

Planking On It

This indirect grilling method produces moist, smoky and flavorful foods

Plankin On It Plank Grilling, an Indirect Grilling Method, Infuses Food With Delicious Smoky Flavor

By Jennifer Walker-Journey

Jimmy Patronis enjoys experimenting with cooking, especially when it comes to dreaming up new recipes or techniques for the dozens of fish entrées served at Capt. Anderson's Restaurant & Waterfront Market, the restaurant he co-owns in Panama City Beach.

When Patronis recently got wind of a trendy new way to prepare fish atop a wooden plank, he had to give it a try.

"I researched it," he says. He armed himself with planks and since then, "I frequently play when I am at home." Soon, the long menu at Capt. Anderson's just may have a new plank-grilled option available.

Plank grilling is a method of cooking on a wooden slab, which enhances the meat's flavor with characteristic smokiness. Also known as planking, the technique dates back to the early days of the American Indians, but recently has been revived by chefs worldwide.

"Absolutely, it's a trend," Patronis says. "Any time you can introduce new ideas to customers, it creates a buzz. Customers talk about it, and it becomes the strongest form of testimony because it is usually person to person."

Hannelore Holland, owner of Somethin's Cookin! Gourmet Foods & Wine in Panama City, agrees, saying television chefs recently have popularized the technique, resulting in more people inquiring about it in her store. She says she sold more planks last year, though "maybe because most people already have them now."

The method involves placing fish, meat or most any other food on top of a wooden plank and then putting the plank on a grill or in an oven. Unlike traditional grilling, planks add a barrier between the fire and the meat that slows the cooking process and gives food a rich, smoky flavor.

"This style of grilling is a very basic process as far as the grill goes," Patronis says.

Holland agrees. "It is very easy. You just soak your plank and put your food on there and really, that's it."

Plank Talk

There's nothing fancy about planks, Patronis says. You can use almost any variety of wood from a lumberyard, but you'll want to be sure it has not been treated. Treated wood may be poisonous if cooked upon, so it may be best to play it safe and purchase your planks from a specialty store, like Somethin's Cookin! Some fish markets and grocery stores also sell planks. Prices generally range from about \$20 for a four-pack to as much as \$42 each for thicker pieces designed for oven use.

Planks come in a variety of species. Cedar is the most common grilling wood. Pecan, alder, oak, maple, cherry and hickory also are good choices and provide more variety in flavor. Thinner planks work best on the grill. When planking in an oven, it is best to use thicker wood of at least 1 inch in depth. Many planks sold at stores will specify if they can work in an oven, Holland says.

The planks will burn a little in the cooking process, so you should not expect them to last more than one or two uses. To help keep your planks longer, consider cleaning them after each use with warm water and a firm dish brush. No soap should be used, as it may hamper the flavor. Once your plank has reached the point where it is no longer useable, Holland suggests breaking it up and using it in the grill to flavor the smoke, like traditional wood chips.

Before using, planks should be soaked in water for at least 30 minutes and up to several hours. Soaking the wood keeps it from burning and allows the food to steam during the cooking process. Patronis compares the soaked wood to a sponge, which allows flavored moisture back into the fish as it cooks.

Water is typically used as the soaking liquid, but wine, juice or broth can be used to offer more depth to the flavor. Another way to get creative is to experiment with what you put in the liquid. Fresh herbs, such as rosemary, oregano or thyme, can add an extra burst of flavor as the meat steams. Other ideas could be lemongrass, licorice wood, cinnamon sticks, or even sticks or grapevines that have been soaked in another liquid, such as bourbon, port or beer.

When it comes to planking indoors in a conventional oven, it is best to place the plank in a roasting pan and fill the pan with water, broth, juice or vinegar. Preheat the oven to a high temperature and then place the meat on the plank. This

simply steams the meat, rather than steaming and smoking as on the grill, but still allows for a more tender, moist and flavorful meat.

Meat can be marinated or rubbed with seasoning before planking, or simply brushed with olive oil and sprinkled with salt and pepper. Once the meat has been prepared and the plank soaked, brush a little olive oil over one side of the plank to keep the meat from sticking, place the food on the oiled side, and set the plank on the grill or in a roasting pan in the oven.

When placing wood – even soaked wood – on direct heat, like a grill, there is always a chance it may catch on fire. If your plank does ignite, don’t fret. Simply spray it down with water to put out the fire, Patronis says. The sprayed water encourages the smoke and steam. If caught early enough, the meat likely will come out uncharred.

With the grill lid down, the smoke from the burning wood and steam from the soaked plank gently cook the meat, producing a more moist and aromatic result.

“The smoldering of the wood is what creates the smoke and flavors of the fish,” Patronis says.

Another advantage of using this method of cooking is that the meat does not require flipping, Patronis says. So delicate meats, such as tender fish, are less likely to fall apart in the process, allowing for a more evenly cooked and moist result.

While it is best to leave the lid down on the grill while planking to keep the steam and smoke penetrating the fish, keep an eye on the meat to be sure nothing is burning. As a safety measure, have a fire extinguisher nearby. And always remember take the plank off the grill after the meat has been cooked.

Getting Creative

Salmon may be one of the most popular plank-grilled foods, but don’t limit yourself. Different types of fish, such as grouper or red snapper, also are great on the plank, Holland says. Just keep in mind that items that cook quickly do not receive the full benefit from planking. The longer the cooking time, the more smoky and flavorful the planked meat will be, Patronis adds.

Other great options for plank grilling include shellfish such as lobster and shrimp. Pork, chicken and steak tend to work best with harder woods like alder or hickory, as those types burn slower, allowing more time to cook the meat.

Even fruits and vegetables can be planked.

“Some things would be interesting, like smoked squash or zucchini,” Patronis says. “Pretty much anything goes.” It is just a matter of experimenting – whether it is with old recipes or new – and seeing for yourself what best suits your taste.

“Any time you introduce a new cooking method into your meal, the texture and flavor of your favorite meals will change,” Patronis says. “It’s just another way to make the ordinary extraordinary.” Cedar Plank Salmon

Jimmy Patronis, Capt. Anderson’s Restaurant & Waterfront Market

- 2 8-ounce salmon fillets
- ½ cup fresh dill, chopped
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 lemon sliced thinly
- 1 teaspoon coarse salt
- ½ teaspoon black pepper
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 untreated cedar plank large enough to fit the fish
- Soak a cedar plank in water for 1 hour.

Lightly coat each salmon fillet. Season with salt, pepper, garlic powder, lemon slices and dill. Place the soaked cedar plank on the grill over direct, medium heat. When the cedar plank starts to smoke, place fish on the plank. Grill for about 15 minutes or until the fish is done.

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