

Bringing Home Argentine Grilled Steak

With Argentine beef and a wood fire, cooking up *churrasco* in the backyard would be easy. We were stuck with American supermarket steaks and a Weber kettle.

≡ BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN ≡

Of all the cooking traditions involving live fire and a piece of meat, none is more sacred than preparing the perfect grilled steak. In Argentina especially, where cattle farming is a major industry and the per-capita beef consumption is the highest in the world (roughly 150 pounds annually), grilling steaks over burning embers is not just a means of getting dinner on the table, but a nationwide ritual.

All this I learned as I made my way to the Jackson Heights neighborhood of Queens, N.Y., where the large Argentine population is served by numerous *churrascarias*, or steakhouses, serving up huge slabs of *churrasco* (which refers to both the technique and the grilled meat itself). As a die-hard carnivore, I was intrigued by a culture that prides itself on the pleasures of a good—some would say perfect—grilled steak and curious to see how this technique would measure up to my own.

Differences were apparent not 10 minutes after I arrived at the first restaurant, a *Porteña*: First, this was anything but fast food. Here (and everywhere else I ate), the waiter warned me that the steak would



This steak may look like an ordinary New York strip, but its deep, wood-infused flavor is anything but the usual fare.

take at least 30 minutes to prepare. In contrast to the American method of slapping meat over a blazing fire to sear hard and fast, Argentine steaks are grilled low and slow over hardwood logs, not charcoal (and never over gas), which imbues them with a

smokiness that is subtler and more complex than the typical “barbecue” flavor one comes to expect of grilled meat here in the States. The resulting steak tastes the way a roaring fireplace smells: warm (not hot) and woody (not smoky).

Second, Argentines scoff at American steakhouse advertisements for “flame-broiled” meats; to them, burning the steak distracts from its prized beefy flavor. Instead, the cuts I was served boasted a mahogany-hued char that snapped with each bite, almost as if the meat were sheathed in an invisible layer of breading. And finally, there was size. Quite frankly, these extra-thick (1½- to 2-inch), nearly 2-pound slabs looked monstrous by my standards, but their immensity had more to do with cooking technique than gluttony. It was simple logic: With thick steaks, the meat could remain on the grill (called a *parrilla* in Argentina) long enough to absorb smoke flavor and avoid the risk of overcooking. With the piquant parsley, garlic, and olive oil sauce known as *chimichurri* served alongside, they added up to some of the best eating I’ve ever done, and persuaded me to race back to the test kitchen, where I would try to duplicate this way of cooking steaks.

Strip Search

The first order of business was sorting out which cut of meat to use. In truth, there is no one cut that can be considered a “typical” Argentine steak. Instead, *churrasco* is a method that can be applied to just about any grill-worthy piece of meat. Still, many of the cuts popular in Argentina—including *vacío* (a type of flank steak), *bife ancho* (prime rib steaks), and *tira de asado* (strips of meat and bone from the rib section similar to short ribs)—aren’t available in this country. In lieu of these, the restaurants I visited in Queens offered a wide selection of the steaks Americans like, from porterhouse to T-bone. All were large (almost roastlike) and boasted either lots of marbling or a substantial layer of external fat to lubricate and moisten the beef during its long stay over the fire.

After scanning my supermarket butcher case, I selected four flavorful steaks that met my basic height and weight criteria (about 1½ inches thick, but well under 2 pounds—after all, Americans aren’t quite the avid carnivores of Argentina): strip steak, shell steak, tri-tip, and bottom round, the last an attempt to replicate rump cap steak, an oblong cut from the top round portion of the hind leg that’s another favorite choice among Argentine grill cooks, or *parrilleros*. I built a medium fire by spreading a full chimney’s worth of charcoal around the bottom of my grill (tactics for pumping up wood-grilled flavor would come later), salted each of the steaks generously, cooked them to medium-rare, let them rest briefly, and then sliced them across the grain. Tri-tip and bottom round were out. Though each offered decent flavor, tasters found them a tad tough and dry. Meanwhile, well-marbled strip steak boasted big beefy flavor, not to mention an interior that was both moist and pleasantly chewy. (Shell steak, a flavorful sirloin cut located just to the rear of the strip loin, lost a few votes for its stringier texture but makes a good bargain alternative to strip steak.)

A Wood-Be Solution

My steaks selected, I moved on to Meaty Matter No. 2: building up the essential wood-smoke flavor. Cooking over actual logs was out of the question; the amount of wood required to build a hot enough fire would not fit comfortably in the average kettle grill. Instead, I tried various wood chunk and chip alternatives (soaked and unsoaked, foil-wrapped and unwrapped). Unsoaked chunks proved best. Four pieces nestled around the perimeter of the fire lasted long enough to tinge the steaks with a subtle essence of burning wood. Placing

Argentine Beef: Wood, Smoke, and Lots of 'Em

Asado, a technique developed by Argentina’s gauchos in which large cuts of beef are cooked by angling them over smoldering logs, is the forebear of today’s *churrasco*, smaller cuts cooked over a wood fire.



STEP BY STEP | KEYS TO SMOKY, CRISP-CRUSTED GRILLED STEAKS

Here's how we produced our own brand of smoky charred *churrasco*—even without the aid of a wood-burning Argentine grill.



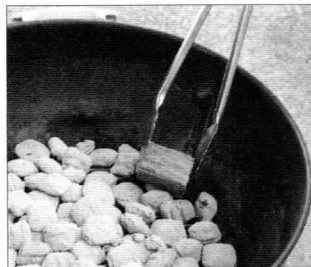
1. USE THE RIGHT RUB

Rubbing the steaks with cornstarch and salt seasons the meat and expedites crust formation by drying the meat's exterior; cornstarch also enhances browning.



2. FREEZE BRIEFLY

The freezer's cold, dry air drives off exterior moisture and chills the steaks' interiors, so they can stay on the grill longer, soaking up more smoke flavor.



3. ADD WOOD CHUNKS TO THE FIRE

Four large chunks of unsoaked wood added to a single-level fire infuse the meat with wood-grilled flavor.

the lid on the grill for the first few minutes of cooking helped to quickly trap smoke flavor.

Unfortunately, I still hadn't nailed the requisite deep-brown char without overcooking the interior. Without resorting to dry-aging my steaks for days (not even the Jackson Heights restaurants went to that trouble), I needed to figure out a way to drive off their exterior moisture so that a deep crust could form. Salting the steaks overnight in the fridge helped—after first being drawn out by the salt, the juices gradually are pulled back in, leaving the exterior of the meat drier than before—but I hated adding this lengthy extra step. Then I thought of something else. In the test kitchen, we're always talking about how the severely dry environment of the freezer robs food of its moisture. Usually that's an effect we're trying to prevent, but could it work in my favor? To find out, I salted the meat and then left it uncovered in the freezer for an hour. Sure enough, the meat emerged from the icebox practically bone-dry, and it browned within moments of hitting the grill. Even better, these partially frozen steaks could stand about 5 more minutes of fire, adding up to more char and more flavor.

Nearly satisfied with my Argentine facsimile, I focused my last few tests on that distinctive crunch I remembered from the restaurant steaks. Inspired by the “nano-breaded” quality of their crusts, I added a small amount of cornstarch to my salt rub—a trick we've used in the past to crisp up everything from turkey skin to potatoes. This twist had two results: I was able to cut the freezing time to 30 minutes, since cornstarch is another moisture-eating powerhouse, and I got steaks with all the color and snap I was looking for, because its starches enhance browning.

Dressing Up

All my *churrasco* needed was the requisite chimichurri dressing, the sharp, grassy flavors of which are designed to offset the rich, unctuous qualities of the steak. My tasters leaned toward one of the most traditional forms: fresh parsley, cilantro, oregano,

garlic, red wine vinegar, red pepper flakes, and salt—all emulsified with fruity extra-virgin olive oil. As I pulled the crisp-crust, wood-smoked steaks off the grill, splashed on a little chimichurri, and took my first bite—near “perfect,” if I did say so myself—I decided to make this new American spin on an age-old Argentine tradition my go-to technique.

CHARCOAL-GRILLED ARGENTINE STEAKS WITH CHIMICHURRI SAUCE

SERVES 6 TO 8

NOTE: The chimichurri sauce can be made up to 3 days in advance. Our preferred steak for this recipe is strip steak, also known as New York strip. A less expensive alternative is a boneless shell sirloin steak (or top sirloin steak). We prefer oak, but other types of wood chunks can be used. Flipping 3 times during cooking allows for even cooking and limits flare-ups. To substitute table salt for kosher salt, halve the amounts listed in the recipe.

Chimichurri Sauce

- ¼ cup hot water
- 2 teaspoons dried oregano
- 2 teaspoons kosher salt (see note)
- 1½ cups loosely packed flat-leaf parsley leaves
- ¾ cup loosely packed cilantro leaves
- 6 medium garlic cloves, minced or pressed through garlic press (about 2 tablespoons)
- ½ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- ¼ cup red wine vinegar
- ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil

Steak

- 1 tablespoon cornstarch
- 2 tablespoons kosher salt (see note)
- 4 boneless strip steaks, 1½ inches thick (about 1 pound each) (see note)
- 4 (2-inch) unsoaked wood chunks (see note)
- Ground black pepper

1. **FOR THE SAUCE:** Combine hot water, oregano, and salt in small bowl; let stand 5 minutes to soften oregano. Pulse parsley, cilantro, garlic, and red pepper flakes in food processor until coarsely chopped, about ten 1-second pulses. Add water mixture and vinegar and pulse briefly to combine. Transfer mixture to medium bowl and slowly whisk in oil until incorporated and mixture is emulsified. Cover with plastic wrap and let stand at room temperature at least 1 hour (if preparing sauce in advance, refrigerate and bring to room temperature before using).

2. **FOR THE STEAK:** Combine cornstarch and salt in small bowl. Pat steaks dry with paper towels and place on wire rack set in rimmed baking sheet. Rub entire surface of steaks with cornstarch mixture and place steaks, uncovered, in freezer until very firm, about 30 minutes.

3. Light large chimney starter filled with charcoal (6 quarts, about 100 briquettes) and allow to burn until coals are fully ignited and partially covered with thin layer of ash, about 20 minutes. Arrange coals in single layer over entire surface of grill and, using tongs, place wood chunks directly on top of coals, spacing them evenly around perimeter of grill. Position cooking grate over coals, cover grill, and heat grate until hot, about 5 minutes. Scrape cooking grate clean with grill brush. Grill is ready when coals are hot (you can hold your hand 5 inches above grate for 2 seconds).

4. Season steaks with pepper. Place steaks on grill, cover, and cook until steaks begin to char, 2 to 3 minutes. Uncover grill, flip steaks, and cook on second side until beginning to char, 2 to 3 minutes. Flip again and cook first side until well charred, 2 to 3 minutes. Flip 1 last time and continue to cook until second side is well charred and instant-read thermometer inserted into center of steak registers 115 degrees for rare, about 2 minutes, or 120 degrees for medium-rare, about 4 minutes. Transfer to large plate and let rest, loosely tented with foil, for 10 minutes. Slice and serve, passing chimichurri sauce separately.

GAS-GRILLED ARGENTINE STEAKS WITH CHIMICHURRI SAUCE

Follow recipe for Charcoal-Grilled Argentine Steaks with Chimichurri Sauce through step 2, turning all burners to high and heating grill with lid down until very hot, about 15 minutes. Place wood chunks in perforated disposable 9-inch aluminum pie plate and set on cooking grate. Close lid and heat until wood chunks begin to smoke, about 5 minutes. Scrape grate clean with grill brush. Proceed with recipe from step 4, cooking steaks alongside pie plate.

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HOW TO MAKE

- Charcoal-Grilled Argentine Steaks with Chimichurri Sauce