



The Great Down Under Barbecue

Sun, sea and succulent, sizzling shrimp: with the basic ingredients in place, it's always a good time to enjoy a barbecue Down Under, as Penny Parkin explains

COME home from work, fire up the barbie and invite some friends over. Down Under, that's dinner sorted. With all that sunshine, it's no surprise the humble barbecue is so popular. In the words of leading barbecue aficionado Mark Thompson: "Take a slab of meat, a sheet of metal and a good smoky fire and you've got yourself the ingredients not just for a top-rate meal, but for an event. It's part tribal bonding, part ritual ceremony, part bare necessity. That's the Aussie barbecue: a back-to-basics, one size fits all outdoor celebration".

There's no denying that the climate provides a perfect excuse for to burn food, drink beer and invite mates over for a few 'tinnies'. Despite its somewhat carnal image however, the great Down Under barbecue remains an institution born of necessity, initiated by Aboriginal tribes who cooked the fruits of their outdoor lader over open fires. The tradition was later adapted by 19th century settlers, inspiring several anthems to tell of 'jolly swagmen' and lands that 'abound in nature's gifts'.

Today, Australia's sun-drenched vineyards provide ideal growing conditions for shiraz, semillon and chardonnay grapes, many of which which produce

great barbecue wines (see p76). The high plains of the southeast region are ideal for grazing beef cattle. Perhaps this explains why the barbecue has become a year-round way of life. Barbecues abound in public parks, on beaches, in bars and cafes, and most Down Under households have one. In fact they've become something of an unofficial national dish.

PERFECT PARTNERS

Certainly, Australian and Kiwi men put their British counterparts to shame when it comes to barbecuing, an experience I witnessed first-hand when I was invited to a friend's suntrap backyard to experience one such typical Aussie cook-up.

While the British men stood around talking about getting burgers out of the freezer and drinking cans of lager, a divinely perma-tanned, natural-born-Aussie called James arrived in the middle of their FA Cup discussion with a carrier bag full of fresh, native Australian wildlife steaks, unpeeled his shirt to reveal an admirable six-pack and calmly assembled what looked like an aluminium sheet in the yard, before casually grilling the lot like a Cordon Bleu chef. In 10 minutes he had the bath filled with ice and stocked with tinnies of beer and a decent selection of wine!

Above Barbecues combine delicious food with socialising, good times and the great outdoors



Photo: Tourism Western Australia

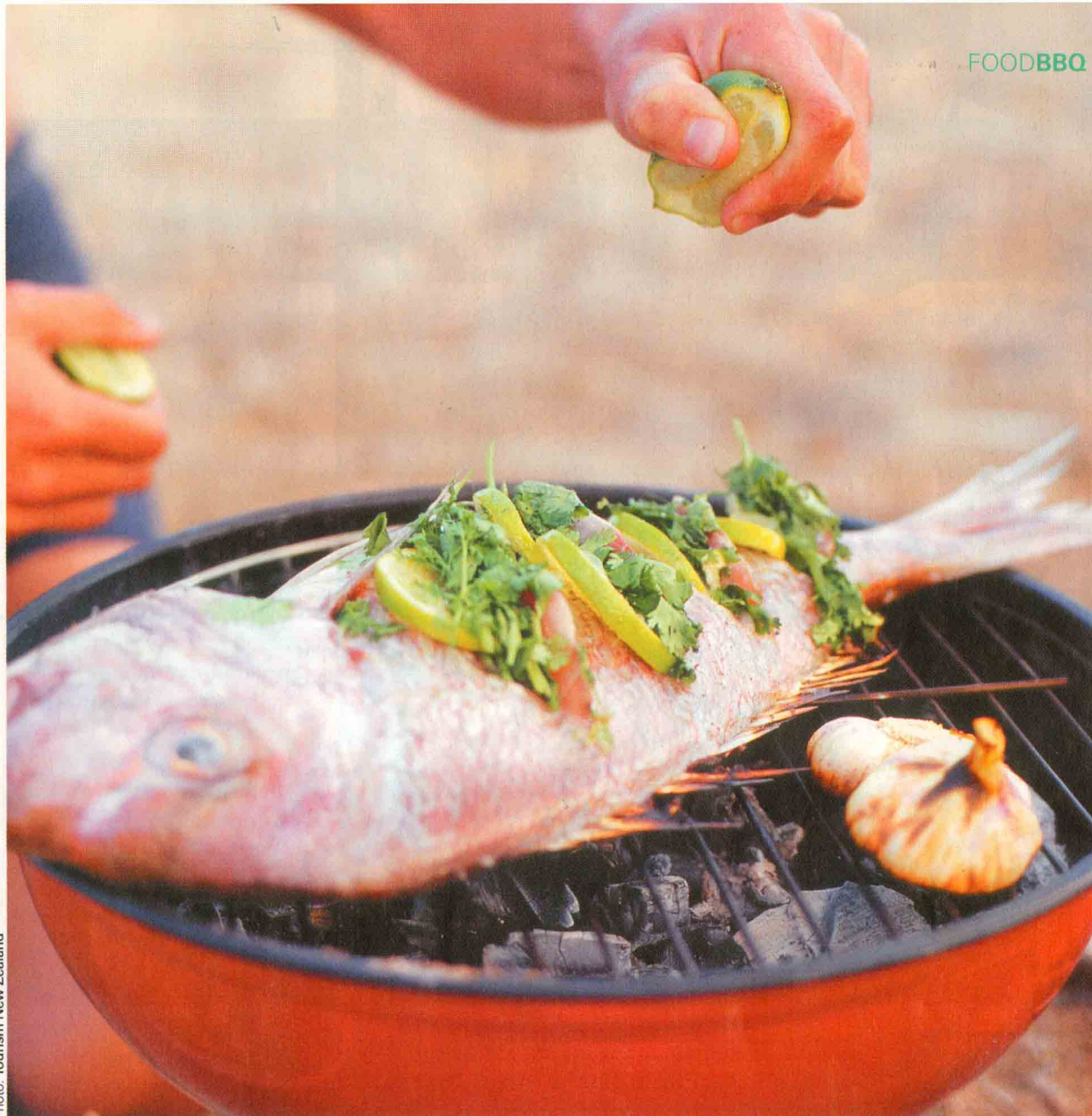


Photo: Tourism New Zealand



Photo: Tourism Australia

So what, I hear you ask, are us Sheilas to do while the men are frying up all the meat within a five-mile radius? Apart from keeping the kids away from the fire and discussing the shortcomings of the male ego, Aussie women can teach anyone a thing or two about salads. The secret ingredient? Cheese! Somehow, good cheese turns a simple, well-dressed lettuce salad into a meal in itself. Just as well when you don't know how long the meat's going to take as Bruce makes off with the tongs for a sit down after one too many tinnies.

BARBECUE ETIQUETTE

So how can us Brits learn how to host a decent Down Under barbecue? For starters, use fresh rather than frozen, raise the seafood quota and avoid cross-contamination between fish, poultry, meat and veg. Australian barbecue chef Benjamin Christie also recommends turning down the heat, as he reckons it isn't needed for most foods. He also recommends cooking with a proper gas barbecue, in spite of the traditional pleasure of squirting paraffin over hot coals. Charcoal might provide spectacular flames, but doesn't actually make the food taste any better.

After witnessing a friend's pyrotechnic attempt at lighting a kettle-style barbecue with the lid on

(the lid shot 20 feet in the air) Benjamin, like most discerning Australian barbecuers, has invested in a large five-burner BeefEater for his Sydney backyard. Not only does its size make it versatile for charring, stir-frying, baking, smoking, rotisserie grilling and convection cooking, but it even has a wok burner on the side. Although more expensive than a charcoal barbecue, a gas one works out cheaper over time, has adjustable temperature controls and is much more low maintenance, with no hot ashes to clean up.

To keep guests busy while you're busy charring their main course, Benjamin recommends serving some light bites. This will prevent them starting fights, dropping children or running out of conversation due to low blood sugar, or the onset of barbecue fatigue. Who knows, it might also act as a bonding tool for guests that don't know each other too well. After all, if you've tried to barbecue a baby octopus and work out exactly what's in the exciting new marinade on the side (oops, was that baby food?), how can that fail to lead to a beautiful new friendship?

If you're a guest at a barbecue, whether an impromptu get-together down at the beach or a large garden party, don't forget to bring along some wine. It's also often a nice gesture to take an

Above Chuck another prawn on the barbie...
Above right ... or go for a fresh-caught local fish. Seafood is a staple of Antipodean grills



Photo: Weber Barbecues, weber.com
Photos: Tourism Australia



From top Barbecue expert Benjamin Christie advises investing in a gas barbecue; Mouth-watering hot prawns; Fun for all dining in the sun

Above right A Weber barbie takes care of dinner, leaving the guys free for a spot of beach volleyball

unusual cut of meat, a great salad or a dessert packed in your jauntiest containers to show willing. For a beach barbecue, take along some form of entertainment such as a radio, guitar and beach games, although beware of letting anything inflatable near anything hot. Last but not least, don't forget your sparkliest outfit (or at least a colourful pair of thongs/shorts/a bikini). Oh, and a corkscrew. You'll never find one otherwise.

CLASSY BARBIE

Down Under barbecue food, whether meat, fish or vegetables, has gained such an international reputation for tasting good that there's a burgeoning, home-grown industry in barbecue restaurants Down Under, where going out in order to experience the true flavour of home-cooked food has become increasingly fashionable. The *Good Food Guide* recommends Prime, Kingsleys Steakhouse and La Grillade in Sydney (or Wildfire, for a Brazilian take on the barbie), Cha Cha Cha in Brisbane or the Steakhouse at Pier 35 in Melbourne. Many pubs also offer grill-your-own meals, where you pick up a plate of sides, a pair of tongs and some raw flesh, and bag yourself a spot on a huge communal grill.

Whether tossing octopus in your back garden or taking a seat at a sun-kissed barbecue restaurant, the Antipodes' well-deserved worldwide reputation for the planet's best outdoor-cooked food won't be disappearing soon. Especially if they keep imploring us to chuck delicious shrimps on their barbies! 🇺🇸

Hot tips

Benjamin Christie reckons his demon barbecue tips are as simple to understand as cracking open a can of Foster's

- To give a tangy twist to steak, Benjamin recommends using a good barbecue rub such as Mountain Pepper BBQ sauce to tenderise the meat, although he generally prefers dry rubs for their more intense flavour. Wildfire Spice and Red Desert Dust (from selected supermarkets and delis) are unique all-purpose seasoning blends designed to be used as a dry rub for grilling or chargrilling, made from indigenous Australian herbs and spices; they are fantastic on barbecued ribs.
- For fish, such as the increasingly available barramundi (Waitrose) which can prove a tricky dish on the barbecue, Benjamin recommends using a medium heat until the flesh just separates when lifted with a knife. Salmon, trout or tuna, on the other hand, can be left cooked rare to medium. It's also a good idea to season the fish with salt or pepper, or a seasoning rub; let the grill heat up for 20 minutes before cooking and oil it twice to ensure a non-stick coating. Seafood such as octopus, prawns, scallops and squid should be marinated and cooked on a high heat for a few minutes, like flash frying.
- The veggies also need to be just right. Our Antipodean friends might have gained a reputation for meat eating, but, believe me, they know how to cook their vegetables to perfection, too. For truly succulent veggies to accompany perfectly cooked meat, it's a good idea to soak them in water for 30 minutes after washing and trimming them, to stop them drying out. Brushing them in oil with lemon juice and seasoning or a marinade is also a good idea.
- Hard vegetables can be cut into half-inch-thick pieces and made into kebabs on skewers. Place the vegetables onto the warm part of the grill, turn them regularly and brush with oil while cooking. Once the skin begins to blister and the inside is soft (after five to 20 minutes), remove them from the barbecue.

BARBECUE SUPPLIERS

- www.outbackuk.com
- www.weber.com