

# Easy, Exotic Grilling

## Satays of vegetables or meat make satisfying finger food

BY RICK & ANN YODER

**S**atay, a Malay word meaning “skewered and grilled,” is a way of cooking that’s common throughout Southeast Asia. While on vacation in Bangkok, we looked forward to daily visits to the cart owners who sold “street food.” Our favorite was the *mu* satay—delectable morsels of pork, grilled perfectly over charcoal. The stand’s owner spoke no English, but we figured out which cut of meat she was grilling through pantomime—touching our backs, ribs, and legs, eventually landing on the shoulder. *That* was the magic cut. Just the right amount of fat marbles the meat, ensuring a tender mouthful. The warmed dipping sauce she served was a delicious combination of sweet and spice in a peanut background with chile overtones. Two small squares of sweet sticky rice accompanied each skewer of pork; with each bite of satay came a bit of rice.

The vacation ended, but our fondness for *mu* satay has become our business. We own a restaurant that features dishes from many different Asian cuisines, and the satay bar is always one of the most popular offerings. Our Seattle customers love the skewered pork, chicken, lamb, beef, shrimp, and

vegetables just as much as we did in Thailand.

Satays are simple to make. Most of the work goes into preparation: trimming to the right size for cooking, maybe marinating for flavor, and skewering for the grill. Satays also are served with a sauce, typically a peanut-based, slightly spicy one. Other intensely flavored mixtures, like a soy-based teri-



*Diagonal positioning makes attractive grill marks. Start with the satays at a 45° to the grill ridges. After a few minutes, rotate the skewers 90° and continue cooking.*

yaki sauce or a fruity sauce laced with chile peppers, offer a good accent to the grilled satay.

### TOOLS FOR CHOPPING AND GRILLING

You need only a few tools to make satays. A Chinese cleaver is invaluable. The broad expanse of the cleaver’s side is perfect for flattening meat; the blunt edge of the blade’s “spine” can tenderize the cut. Keep your cleaver sharp, not only to make cutting easy work but also to discourage you from using too much force. If you’re pressing hard on the cleaver and it slips, you could cut yourself instead of the food. It’s best to work on a large, sturdy cutting surface.

Bamboo skewers come in several different lengths, but the 8-inch ones are easiest to use. Soak them in water for 30 to 60 minutes before skewering the food to keep the bamboo from burning on the grill. A pair of tongs helps you turn satays on the grill, and a 1-inch pastry brush is good for basting satays with marinades while they cook.

### PREPARING FOR THE SKEWER

Many vegetables, as well as meat, seafood, and poultry, are suitable for satay-style grilling. Chinese or Japanese eggplant is especially good, as are yellow

*Mix and match satays and sauces to make a meal full of bright flavors and textures. The vegetable satays, from left, are zucchini, eggplant, shiitake, and yellow squash; the meat satays are pork and chicken. Sauces, from left, are teriyaki, sweet-hot, and peanut.*





squash, baby onions, and shiitake and button mushrooms.

Proper preparation is the most important element in creating a satay. Whatever ingredients you use, they should be in fairly small, even pieces so they cook quickly and at the same rate. Small vegetables, mushrooms for example, may be left whole, but most vegetables must be sliced to fit on a skewer. Softer vegetables like eggplant should be cut in slices of about 1 inch thick, while hard vegetables such as squash should be sliced into

pieces between  $\frac{1}{2}$  and  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch thick.

When preparing chicken and pork for satays, use skinless, boneless chicken breast and pork butt. The chicken should be trimmed of tendons and all visible fat, and the pork should be trimmed of its outer layer of fat. Both should be cut into  $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch cubes.

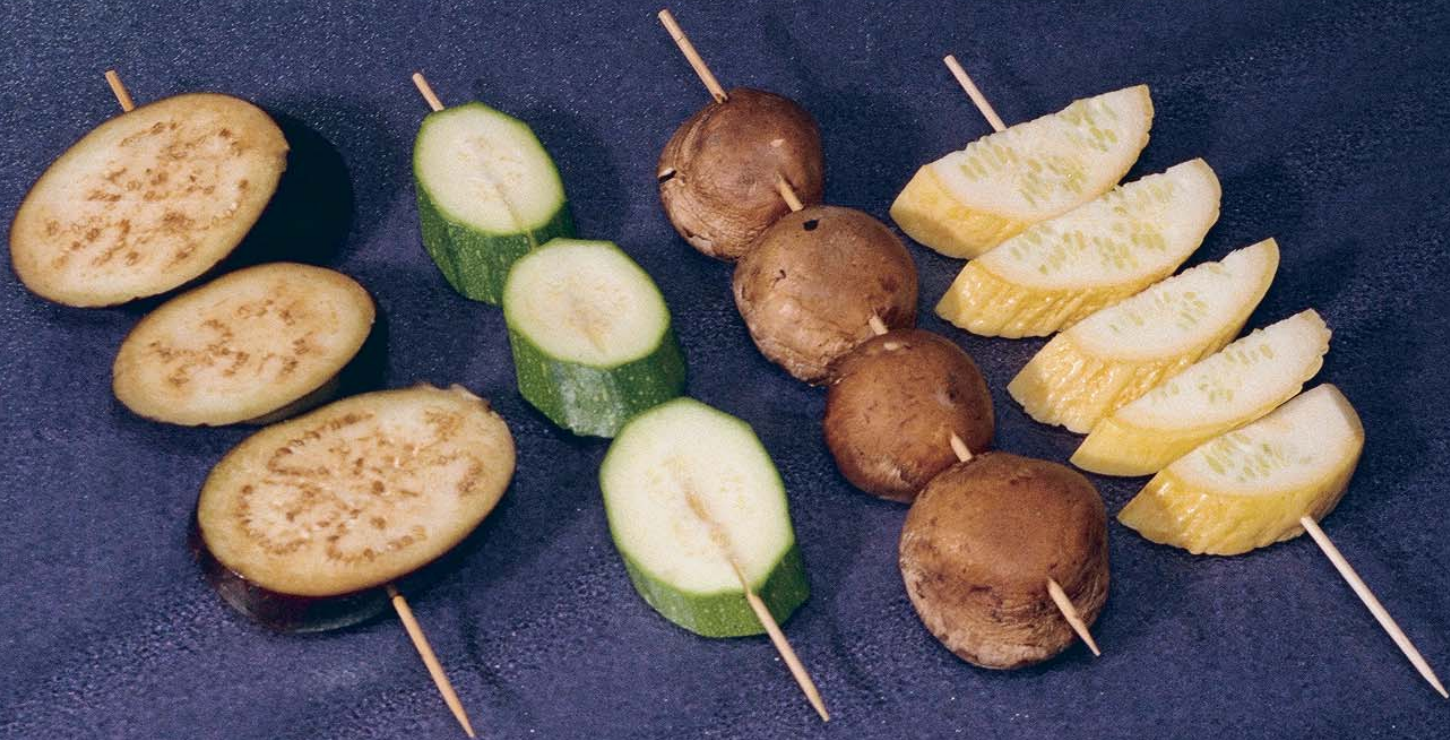
#### **CHOOSING A FIRE**

Satays can be the center of a great informal meal. All you need is a hibachi or other small tabletop grill that allows guests to “pick a stick” and cook it for themselves. However, if you’re cooking

for a crowd and using a large barbecue, one person should be in charge of cooking. (Too many cooks make it difficult to keep track of who put down which skewer, and how long each skewer has been on the grill.) When weather allows, grill outside over charcoal. In winter, you can cook satays under the broiler, in a skillet with a ridged surface, or, if you’re lucky enough to have one, on an indoor grill.

Keep an eye on the fire’s heat; overcooking is easy when working with small





pieces of food. To make sure the grill isn't too hot, try to hold your hand 6 to 8 inches over the grill for 3 to 5 seconds. If you can't, the grill is too hot.

While you don't want too much heat, too little won't give your satays that tasty grilled surface. Look for glowing red coals that have begun to form a layer of ash. You can make the heat more or less intense by pushing the coals together or spreading them apart. If using an electric or gas grill, let it come up to full heat for at least 10 minutes before you begin cooking. Group satays of the same type so you can monitor cooking times.

### CHICKEN OR PORK SATAY

The chopped peanuts will stick together, but they should not form a paste. For pork satay, choose a shoulder cut (pork butt) with lots of visible marbling. *Serves eight as an appetizer.*

*16 bamboo skewers, 8 in. long*

#### FOR THE SPICE RUB:

*1 Tbs. whole coriander seeds  
2 tsp. whole cumin seeds  
½ tsp. turmeric powder  
¼ tsp. cinnamon  
1 tsp. salt  
2 tsp. sugar  
1 stalk lemongrass, white portion only, minced  
10 shallots, minced  
2 Tbs. roasted peanuts, chopped fine*

#### FOR THE SATAY:

*1 lb. skinless, boneless chicken breast or 1 lb. pork butt  
Peanut or vegetable oil*

Soak the bamboo skewers in a shallow dish of water for 30 to 60 min. Heat the grill or broiler.

**Make the spice rub**—In a dry pan over medium heat, roast the coriander and cumin seeds until fragrant, about 3 min.; be careful not to scorch them. Put the roasted seeds, turmeric, cinnamon, salt, and sugar in a spice grinder (or a coffee grinder that's used exclusively for spices) and grind to a fine powder. Transfer the spices to a medium mixing bowl and add the lemongrass, shallots, and peanuts. Stir the mixture.

**Cut and marinate the chicken or pork**—For chicken, trim the fat and tendons. With a mallet or the side of a cleaver, firmly smack the chicken breasts once to flatten slightly. To trim the pork, slice off most of the outer layer of fat. Cut the chicken or pork into ¾-in. cubes. Coat the meat with the spice rub and thread 5 or 6 pieces on each skewer. Put the skewers in a shallow dish, cover, and refrigerate 2 to 4 hours, turning occasionally.

**Grill the satays**—Just before grilling, use a pastry brush to lightly coat both sides of the satays with the peanut or vegetable oil to prevent sticking. Put the skewers on the heated grill, at a 45° angle to the grating. For a cross-hatch effect, rotate the skewers 90° after 2 to 3 min. and then continue cooking for 1 min. Turn the skewers and repeat the process; the second side will require a little less cooking time. Over a medium-hot fire, total cooking time for chicken should be about 5 min.; pork, 7 min. Serve with the sauce of your choice.

### VEGETABLE SATAY

Direct heat will burn the sugar in the basting sauce, so brush on the basting liquid immediately *after* grilling each side of the vegetable skewer. *Serves four as an appetizer.*

*16 bamboo skewers, 8 in. long*

#### FOR THE BASTING LIQUID:

*¼ cup soy sauce  
2 Tbs. rice wine (preferably Chinese Shaoxing), or a good-quality dry sherry  
1 Tbs. finely chopped fresh ginger  
1 tsp. sesame oil  
½ tsp. grated orange zest  
1½ tsp. finely sliced scallions (white portion only)  
1½ Tbs. brown sugar*

#### FOR THE SATAY:

*1½ lb. vegetables (choose from squash, baby onions, Japanese eggplant, mushrooms, etc.)*

Soak the bamboo skewers in a shallow dish of water for 30 to 60 min. Heat the grill or broiler.

**For the basting mixture**—Mix all the ingredients together and stir until the sugar dissolves.

**Cut and skewer the vegetables**—Cut soft vegetables, such as eggplant, on the diagonal in 1-in. slices. If using regular eggplant, cut it into slices and then into half rounds or wedges. Cut harder vegetables, such as yellow squash, in half lengthwise and then slice on the diagonal into pieces ½ to ¾ in. wide. Cut baby onions in half; leave mushrooms whole. Put only one type of vegetable on each skewer and thread the skewer so the vegetable's flat surface faces the grill (see photo above).

**Grill the satays**—Put the skewers on the heated grill at a 45° angle to the grating. For a



Cut and skewer vegetables for even cooking. Firm vegetables are cut in small pieces, while softer ones are cut thicker. The best way to skewer vegetables? Put a slice on a flat surface and hold it in place with your palm as you drive a skewer through the center of the slice. This method ensures the vegetables' flat surfaces face the grill.

A spice "rub" marinates the pork and chicken. Cumin, turmeric, and cinnamon are moistened with minced lemongrass, shallots, and peanuts; this creates a paste rather than a liquid marinade.



crosshatch effect, rotate the skewers 90° after 2 min. and continue cooking for 30 seconds before turning the skewers over and repeating the process. Over a medium-hot fire, cook the vegetables until they're soft, which will probably take no more than 5 min. Very soft vegetables, such as mushrooms, need less. After the skewers have been turned over, brush the cooked side with the basting sauce. When the second side is done, baste it and then serve at once with the sauce of your choice.

### PEANUT SAUCE

It can be difficult to find fresh galangal, a relative of ginger; however, Asian markets often stock frozen galangal. While cooking the sauce, watch the heat carefully; after the peanut butter is added, the sauce can curdle if it gets too hot. *Yields 1½ cups.*

2 Tbs. tamarind pulp  
 ⅔ cup warm water  
 4 dried red chiles  
 3 Tbs. peanut oil  
 3 slices galangal (the thickness of a quarter), chopped fine  
 3 shallots, chopped fine  
 2 cloves garlic, chopped fine  
 1 stalk lemongrass (white portion only), chopped fine  
 1 tsp. shrimp paste (optional)  
 1 Tbs. sugar  
 ½ tsp. salt  
 ⅓ cup smooth peanut butter  
 1¼ cups water

In a small bowl, cover the tamarind pulp with the warm water and soak until soft, about

20 min. Break the pulp with your fingers to separate seeds and strings. Pour the liquid through a fine strainer.

In another bowl, soak the chiles for 20 min. in scalding water. Drain the liquid and chop the chiles fine.

Heat the peanut oil in a wok or heavy pan until very hot. Stir-fry the chiles, galangal, shallots, garlic, lemongrass, and shrimp paste for 1 min., or until fragrant. Add the tamarind water and bring the mixture to a boil. After it has boiled for 1 min., add the sugar, salt, peanut butter, and water. Lower the heat and simmer the sauce until it thickens, about 10 min. Serve warm or at room temperature.

### VARIATION: PEANUT SAUCE FOR PORK

*Yields about 2 cups.*

¼ fresh pineapple, peeled, cored, chopped and drained (or ⅔ cup canned crushed pineapple, drained)  
 1 small fresh red chile, sliced fine  
 ½ tsp. lime juice  
 Pinch salt  
 Pinch sugar

*Peanut Sauce (see recipe at left)*

In a small mixing bowl, mix together the pineapple, chile, lime juice, salt, and sugar. Put the peanut sauce into individual bowls and top with a dollop of the pineapple mixture. This sauce will only keep for a day or two.

### SWEET-HOT SAUCE

*Yields 2 cups.*

4 cloves garlic, chopped  
 2 tsp. red pepper flakes  
 1 small fresh red chile, stemmed and chopped  
 ½ tsp. salt  
 2 Tbs. brown sugar  
 1 scant cup dried apricots, loosely packed, chopped fine  
 3 Tbs. rice vinegar  
 ⅔ cup apricot nectar  
 ½ cup pineapple juice  
 ¾ cup red-plum jam or plum sauce

Put all the ingredients in a nonaluminum saucepan. Bring to a boil, stirring occasionally, and then reduce heat and simmer for 12 to 20 min., stirring occasionally, until thick. Cool slightly, then purée in a food processor until almost smooth.

Serve in individual dipping bowls. Store the sauce in the refrigerator; it will keep for a week.

### TERIYAKI SAUCE

*Yields scant 1 cup.*

½ cup soy sauce  
 ¼ cup rice wine (preferably Chinese Shaoxing), or a good-quality dry sherry  
 1 Tbs. peanut or vegetable oil  
 1 Tbs. sugar  
 1 tsp. grated fresh ginger  
 1 tsp. finely chopped garlic

Combine all the ingredients, stirring to dissolve sugar. Serve in individual dipping bowls.

*Rick and Ann Yoder are the founders and owners of Wild Ginger, a restaurant in Seattle that specializes in satays. ♦*