

# ADVICE FROM CHEF RICHIE VEGGIES ON THE GRILL

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“No salt, no pepper, no job”  
—my motto

Practice on your own before grilling for guests. *Getting a feel for grilling* is a big part of the program

## CHOOSE YOUR INGREDIENTS

Use local organic/naturally grown vegetables. By doing so you will be using height-of-the-season ingredients grown with special care. They often have superior flavor, texture and shelf life, in addition to being interesting (varieties never before seen pop up all the time). I recommend your own edible backyard for harvesting ingredients. If you don't grow your own or need to supplement, please shop at farmers' markets and at local farms that welcome visitors. Summer is coming and with it big fat heirloom tomatoes; many varieties of eggplant; zucchini, fancy yellow, crookneck and heirloom summer squash; sweet corn; a myriad of peppers and onions including *cebollitas verdes* (green onions); and many more treasures from the local earth that are transformed into explosions of flavor by grilling. Here are my staples for a summer party of four:

- 2+ pounds of eggplant
- 2+ pounds of zucchini/summer squash
- 4 large ears corn
- 16 green onions

Also, have on hand:

- Olive oil and a lighter oil (*either* rice bran oil, organic canola, or grape seed) mixed 1 part olive oil to 3 parts of the lighter oil. You'll need a lot of this oil mixture, and it will help to use "speed pours," those plastic stoppered-metal tipped bottle tops, for pour control.
- Kosher salt or sea salt (put it in a bowl so you can pinch it up)
- Pepper and a full/efficient pepper mill or grinder

Optional special touches:

- Chopped and/or whole fresh herbs
- Multicolored heirloom tomatoes
- Edible blossoms (like Turkey Tail Farms' calendulas and hearty lettuce mix that they pick to order for you "the morning of") as flavor/visual explosion garnishes.
- Local cheeses, olives and toasty breads make fine accompaniments too.

## READY YOUR EQUIPMENT

I prefer coals (briquettes) to propane, but for beginners, propane grills are the best way to go, due to the ease in manipulating the heat. Directions in this "lesson" refer to propane. More experienced grill cooks will, I hope, be able to extrapolate my suggestions to use of coals.

In addition to your grill (and a full propane tank) you'll need:

- A sturdy, preferably large/wide metal-toothed grill brush
- Towels/rags you don't care about that aren't frayed (Frayed

towels can catch fire; also, *never use a wet towel to pick up anything hot, ever*, in order to avoid the common vapor burn mistakes.)

- A large sturdy table for organizing your raw and then cooked *mise en place* (prepared food items).
- Platters or stainless steel bowls for both raw and grilled veggies
- A sturdy pair of tongs, medium length, and a large metal spatula (called a "turner")
- A sturdy, large cutting board and a very sharp knife. I suggest a Forschner 8-inch, or chef's knife with a scalloped (slotted) blade, and I suggest taking an on-line knife skills and safety course. (That's my liability disclaimer.)

## PREPARE YOUR VEGGIES

First organize (what we call in the business) your "stations." Use separate containers/bowls for each vegetable as you ready it for grilling, and have separate plates/platters/bowls at the ready for presentation after grilling.

**Summer squash:** Pick medium, or a little bigger, zucchini and yellow squash. Quarter lengthwise and slice into 1- by 3-inch-long pieces. Cut flying saucer-type squash "on the equator," making rounds for a nice presentation. If the seeds are tight and compact, leave them, but large seeds in big/loose seed sections should be cut out and discarded. Drizzle squash abundantly with oil (8 to 12 tablespoons). Start with 2 tablespoons, toss, add 2 more, if needed. You want to coat the squash well, but leave very little run-off at bottom of bowl. Add a 3-finger pinch salt, 10 turns of the pepper mill, toss and add a 2-finger pinch salt and 7 turns of the pepper mill. Toss and set aside.

**Eggplant:** If "globe" variety (football-shape), cut round cross sections  $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch thick. Set aside the 1 or 2 tough pieces at the stem end. Use closer to  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of oil. Add two tablespoons at a time, tossing in between, until only a touch of unsaturated flesh is visible, if any. Salt and pepper as with squash, but use 50% more of each. Toss and set aside.

**Corn:** Shuck the ears and remove the fine hairs with a damp towel. Be meticulous. Do it twice. Carefully, with a big/sharp knife that won't slip. Cut each ear in four sections (three if the ears are smaller), making the pointy ends bigger. (Cutting through the cobs is difficult, so you may want to cut after cooking.) Season with oil, salt and pepper as above. Toss and set aside.

**Green onions:** Cut the very bottom and the tops off. With a damp towel, tug on the bottom/white part to see if an outer layer will come off. Wipe clean. Drizzle with  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup of oil, sprinkle a 2-finger pinch of salt and add 3 turns of the peppermill. Toss and set aside.

Also prepare any garnishes.

## CAUTION ON FLARE-UPS

Never, ever, pour the veggies (and oil) straight onto the grill. Excess oil can cause flare-ups when it comes in contact with grill flames. If you get a flare-up, immediately get your veggies off the grill with your tongs, grab a clean towel and towel off your veggies piece by piece, then *start over* with less oil. Burnt veggies will get a bad flavor and blackish oily sheen, but more importantly, flare-ups can cause severe burns. For minor burns, have a bowl of icy water conveniently positioned and get the burn into it as soon and often as possible. If it's a major burn, apply burn ointment, wrap it well to avoid any possibility of food contamination and continue to cook with one good hand, or hand off the job to a sous chef and then go to the hospital. Burns, even minor ones, should be taken very seriously. The infections that can result are unusually painful and hard to cure. In summary, avoid flare-ups at all cost and whenever one does happen, take it seriously, and **get your hand out of there lickety split**.



## GETTING TO IT

Early in the day, you will have checked your propane tank level, turned on the grill, closed the lid and brought it to maximum temperature, opened the lid and felt with a flat hand where the grill burns hottest, mediumest and coolest, and then cleaned it with your brush and then oily towel.

Now, your *mise en place* and stations are ready, the grill is on low with the lid closed, and your guests are settled in with a beverage in hand. Turn the grill to high and say a silent prayer to yourself plus a toast out loud to your guests. Open the lid. Have a clean, dry towel or two ready (hanging on your apron string).

## THE GRILLING

With your hand and/or tongs, put “round one” on the grill. (A “round” is four pieces of each item; you’ll do this in two or more rounds.)

Put the **eggplant** on the hottest spot at first, but be prepared to move it often and turn it over more than once until golden brown on both sides. If the eggplant becomes mushy, that’s because it has been cut too thinly. Eggplant is the most difficult to work with. Under- or over-oiled and under- or over-cooked eggplant is a problem, but cooked right it’s a force of nature.

Put **summer squash** on the second hottest area, and be prepared to move them between hot and medium areas. Typically with zucchini (and other veggies that are flat on one side but rounded on the other, like Asian eggplant varieties or tomato halves), the flat (presentation) side goes onto the grill first.

**Corn** should, at first, go onto medium-cooler spots because

the oil tends to hide between the kernels, release on the grill, and cause flare ups. Corn is one of the few ingredients that come out great even when cooked unevenly because, especially at the height of the season, its flavor is superior even if raw. If some of each ear gets nice color, you’ve succeeded.

**Green onions** should go onto the hot-medium spots at first, but should then go to medium-cool and cool spots because you want some good color, but little overall cooking. Be careful for these (and anything cut small/thin) falling through the flatirons. Maybe have some extras up your sleeve just in case.

Turning the veggies and controlling the heat are the two simple actions that you’ll need to manage while grilling. Move the veggies around to the best spots and get ready to turn them. Use the tip of one of your tong edges or the corner of a thin metal spatula to gently lift up one side and daintily take a peak underneath. If you encounter resistance, it’s not time to turn. Wait a minute or two and try the other side. If it releases (and this is one of the best feelings a cook can have), look at the grilled side, and if it’s on the brown side of golden brown, flip it over. Note also that you can get great results from cooking anything all or almost all of the way on one side, if that’s how getting great color and avoiding sticking plays out.

In order to stay ahead of the game, use your grill brush and oiled towel often. A clean grill will give you a huge advantage. It’s important to control your grill’s temperature at all times. Maintain the highest possible heat and cool it down when necessary (like when you’ve got too much oil drippage and flames are shooting into the sky or when veggies seem to be cooking on the outside too fast). Open and close the lid as

often as necessary. If your grill has temperature gauges/knobs, you know you can adjust ad infinitum.

## GETTING CREATIVE

You might want to grill some **heirloom tomato** halves as well. Core before grilling then peel afterward. Garnish with basil, garlic, drizzle with olive oil and layer with buffalo mozzarella (and any other grilled veg); and/or top with toasted seasoned breadcrumbs.

**Stone fruit** halves (peaches and apricots) and figs are especially flavorful when *lightly* grilled...yes, use oil, salt and pepper).

Use any of the above suggestions as sides that accompany proteins/main course items. Apply the above principles to any ingredients that inspire you, especially if you find them at the farmers' market. The growers will certainly have additional suggestions, and please tell them I sent you. 🐛

*Former president of Chico Food Network, Chef Richard Hirshen walks the talk about bringing fresh, local ingredients into restaurant kitchens: check out Farwood Bar & Grill in Orland, where he is transforming the menu. Why? Quoth Richie, "Small picture: Bring local organic/natural/artisan products onto the menu. Big picture: Galvanize a community." Richie invites email with questions on grilling vegetables: chefrichie@msn.com.*

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