

Grilling the Mediterranean Way

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On the weekends, in countless backyards all over America, there are men and women donned in Hawaiian shirts, baseball caps, and shorts with spatula and tongs in one hand, and a bottle of beer or glass of wine in the other. Not much seems more American than throwing a couple of steaks or chicken breasts on the grill, cooking them up, and then sitting around a table eating an abundance of starchy salads, chips, soda, and ice cream.

Of course, people in other parts of the world also grill. In fact, recent findings in caves in Israel, South Africa, and Kenya, show that our early descendants have been cooking meat over a fire for at least a million years! I have eaten a lot of grilled food in the Mediterranean region of the world. The Mediterranean diet is considered to be one of the healthiest diets in the world. Some Mediterranean countries include: Spain, France, Italy, Greece, Egypt, and Lebanon. Similar to the U.S., grilling often takes place on the weekends and some of the foods eaten are comparable, but there are some major differences that make the Mediterranean grill healthier.

Grilling recipes from the Mediterranean are usually quite simple, but loaded with flavor that comes from the fresh herbs and lots of extra virgin olive oil. Chicken souvlaki is one of my favorite grilled dishes from Greece. It is marinated in freshly squeezed lemon juice, crushed garlic, olive oil, oregano, salt and pepper. I learned one of the secrets of making delicious souvlaki by watching a street vendor on the Mediterranean island of Crete. As the souvlaki was cooking on the grill, he continuously squeezed fresh lemon juice on the chicken. This kept the chicken moist and gave it extra flavor. When the souvlaki is served, one last squeeze of lemon juice is added as well as a sprinkle of salt. Grilled bread rounds out this delicious meal.

You will always find grilled vegetables alongside meat, chicken, or fish on the Mediterranean grill. Most vegetables are also marinated ahead so when they are grilled they become extra juicy, caramelized, and full of flavor. I like to marinate Portobello mushrooms with olive oil, thyme and balsamic vinegar. Sliced zucchini is delicious with olive oil, oregano, salt, and pepper. I don't marinate corn on the cob, but I do brush it on the grill with a butter/olive oil blend mixed with fresh chopped herbs and garlic. Vegetables are so easy to grill and rarely come out anything but delectable.

Both grilled vegetables and meat are even better topped with a simple sauce when served. I like a tahini lemon sauce for grilled mushrooms or eggplant and a Dijon mustard sauce is amazing on grilled sweet potatoes. Sometimes it can be as simple as olive oil drizzled on the vegetables as they are being served. Filling out the Mediterranean dinner table you will also find plenty of delicious salads,



fresh fruit, and whole grain sourdough bread often right out of the oven. Olive oil is used in large amounts on everything eaten.

In the traditional Mediterranean grill you won't find processed foods like potato chips, soda, ring dings or s'mores, you will find roasted red peppers, grilled sweet potatoes, Moroccan iced tea, wine, baklava and in-season fruit. The focus on fresh, local, unprocessed foods is what makes the Mediterranean diet both healthy and delicious. Here are a few of my favorite grilling recipes including the chicken souvlaki with tzatziki sauce (a traditional Greek yogurt and cucumber sauce) and grilled sweet potatoes. Also, if you are in the market for more Mediterranean grilling recipes I would check out the cookbook **Mediterranean Grilling** by one of our favorite authors Diane Kochilas.



For more Mediterranean recipes on-line check out the following sites:

Oldwayspt.org

Mediterraneanliving.com

Mediterrasian.com

