

A Guy's Best Friend

Steak

Steak is the one dish every self-respecting man—no matter how kitchen-phobic—should know how to cook. Cooking a great steak isn't gender specific, of course, and plenty of women excel in its preparation. But even if your mother/wife/girlfriend cooks like a pro or *is* a pro, there's a good chance she'll look to you to cook the steak. Will you shy away from a hunk of raw beef or raging fire, or will you calmly take tongs in hand and step up to the grill with confidence?

You can master the basics in thirty minutes (and spend a lifetime perfecting the fine points). There's a lot, um, at stake in this chapter, so listen up.

The Steak

Steaks come in a hunger-inducing array of cuts, shapes, and thicknesses (see photo on page 226). You can think of them in three categories.

Top cuts | The intrinsically tender steaks, which include New York strip, filet mignon, rib steak, rib eye, sirloin, porterhouse, and T-bone. (They come from the upper part of the steer, hence "top" cuts.)

Bottom cuts | Fibrous, somewhat tough steaks that become tender when thinly sliced across the grain. These include skirt steak, flank steak, and hanger steak, which are cut from the steer's underbelly.

Tough love cuts | Steaks that require prolonged cooking with liquid at a low temperature (braising—see page 9), like chuck or blade.

The Seasonings

Some of the world's greatest steaks, like Spain's *chuletón* (rib steak), are prepared using only one seasoning: salt. Italy's magnificent *bistecca alla fiorentina* requires only two seasonings: salt and extra virgin olive oil. No matter what the seasoning, it should remain subservient to the beef—in other words, enhance the flavor, not overpower it.

Salt | A great steak demands salt—preferably in coarse crystals, which stay intact during cooking. I prefer coarse sea salt or flat crunchy crystals of *fleur de sel* (naturally evaporated sea salt). Kosher salt also works. Table salt won't give you a great crust.

Pepper | For me pepper is a mandatory seasoning. The pepper should be freshly and coarsely ground. (To get a coarse grind, loosen the top nut on the pepper mill.) If you cook a lot of steak, you may want to pregrind your pepper in a spice mill (more fresh pepper for less work). There's one exception to the freshly ground rule: Store-bought cracked black peppercorns. Why? The pieces are sufficiently large to taste like whole peppercorns.

Rubs | Rubs are combinations of salt, pepper, herbs, and/or spices that are literally rubbed onto the surface of the steak, flavoring it before the meat is cooked. On page 239 you'll find my Fennel Mustard Peppercorn Steak Rub.

Marinades | These wet seasonings work well with popular tougher cuts such as flank steak and sirloin. One popular marinade for steak is Japanese teriyaki (soy sauce for salt, sugar or mirin—sweet rice wine—for sweetness, and dark Asian sesame oil for nuttiness).

Fat | When it comes to cooking and serving steak, fat is a good thing. Fat equals flavor. Fat keeps your meat moist. Enhancing with fat raises a great steak to the stratosphere. Among the ways to do this: Wrap a filet mignon in bacon, sauté a hanger steak in plenty of butter, drizzle a *bistecca alla fiorentina* (Tuscan steak) with olive oil, or crown a T-bone with a disk of truffle butter while it rests.

The Heat

As the author of eight grill books (and three grilling TV series), you'd expect me to say that there is only one way to cook a great steak: on the grill. True, it's hard to beat a T-bone charred over a wood or charcoal fire (or directly on the embers). But, in fact, there are many great ways to cook a steak.

Grilling | My favorite way to cook tender steaks. Set up the grill for direct grilling and make sure it's screaming hot. (You want a three-Mississippi fire, see page 12.) The exception is when you're cooking a porterhouse that's more than 1½ inches thick; in that case, work with a two-zone fire: one hot zone and one medium zone. You sear the outside of the steak over the hot zone for a couple of minutes, then move the steak to the medium zone to cook it through.

Caveman grilling | My favorite way to cook T-bones. You light natural lump charcoal in a chimney starter and rake out the coals in an even layer over the bottom of the grill. Fan off any loose ash with newspaper. Place the steaks on the glowing coals. No grill grate needed.

Panfrying | Panfrying a steak may seem like an also-ran next to the live fire methods, but most chefs (and civilians) in France use a skillet. You heat it screaming hot, grease it with butter or vegetable oil, and sear the steaks in the hot fat. Sizzling crust? Check. Moist center? Check. And unlike grilling, which has a tendency to dry out lean steaks, panfrying adds fat to the meat. On page 238 you'll find a great recipe for a new take on steak au poivre (Filets Mignons with Peppercorn Cream).

Skillet roasting | This is my favorite method for cooking thick, intrinsically lean steaks, like a grass-fed porterhouse. You sear the steak on both sides in an ovenproof skillet, such as a cast-iron one, then place the skillet in a hot oven to finish cooking. The pan holds in all the fat and helps keep the meat from drying out. On page 231 you'll find a great recipe for garlic and rosemary-roasted Skillet Rib Steak.

Broiling | When I was growing up, my grandmother served sirloin broiled to the color of gray flannel. Broiling remains my least favorite method for cooking a steak. If you do broil a steak, preheat the broiler screaming hot and get the steak as close to the heat source as possible (within 1/2 inch) to sear the meat. Trick: When you season steak for broiling, sprinkle on a *little* sugar (½ teaspoon): It will caramelize, giving you a better crust.