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Your A-Z Guide to  
Juicy Grilled Steak

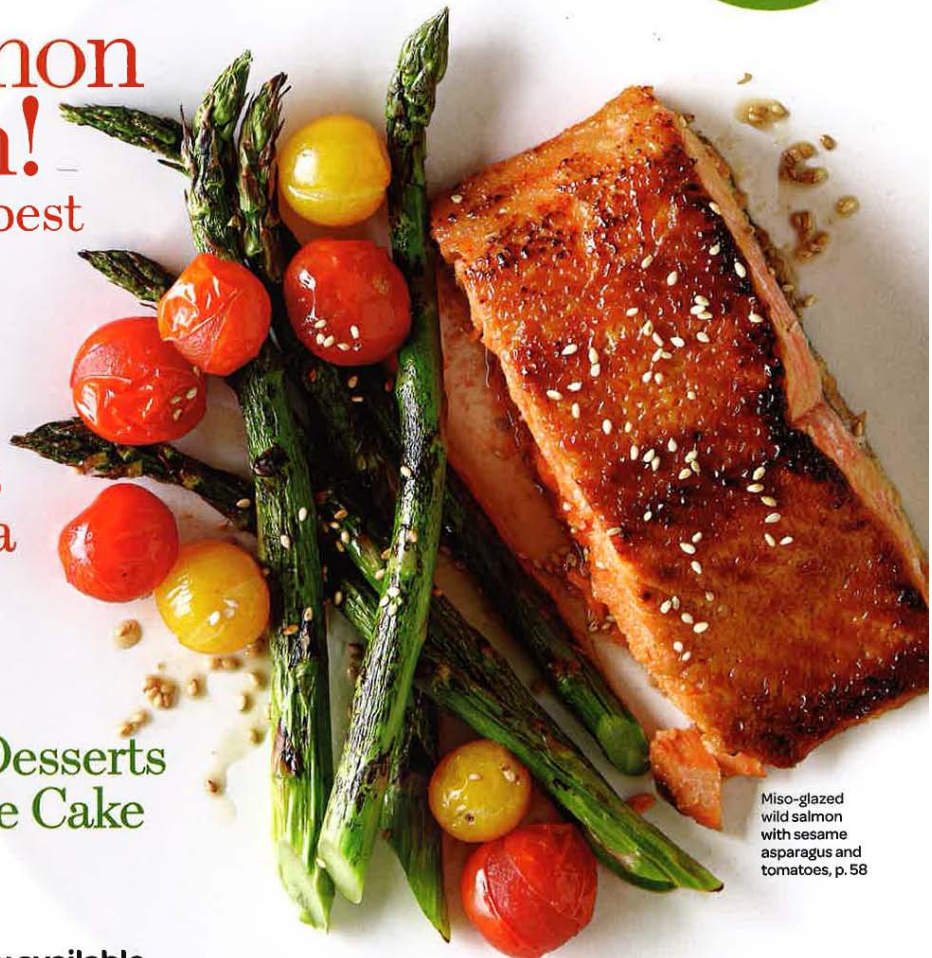
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Chef Parke Ulrich outside of Epic Roasthouse, where he grilled juicy strip steaks in view of the Bay Bridge.

# Grilled Steak

**A-Z** Charred. Juicy. Tender.  
A guide to getting it right.  
By **Parke Ulrich**

As executive chef of Epic Roasthouse, a steakhouse in San Francisco, I know a few things about steak. Here are my tips for great grilling, plus easy ways to add flavor with a fragrant marinade, a toasty spice rub, a tangy herb sauce, and a flavored butter bound to become your new favorite thing.

## A

**Advance planning** At least 1 hour before grilling, and preferably much longer than that, I rub my steaks with olive oil and then season them generously with kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper. Salt is the key here, and it does two things: It draws out moisture, which concentrates flavor, and it begins to break down muscle tissue, making the meat more tender. If you plan to season your steaks more than 1 hour ahead, refrigerate them uncovered and let them come to room temperature before grilling.

## B

**Butcher** Knowing where to buy steaks is just as important as knowing how to cook them, and developing a relationship with your butcher is invaluable. He

or she can educate you on the wide variety of steak cuts and help you with special orders. While all of this can happen at a supermarket, a dedicated butcher shop will likely offer more variety, including prime beef (the highest grade) and aged steaks, so it's worth seeking one out in your area.

## C

**Compound butters** A flavored (compound) butter like the one at right is a really easy way to dress up a grilled steak. Gutsy and aromatic ingredients like fresh herbs, blue cheese, garlic, olives, roasted peppers, anchovies, capers, and chiles are all good candidates for mashing into softened butter along with salt and pepper. Then it's simply a matter of topping the hot steak with some of the butter and letting it melt into delicious goodness.

### **miso-truffle butter**

*There's something about the way salty, savory miso mingles with charred grilled beef that's impossible to resist. Makes about ¾ cup, enough for about 12 steaks*

Mash 4 oz. (½ cup) softened **unsalted butter** with ¼ cup **white miso** in a small bowl. Mix in 1 tsp. **white truffle oil**. Use right away or refrigerate for up to 1 week. Bring to room temperature before topping steak with it.



## simply great grilled steak

*My method for grilling steak starts with well-seasoned meat. After a sear over direct heat, the steak finishes cooking slowly over indirect heat. Makes as many steaks as you can fit onto your grill*

Season a thick **steak** (or steaks) well with **kosher salt** and **freshly ground black pepper**. Let sit at room temperature for at least 1 hour or refrigerate uncovered for up to 48 hours. (Alternatively, flavor with a marinade or spice rub.) If refrigerated, let come to room temperature before grilling.

For a charcoal grill, light a chimney starter full of charcoal and bank the coals against one side of the grill. For a gas grill, start with all burners on medium high and then turn off one or more of the burners.

Pat the steak dry and grill over the hottest part of the grill, rotating it occasionally to create a crust, until well browned on one side, 2 to 4 minutes. Flip and sear the other side.

Move the steak to the cooler part of the grill, cover, and cook to your desired doneness (see "X-ray vision," page 42). The time this takes will vary depending on thickness and grill temperature, from 5 minutes for a thin steak to 25 minutes for thick. Let rest 5 to 10 minutes before serving.

## D

**Dry-aged beef** Tender and full flavored, dry-aged beef is fantastic on the grill. It has less moisture, so it browns beautifully, and the smoke from the grill complements the funky-in-a-good-way flavor of the meat. Only the best grades of beef—ones with evenly distributed fat—are dry-aged, which adds to its allure. You won't find dry-aged beef in most supermarkets, but you can get it at some butcher shops or by mail order.

## E

**Equipment** Here are my essentials:

**CHIMNEY STARTER** A chimney is a quick, inexpensive, and easy way to light a charcoal fire. Just

stuff the bottom of the metal cylinder with newspaper, add charcoal to the top, and light the paper. Thermodynamics does the rest. When the coals are ready, simply dump them into the grill.

**TONGS** A good pair of stainless steel tongs is essential for flipping steaks and moving them around on the grill. I've pretty much singed off all the hair on my forearms from years of cooking over live fire, but if you want to keep yours, look for tongs with a handle at least 12 inches long.

**BASTING BRUSH** For brushing steaks with marinades, infused oils, and glazes. I'm a little old school and so prefer one with a long wooden handle and natural bristles, but silicone bristles also make sense when working over flames.

**GRILL BRUSH** A dirty grill makes food taste bad and can cause it to stick, so invest in a good quality grill brush to keep

things clean. The best have stiff wire bristles and an offset handle so that you can apply an even amount of pressure while cleaning. To clean well, heat the grill first and then brush away that old carbon buildup.

## F

**Fat** Because fat equals flavor, you want steaks with even marbling; this intramuscular fat melts during grilling, naturally basting the meat so that it's juicy.

## G

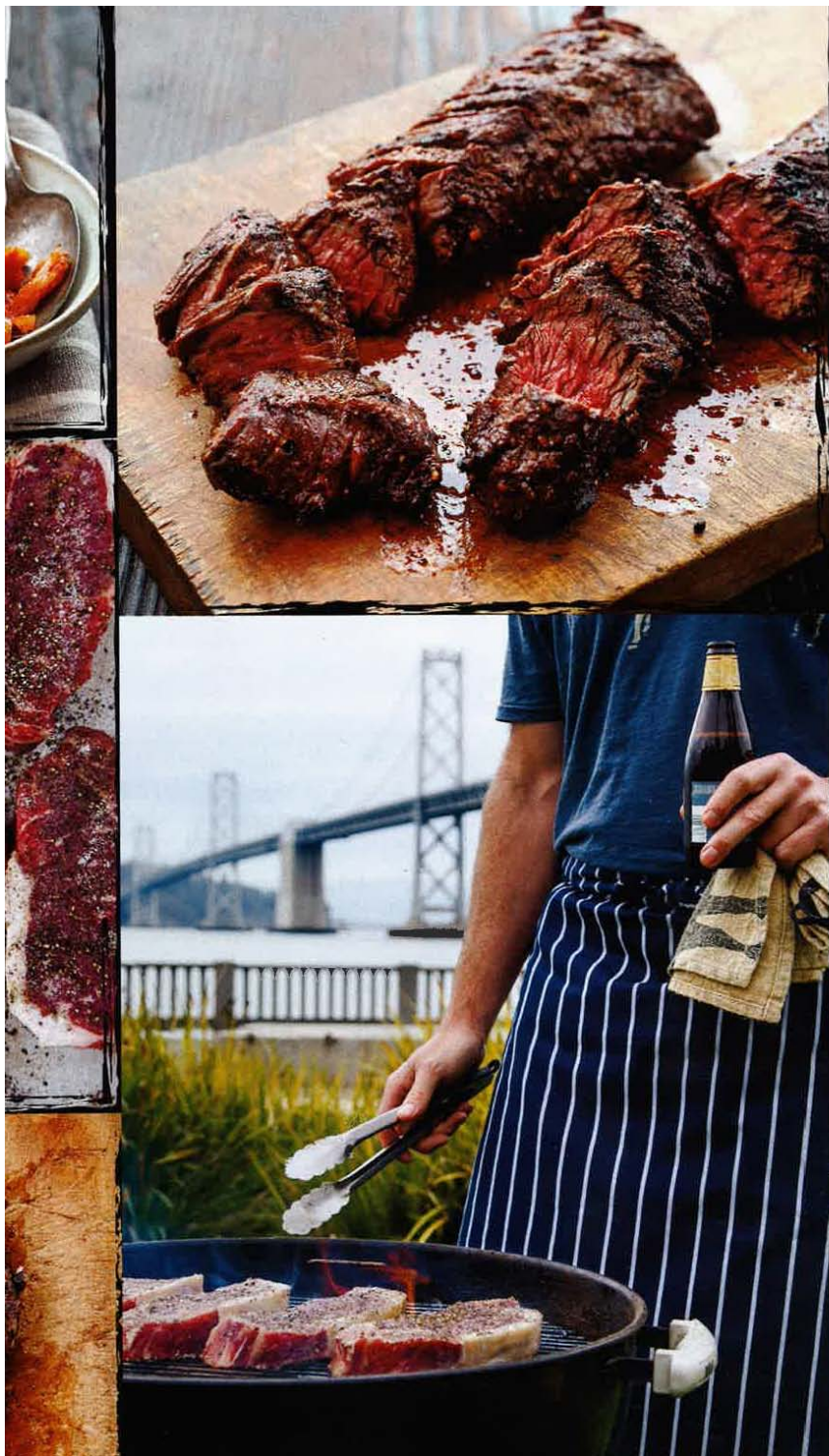
**Grill** Gas or charcoal? I prefer a charcoal grill for best flavor, but I appreciate the convenience of a gas grill. Your choice. Or, better yet, have both on hand, one for weeknight cooking and the other for weekends.

## H

**Hanger steak (and other value cuts)** Often referred as the "butcher's steak" because butchers would keep it for themselves, hanger steak is prized for its flavor and tenderness. It grills quickly and is best served rare to medium rare. Other good value steaks include flank, skirt, and flat iron.

## I

**Indirect grilling** Cooking over the cooler part of the grill is usually reserved for larger or tougher cuts, but I like to grill steaks indirectly, too. After a quick sear over direct heat, I move the steaks away from the fire to finish cooking them low and slow; this keeps the meat from shrinking and produces a tender, juicy steak that's the



same beautiful hue all the way through. See “Simply Great Grilled Steak” on the opposite page for details.

## J

**Juice** Though the goal of resting a steak (more on that in a bit), is to allow the juice inside to be redistributed, there’s usually some left behind on the platter or cutting board. Don’t let this savory liquid go to waste! Add it to a sauce or vinaigrette or drizzle it over the steaks, the vegetable side, or grilled bread.

## K

**Kimchi** At Epic, we love serving kimchi, the beloved Korean condiment, with grilled steak. The fermented vegetables, which are a little spicy and a little sour, accentuate the richness of a great grilled steak. We either put a little kimchi right on top of the steak, or mix some finely diced kimchi into aioli for a more refined accompaniment.

## L

**Lighter fluid** Avoid it unless you like food that tastes like petroleum. Use a chimney starter (see “Equipment” on the opposite page) instead.

**Clockwise from top left:** kimchi from Epic Roasthouse; spice-rubbed hanger steak; Ulrich grilling New York strip steaks while enjoying a local beer and a great view; a rib-eye at rest; well-seasoned New York strip steaks.

# M

**Marinades** A great way to add bold flavor, marinades are quick and easy to make. I especially like to use them on cheaper cuts, such as flank steak, which benefit from the additional moisture. The best marinades contain some kind of fat to keep the meat moist, aromatic seasonings, and an acid to help deliver flavor.

## champagne-lavender marinade

*Lavender may not immediately come to mind when you think of steak, but paired with thyme and Champagne vinegar, it adds a subtle summery note to the meat, as if you were enjoying your steak at a bistro in Provence. Makes about 1½ cups*

Crush 1 tsp. **dried lavender** with a pinch of **kosher salt** and then add it to ¾ cup **Champagne vinegar**. Let steep for at least 5 hours. (The vinegar will keep in the fridge for weeks.) When ready to marinate, whisk the vinegar (no need to strain) with ¾ cup **extra-virgin olive oil**, ½ tsp. chopped **fresh thyme**, ½ tsp. salt, and ¼ tsp. **freshly ground black pepper**. Reserve some of the marinade for basting, if you like, then use the rest to marinate steak for at least 30 minutes at room temperature and up to 8 hours refrigerated. Pat the meat dry and season with additional salt and pepper. Grill as directed on page 38, skipping the initial seasoning and basting occasionally with the reserved marinade.





Clockwise from top left: the makings of the champagne-lavender marinade; wood chips on coals create smoky goodness; what “quadrillage” looks like on New York strip steaks.

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## N

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**Naked** Though I love a good marinade or spice rub on cheaper cuts, I tend to cook my best quality steaks naked. (Not me—the steak!) Well, practically naked; as mentioned earlier, I always season steak with salt and pepper.

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## O

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**Oil** To keep your steak from sticking (and help promote grill marks), oil the grill grates with a paper towel dipped in oil once they're hot.

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## P

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**Porterhouse (and other luxury cuts)** Porterhouse, one of the most popular and priciest cuts of beef, contains two of the most tender cuts, the tenderloin and the short loin (aka New York strip), divided by a T-shaped bone. It's a honkin' big and thick piece of meat, so invite a few friends over and let the porterhouse be the talk of the dinner. Other indulgent cuts include rib-eye, sirloin, and tenderloin.

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## Q

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**Quadrillage** A fancy way to say “those crosshatched grill marks you get on a steak when you lift it off the grate and turn it 90 degrees halfway through searing.” I don't usually do this for my steaks, but you can.

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## R

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**Rest** One of the most important steps to grilling a great steak is rest. Before serving, let the steak sit somewhere warm for 5 to 10 minutes so that its juice,

### steak rub

*Despite all of the spices in it, this toasty rub doesn't overwhelm, it enhances.*

**Yields about ½ cup**

In a dry skillet over medium heat, toast 2 Tbs. **black peppercorns**, 2 tsp. **paprika**, and 1 tsp. each **cumin seeds**, **coriander seeds**, and **chili powder**, shaking the skillet occasionally, until fragrant, about 1 minute. Grind to a powder in a spice grinder or mortar and pestle. Transfer to a small bowl and mix in ¼ cup **kosher salt** and 1 tsp. each **Old Bay seasoning**, **dry mustard**, and **cayenne**. Coat both sides of the steak with some of the rub and let sit for at least 1 hour at room temperature and up to 48 hours refrigerated. Let come to room temperature and lightly pat dry before grilling as directed on page 38, skipping the initial seasoning with salt and pepper. The rub will keep airtight for up to 1 month.

which has been driven to the center by heat, has a chance to redistribute and the muscle relaxes. If you skip this step, your steak will not be as tender and juicy as it should be.

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## S

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**Spice rubs** Rubbing steaks with spices (and salt as in the recipe above) creates a savory crust. You don't need a thick coating (just use whatever sticks to the meat), but the longer you leave it on before grilling, the deeper the flavor will be.



Grilled flank steak with chimichurri sauce.

## T

**Touch** When I suggest you get a feel for grilling steak, I mean it literally. Take the steak's temperature, give it a poke with your finger, and see how it feels to you at the different temperatures, the most important one being just how you like it cooked.

## U

**Umami** Umami is a basic taste just like sweet, sour, bitter, and salty. Not sure you know it? Just take a bite of a well-seasoned, well-seared steak. That meaty, savory flavor is umami. The miso butter on page 37 is also packed with umami, which is why it's so delicious on steak.

## V

**Vigilance** It's easy to get distracted when you're outside grilling, but don't wander off too far or you may miss a flare-up

and burn your steak. Grab a beer and stay close.

## W

**Wood** There's nothing like cooking a steak over a wood fire, but it's not a practical choice for most people. To get a similar smoky flavor, use some soaked wood chips. The chips will smolder and smoke, transferring that elemental flavor to your steak.

## X

**X-ray vision** Determining doneness would be a breeze with X-ray vision, but until there's an app for that, an instant-read thermometer can let you "see" how the steak is cooked. The temps that follow reflect when you should take the steak off the grill:

- For rare:** 125°F
- For medium rare:** 130°F
- For medium:** 135°F
- For medium well** (not that I recommend it): 140°F
- For well done:** Well, don't.

## Y

**Yummy sauces** The buttery béarnaise and the Madeira sauce we serve at Epic both

complement the richness of steak. Our horseradish and chimichurri sauces, on the other hand, offer contrast. In summer, I like a bright, tangy, chimichurri sauce like the spicy one at left (and shown above).

## Z

**Zante grapes** Grapes and steak? You bet! Zante grapes (also called Champagne grapes, because the small, seedless grapes look like tiny bubbles) are a delicious, dramatic accompaniment for grilled steak. Char clusters of grapes on the grill (their thick skins can handle the heat) and serve alongside the steak; they're like red wine sauce on a vine, as the sweet tartness of the fruit marries perfectly with the salty, charred crust of grilled steak.

*Parke Ulrich is executive chef at Epic Roasthouse and Waterbar in San Francisco. □*

### Chimichurri sauce

*My take on the classic Argentinean condiment includes a little heat in the form of a jalapeño.*

**Makes 1 cup**

In a blender, purée 1½ cups coarsely chopped fresh **flat-leaf parsley**, 1 cup coarsely chopped **fresh cilantro**, ¾ cup **extra-virgin olive oil**, 1 Tbs. **sherry vinegar**, 2 medium cloves **garlic**, 1 small **jalapeño**, 1 tsp. **kosher salt**, and ¼ tsp. **freshly ground black pepper**, adding more oil as needed. Transfer to a small bowl and season to taste with more salt and vinegar, if needed. (The sauce will keep in the fridge for 1 week.)