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Hot Summer Cooking Tips from a Grilling Guru

Ah July in Montana! Warm days, cool nights, fishing trips, and farmers' markets - all the best parts of a Big Sky summer come together in one delicious place - the grill. Whether your family grills on charcoal or gas, in your backyard or at a campground, summertime grilling is a wonderful way to add smoky flavors to an entire meal. The great news is that grilling is not just for slabs of meat; it's perfectly suited for veggies too.

"Our family grills almost every kind of food and almost all year-round," says Dr. Ginny Mermel, a Certified Nutrition Specialist (CNS) and Chair of the School Health Advisory Council for Billings Public Schools. "In the summer, some of our favorite grilled meals are fish, such as salmon or trout, on cedar planks, a whole turkey with grilled corn-on-the-cob, and an Italian grilled dinner called a frita mizta or mixed grill."

According to Mermel, all these feasts translate easily to any grilling situation. Here are three of her favorites.

- **Grilled fish on cedar planks:** Soak planks in water for 20 minutes to 4 hours before grilling. Put wet plank on grill with fish (or other items) on top if it. Turn heat down to medium or let charcoal burn down a bit. Put cover on grill and cook fish for about 20 minutes on a plank; no need to turn during cooking.
- **Whole grilled turkey:** Cut the backbone out of a small hen turkey (10-12 pounds) and flatten. Marinate in lime juice and chile or your favorite marinade overnight. Grill, skin side up, over medium heat for 60-90 minutes and serve with grilled vegetables, jalapeno corn bread, and a tossed green salad.
- **Grilled Italian Tomatoes:** Wash well-ripened Italian tomatoes; cut in half and squeeze gently to remove most of the seeds. Place cut side up on double layer foil shaped into a pan. Top cut surface of each tomato with a tablespoon of fresh pesto and grill until the tomato skins begin to char. Remove from grill, put in large bowl, and mash with a fork. Add cooked linguini, toss, and top with grated cheese to taste.

As a nutrition professional and a gourmet cook, Mermel is always looking for deliciously simple ways to prepare fresh, healthful foods for her family and guests. "Grilling really makes healthy cooking easy. With minimal fat and salt, you can cook very flavorful food quickly," she says. "For example, toss a few herbs from your garden or farmers' market onto the coals during the last five minutes of grilling. Aromatic herbs, thyme or rosemary, for example, create a wonderfully smoky flavor for chicken or lamb." Some inexpensive pieces of equipment can also make a big difference. Mermel recommends the following three items:

- **An instant-read thermometer** (about \$10) makes it easy to cook meat enough, but not too much.
- **A long-handled silicon basting brush** (\$5 to \$6) can be rinsed well and does not leave bristles on food.
- **A set of cedar grilling planks** (around \$15) can be cleaned and reused multiple times.

"Garden fresh vegetables are some of the best items to cook on a grill," explains Ginny Mermel. "Toss sliced summer squash, peppers, or onions with a little olive oil, sprinkle with some sea salt, and grill quickly."

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