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Where there's smoke, there's flavor

Bridgette A. Lacy, Staff Writer

Looking to add a little oomph to your grilling this cookout season? Take a cue from Chef Shane Ingram of Four Square restaurant in Durham, who cooks with cedar planks when grilling salmon and other fish.

"It's a healthy way of adding flavor to fish," says Ingram, whose restaurant is known for its contemporary American cuisine. As the chef talks, he seasons a wild king salmon fillet with only sea salt flakes.

"The cedar is very aromatic anyway. When you smoke it or put it on top of the grill, it really bouquets out and the wild salmon picks it up so easily."

The adventurous griller will find that planks are a great platform for giving savory, smoky flavor to fish -- as well as pork, beef and all kinds of meats, vegetables, even fruit. Best of all, once you get your food going, the method doesn't require a lot of time standing over a hot grill.

Ingram cooks his fish on a cedar plank on his restaurant grill, covering the fish and plank with a metal bowl during the 7-minute cooking time. A container of water is nearby -- in case the plank catches fire.

To go with the salmon, Ingram prepares creamed corn from fresh ears of corn and grilled radicchio. The richness of the salmon and the creaminess of the corn -- flavored with red peppers, jalapeno, thyme, onions and white wine, coupled with the bitterness of grilled radicchio -- culminate in a delicious-looking and, we soon find out, delicious light meal.

Plank cooking requires a clean, untreated piece of natural wood -- cedar is good, but alder, cherry and maple and other woods also can be used. Before grilling, the plank is soaked in water -- to lock in moisture and to keep the plank from catching fire --then preheated.



At Four Square Restaurant, chef Shane Ingram serves herbed salmon, grilled on cedar planks, atop creamed corn.

Staff Photos by Juli Leonard

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The real secret to plank cooking is in the smoke.

"The key to getting really good smoke-infused food is keeping the lid on the grill," says Dina Guillen, a co-author of "The Plank Grilling Cookbook" (Sasquatch Books, \$18.95). "The smoke serves two purposes: It flavors the food and it keeps it moist."

While plank cooking can be done on charcoal and gas grills, Guillen and fellow cooks find that gas grills work better because it's easier to control the fire. (Although one cook in the book had only a charcoal grill and did fine. You just have to watch the heat, the book advises.)

You can use an oven, but when you cook on a plank in the oven, the flavor comes from the wood not the smoke, Guillen says.

Guillen began cooking on planks after her brother started selling them and asked her to come up with recipes. She learned that different woods bring out the flavors of certain ingredients.

Alder, with its smoky but mild flavor, is good for both pork and lamb. "It keeps the meat moist," she says. "Typically, I have to brine my pork chops. When you put it on the planks, it's like putting it in the oven. All the juices are cooking on the plank."

Cherry, she explains, has a sweetness to it that enhances the natural sweetness of foods. It's good for cooking fruit such as peaches, apples, nectarines and apricots.

Maple, more subtle than cherry, is also good for fruit, she says.

Cedar is the strongest of the woods, and its spicy and sweet wood complements vegetables, salmon and duck, she says.

Hickory, another strong wood, is best only for meats and fish, Guillen says. Oak's bitter flavor is good for cooking beef, including short ribs and steaks.

Finding wood planks in this area isn't difficult. You can buy them from Whole Foods Market, Fresh Market and William-Sonoma. Ingram buys them from Louis Graham of Graham Woodworking in Chatham County.

Graham sells the planks on Saturday mornings at the Carrboro Farmers' Market. He sells a bundle of five cedar or hickory planks -- 6 1/2 inches wide, 14 inches long and 1/2 inch thick -- for \$10.

"I just keep to local woods," he says. "I make planks about eight times per year. I keep a fresh supply on hand. It's common that if you buy one on Saturday, it might have been a tree the week before."

Getting the planks is one thing. Serving a plank-cooked entree is another. Some cooks revel in guests' reaction to the smoky flavor of their dishes. Guillen often serves her dishes on the planks, giving a "wow" factor to the meal already made beautiful by the mahogany glaze of the meats' juices.

"You don't have to add oil or butter to make meat moist," Guillen says. "When you plank grill, you don't have to do any of that."

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