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The Challenge of Cooking in a Summer Rental

With some basic tools and an eye for local delicacies, vacationers can create memorable meals



Hake with corn, carrots, beech mushrooms and shishito peppers. *PHOTO: ALEX SCOTT FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **SARAH ROSE**

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Summer rental houses have one downside for many families: Making dinner in a strange kitchen can be a recipe for vacation stress.

But with a basic shopping list, laid-back expectations and an eye for local delicacies, vacationers can wind up with some of the year's most memorable meals, says chef Michael Ferraro, "if you keep things simple and straight forward."

When Mr. Ferraro, the chef-owner of Delicatessen in New York City, rented a motor home last September to explore the Florida coast, he stopped at every seafood shack on the beach and fell for a local catch called hogfish.

As dinner time came in the RV, the chef-owner of Delicatessen in New York City prepared hogfish in the tiny mobile kitchen using borrowed pots and a few tricks.

He placed the hogfish atop of a bed of chopped garlic, shallots and lemons, then drizzled olive oil salt and pepper and thyme on top. Then he took the fish, along with the vegetables, outside and grilled it in a sauté pan so that it would pick up a smoky flavor—the flesh is too tender to cook directly over the flame.

Tools matter, Mr. Ferraro says, and in most rental kitchens the knives are "just unusable." So he always packs his own for vacation, even if it means checking a bag at the airport. He also brings sea salt from home to finish dishes.



Chef Michael Ferraro in Brooklyn, N.Y. PHOTO: ALEX SCOTT FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Shopping for a week’s holiday frequently means stocking up on the very basics—salt, sugar, coffee, olive oil and butter. Buy the minimum sizes available, Mr. Ferraro says, and while it might mean spending more for the smaller sizes, he tries not to penny-pinch on his time off.



Mr. Ferraro grills corn. PHOTO: ALEX SCOTT FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Mr. Ferraro lets the landscape inspire his shopping list. He avoids heavy starches on vacation and instead focuses meals on proteins—fresh-caught fish or locally raised meat—and

seasonal vegetables. By cooking with what grows in the area, he says, “the ingredients will usually describe the place best” and give an authentic taste of the destination.

If food markets are close to your rental, you might not want to buy a week’s worth of food at once but instead let the destination dictate the menu. “I go to the market kind of empty-handed on nights I want to cook, and wing it,” he says.

Beyond pantry staples, a few key ingredients in the shopping cart will lend professional flare to summer dishes, he says: Lemons, fresh herbs, garlics, shallots, sea salt and prepared chicken stock are a chef’s weapon for creating quick pan sauces and finishing dishes. “On vacation there will always be wine; you can use that too.”

FIVE TIPS

- Bring sharp knives from home, even if it means checking a bag at the airport.
- Shop in markets for seasonal vegetables and local proteins. If you cook with what is native to an area, you will get a taste of the place.
- When you’re buying staples—butter, sugar, salt and coffee—add finishing touches for dishes, such as lemons, fresh herbs, sea salt and chicken stock.
- Take food preparation outdoors, where cleanup is easy, and make the grill your best friend.
- Pizza dough can be prepared at home and transported in a cooler for a quick grilled pizza when you arrive at your rental.

Few of us want to spend hours tied to the

kitchen on vacation, so Mr. Ferraro suggests buying ingredients as close to ready-to-cook as possible, such as pre-cut carrots, onions and celery. When purchasing proteins, ask the butcher or fishmonger to do as much prep as possible, such as trimming steaks

or scaling and filleting fish.

Spending hours in an overheated and ill-equipped kitchen can turn a vacation into hard work, so make ample use of the grill, if there is one, he says. Move prep work such as chopping vegetables or shucking corn outdoors. "Prepping outside is so easy to clean up, you can literally just hose down the area." (But don't leave leftovers or scraps outside if there are animals or other wildlife who might be attracted to it.)



Chef Michael Ferraro used simple seasonal ingredients in his dish, hake with corn, carrots, beech mushrooms and shishito peppers. PHOTO: ALEX SCOTT FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

For trips to the beach, Mr. Ferraro recommends making one large sandwich and cutting it into smaller sizes then packing it in a cooler so you won't heat up the kitchen and can maximize your time in the sun.

While adults might enjoy the spontaneity of new foods in exotic places, traveling with children requires more structure, says Mr. Ferraro, who has five nieces and nephews under age 7. He stocks up on between-meal snacks, such as hummus, apples and cashew butter. He also suggests carrying pizza dough from home in a cooler; the dough rests in the car on the way, then can be rolled out and popped on the grill for a quick homemade pizza on arrival.

MORE TRICKS OF THE TRADE

- Add Some Sizzle to Your Steaks This Summer (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/add-some-sizzle-to-your-steaks-this-summerfive-tips-1431537843>)
- A Menu of Surf, Sand, Grilled Shrimp (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324659404578501221233387286>)
- A Chef's Road-Trip Adventures (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303360504577408814189766188>)

If you
cook
your
way

through all your groceries without throwing anything away you'll leave with a feeling of accomplishment, Mr. Ferraro says. But it's not the end of the world if you leave pantry staples behind for the next renter, who might appreciate a small bottle of ketchup or a salt grinder, he says. "Those things you take for granted, and it's a nice touch for the next guest."

Pan-Roasted Blackened Hogfish With Mélange of Summer Vegetables

- (2) 5 oz skinless portions of hogfish
- 1 tablespoon of your favorite blackening seasoning or dry chili rub
- ½ cup white beech mushrooms
- ½ cup shishito peppers, whole
- 6 baby carrots, peeled
- 2 ears corn
- 1 lemon
- 1 bunch fresh thyme
- 3 cloves garlic, divided
- 1 teaspoon minced shallot

- 2 tablespoons butter, divided
- 4 tablespoons canola oil, divided
- 1 tablespoon good quality extra virgin olive oil
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- Scallion greens, chiffonade for garnish
- Salt & pepper

1. In a medium sauté pan over medium-high heat, add 2 tablespoons canola oil. Season both sides of the fish fillets with salt and pepper, and the presentation side with the blackening spices.

2. Begin to roast presentation side down first. Lower the heat to medium and allow to cook without moving for 4 minutes.

3. Add 1 tablespoon of butter, 2 smashed garlic cloves, and 3 sprigs fresh thyme. Lower the heat to medium and begin to baste fish for an additional minute.

4. Flip the fillets and continue to baste for 2 minutes.

5. Squeeze juice of half a lemon over fish fillets. Remove and set aside.

For grilled corn:

1. Clean 2 ears of corn. Drizzle each with canola oil and season with salt and pepper. Grill until corn begins to slightly char on all sides. Once cooked, chop each piece of corn in half.

For glazed baby carrots:

1. Cut baby carrots on bias in 1-inch pieces. Boil in salted water until tender.

2. Strain and add to a small sauté pan with ½ tablespoon of butter and ½ teaspoon of sugar. Season with salt and pepper.

For sautéed beech mushrooms & shishito peppers:

1. Over high heat in a medium sauté pan, heat remaining canola oil. Begin to sauté beech mushrooms and shishito peppers. Add 1 clove minced garlic, 1 teaspoon minced shallot, 2 sprigs of thyme, and remaining butter. Season with salt and pepper.

To serve:

Plate bed of mushrooms and shishito peppers on a large platter. Top with pan roasted hogfish fillets. Arrange the glazed baby carrots and charred corn on the side. Garnish with scallion chiffonade and a drizzle of extra virgin olive oil.

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