

COOKING OVER A CAMPFIRE WILL CHANGE YOUR LIFE

Our ultimate guide to embracing an open flame, whether in the backcountry or your backyard.

WHENEVER I'M ASKED what my perfect meal is, my brain races straight to the 2005 Boy Scout Camporee. I see prepubescent me biting into that greasy hot dog, covered in the neon of yellow mustard, soaked in the smoke of a wet-wood fire (it was winter), all cradled delicately in my hand-me-down gloves. *That* hot dog. That is what I'd like to leave the world with.

After an afternoon of stomping around in hiking boots bought to "grow into," it was time to eat. Following the kid-next-to-me's lead, I rummaged a used stick in the bed of coals, burning off leftover bits of pork and beef, mounted my dog, and began spinning it above the flames. I sat and waited.

I was as close as I'd ever been to actually being that Western explorer, my great-great grandmother in Ireland, or whatever swamp creatures we all descended from, staring into the fire—as captivated by the flames as any of us are today by our phones—waiting patiently, or impatiently, for its magical transformation of meat into meal. And all of them, like me, cursing the changing wind that blows smoke into their eyes. →

“THERE CAN BE TOO MANY COOKS IN THE KITCHEN, BUT THERE’S ALWAYS ROOM AROUND THE CAMPFIRE.”

It’s that timelessness that brings me back again and again to my firepit. At least once a month, when I feel the stir that says, *Get outside*—when I need to be reminded what “cooking” really means—I’ll hike a few miles to my favorite overnight camping spot or, more often than not, simply head out to my backyard. I lug my cast-iron Dutch oven from under the stove, toss it in the raggedy firepit, and call up a few friends. There can be too many cooks in the kitchen, but there’s always room around the campfire.

Without the sterile blue flame of the gas burners, the pings, hums, and whirs of the kitchen, I can let the afternoon coast while I kneel in front of a fire, bidding it, begging it, to turn whatever piece of meat I have into something worthy, as my monkey brain speaks out, *Yes. This is good.*

I’m always reminded of that Boy Scout campout. That first bite that made me question if I had ever even experienced a hot

dog before, or if losing the feeling in my feet and fingertips from the cold had made me a husky-sized culinary daredevil, tasting more intensely than ever.

This is good.

Sometimes, though, it doesn’t taste good—the lamb braised for too long, the potatoes burnt on one side. But the meal is never ruined. Sure, I pursue the rush of absolutely nailing that perfect medium rare or crispy char, but I don’t always get it, and that’s OK—reassuring, even.

Cooking over an open fire, just once, will help you better enjoy it all: cooking, eating, walking through the grocery store, the world. It makes you realize you are not, in fact, just a creature of convenience, but one who still relies on the slow processes of life. Plants growing, animals aging, and heat slowly transforming it all. You’ll understand what it takes, beyond

reaching into a frozen food aisle, to truly make a meal. What it feels like to smell sizzling grease, the sweet aroma of caramelized vegetables, and the smoke of wood grown 50 feet away. The food is just the final product of a process.

I slow down and enjoy the drip of time, soothed by the primal satisfaction of a dancing fire. I watch the log transform into coal and coal to ash. I meet the eye of a friend I’ve known for more than a decade, the stranger I finally have plenty of time to talk to, and the girlfriend I’m trying to impress. And it’s good. —JAMES LYNCH

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SARAH CENICEROS.

BUILD A PROPER COOKING FIRE

No big flames here: “Hot coals will give your food nice smoky flavor, without blackening it,” says Dylan Eyers of Eat Wild. Here, his key steps.



1. Form super-dry twigs into a thick, tight tinder bundle. Hold it upright, light the bottom, and place on ground.



2. Lay two super-dry sticks (1" max in diameter) parallel over the lit tinder. Feed in more sticks parallel as they burn to create surface area for flames to catch.



3. Once you have coals, set up two flat rocks (6"-ish tall) parallel near the fire. Use a stick to shuffle in some coals.



4. Suspend a grate across the rocks—you’re ready to cook! Control temp by adjusting grate’s position to coals, or adding more. —JL

LEARN THE BASICS

New to cooking with fire? The best friends behind the wildly popular TikTok account @menwiththepot, Slawek Kalkraut and Krzysztof Szymanski—who make epic food in the backwoods of Ireland—share their top tips.

BY JUSTIN SULLIVAN

1

START IN YOUR BACKYARD.

Get comfortable cooking over an open flame in a familiar environment, where you have access to plenty of tools and ingredients. All you need is a steel grate.*

**Before lighting up, check your local laws. Some places have restrictions on backyard fires.*

2

CAST IRON IS KING.

Other than a sharp knife, a cast-iron pan or pot is essential. It’s durable, retains heat beautifully, and is easy to clean.

3

MISSING A TOOL? MAKE ONE!

Packing a kitchen’s worth of tools into the outdoors is impossible. So, look around. Need a steak tenderizer? Use a stone. A spit? Grab a stick.

4

(TRY NOT TO) ADD FUEL TO THE FIRE.

Cooking fires can be quite small. If your food is taking forever to cook, it most likely needs to get closer to the hot coals. Adjust your grate and then assess.

5

LEAVE NO TRACE.

Only cook in specified campfire areas and pack out *all* trash (including the oft-forgotten small stuff like bottle caps and wrappers) and food scraps. Remember to completely douse your fire with water and mix any ashes and extinguished embers with soil.

THE BEST CAMPFIRE COOKWARE

The great outdoors call for some grade-A equipment.

BY ALEXIS MORILLO



CAST-IRON SKILLET

This is the workhorse. Yes, it’s flameproof, but avoid placing it directly on the fire or the food will burn.

Camp Chef Cast Iron Skillet
\$21, campchef.com



COMPACT GRATE

With foldable legs and a heavy-duty steel cooking surface, this turns any backyard or campground firepit into an outdoor kitchen.

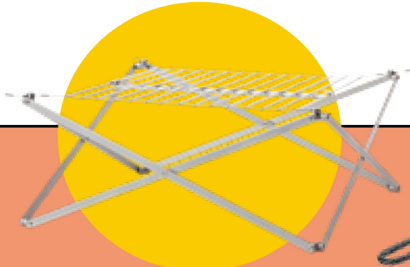
Camp Chef Lumberjack
\$24, walmart.com



DUTCH OVEN

For skillet graduates. Place this (heavy!) legged cast-iron pot in the coals, which can also sit on the rimmed lid for added heat.

Lodge Camp Dutch Oven
\$55, lodgecastiron.com



PORTABLE GRATE

The steel frame adjusts to two different heights, collapses completely flat, and even rolls up for easy stowing.

Wolf and Grizzly Compact Grill
\$115, wolfandgrizzly.com



LIGHTWEIGHT PAN

The handle of this nonstick carbon steel frying pan folds up so you can comfortably stuff it in a backpacking pack.

Ozark Trail Steel Frying Pan
\$7, walmart.com