

Executive Summary

- An exploration of Asian approaches to grilling and barbecue.
- Traditional Asian grilled dishes—and accompanying spices and sauces.
- Translating such concepts into workable retail and foodservice dishes.

Asian Inspiration Comes to the Grill

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Grilling—it's all-American, it's international. And, more and more, it's Asian. It all started with nomadic Mongols, who developed their method of spit-roasting over charcoal because it was lighter and more portable than wood, and required no heavy cooking vessels. The Mongols brought this tradition to China, where grilling over an open flame took off like wildfire.

Even today, grabbing anything from a quick snack to a meal from street vendors who cook over small portable grills is a popular dining option in Asia—in fact, many traditional Asian kitchens don't even have ovens. And, with the American affinity for all things grilled, Asian-influenced grilling continues to grow in popularity from coast to coast.

Basics of Asian grilling

So what makes Asian grilling different? Unlike the typical American barbecue, big, juicy steaks are not a feature of Asian grilling. Animal proteins typically make up a smaller portion of meals, which are traditionally based around starch and vegetables. You're more likely to find meat cut into smaller pieces and threaded onto skewers, or ground and formed into small patties, to cook faster and more economically. Meat is generally cooked through rather than served medium-rare. And, because meat is expensive, nothing is wasted—Asian chefs practically invented “nose-to-tail” eating. For example, yakitori restaurants in Japan don't solely feature grilled chicken breast or thighs—gizzards, skin, livers and hearts are also menu mainstays.

While skewered pieces of meat are popular, thin skewers aren't the only way that foods are secured for grilling—you'll also find ground meat or shrimp mixtures grilled on thick stalks of bamboo or sugarcane. Grilled foods come off the stick, too; banana or bamboo leaves wrap tasty fillings in grill-ready packets. This Asian version of the French *en papillote* technique keeps the ingredients moist and releases a burst of appetizing aromas upon opening the package.

Vegetables play a big role in Asian grilling, too. They can be skewered and grilled like meat, or charred to concentrate flavor, then served as a side dish or puréed into sauces. Perhaps even more than the main ingredients, it's the palette of flavors used in marinades, rubs and sauces that makes Asian grilling deliciously different. Layering marinades, bastes, glazes and sauces creates complex flavors that satisfy in small portions and balance well with vegetables and rice. Flatbreads often round out the meal. China's scallion pancakes and India's naan are two tasty examples, providing a plate, wrapper and starch component all in one.



Photo: Gilroy Foods & Flavors

Grill-hopping around Asia

We find many avenues to explore when it comes to Asian grilling—every country has its own technique and tastes, based on climate, tradition and resources. And, digging deeper, each country is home to myriad regions with unique culinary creations.

Japan. The land of the rising sun is famous for the degree of artistry and specialization it brings to everything it does, and food is no exception—restaurants focusing on one style of cooking or one type of food abound. Restaurants serving *yakitori-ya*, literally “grilled poultry,” turn out skewers of every conceivable part of the chicken, and even a few inconceivable ones, like cartilage. Salt is lightly sprinkled on just before grilling, and the skewers are served with soy sauce and grated daikon as condiments. As an alternative, a rich barbecue sauce called *tare*, made from soy sauce, mirin, sake, sugar and aromatics like ginger, is lightly brushed on while the chicken is cooked.

Grilled foods receive a kick from teriyaki or spicy chile sauces for dipping, or a sprinkling of *shichimi togarashi*, a seven-spice blend based on red chile flakes (*togarashi*) that

often includes Sichuan pepper (*sansho*), white sesame seeds, seaweed flakes (*nori*), dried pieces of mandarin orange peel, black hemp seeds and white poppy seeds. In *yakiniku* restaurants, bite-sized morsels of meat and vegetables are cooked over charcoal, gas or electric grills and served with a mixture of soy sauce, sake, mirin, sugar, garlic and sesame.

In addition to restaurants specializing in grilled chicken or meat, Japanese brewpubs known as *izakaya* offer all kinds of grilled small plates that go well with beer, sake or *shochu*. Since grilling mostly takes place indoors, at home or in restaurants, a special type of charcoal called *bincho*, which burns hot and smokeless, is preferred.

Izakaya-style restaurants are really taking off in the United States, with establishments popping up nationwide, from Musha in Santa Monica and O Izakaya in San Francisco to Sake Bar Hagi in Manhattan and O Ya in Boston. Tapping into the small-plates craze, these friendly bars offer Japanese food beyond the teriyaki, tempura and sushi that Americans already love.

Korea. The foods of Korea are hot right now, literally and figuratively, but many cities with a Korean population

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have been enjoying the Korean barbecue specialty *bulgogi* for years. Beef ribs, cut thinly across the bone, are marinated in soy sauce, sesame oil, green onions, chiles and garlic before grilling. In restaurants, diners grill their own dinner on burners set into the table, then wrap the meat in lettuce leaves and garnish to their taste with a variety of sweet, spicy and vinegary condiments, like *gochujang*, a hot chile fermented paste, and *doenjang* fermented soybean paste, the Korean version of Japanese miso.

Korean fast-food restaurants have even developed a “*bulgogi* burger,” a hamburger patty marinated in *bulgogi* sauce and served on a bun with lettuce, onion and tomato slices—a great way to deliver new flavor in a familiar format.

Thailand. Nearly anyone lucky enough to visit Thailand is immediately seduced by the amazing street food. In the outdoor markets amidst the smoking braziers, everything that will fit on a skewer seems available—tofu, chicken, seafood and fruit. The combination of sweet, hot and umami that’s so appealing in Thai food is the basis for dips, sauces and seasoning pastes that turn a simple skewer into an irresistible treat.

Southeast Asia. Other countries in Southeast Asia also shine in the grilling department. In Vietnam, grilled pork, marinated in fish sauce, sugar, garlic and shallots, is piled on a baguette along with butter, mayonnaise, pâté and pickled carrots and daikon to make the *bánh mì* sandwich that’s becoming increasingly popular in American cities.

Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines all have a version of satay, slices of meat, often marinated in turmeric, threaded onto bamboo skewers and grilled. In Thailand, peanut sauce, redolent with spices and fresh herbs, adds layers of flavor to satay. Satay Padang skips the peanut sauce in favor of a spicy, creamy coconut milk sauce. In Indonesia, a spicy chile mixture, *sambal oelek*—mainly crushed chiles—adds kick to satay.

China. The Chinese adapted and refined the techniques of the Mongol herdsmen and developed a sophisticated repertoire of flavoring and cooking techniques. But there’s still a place for grilling in open-air markets and street carts, where meat, flatbreads, vegetables and fruit are cooked over an open flame.

You’ll also find restaurants that specialize in meat grilled tableside in a similar fashion to the Korean *bulgogi*. Diners grill thin slices of beef or lamb on a charcoal brazier set into the table, then dip the meat into spicy sauces before


folding it into flatbreads or buns. As a variation, after grilling, the meat can be simmered in a casserole with noodles, vegetables and rice wine.

India. Don’t overlook India when discussing Asian grilling—you’ll find unique and delicious variations, like the super-hot clay ovens called tandoor, in which flatbreads and skewered chicken, lamb and beef are cooked. Before cooking, meats are first marinated in lemon juice to tenderize, then seasoned with a tandoori paste or rub that might consist of ginger, garlic, spices, yogurt and red coloring from ground annatto seed (or, more frequently these days, red food coloring).

Bringing Asia home

Building flavor profiles for marinades, rubs and sauces with spices, chile oils, powders and vegetable purées can reproduce the taste of Asian barbecue in a manufacturing setting. Soft-frozen vegetable purées and seasoning blends can be the base for dips and sauces. With customized flavors, it’s even possible to incorporate the flavor of distinctive cooking techniques, like grilling and smoking, into products that never go near an open flame.

Teriyaki is ubiquitous on grocery shelves, and consumers are comfortable with the idea of “brush on” Asian flavor. The time is ripe for developing less-familiar grilling sauces and condiments based on region-specific Asian cuisines. Condiments, ranging from mellow Japanese *tare* sauces for brushing onto yakitori to *ssamjang*, the chile-spiked bean paste that Koreans slather on *bulgogi*, provide additional ways to customize food by layering on regionally distinctive flavors.

Consumers are looking for something beyond Cajun, lemon-herb or jerk seasoning rubs, and are increasingly aware of not only the broader spheres of Asian cooking, but also the regional variations. Food product developers shouldn’t be afraid to “peel off the first layer” to uncover unique, local dishes when seeking Asian inspiration. 

Sean Craig, senior executive chef, Gilroy Foods & Flavors, Cranbury, NJ, is a member of the Research Chefs Association. To consult with Craig on using vegetables, seasoning blends and savory flavor profiles to develop Asian-inspired products, contact him at sean.craig@conagrafoods.com.

