

Diane's Blog
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Enjoying the Sizzle and Flavor of Live Fire Cooking Without Busting the Budget

While steaks (not so cheap), burgers, and hotdogs are the usual suspects for the grill, there are many great and creative possibilities for budget-crunched families who like to light a fire and enjoy summers outside. Whether one is lighting a fire with charcoal briquettes or hardwood charcoal, or flicking a switch and turning on a gas barbecue, there are budget-saving tips to learn and terrific new recipes to discover.

First, let's talk about fuel and how to use it most economically. Once the burners are lit, a gas grill needs to preheat, with the lid closed, for about 15 minutes in order to get the grill grates and internal temperature searing hot; heating it any longer wastes fuel. For a charcoal grill, the quantity of charcoal you need depends on the size of your grill and how much food you will be grilling. Start with enough to cover the bottom charcoal grate in a single layer. You can always replenish with more charcoal as needed. Here are a few guidelines: A 6-quart chimney starter filled two-thirds full holds roughly 4 pounds of charcoal or 60 briquettes. This is enough to cover the charcoal grate of a 22-inch kettle-style grill with a single layer of coals and provides about 45 minutes of cooking time. A 14-inch kettle-style grill needs about 2 pounds of charcoal, or 30 briquettes, for the same coverage. At standard retail prices, a 9-pound bag of charcoal briquettes cost \$6.49, so on a medium-sized grill it will cost about \$2.20 to \$3.25 to grill for 45 minutes. If you can find charcoal on sale you will do even better.

Next, consider the efficiency of grilling your entire dinner on the grill or, better yet, grilling once and cooking extra to have enough food for a second night's meal. With 45 minutes of grilling time, I can grill-roast new potatoes tossed with olive oil, salt and pepper on the perimeter of the grill grate while grilling my protein. Since meat and poultry need to rest for a minimum of 5 minutes after grilling to allow the juices to redistribute throughout the meat, leaving it juicy and tender when sliced, you can use that time to grill a vegetable or two to accompany the meal. Grilling asparagus, thickly-sliced zucchini, sweet onions, or peppers over the direct coals brings big smoky flavors and a crisp texture to summer's best vegetables. Firing up the grill once and cooking extra means another night's dinner is almost at hand – three or four extra grilled chicken thighs translates to an easy main-course salad with sweet corn, black beans, and cherry tomatoes topped with slices of chile-grilled chicken.

Skip the expensive Ribeye or NY Strip steaks at almost \$12.00 a pound and set your sights on beefy cross-cut short ribs, labeled beef chuck flanken short ribs, which are often on sale for \$4.00 a pound. The savings come because these cuts are sliced when purchased, making a smaller portion size that is both economical and healthier. While you are likely to serve a whole strip steak weighing almost 3/4 pound to each adult, slices of flanken short ribs weighing less than 2 pounds serves four nicely.

The recipe highlighted in my video is meant for busy weeknights or relaxed weekends at the grill, where delicious smoky flavors make for big-flavored food with low-budget grocery bills. This is the summer to enjoy a cookout in your own backyard.