

Born to Barbecue

Barbecuing over charcoal is the simplest and most natural way of cooking fresh fish. Let the eurotoque chefs concoct their sauces, dress up red mullet *en papillote* or serve it criss-crossed with lemon grass: anyone preparing *salmonete* any other way than barbecued is either trying to hide something, or has never tasted the freshly caught variety. Contrary to what you might read in cookery magazines, barbecuing is not necessarily a skill that can be acquired. The French, with no less an authority than Brillat-Savarin as their spokesman, maintain, “a chef is trained, but a good *rôtisseur* is born to the role.” They are right, of course, and I would be the first to endorse this view. In my own experience, anyone of a nervous disposition is definitely not of the right cast to be in charge of a barbecue, a task better left to those with a more stoical mentality.

If you are not one of these barbecue “naturals”, yet still insist on eating dried-up sardines cooked over a reluctant fire, either you are trying to salvage some sense of self-esteem, or else you haven’t got a cat. Even if the barbecue turns out to be a success, it is the fish



Neighbour João,
a relaxed *rôtisseur*

that will reap the praise, not the cook. To avoid the worst, you need:

- ▷ a grill with an adjustable rack that can be raised or lowered to control cooking temperature;
- ▷ a bottle of water, to douse any sooty flames that might flare up when fat drips onto the glowing charcoal, and that will instantly blacken the fish, tainting it with those evil benzopyrenes;
- ▷ a long barbecue fork for turning the fish over and moving it around; forget the fact that a real expert can do the job with his bare hands: you will at least look the part, brandishing this professional tool in your hand;
- ▷ a small bowl of *molho*: olive oil mixed with powdered paprika, garlic and *piri-piri*, to spread on the less fatty types of fish; this oily mixture is also used for coating the hot grid before grilling.

Charcoal is not essential; another method is frequently used in Argentina and has turned out to be at least equally effective when I tried it: twigs and small branches, the thickness of your thumb, are burnt in a modest fire flanking the main barbecuing operation. Glowing embers from this can be pushed under the grill from time to time, as and when necessary. Crucial is a band of helpers, not only to peel potatoes and make the salads, but also to attend to the chef's psychological well-being. One of the best ways of doing so is to ply him or her—which is not the rare case one might assume—with regular supplies of red wine or beer. Hops and tannins are famous for their calming properties and can be relied on to stave off any rising sense of panic that might occur.

An adventurous mixed grill



An omnipresent problem is the fish getting stuck to the grill, a disaster the experienced *rôtisseur* will seek to avert by constantly moving the fish around during the early stages of cooking. At this point, the realization dawns that the hinged, double-sided grill designed to encase the fish, which seemed such a clever device in



The perfect sargo

the shop, is actually not such a good idea after all. It appears to develop maximum adhesive strength at the moment the fish is to be served, leaving the host, in full view of his guests, trying to scrape the ruined remnants off the metal rungs. Once past this point of no return, no amount of cursing will serve any useful purpose, nor is it necessarily the best time to recall Brillat-Savarin's words of wisdom to the barbecue master's mind.

The smaller the fish, the fiercer should be the heat, and the shorter the grilling time. Large *carapaus*, mackerel, fat eels and *bar-riga de atum* need a longer stay on the grill, over a lower heat, so that they get cooked evenly all the way through, without the outside getting charred. Here are three examples *en detail*:

▷ **Roast eel:** If you fancy a nice and fat eel, try grilling it slowly over a low heat. It will lose a lot of its lard, which is no matter as it has got enough of it, and taste delicious, particularly if garnished with heaps of garlic and parsley. This dish constitutes the culinary antipode to Northern Germany's classic *Speckaal*, where the eel is fried in what at most would be plenty of butter, served with fried potatoes and coated by a slippery remoulade. Its Algarvian cousins, measuring roughly the width of a finger, are either fried or stewed and served as *ensopado de enguias*.