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When it comes to grilling, watch the heat and get creative

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At least three times a week, Mike Gregory and his family are firing up the grill — steaks and ribs mostly, because that's his favorite to make.

He says it's something about the whole experience — the savory smell, the seasoning and the sauce — that makes grilling one of Gregory's preferred cooking styles, tied only with smoking meat.

"I like everything about it — being outdoors, getting everybody together and seeing their faces when they take a bite and taste how good it is," said Gregory. A bonafide grill master, he was crowned King of the Grill on Sunday at a barbecue competition held at Skybox Sports Bar and Grill in Crawfordville.

With July being National Grilling Month now seems as good a time as any to join in on the smoky outdoor pastime. But before you start lighting fires, there are some things to consider.

A clean grill is a good way to start, said Chef Walter Wright, dean of Culinary Arts at the Tallahassee Keiser University campus. Then take an oiled rag and wipe it down before lighting anything.

Temperature is also a key component to grilling.

"You want to make sure your grill is at a high temperature to sear the meat or poultry — it keeps the juices on the inside," Wright said, explaining that experienced grillers just know when it's right, but there's also the hand test.

"Put your hand above the grill about six inches from the grate," he added. "If you put your hand out and it feels like it's going to hurt you then it's too hot. But if you can put your hand over the grill for two to three seconds then it's the right temperature. If you can put your hand over the grill for five to 10 seconds then it's usually not hot enough."

A general rule when using charcoal is to let it burn for at least 40 minutes — even still you must be aware of the heat, said Chef Rob Citto with the Publix Apron's Cooking School.

In sharing a disaster story he explained an incident where he was cooking marinated flank steaks while working as a chef on a boat in Costa Rica.

"I just knew these steaks were going to be good and the juices would caramelize," he said. "But I had not been familiar with the heating element on the grill. I started throwing the flank steak on the grill like I'm dealing cards. The marinade hit the grill and the flames went out of control."

"So that's a big don't," he added. "You want to drudge off your marinade. Or else when that hits the flames it will shoot fire straight up and char the meat."

If you aren't using a marinade, then it's best to season the meat while it's on the grill, Wright said. At the same time, because grilling is a dry cooking method, you'll want to keep the meat moist — which can be done by using some type of butter, barbecue sauce or even just water.

Turning the meat every few minutes — as opposed to letting it cook half way then turning it — also keeps the meat from getting dry, Wright added.

“When it cooks a quarter of the way, flip it,” he said.

You should use a meat thermometer to check if the meat is done, he added. If you don't have a meat thermometer, then you can touch the meat to see if it's spongy. If it's spongy then it's not done, if it's firm, then it's done.

There's so much you can cook on the grill.

“Think outside the box,” Timineri said. “Try grilling fruit just enough to get that smoky grill flavor. Then chill it in the refrigerator before serving.”

Citto likes grilling seafood — shrimp, lobster and oysters, as well as corn, which he says tastes best when prepared on a grill.

“What I like to do is leave the husk on and soak it in water for 45 minutes,” he said. “Take it out and put the entire corn — husk included — on the hottest part of the grill. The husk will smoke the corn. It tastes so much better this way.”

Also anything can be put on skewers, Wright said. And while chicken, steak, ribs and burgers are popular items to put on the grill, vegetables are great, too, and can be paired with a marinade as well.

He also suggests vegetables lightly tossed in olive oil and fresh herbs.

“It's great for the summer time,” Wright said.