SO MANY GRILLED FOODS!

Brenda Davis, RD

Many people assume that when they adopt a plant-based diet, they're waving goodbye to the cherished ritual of backyard barbecues and sun-drenched grilling sessions. Nothing could be further from the truth.

In fact, plant-based grilling not only keeps the spirit of the BBQ alive, but it also expands it. Summer grilling becomes a celebration of vibrant vegetables, such as corn, zucchini, bell peppers, eggplant, asparagus, green beans, Bok choy, broccolini, onions, cauliflower steaks, foil-wrapped potatoes, carrots, and beets. Protein-rich staples like marinated tofu, tempeh, hearty veggie burgers, sausages, and even seitan roasts hold their own over the coals. And don't forget fruit: grilled pineapple, peaches, or even watermelon develop a caramelized sweetness that transforms a simple meal into a culinary memory.

I love to fire up the BBQ in the summer and avoid using a stove or oven. My favorites are salmon tofu with grilled potatoes and veggies, and tofu/veggie skewers. If you'd like to grill a little more often but are at a loss for what to grill or how to do it, this article is for you. Enjoy!



A World of Plant-Based Options for the Grill

One of the greatest surprises for many people new to plant-based eating is just how abundant and satisfying the world of plant-based grilling can be. A well-prepared grill transforms humble vegetables, hearty plant proteins, and even fresh fruits into flavourful, smoky delights that rival any traditional barbecue fare.

1. Vegetables: From Garden to Grill

Grilled vegetables are the vibrant backbone of any plant-based BBQ. High-heat grilling caramelizes natural sugars, intensifies flavours, and creates the signature char that makes outdoor cooking so satisfying.

Some standout vegetables include:

- Asparagus: Grills quickly and gains a delightful crisp-tender texture and charred tips.
- Bell Peppers: Their natural sweetness deepens when charred until the skins blister.
- Bok Choy: Halved lengthwise and lightly charred, it pairs beautifully with Asian-inspired marinades.
- Broccolini or Baby Broccoli: Tender stems and florets take on a sweet, smoky flavour when lightly brushed with a marinade and grilled until just crisp.
- Cauliflower Steaks: Hearty and substantial — perfect as a centrepiece or side.
- Corn on the Cob: Sweet and smoky, grilled in husks, foil, or directly over the flame.
- Eggplant: Ideal for grilling thick slices or planks that hold marinades well.

- Green Beans: Threaded onto skewers or cooked in a grill basket for a smoky twist on a classic side.
- Onions: Wedges or rings become deeply caramelized and add umami richness.
- Root Vegetables: Carrots, beets, or potatoes wrapped in foil or par-cooked then grilled to develop sweet, smoky edges.
- Zucchini & Summer Squash: Sliced lengthwise or into rounds, they grill quickly and absorb marinades beautifully.

2. Plant-Based Proteins: Hearty and Satisfying

Plant proteins hold their own over the coals and deliver the hearty satisfaction that many people crave from a BBQ:

- Tofu: Firm or extra-firm tofu absorbs marinades exceptionally well; grill as slabs, cubes on skewers, or crumbled into veggie kebabs.
- Tempeh: This fermented soy product has a nutty flavour that pairs beautifully with smoky grilling. Steam first to soften, then marinate well.
- Veggie Burgers: Lentil, bean, grain, or mushroom-based patties hold together nicely and develop delicious grill marks. Of course, there are plenty of commercial options available for convenience.
- Plant-Based Sausages: Many store-bought varieties grill up beautifully for a classic sausage experience. Serve with sauerkraut or apple sauce.
- Seitan & Gluten-Based Roasts: Rich in protein with a chewy texture that stands up well to high heat and smoky flavours.

3. Grilled Fruits: Sweet Treats

Grilling fruit caramelizes natural sugars and deepens flavour — a perfect sweet ending or complement to savoury dishes:

- Pineapple: The classic; sliced into rings or spears, it becomes golden, smoky, and intensely sweet.
- Peaches & Nectarines: Halved and grilled until tender, these pair beautifully with fresh herbs or non-dairy yogurt.
- Watermelon: Lightly charred watermelon steaks surprise with a savoury-sweet twist.
- Bananas: Wrapped in foil and grilled, they become a warm, caramelized treat — delicious with a drizzle of maple or a sprinkle of cinnamon.

With all these options, plant-based grilling isn't about giving up — it's about expanding your barbecue horizons with vibrant flavours, beautiful textures, and endless culinary creativity.

Grilling: A Cultural Touchstone

Grilling is far more than a cooking method — it's a cultural ritual steeped in tradition across the globe. From North American backyard cookouts to Argentine asados, South African braais, Korean barbecue, Middle Eastern kebabs, and Japanese yakitori, grilling connects people through shared food and stories around the flame.

Plant-based grilling honours this cultural legacy while aligning with modern sustainability and health values. Many cultures already use plant-forward grilling traditions — think of smoky Mexican elote (grilled corn pictured below), charred vegetables in Mediterranean mezze platters, or Indonesian satay with tofu or tempeh.



Is Grilling Risky for Health?

While grilling brings flavour and conviviality, it also carries with it the risk of exposure to potentially harmful compounds such as:

- **Heterocyclic Amines (HCAs)**: Form when amino acids and creatine in muscle meats react at high temperatures. HCAs are of no concern to plant-based eaters, as plants contain negligible creatine.
- **Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbons (PAHs)**: Develop when fat drips onto flames, creating smoke that deposits PAHs onto food. While animal fats are the main source, plant-based fats (like oils) can still drip and generate PAHs, albeit to a lesser extent.
- **Advanced Glycation End Products (AGEs)**: Result from dry-heat cooking of proteins and fats, contributing to oxidative stress and inflammation. Grilled animal products tend to produce far more AGEs than plants, but charred plant foods can still generate some.
- **Acrylamide**: Occurs when starchy plant foods, particularly potatoes, are cooked at high heat (e.g., frying or grilling).

Strategies to Reduce Harmful Compounds:

- **Marinate**: Marinades with acidic or antioxidant-rich ingredients (e.g., citrus juice, vinegar, mustard, and herbs) can help reduce the formation of carcinogens.
- **Use lower temperatures**: Grill over low or medium rather than high heat and avoid direct flames.
- **Minimize charring**: Flip foods frequently and trim any burnt sections.
- **Use foil or grill mats**: These can help prevent direct flame contact and fat dripping.

- **Opt for oil-free or minimal-fat marinades**: Less fat dripping means fewer PAHs.

Fortunately, plant-based grilling naturally carries a much lower risk because the key culprits (HCAs and high levels of PAHs from animal fat) are largely absent. Nonetheless, mindful technique ensures you get the best of the BBQ without the downsides.

Plant-based grilling keeps the timeless summer BBQ alive — but with colourful produce, hearty proteins, and vibrant global flavours. With thoughtful technique and delicious recipes like these, the grill becomes a place not just for food, but for connection, community, and healthful celebration.



Plant-Based Recipes for the Grill

Grilled “Salmon” Tofu with Creamy Dill Sauce

A fresh, smoky, and ocean-inspired main dish — beet-marinated tofu fillets finished with a bright, tangy dill sauce. A tofu salmon gathering with family and friends. Cut the tofu in squares, rectangles or triangles – whatever you prefer!

Ingredients:

Creamy Dill Sauce



- 1/2 cup raw cashews, soaked for 4 hours and drained
- 2 tbsp white wine vinegar or apple cider vinegar
- 1/4 cup water (adjust to desired consistency)
- 2 tbsp chopped fresh dill pickles
- 2 tbsp fresh dill, chopped
- Salt, to taste
- 1 tsp maple syrup or other sweetener (optional, to round out acidity)

Salmon Tofu



- 1 block (400–450 g) firm or extra-firm tofu, drained and patted dry
- 1/2 cup canned beet juice (or juice from cooked beets)
- 3 tbsp Dijon mustard
- Juice of 1 fresh lemon
- 1 tbsp tamari or gluten-free soy sauce
- 1 tbsp maple syrup (optional, for balance)
- ¼ cup tahini (in place of oil)
- 1 bay leaf
- 1/2 tsp dried thyme
- 2 tsp seafood seasoning (e.g., Old Bay)

Instructions:

1. Slice into filets into squares, rectangles, or triangles.
2. Make the sauce. Blend beet juice, Dijon mustard, lemon juice, tamari, maple syrup, tahini, bay leaf, thyme, and seafood seasoning on low speed, then increase to high for about a minute.
3. Place the tofu fillets in a 9 x 13-inch pan. Cover with marinade for at least 2 hours (or overnight) in the fridge.
4. Prepare creamy dill sauce. Blend the soaked cashews with vinegar, water, pickles, fresh dill, salt, and sweetener until smooth. Adjust seasoning as needed.
5. Preheat grill to medium heat. Lightly oil the grates or use a grill mat.
6. Grill tofu about 7-10 minutes per side on low heat, basting with leftover marinade. Remove when nicely marked and heated through. Serve with Creamy Dill Sauce.
7. Serve tofu fillets warm, topped with dill sauce. Serve with grilled potatoes and a big salad, grilled asparagus or other green vegetables.



Hearty Lentil Walnut Burgers

Makes 8 burgers

A satisfying, protein-rich veggie burger with deep smoky flavour and hearty texture.

Ingredients:

2 cups cooked green or brown lentils
1 cup ground walnuts
1/2 cup cooked and cooled oats or quinoa
1 medium onion, diced
3 cloves garlic, minced
¼ cup ground flaxseed
3 tbsp nutritional yeast
3 tbsp tomato paste or BBQ sauce
1 ½ tbsp tamari
1 tsp smoked paprika
1 tsp ground cumin
Pepper to taste



Instructions:

1. Mash lentils in a large bowl, leaving some texture. Add walnuts, oats or quinoa, onion, garlic, ground flax, nutritional yeast, tomato paste or BBQ sauce, tamari, paprika, cumin, and pepper. Mix well.
2. Form into 8 patties. If the dough is too wet, refrigerate it for an hour or more or add 2 tablespoons of chickpea or other flour.
3. Preheat grill to medium. Grill patties on a grill mat or BBQ tray for about 7-10 minutes per side, or until nicely browned.
4. Serve on whole grain buns with your favourite toppings or with mushroom gravy, grilled potatoes, and grilled vegetables.

Rainbow Grilled Veggie Skewers with Lemon-Herb Marinade

Makes 8-10 skewers

Colourful skewers that showcase the best of the season, kissed by a zesty, oil-free marinade. Feel free to get creative with veggies. Add mushrooms, eggplant, or a slice of corn on the cob. For a full meal skewer, add tofu or tempeh cubes.

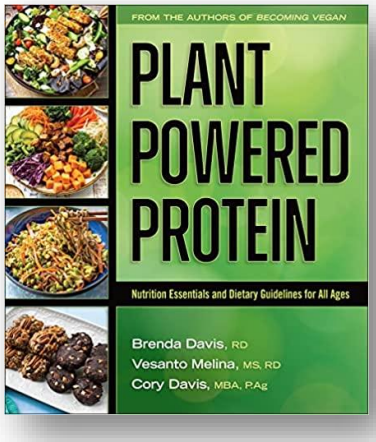
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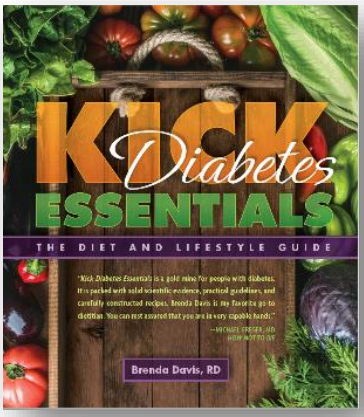


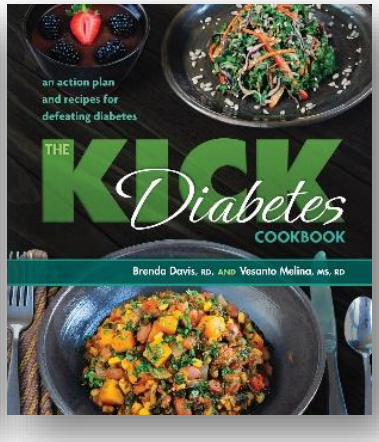
3 tbsp lemon juice
1½ tbsp tahini
1½ tbsp tamari
1 Tbsp Dijon mustard
1 clove garlic, minced
1 tsp dried oregano or rosemary
Freshly ground black pepper
1 medium zucchini, sliced
1 red bell pepper, cut into chunks
1 yellow bell pepper, cut into chunks
1 red onion, cut into wedges
2 cups cherry tomatoes

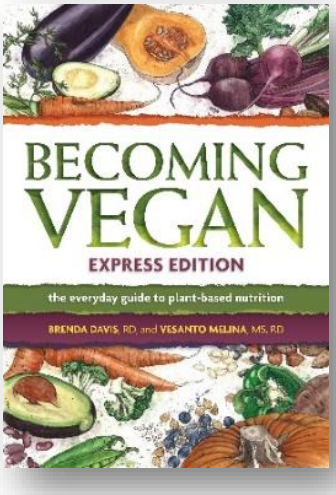
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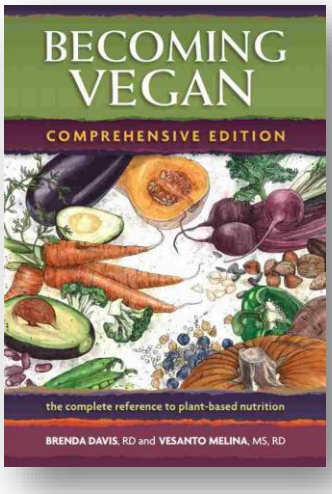
1. Whisk together lemon juice, tahini, tamari, mustard, garlic, herbs, and pepper.
2. Thread the vegetables onto skewers. Place on a roasting pan or cookie tray and brush all sides with the marinade.
3. Preheat grill to medium. Grill skewers 8–10 minutes, turning to lightly char all sides, basting once or twice with extra marinade.
4. Serve warm as a side or main dish.

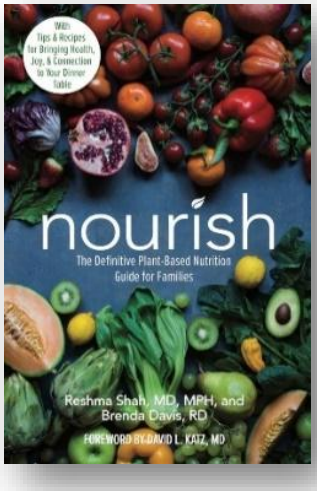












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