking fish in a fire: you wrap it in either damp newspaper or clay. I lean towards clay as it is easier to handle, and feels more natural. To find clay, you need to look along the edges of a creek or stream.

Roll out a pencil-sized piece, and if you can wrap it around your finger without it breaking, then you've got good clay. Roll-out a 1cm thick sheet

of this clay and place on it a gutted fish stuffed with a few interesting flavourings (wild garlic, a lime, ginger, lemongrass). Wrap the fish in the clay, ensuring there are no air gaps, and carefully place it in the hot ashes, covering with more glowing, hot ashes. Leave it to cook for 40 minutes to an hour.

Spatchcock chicken or ribs

Cooking meat skewered on some branches is great fun and impresses the kids like nothing else, except perhaps cooking fish in clay. Spatchcock a chicken – its easy! – or get your butcher to do it; or use a rack of ribs instead.

Make a dry rub using roughly equal quantities of allspice, crushed garlic, grated ginger, sugar, chilli powder and salt. Then rub thoroughly over the chicken or ribs. Skewer your chicken with crossed branches poked through the legs on opposite sides, in an X shape. Prop the meat above the fire – if the heat is right, the meat should start charring after about five minutes; cook for 15 minutes in total. Check the juices run clear by poking the thickest part of the meat before serving.

Bonfire puddings

Simple banana halves fried in butter never fails. There is no need to add sugar, although leftover Easter egg works well with this.

If you're feeling more ambitious, try this "bonfire clafouti": cover the bottom of a cast-iron casserole dish with a layer of pear or apple halves, make a thick batter using a packet sponge cake or muffin mix, and pour over the fruit. Place the lid on the casserole dish and balance it above the hot ashes (there needs to be an air gap under the dish to stop it from burning). This is a fantastic way to finish your bonfire dinner.

These are my favourites, tried and tested, but I'm always keen to hear new ideas. So what inspired campfire dishes have you come up with and which have ended in disaster? Also, what's good to drink with a charred dinner? I'm a bit biased - I like a certain well-known stout with most things, but a bottle of wine is also guaranteed to taste better drunk in the fresh air around a fire.

[Next](#)

[Previous](#)

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