

The Food Lab: How to Grill or Broil Tofu That's Really Worth Eating

By J. Kenji Lopez-Alt; Updated: October 30, 2019

Brief bio: his first book, *The Food Lab: Better Home Cooking Through Science* is a New York Times Bestseller, winner of the James Beard Award for General Cooking, and was named Book of the Year by the International Association of Culinary Professionals.

Raise your hand if tofu is your favorite food! Yeah, I thought so. Not all that many of you. Us tofu-lovers don't get a whole lot of understanding 'round these parts. In large part, it's because—at least in this country—tofu has the unfortunate reputation of being a meat substitute. Few Americans see it as a fantastically flavorful and nutritious ingredient in its own right. I've loved tofu for far longer than I ever contemplated vegetarianism or even knew that veganism existed.

There's a lot of bad tofu out there (particularly bad grilled tofu, I'd add), and more often than not, it's because people try to cook it like it's a piece of meat. Tofu is really easy to dislike when it's soggy, mushy, bland, or burnt. But great tofu—tofu with a tender center surrounded by a well-seasoned, crisp crust—is one of the most satisfying bites of food I can think of, a food that can and should be appreciated by all serious eaters, no matter their diet. It's a unique product and it takes a unique approach to cook well.

Here are eight tips to help you grill or broil tofu so good even tofu-haters might come around to it.

Rule #1: Use Firm, Non-Silken Tofu

Firm, non-silken tofu is best for grilling.

Tofu comes in two basic forms: silken and cottony, which are made using two different coagulating agents. Within these two categories, you'll find varying degrees of firmness from custardy soft to very firm and meaty, depending on their final water content. Some brands conflate soft with silken, but traditionally, the two are orthogonal measures (that is, it is possible to have soft cottony tofu just as it's possible to have firm silken tofu).

I prefer silken tofu for stews and soups like this Korean Soondubu Jjigae (warning: not vegan) or Sichuan Mapo Tofu (that's a fully vegan version). The custardy texture gives the finished dish a pleasing slipperiness.

But for frying or grilling, I prefer the heartier texture of a firm, non-silken tofu. Non-silken tofu has the added benefit of being more porous, allowing it to draw more flavor from sauces and marinades.

Some folks recommend freezing and thawing tofu before cooking it, which can open up its pores and give it an entirely different texture, allowing it to absorb even more marinade. I personally

find that this ends up making for tofu that is too absorptive. I want some of that dense, subtle tofu flavor to remain in my finished dish.

Rule #2: Cut Your Tofu Wide

Plenty of recipes suggest spearing chunks of tofu on a wooden skewer or slicing it into thin slabs. I don't recommend either method. As you'll soon see, my method requires slow cooking, which means that your tofu ends up losing quite a bit of moisture and volume during the process. Thin or small pieces of tofu end up turning to leather.

In order to maintain a nice, dense, juicy core encased in a crisp crust, I cut my tofu relatively thick—about 1/3-inch or so, leaving it in slabs that are as large as possible for easier handling down the line.

Rule #3: Dry Well

It takes a lot of heat energy to convert liquid water into steam, and liquid water has to be driven off before foods can start crisping in earnest. It stands to reason, then, that removing excess moisture should be one of your priorities before placing your tofu on a grill. Some recipes for tofu suggest removing the whole block from the packaging, then pressing on it with a weighted paper towel to remove excess moisture. This is a wildly inefficient way to do it. Instead, simply slice the tofu first, then lay it out on paper towels, press with more paper towels, and you're done.

When I'm pan-searing tofu in oil, I'll also accelerate the drying process by pouring boiling water over the sliced tofu (this actually helps it to dry faster by causing the tofu to squeeze out excess internal moisture. A grill is an environment highly conducive to evaporation (lots of circulating air on all sides of the tofu), so we don't need to be quite so careful. I skip that step for grilled tofu.

Rule #4: Season Wisely

Marinades and spice mixes are often used as a vegetarian or vegan's crutch. Tofu is so bland, I've got to add something to spice it up! is how the thought process goes. The fact is, if you're cooking it right and seasoning it with the right amount of salt and pepper, tofu can be quite flavorful even on its own. You should strongly consider not using any marinade at all when cooking. But if you do decide to marinate, I'd recommend a marinade that is relatively thick (watery marinades can inhibit good browning) and contains some amount of sugar, which helps the tofu brown and crisp better.

Your favorite barbecue sauce or any one of our barbecue sauce recipes would be a good place to start. Jerk marinade would also be great here (especially if you've got some pimento wood to add some smoke to your fire) as would the marinade for this Pruvian-style Grilled Chicken. Any marinade intended for chicken, fish, or pork is a good fit. In this photo, I'm using a marinade similar to the one I use to make Thai-style Grilled Chicken (gai yang). It's great on tofu.

No matter what marinade you choose (or don't choose, as the case may be), apply it very, very sparingly and don't worry about marinating for too long. Overnight is fine, but even 15 minutes will work here, especially when we get down to rule #8.

Rule #5: Preheat and Clean Your Grill

I can't tell you the number of times I've been to a vegetarian cook-out and watched the crisp crust that forms on the outside of a piece of tofu end up getting fused to the grill grates, leaving you with pale, pock-marked tofu with just a faint specter of flavor. Tofu is almost more difficult to cook than fish in this respect.

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The secret? It's a two part process. First off, you've got to have a very, very clean grill. Some people like to clean their grill at the end of a grilling session. Some people are wrong. From a pro-kitchen cook and homemakers perspective, this feels good. You're putting away and cleaning up all your tools after you're done with them. But from a culinary perspective, it's not the right way to go.

See, grills are easiest to clean when they're ripping, ripping hot. Fats turn to liquid, burnt-on food gets vaporized, and the whole thing is easier to scrub clean. If you wait to clean your grill after you're done cooking, it's already cooled sufficiently that cleaning it will be inefficient. Instead, you should clean at the start of your cooking session. Preheat the grill with the lid on for at least 10 minutes in order to get those grates screaming hot, then scrub them down with a heavy-duty grill brush to remove any and all gunk.

Of course, it doesn't hurt to give it a good scrub down both before and after cooking, especially if you don't fire up that grill too often.

Rule #6: Oil Your Grill Well

A clean set of grill grates is half the battle. Next you've got to season them. Just like a cast iron skillet, grill grates can build up a layer of seasoning when you rub oil into them. As the oil heats, it forms a polymer that makes the surface of those grill grates virtually non-stick.

To do it, have a small bowl with a few tablespoons of oil in it along with a wadded up kitchen towel or paper towels. Grab the towel with a set of tongs and rub the preheated grill grates with the oil-soaked rag. Let the oil smoke for 40 seconds or so, then rub with oil again. Repeat three to four times total to build up a good layer of seasoning.

If cooking indoors under your broiler, set your tofu on an oiled wire cooling rack set in a foil-lined rimmed baking sheet.

Rule #7: Slow, Indirect Heat = Crispy Tofu

Grilled tofu recipes often recommend cooking tofu over medium or high heat. The logic seems sound: tofu doesn't have to cook through to the center like chicken or steak. It's also often sliced thinner. So really all you have to do is brown the exterior. And this is true...to an extent.

Quick heating will give you tofu with nice grill marks and small areas of crispness. But if you want tofu that's really crisp with concentrated flavor all over its surface, then low, indirect heat is where you want to be. By placing the tofu over a cooler side of the grill and covering it, you create an oven effect which slowly dries the exterior of each slice, making it much easier to brown and crisp.

That means that in a gas grill, as soon as the tofu hits the grates, turn the burners directly under it to low heat and close the lid. With a coal grill, arrange the coals so that they are underneath just half of the cooking grate. Return the cooking grate, and place the tofu slabs over the cooler side of the grill and cover it.

I like to give my tofu a 90° turn half way through cooking each side to give it a nice cross-hatch patten which, beyond its sheer cosmetic purposes, actually ends up giving the tofu better flavor. Over low heat like this, tofu should take about 20 minutes to cook start to finish.

For broiling indoors, adjust a rack to 6 to 8 inches below the broiler element, and preheat the broiler to low (if your oven gives you the option of two broiler settings). Place the tofu under the broiler and cook, shifting the pan around every few minutes to promote even browning, and flipping the tofu half way through cooking (It should take about 20 minutes).

Rule #8: Reapply Marinade After Cooking

If there's only one lesson you learn from this article, this is it: apply more marinade after cooking and before serving. A great marinade is a good starting point, and grilling that tofu with the marinade applied to it will only concentrate that marinade's flavor. At the same time, it'll also alter it, destroying its more subtle, volatile elements. By saving some of your marinade and reapplying it after the tofu is done cooking, you double up on flavor. I like to mix my leftover marinade with a little oil to add some texture-enhancing fat to the surface of the tofu before serving.

<https://www.serious-eats.com/2015/02/the-food-lab-how-to-grill-tofu-vegan-experience.html?fbclid=IwAR2VkdByQdxHR2f4sHJ9mSZ68i3lluiJZkkcJkcbXXPAVnh41tjtczcp5BA>