



The Only 4 Techniques You Need to Know to Cook Every Vegetable

By [Anthea Levi](#) | January 12, 2021

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These four smart techniques are easy to master, thanks to this detailed how-to guide by chef Seamus Mullen.
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Have you ever felt like the only way to [add more vegetables to your diet](#) is to eat unsatisfying salads and be miserable? We hear you. Fortunately, you're wrong (no offense).

Vegetables are more versatile than many of us realize — and they can be used for way more than making sad salads. Just ask [Seamus Mullen](#), chef, restaurateur and author of the cookbook [Real Food Heals](#).

"The idea is to understand the vegetable as a canvas or foundation, and then maximize its flavor using various techniques," Mullen, who is also a chef at the [Institute of Culinary Education](#), tells us.

Take a beet, for example. "A simple beet might not be that interesting, but if you slow roast it, the sugars will develop, and if you add aromatics like garlic and thyme, you will get a more nuanced flavor," Mullen says. "Then, add vinegar, olive oil and fresh herbs and it becomes even more interesting."

Making veggies more enjoyable should be top of mind for most of us, since fewer than 1 in 10 American adults actually eats the recommended amount of vegetables (about [2.5 cups](#)) daily, per the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

To help you hit your greens goals, we explain how to cook vegetables with four smart techniques that result in produce you'll actually crave.

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1. Char-Grilling

It's basically exactly what it sounds like: grilling vegetables until they're charred to a crisp. Don't worry, you're not meant to eat a mouthful of burnt veggie peels — the idea is to remove the charred bits to uncover a unique, layered flavor below.

"This is an amazing way to get a rich, slightly smokey, delicate flavor out of a variety of vegetables," Mullen says.

Nutritionally speaking, charred foods aren't flawless. "Certain charred foods can contain carcinogens, but the amount and type vary depending on the composition of the food," says [Kristy Del Coro, RD](#), a Maine-based dietitian who specializes in culinary nutrition.

"For example, char-grilled meats can form [harmful compounds] like polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) and heterocyclic amines (HCAs), from the interaction between the proteins in the meat and high heat," Del Coro explains. "[Non-starchy vegetables](#) such as zucchini, peppers, asparagus, and mushrooms don't form the HCAs that are associated with increased cancer risk, but will have some amount of PAHs, especially if they also contain a lot of extra fat."

FYI

Don't get too freaked out by the concerns around grilled foods, especially when charring vegetables instead of meat. "Scraping off the charred parts

will help reduce the PAHs since they tend to stick to the outside of the food,” Del Coro says. “Plus, vegetables’ naturally high antioxidant content can also potentially counteract the harmful effects from the PAHs.”

How to Do It

There are three different ways to make char-grilled veggies, according to Mullen. Here's how to do each, depending on the equipment you have on hand.

Direct Grilling Method

1. Heat the grill on a high setting.
2. Prep vegetables by drizzling them with olive oil and seasoning with salt and pepper. "Even though you'll peel the outside of the vegetable, these flavors will carry through," Mullen says.
3. Place the vegetables on the grill and lower the heat to prevent them from burning too quickly.
4. Turn the vegetables frequently to ensure an even char.
5. Once the vegetables are tender and the exterior is evenly charred, remove them from the grill and allow them to cool in a plastic container or a paper bag. "Cooling the vegetables in an enclosed container helps them start to steam," Mullen explains.
6. Once cooled, carefully peel and discard the blackened exterior, then re-season the vegetables with salt and pepper.

"Once done, the interior of the vegetable will be bright, sweet and have a nearly 'melted' consistency," Mullen says. He recommends seasoning peeled veggies with salt and pepper, vinegar, spices, fresh herbs, yogurt or your favorite sauce to complete the dish.

Coal Method

1. Bury vegetables directly in the coals of a burning wood fire. (You can wrap them in [aluminum foil](#) or place them directly into the coals.)
2. Use a meat fork or cake tester to pull the vegetables out periodically and check their char and tenderness. The veggies are done when the interior is soft and the exterior is fully charred.
3. Remove the vegetables from the coals, let them cool and then peel them with a paring knife to completely remove the charred outside.

How long the vegetables need to cook for depends on the type you're using. "For example, a baseball-sized beet might take about an hour," Mullen says. "In the end, you'll be left with a sweet, smokey delicious root vegetable that can be mashed, dressed or simply seasoned."

Oven Method

1. Preheat the oven to 495 degrees Fahrenheit.
2. Rub vegetables with extra-virgin olive oil to help conduct heat.
3. Roast vegetables in the high heat, turning them periodically to make sure they char evenly. Vegetables like whole bell peppers will take about 25 to 30 minutes to char, Mullen says.
4. Once charred, remove the vegetables from the oven and let them cool in an enclosed container.
5. When cooled, peel off the burnt vegetable skin. "Avoid cleaning the charred vegetables under running water," Mullen says. "All of the nice oils that the vegetable exudes will get washed away and you'll lose flavor."

Tip

"With each of these approaches, the final product — after cooling and peeling — will need to be seasoned and then reheated if you choose to serve it warm," Mullen explains. "A dollop of good yogurt, a shot of excellent extra-virgin olive oil, some crunchy sea salt and fresh herbs will go a long way to making any of these vegetables sing."

Which Veggies Work Best

"The [direct grilling] method works well with eggplant, leeks and onions," Mullen says. "Burying the vegetables directly in the coals of a wood fire is great for harder root vegetables like yams, celery root, beets and parsnips." Mullen recommends charring celery root in coals, then peeling it and using a potato masher to produce a delicious root mash.

If you're using a regular oven at home, Mullen recommends charring [red bell peppers](#). Once they're cooked, cooled and peeled, you can use them to make tasty condiments like a Spanish romesco sauce.

"For romesco sauce, the peppers are roasted together with onion, garlic and tomato, then pureed into a rustic, chunky puree with toasted almonds, hazelnuts, paprika,

olive oil and sherry vinegar," he says. Pair it with grilled veggies, fish or meat for a flavor-packed bite.

2. Olive Oil-Frying

Fried foods get a bad rap (hence why [air fryers](#) are all the rage right now). But using extra virgin olive oil makes a big difference, Mullen says.

"There is a common misconception that you can't [fry in olive oil](#)," he says. "I would like to give everyone permission, once and for all, to fry in olive oil." Why? The end result is better for you than foods fried in canola or vegetable oil, which are two unhealthy and highly oxidative oils, Mullen says.

One reason EVOO isn't typically recommended for frying (apart from its price tag) is the ingredient's [smoke point](#), which is lower than alternatives like canola oil.

"However, well-sourced, true, unrefined extra virgin and virgin olive oil actually have a much higher smoke point than most people think — it's around 400 degrees Fahrenheit," Del Coro explains.

When oils are heated above their smoke points, they can start to break down, potentially producing off-flavors and harmful compounds. However, food can be fried at 350 to 375 degrees Fahrenheit and sometimes even lower, Del Coro says, making [extra virgin olive oil](#) an appropriate pick for frying.

"Most importantly, because it is so high in monounsaturated fat, so even if it does reach its smoke point or start to oxidize and break down, it will not form nearly the same level of harmful compounds that other polyunsaturated oils like canola or vegetable oil do."

How to Do It

1. Mullen recommends frying vegetables in small batches. "I try to fry in the smallest vessel I can get away with without crowding it," he says. "Oil is very thermo-conductive, so the tighter the vessel, the better the heat is retained." It also helps produce a crispier product. Opt for a 1-quart saucepot instead of a wide sauté pan.
2. Add enough oil to your pan or pot to fully submerge your vegetables. Heat the oil to about 375 to 390 degrees Fahrenheit.
3. Once the oil is hot, add the vegetables and fry in small batches for about two minutes, or until the interior is tender and the exterior is crispy.

4. Transfer fried veggies to a paper towel-lined plate and repeat this process for subsequent batches.

Tip

Just don't reuse the same oil over and over again when frying. "Each time it is used, the oil degrades, making it more likely to form harmful compounds," Del Coro adds.

Not into EVOO? Try [avocado oil](#). "It has similar health benefits and smoke point to olive oil but is more neutral in flavor," Del Coro says.

Which Veggies Work Best

"I love frying artichokes in olive oil and serving them with a homemade aioli," Mullen says. "[Cooked chickpeas](#) tossed in chickpea flour and then fried taste great served with paprika, a squeeze of lime, cilantro and a sprinkle of sea salt."

Also delicious: frying your favorite mushrooms in olive oil — Mullen loves using maitake — then serving them up simply with a generous squeeze of lemon juice.

3. Smoking

Smoking is a method typically reserved for preparing meats (think: ribs), but veggies are equally smoke-able. "There is something primordial and wholly unusual about this preparation," Mullen says. Count us in.

Smoking veggies is a great way to get hardcore carnivores excited about [plant-based eating](#) because the method can produce flavors that mimic those of grilled meats.

Upping our veggie-to-meat ratio is always a good idea when it comes to our health. Research consistently shows that plant-forward diets are linked to lower blood pressure and reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, per the [Cleveland Clinic](#).

How to Do It

If you don't have a smoker at home, you can try this method by hanging veggies over a good ol' campfire or fireplace. "The vegetables will slowly cook from the ambient heat and smoke, which imparts a lot of flavor," Mullen says.

1. If you're using harder veggies, like potatoes, cook them before smoking.

2. For the campfire method, hang vegetables over the fire (there are special stakes you can buy to help you hang food above a campfire). The farther away from the heat source, the better the smoky flavor. Mullen recommends hanging veggies 1 to 1.5 feet above the fire.
3. The name of the game here is low and slow. "If you're smoking a cauliflower above a campfire, it may take about two hours at a minimum of 250 degrees Fahrenheit," Mullen says.
4. Consider the vegetables done when they're tender and slightly charred on the outside.

Which Veggies Work Best

"Among my favorite things to smoke are cauliflower, potatoes, sunchokes and even fruit," Mullen says. "[Mashed potatoes](#) made with smoked potatoes are also a revelation."

"Potatoes do well by being par-boiled in salted water, then peeled before smoking," Mullen explains. "Other vegetables like cabbage are wonderful when left to smoke for hours until tender at the center and crispy on the outside."

4. Braising

Much like smoking, braising is also most often used for cooking meat. The idea is to simmer a tough cut of meat, like chuck, in a broth with vegetables at a low temperature either on the stove or in the oven for a number of hours. Veggies can be cooked the same way.

"When it comes to braising vegetables, I often use a beef or [chicken stock](#) to add some richness of flavor and also a drop or two of wine or vinegar to balance acidity," Mullen explains.

And if you drink the flavor-packed broth along with your cooked vegetables, you'll soak up any nutrients that may have leached out of the produce and into the braising liquid. What's more, braising veggies with a source of fat (like olive oil) can help bolster the body's absorption of fat-soluble vitamins, like the beta-carotene in carrots and the vitamin K in kale.

How to Do It

1. Gently brown the vegetables in olive oil on the stovetop.

2. Deglaze the pan using wine or vinegar before just barely covering the vegetables with your broth of choice.
3. Simmer the mixture until the vegetables are tender, about 25 to 30 minutes.

Which Veggies Work Best

"Mushrooms have a particularly meaty quality and do very well in a braise," Mullen says. So do leeks, onions and shallots, all of which can soak up tons of flavor from the broth.

Looking for a hit of protein? Try [soaking dried beans](#) and then braising them. It will take a little longer (around an hour and a half of braising), but the flavor will make you forget canned beans ever existed. See ya, Goya.

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