



I don't know anything.
—Michelle Kelly, Editor

That's becoming very apparent.
—David Zimmer, Grill Genius

GRILL SKILLS

HER CRED'S AT STEAK

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When barbecue know-how is in your job description, you'd better sign up for boot camp with the Grill Genius

WE'RE AT THE LAKE.

It's a chilly, late summer morning, the ground is still slimy with dew, and a charcoal barbecue is set up—accidentally—beside a large nest of lazy ground wasps. Every so often, someone walks unnervingly close to the nest. “Watch the wasps!”

This is hour one of Barbecue School, and class is about to begin. David Zimmer (former *Cottage Life* editor, grill master, all around curmudgeon) is here to teach Michelle Kelly (current *Cottage Life* editor, grilling newbie, all around keener) the basics. Why? Because an editor at *Cottage Life* should know how to work a grill. Obviously. But also because Michelle, a lifelong cottager and, therefore, a life-long eater of barbecued food, is convinced of one thing: the griller is King (or Queen) of all meals. No matter the elaborate planning that goes into the dinner prep—the shopping and the chopping and the salad-making and the beer-buying and the set-up—no matter who does *all* that work, it's the person who delivers the perfectly done steak from the grill who gets the props when everyone sits down to eat. “You’ve outdone yourself!” “Awesome job!” “Standing O!” Etcetera. Nobody gushes over the steamed quinoa or the marinated olive appetizer. Nobody gives a shout-out to the person who swept seven weeks’ worth of dirt and pine needles off the deck.

At least, that's how Michelle tells it. But to be the one who does the grilling—and therefore gets the love—you have to know how to grill. And Michelle knows very, very little. “Should I go change my pants for this?” she asks Zim.

Let's get started.



These are “strike anywhere” matches. Yeah, except on the side of the box.

If you strike one on your teeth, I'll give you a dollar.

LESSON 1 Lighting the coals

If charcoal grills look like something out of the 1950s, as Michelle notes, it's because they haven't changed much since then. Most charcoal grills have more or less the same parts: a cooking chamber, a grate, a lid, and vents. “You control the heat by controlling the air-flow,” Zim explains. “You start a fire and you manage it.”

Some fancy charcoal grills have a gas ignition system, with a burner that lights the charcoal for you. If yours doesn't, you can use a charcoal chimney starter, filled with crumpled newspaper and charcoal—in lumps or briquettes.

“People prefer one or the other,” says Zim. “But I just use what I have on my deck.” Lump charcoal looks like wood, he explains, because it is wood: hardwood heated in the absence of oxygen. It lights easily, burns hot, and leaves little ash, but it doesn't last as long as briquettes.

Briquettes, on the other hand, are basically ground-up charcoal, with additives. They give predictable, even heat and tend to burn longer, but they produce a ton of ash.

Once your fuel is in the chimney, you're ready to light the paper. “This is the part that makes me nervous,” says Michelle. “I know it's irrational, but a friend in university completely singed off his eyebrows doing this.”

“You're just lighting newspaper on fire,” says Zim. “I think you can handle it.” He suggests a barbecue lighter. Or matches, but matches seem to take a damn long time. No, it's just how Michelle lights them. “Didn't you ever smoke?” Zim asks. “It's like I'm watching you peel a carrot.”

Chimney starters work by convection, drawing oxygen and flame up through the charcoal and igniting it—no lighter fluid necessary. Finally, the chimney starts to smoke. It's okay, just the newspaper burning off, Zim explains. Wait 15 to 20 minutes, and the charcoal will start to turn grey. It's ready for cooking. >>

FACE THE FEAR OF CHARCOAL



LESSON 2 Cooking chicken over indirect heat

With the cooking grate removed, dump the lit charcoal out of the chimney and into the chamber. Wear oven mitts; the charcoal pieces will be as hot as “a nuclear reactor,” says Zim. Using tongs, spread them over one side of the cooking chamber. Put the grate and the lid back on. Use the vents—most charcoal grills have a lower and an upper vent—to control the heat. The lower vent is your “gas pedal,” says Zim: open it wide for a very hot fire; keep it almost closed for low heat. Always keep the upper vent open while cooking; otherwise, your food will develop an acrid flavour. Shut both vents and the fire will die. No air means no oxygen, which means no combustion. Which means no chicken.

When you cook with indirect heat your food is—ideally—never directly over the coals. This method gives food a roasty taste, instead of a strong chargrilled flavour. Indirect grilling takes longer, but you’re less likely to burn your food. If you have a lot to cook, and the grill is full, arrange the meat strategically. Some cuts can handle more heat, says Zim. With chicken, put thighs and drumsticks closer to the coals, where they’ll shield the delicate breasts, which should go farther from the heat.

With tongs, Michelle arranges her chicken. “This is a chicken breast, so I’m going to put it here.”

“That’s actually a thigh,” says Zim.

Close the lid, and let the meat cook. Bone-in chicken pieces typically take 35 to 45 minutes. If you don’t have an instant-read meat thermometer, test for doneness by piercing the thickest part of the meat with a knife. Juices should run clear and the meat shouldn’t look too pink. Because nothing ruins a barbecue like food poisoning! >>

For indirect cooking, dump hot coals over half of the cooking chamber.



You want to put food on one side and heat on the other. Meat. Heat. Meat. Heat.

You gotta keep ‘em separated.



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MASTER THE PROPANE

LESSON 3 Lighting the barbecue quietly

The key to lighting a propane grill? Introduce the gas to the flame (or spark)—not the other way around. Why? “You want to avoid doing anything that burns off your facial hair,” says Zim. People fear propane grills because they’ve had a bad experience, or they know people who have had a bad experience. Usually this is because they’ve turned on the gas and allowed it to sit too long before lighting. “If you turn on the gas, then go make a white-wine spritzer, then come back and light the grill, your barbecue lid is going to end up in the neighbour’s yard,” says Zim. Open the lid, then turn the valve on the propane tank counter-clockwise all the way. Turn on one burner, press the igniter right away—you should hear a *pffft*, not a *whomp*—then turn on the other burners. Now, close the lid while the barbecue preheats.

There are barbecue accessories and gadgets that seem cool—smoker boxes, side burners, lights—and those can be helpful, but you don’t need them to grill a good burger. “You’re grilling. Not performing surgery,” says Zim. And no gizmo will up your game as much as practice and technique.

“Why does this fancy gas grill have so many drawers?” Michelle asks. “I don’t know,” says Zim. “It’s like babies’ clothes. Why do their pants have so many pockets? What do they need to carry around?”

“Nothing,” says Michelle. “Babies don’t even know they have arms.” >>

After opening the valve on top of the propane tank, turn on one burner, but don’t dawdle.

Push the igniter, a.k.a. the clicker, the lighter, or the button thingy.

I love the smell of propane in the morning. It smells like victory.

Dave, it’s the afternoon.

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LESSON 4 Grilling burgers on direct flame

When the grill is hot, put your burgers on. “Lid open or closed?” Michelle asks. Answer: Both. Sort of. “With a powerful grill, you can leave the lid open,” says Zim. “But that’s a bit like leaving the door to your house open in winter. You lose a lot of heat.” If you keep the lid closed all the time, however, the heat builds up. “You end up baking the top of the burgers while grilling the bottom.” The solution is to open and close the lid when necessary, monitoring the burgers.

The old “flip it once” rule isn’t a rule. “If you flip the burger only once, it can get charred on one side and grey on the other,” says Zim. Grills have hot spots. They’re not uniform. Move the burgers around so they have equal time on the hotter parts. If you try to move a burger, and it sticks, “it’s probably not done,” says Zim. “Once you get enough brown on it, it’ll release.” Try again in a minute or so.

You may be tempted to press the burgers with your flipper to make them cook faster, but this is a meat-destroying mistake. Pressing wrings the juices out of your patties and makes them dry. “You’re squeezing the life out of them,” says Zim.

“How long do burgers take?” Michelle asks. Zim refuses to answer. It depends on the grill, the meat, the season. Maybe on the phases of the moon, or if a butterfly flaps its wings halfway around the world. Do a finger test: touch one burger with the tip of your finger. It should feel firm, and you should see clear juices.

Don’t fear flare-ups—fats drip out of the meat as it cooks and ignite, usually in one spot or another. “Just move the food,” says Zim. That said, don’t confuse a minor flare-up with a blaze in the grease trap. If grease builds up in that little pan, and it catches fire, all you can do is turn off the gas and smother the fire with salt or baking soda. (On a charcoal grill, shut all the vents.) “I once had a grease-trap fire while cooking a lot of burgers. I did 60 burgers fine. But I couldn’t do 70.”

“It was done like dinner,” says Michelle. “It was done like a *tire fire*,” says Zim. >>

If the burgers stick, give them another minute or so on the grill.



GET THE RIGHT BARBECUE

How much should I spend on a barbecue?

It really depends on your level of passion for outdoor cooking and the number of hungry mouths you regularly have around the cottage table. Expect to pay \$400 to \$500 for a well-built, smaller-sized gas grill or \$800 to \$1,000 for a high-quality, full-sized model. For a charcoal burner, \$50 to \$100 will get you going with a table-top model, and \$400 to \$500 will get you a top of the line, do-anything cooker. Obviously, you can pay more: outdoor kitchens, ceramic kamado cookers, and professional-grade smokers are in a different price echelon.

A warning: there are a lot of crappy grills out there, often at amazingly low prices. These poor performers, with no source for replacement parts, often fail within a year or two. (Just visit the scrap-metal pile at your cottage landfill, and you will see a few shiny examples.) Instead, look for brands by well-known manufacturers of grills and smokers. The good ones have been around for a while.

Should my first barbecue be gas or charcoal?

If you’re intimidated by the idea of lighting and managing a cooking fire, or if you just need to get food on the table pronto, then go with gas. But if you don’t mind a learning curve because you prize flavour over all else, charcoal is for you. Mastering a charcoal grill does take time; but, like learning to drive a stick shift, it is a skill that is never lost and will make using other types of cookers a snap.

What extras are worth getting on a barbecue?

Many grills offer built-in accessories such as side burners, warming drawers, and infrared searing stations. I would happily give up all of them, as long as I can have a dedicated rear rotisserie burner, a built-in box for smoking chips, and a replaceable, probe-style thermometer in the lid.

What maintenance will my new grill need?

Blessedly, modern grills don’t require much maintenance at all, aside from cleaning the cooking grates. If you really like to slop the sauce around or roast big cuts without a drip pan, it’s a

good idea to make sure that the grease and glop is flowing into the “trap,” usually a foil pan. A grease-filled grill is a prime candidate for a runaway barbecue fire. (Been there, done that.) What’s worse is that those greasy drippings are acidic and will corrode the body and burners of your grill.

What parts of a barbecue wear out and how do I replace them?

Cooking grates, heat-deflecting drip bars or shields, and burners are the most common grill casualties because they live in the belly of the beast, where it’s hot and greasy. All are easy to replace and can usually just be lifted out, although some burners are fixed in place with a screw or two. This is where it pays to own a grill made by a well-established company: you can get high-quality replacement parts from the manufacturer. Third-party grill parts, sometimes called “universal fit,” are notoriously bad. Even if they do fit, they often fail prematurely.

—David Zimmer

TURN TO THE ROTISSERIE

LESSON 5 Roasting pork loin on a spit

Rotisserie grilling isn't actually grilling; the meat roasts while it slowly rotates. This method is good for big chunks of protein: whole chickens. Prime rib. A pig. You can outfit most barbecues with a rotisserie attachment—basically, a metal rod with a small motor. To prep the 'cue, heat the coals as you would for indirect cooking. Arrange the coals on either side of the grill, with the drip pan positioned in the middle. (Many gas grills have dedicated rotisserie burners, says Zim. Just put a drip pan on the cooking grate under the meat.)

The toughest part of cooking on the rotisserie, says Zim, is putting the meat on the spit fork without sending anything flying or stabbing yourself. "This is going

to get a little rammy and violent," he warns Michelle. Grab the roast with one hand and push it onto the spit rod—it takes some muscle—then attach the second spit fork. When the meat is in position, finger-tighten the screws. Michelle does this spitting smoothly—"I go to the gym, Zimmer"—and is pleased. "I'd high-five you," she tells him, "but I might give you salmonella."

Centre the meat over the drip pan, then turn on the motor. If you haven't pre-seasoned or marinated the meat, now is the time to get some flavour on it. As the meat rotates, you can gently press a spice rub into the surface. "What's in this spice mix?" Michelle asks. "I don't know," says Zim, "but it's expensive, so you might want to stop throwing it around like a drunken sailor." A roast will take about an hour, Zim says, but it depends—a lot—on the size and on how well done you like your meat.

The next hard part of rotisserie grilling comes at the end, when you're ready to pull out the spit rod. First, you have to remove the smokin' hot screws. "That's why I never leave home without these," Zim says, whipping out a pair of pliers.

That moment will come later. For now, the roast is roasting, and Michelle is doing jumping jacks to stay warm. Or maybe she's just had enough learning. "Let's go get a beer," she says. "It's five o'clock some—oh, it's five o'clock now. Seriously, Zim, I want a beer."

"This day went well," says Zim.

"I swore a lot less than expected," says Michelle.

Then they walk straight towards the wasps' nest. 🐝

Like Michelle, associate editor Jackie Davis is a grilling newbie. She's sure as heck never Frenched a loin roast.

We're going to cook a Frenched loin roast. "Frenched" means the bones are cleaned, so it looks pretty.



It looks pretty delicious, I'd say.



Great grilling gear

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