

WHEN I WAS A KID I once picked up a magazine that a friend's Mum had left lying on a chair. It was all about food ... early sixties' type food ... how to turn your snags into gourmet treats by peeling the sausage skin off and serving with a ring of canned pineapple, 101 ways with mince and stale bread ...

There was also a lovely article about what to serve when an unexpected horde dropped in for dinner (I think the answer involved even more mince and stale bread plus a few cans of tomato soup) and from that moment on I've had a secret, gorgeous daydream ...

What if a horde DID drop in for dinner? A whole wonderful barbarian horde with horses and flashing shields and swords waving in the air, and beards of course and long barbarian pigtailed tied up with horse hair twine.

In all the years that passed I never quite gave up the hope that such a horde MIGHT drop in one day. Just a tiny little horde would do. I could light up the barbecues down at the bottom of the garden (that's barbecues, not barbecue, as I'm blessed with two inventive males in the family who have provided me with an elegant sufficiency of barbecuing gear).

I could throw on all sports of food guaranteed to delight the barbarian stomach ... kebabs and marinated chops and genuine sausages and ...

Of course nowadays it would be just my luck that the whole horde would turn out to be vegetarian.

Vegetarians are a problem at a barbecue. The whole point of barbecuing is that things sizzle and singe and become slightly edged with charcoal ... and when you think of sizzling and singeing you mostly think of meat.

Just in case a vegetarian horde ever does drop in at our place, I've got a few non-meat alternatives to barbecue. Actually they're so good that non-vegetarians might very well prefer them too.

Bread and cheese kebabs

Ingredients: very good bread and excellent cheese. You can also add marinated mushrooms, hunks of red capsicum or chunks of good red tomatoes.

Cut cheese in chunks. Tear bread likewise, thread on skewers. Add other stuff if you like. Toast above the coals until the edges of the bread are toasted, and the cheese runnyish, but not dripping into the fire.



The barbecue alternative

Jackie French chucks another shrimp on the barbie

If you choose to have great whacking hunks of bread and cheese they'll still be cool inside (this can actually be quite good). Smaller bits of bread will turn quite crunchy and different breads take longer to toast and different cheeses take longer to melt. You'll need to experiment.

I like a good soapy young mozzarella cheese (bocconcini); but a small hunk of youngish parmesan isn't bad and even 'rat trap' tastes better roasted over a fire. A possible variation is to skewer the odd anchovy in between the chunks of bread and cheese.



Lemon and garlic butter corn cobs

Melt half a cup of butter with four crushed cloves of garlic. Take off the heat. Add a good grating of black pepper and the juice of a lemon.

Soak eight cobs of corn, papery wrapping and all, in water for twenty minutes. Then unwrap them carefully — don't tear the wrapping. Pour a little of the slightly cooled and thickened melted butter mix onto each cob. Rub in well with your fingers or a pastry brush.

Grill until cooked through — at least twenty minutes or half an hour, turning several times.

You can also try this with foil instead of the natural corn packaging; but it's not nearly as good.

NB Don't buy corn wrapped in plastic. It tastes like plastic.

Veg kebabs

Ingredients: 1 large sliced eggplant (salt and drain for half an hour to remove bitterness but see below), 2 red onions, 25 button mushrooms, a red capsicum, half a cup of olive oil, 3 cloves garlic, a dash of tabasco sauce (optional), artichoke hearts (optional), hunks of red tomato (optional) hunks of boiled but firm potato (optional) thyme, juice of a lemon.

Cut the eggplant, red capsicum and the onions (peeled) into chunks about the size of the button mushrooms. Mix the other ingredients. Marinate for at least an hour or overnight.

Thread all the veg onto skewers. Grill till softish and slightly charred.

Grilled mushrooms

Choose great big flattish ones, as dark and fragrant as possible.

Mix lots of garlic and black pepper and chopped parsley into melted butter or margarine (or even olive oil). Pour a generous amount into the cap of each mushroom. Grill the mushrooms top downwards until the stems look cooked or until the mushrooms look like they might soon collapse or burn. Eat hot.

Chargrilling

You need a hot plate for this, though builder's mesh also works as long as the veg are sufficiently basted in oil.

Good foods to char include thin slices of eggplant (supposed to be salted for an hour first to let the acid juices escape, but I don't bother — modern cultivars aren't as bitter as old-fashioned ones), capsicum (strip the blackened skin off before you serve it), shelled green prawns, fresh very ripe and fragrant pineapple, strips of zucchini brushed with olive oil and dusted with oregano and black pepper, small, sweet onions sliced in half, par-boiled potatoes, sweet potatoes and pumpkin, baby octopus marinated for a couple of hours beforehand.

Stuffed potatoes / tomatoes / capsicum roasted in the fire

Hollow out the veg. In the case of tomatoes and capsicum this is easy; use a sharp teaspoon for the spuds.

Spud Filling:

Any mixture of: sour cream, light sour cream, chives, grated cheese, chopped mushrooms, chopped parsley, very finely chopped capsicum, plus the grated potato residue.

Tomato stuffing: ricotta cheese with chopped chives, crushed garlic and pine nuts

Capsicum stuffing: cooked rice mixed with curry spices and onion browned and softened in olive oil.

Wrap veg in foil; bake in the coals for at least 40 minutes. Unwrap carefully so you can wrap again if they're not cooked.

Barbecued garlic bread, grilled over the coals

Do not wrap the stuff in foil! You lose all the flavour of roasting, toasting bread.

Cut some decent bread into thick slices. Brush each one with olive oil on both sides with a little (or a lot) of crushed garlic added to the oil (you can also tear in a few thyme or rosemary leaves).

Thread each slice on a skewer and grill over the coals till the outside is crisp and brown and garlicky and the inside soft.

This is by far the best garlic bread I have ever eaten.



Fruit kebabs

Thread fresh pineapple, firm yellow peaches, banana, apples, nectarines, apricots on skewers. Grill them as they are (fast before they turn brown, sprinkle with lemon juice if they are to be left more than twenty minutes) or

brush with a mixture of half a cup of brown sugar melted with a quarter of a cup of butter; add a tablespoon of rum at the end. (This amount is for about ten people. For smaller hordes or smaller appetites reduce proportions accordingly, or keep it in the fridge for another time.)

There are many types of bread, but this is

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