The Best Grilled Burger

Preground chuck patties may be easy to throw on the grill, but if you want ultrabeefy, tender, juicy burgers, start with steak tips—and open the freezer.

By Andrew Janjigian

To me, one of the best things about summer is the chance to eat a really great burger off the grill. By that I mean a burger with an ultracraggy charred crust, a rich beefy taste, and an interior so juicy and tender that it practically falls apart at the slightest pressure.

The problem is, such a burger is actually pretty hard to come by. While the typical specimen may have a nicely browned crust, it’s also heavy and dense with a pebbly texture. The reason is no mystery: Most cooks use preground meat from the supermarket, which is usually ground so fine that a certain amount of graininess is inevitable. Furthermore, they tend to shape the meat into tightly packed disks that, while easier to flip on the grill, guarantee dense texture. Forming loose patties produces that prized open texture, but it’s a far riskier proposition on a grill than in a skillet or on a griddle. On a flat uniform surface, a loosely packed patty is fully supported, and once that patty forms a crust, carefully sliding a spatula beneath it and gently flipping it over is relatively easy. On the open grates of a grill, however, that same patty is likely to wind up on the coals before a crust can form to hold it together.

This summer I decided to tackle these issues head on and find an approach to a truly excellent backyard burger. I’d look at every possible variable, from how and when to season the meat, to how best to work, but it would definitely be worth it.

A Real Grind

It was a given that I’d need to grind my own meat. Besides being ground too fine, commercial burger meat is also manhandled during processing and compressed inside tightly wrapped packages. This overmanipulation draws out a lot of the sticky protein myosin, so even if you form your patties with a gentle hand at home, your results have already been compromised—a denser texture is inevitable. And while chuck (the cut that’s often preground for supermarkets) might make a decent burger—I would certainly consider it—I wanted to decide for myself which cut would deliver the best flavor.

In the test kitchen, we’ve found it easy to grind meat ourselves with a food processor. The method we’ve developed (no matter the cut) calls for trimming gristle and excess fat from the meat, cutting the meat into ½-inch pieces, freezing it for about 30 minutes to firm it up so that the blades cut it cleanly instead of smashing and smearing it (which leads to pasty, dense results), and finally processing it in small batches to ensure an even, precise grind.

I narrowed the cut of meat to three options: chuck, boneless short ribs, and sirloin steak tips (aka flap meat). Each of these choices is relatively inexpensive, decently tender, and contains a sufficient amount of fat to ensure burgers that are reasonably moist and flavorful. Chuck had great flavor and ample marbling, but it contained a lot of sinewy connective tissue that had to be painstakingly removed before grinding (something the mass-market preground versions easily take care of during processing). Deeply marbled short ribs were gloriously fatty and rich—but a bit too rich for several tasters, so they were also out. Somewhat leaner steak tips had great meaty flavor and required virtually no trimming. They came up a bit short in terms of richness, but I had a trick up my sleeve for fixing that.

In our Juicy Pub-Style Burgers recipe (May/June 2011), we call for tossing the ground meat with melted butter. The burgers don’t taste of butter, but they gain deeper flavor and richness. However, pouring melted butter over my near-frozen meat was somewhat problematic; the butter started to solidify on contact, making it tricky to evenly distribute. I realized that there was a way to incorporate the butter that would not only enable even distribution but also be easier: adding it to the food processor when grinding the meat. Cut into ¼-inch cubes and frozen, 4 tablespoons of butter ground perfectly into pieces the same size as the beef and were scattered uniformly throughout the mixture.

A Sticky Situation

Now I was ready to sort out the mechanics of shaping and grilling. I determined that 6 ounces was the ideal portion size: generous but not excessive. A patty that was 4½ inches across would fit perfectly on the average bun once cooked. This gave me patties that were ¾ inch thick, which I figured were just thick enough to allow decent char on the exterior without overcooking at the center (any thicker and they’d be too hard to eat). I also knew from experience that I would need to make a small depression in the center of each patty before grilling to ensure that they finished flat instead of ballooning outward.

But before I could even add those divots, I had to sort out my biggest obstacle: How could I form my burgers so that they wouldn’t fall apart on the grate but at the same time achieve that essential open texture? Too much manipulation of ground meat translates to tough burgers, but maybe a little handling of it could work in my favor. If I could draw out just a little sticky myosin, maybe it would...
help hold the burgers together without making them tough. First I tried kneading the ground meat lightly as if it were dough. Unfortunately, with this approach knowing exactly when to stop was difficult; it was far too easy to under- or overshoot the mark.

What if I heavily kneaded only a small portion of the mixture until it was very sticky and then combined that with the remainder? This wasn’t much better; it was a challenge to evenly incorporate the sticky, tightly packed portion into the rest without eventually overworking the lot of it.

Salt, like kneading, also draws out myosin. For this reason, I’ve always avoided adding it to ground meat before shaping, instead seasoning the patties just before putting them on the grill. I wondered if there was a middle ground. It would certainly be easier to control how much salt I added compared with how much I kneaded, so I made batches of burgers containing increasing amounts of salt, from 1/4 teaspoon up to 1 teaspoon per pound of meat. Adding the salt and then using a fork to toss the meat allowed me to evenly distribute the salt without overworking the meat. Sadly, small amounts didn’t help bind the meat together, and by the time I’d added enough to give them the necessary structure, the resulting burgers were tough and springy.

However, working salt into the interior of the meat did have an upside: It thoroughly seasoned the meat and made it juicier. This made good sense: Just as the salt in a brine helps meat retain moisture as it cooks (salt alters the structure of the proteins to allow them to hold on to water more efficiently), the salt mixed into the ground meat ensured that it stayed juicy and moist on the grill. I just had to be precise, adding only as much salt as I could get away with before adversely affecting the burgers’ texture. That turned out to be 1/2 teaspoon per pound.

Chill Out and Loosen Up

I had made great progress, but if I couldn’t find a way to keep my burgers intact, it didn’t matter how good they tasted. My loosely formed patties held together pretty well for the first few seconds on the grill, but as soon as the meat lost its chill from the refrigerator, the patties started to fall apart. I needed an approach that would hold the patties together long enough for them to develop a crust (which would then take over the job). When I thought about it that way, the answer became obvious: Freeze them. For my next test, I placed the burgers in the freezer until they were just firm but not frozen solid (which took about 30 minutes) and then headed out to the grill. As I’d hoped, by the time they’d thawed at their centers, they had developed enough crust to ensure that they held together. In fact, because they were cold, I found that they could stay on the grill a few minutes longer per side—gaining even more tasty char and making flipping all the more fail-safe—without going beyond medium-rare.

All that remained were the details of the fire itself.

To ensure that the burgers charred on the exterior dramatically and quickly, a hot fire proved best. Since they took up very little real estate on the grate, I corralled a few quarts of charcoal inside a disposable aluminum roasting pan (perforated to let in oxygen so that they would burn) underneath the burgers to guarantee a cooking space that was plenty hot. (On a gas grill, this translated to setting all the burners to high and preheating the grill for 15 minutes.)

Whether served with the classic fixings like lettuce and tomato or something fancier—I developed three different creamy grilled-vegetable toppings—this was a grilled burger that actually lived up to my ideal.

TENDER, JUICY GRILLED BURGERS

SERVES 4

This recipe requires freezing the meat twice, for a total of 65 to 80 minutes, before grilling. When stirring the salt and pepper into the ground meat and shaping the patties, take care not to overwork the meat or the burgers will become dense. Sirloin steak tips are also sold as flap meat. Serve the burgers with your favorite toppings or one of our grilled-vegetable toppings (for our free recipes for Grilled Scallion Topping, Grilled Shiitake Mushroom Topping, and Grilled Napa Cabbage and Radicchio Topping, go to CooksIllustrated.com/aug14).

1½ pounds sirloin steak tips, trimmed and cut into ½-inch chunks
4 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into ¼-inch pieces
1 (13 by 9-inch) disposable aluminum pan
( if using charcoal)
4 hamburger buns

1. Place beef chunks and butter on large plate in single layer. Freeze until meat is very firm and starting to harden around edges but still pliable, about 35 minutes.
2. Place one-quarter of meat and one-quarter of butter cubes in food processor and pulse until finely ground into pieces size of rice grains (about ⅛ inch), 15 to 20 pulses, stopping and redistributing meat around bowl as necessary to ensure beef is coarse and pack it gently into patties that stay fall-apart tender.
3. Sprinkle 1 teaspoon pepper and 3/4 teaspoon salt on one side of the patties and gently toss with fork to combine. Divide meat into 4 balls. Toss each between hands until uniformly but lightly packed. Gently flatten into patties ¾ inch thick and about 4½ inches in diameter. Using thumb, make 1-inch-wide by ¼-inch-deep depression in center of each patty. Transfer patties to platter and freeze for 30 to 45 minutes.

A TOUGH SELL

This burger was made with preground meat held together even when we literally glued the meat together. By grinding meat ourselves, we can keep it coarse and pack it densely into patties that stay fall-apart tender.

SMASHINGLY TENDER

Meat ground at home delivers a much more tender burger, one that splattered easily under the Dutch oven’s weight.

4A. FOR A CHARCOAL GRILL: Using skewer, poke 12 holes in bottom of disposable pan. Open bottom vent completely and place disposable pan in center of grill. Light large chimney starter filled two-thirds with charcoal briquettes (4 quarts). When top coals are partially covered with ash, pour into disposable pan. Set cooking grate in place, cover, and open lid vent completely. Heat grill until hot, about 5 minutes.

4B. FOR A GAS GRILL: Turn all burners to high, cover, and heat grill until hot, about 15 minutes. Leave all burners on high.

5. Clean and oil cooking grate. Season 1 side of patties liberally with salt and pepper. Using spatula, flip patties and season other side. Grill patties (directly over coals if using charcoal), without moving them, until browned and meat easily releases from grill, 4 to 7 minutes. Flip burgers and continue to grill until browned on second side and meat registers 125 degrees for medium-rare or 130 degrees for medium, 4 to 7 minutes longer.

6. Transfer burgers to plate and let rest for 5 minutes. While burgers rest, lightly toast buns on grill, 1 to 2 minutes. Transfer burgers to buns and serve.

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Add Salt for Juicier Burgers

Mixing ground meat with too much salt will make burgers tough, but ¼ teaspoon helps the meat retain its juices.

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3. Sprinkle 1 teaspoon pepper and ¾ teaspoon salt on one side of the patties and gently toss with fork to combine. Divide meat into 4 balls. Toss each between hands until uniformly but lightly packed. Gently flatten into patties ¾ inch thick and about 4½ inches in diameter. Using thumb, make 1-inch-wide by ¼-inch-deep depression in center of each patty. Transfer patties to platter and freeze for 30 to 45 minutes.

Make a Burger That Goes Splat

Store-bought burger meat can’t help but cook up dense and tough. It’s ground very fine and then wrapped up tightly for retail—factors that cause too much of the sticky protein myosin to be released, literally gluing the meat together. By grinding meat ourselves, we can keep it coarse and pack it densely into patties that stay fall-apart tender.