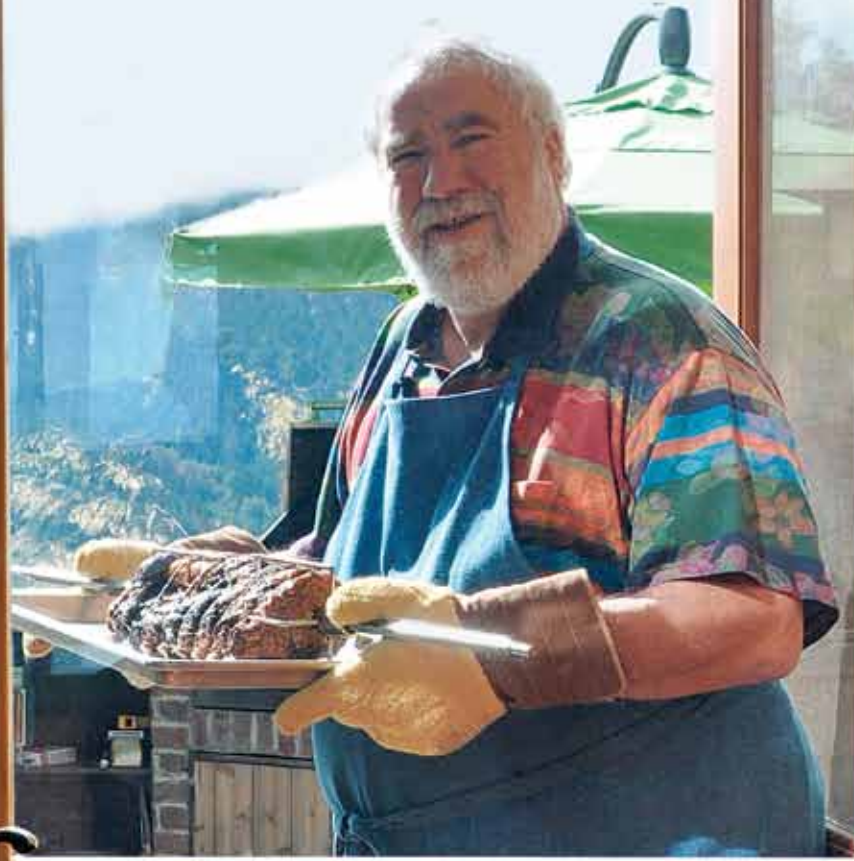




BEHIND THE KITCHEN DOOR



Barbecue Central

A sneak peek at grill guru Bruce Aidells's stunning outdoor kitchen.

BY MELISSA DENCHAK AND CHARLES MILLER

HE'S THE NAME BEHIND AIDELLS SAUSAGE COMPANY and the author of nearly a dozen books on poultry, pork, and beef, so it should be no surprise that the outdoor kitchen where Bruce Aidells does his grilling, smoking, and roasting is pretty spectacular.

When Bruce and his wife, Nancy Oakes, the chef-owner of the acclaimed restaurant Boulevard, in San Francisco, designed the open-air cooking area for their new house in 2004, they had two criteria in mind: It needed to serve as an extension of their indoor kitchen, which is just a few steps away, and function as a convenient space for working, cooking, and entertaining.

A built-in gas grill, wood-fired pizza oven, and custom-made concrete countertop anchor the space, which overlooks the rolling hills of Healdsburg, California. We stopped by to admire the views and get Bruce's thoughts on the design and on the tools he uses. We left well informed and well fed.



"I knew the grill I wanted before I even began designing the space. I have a lot of confidence in Viking equipment; they build serious stuff that lasts."

"I chose concrete for my countertop because it's an amazing material. You can customize the texture and color, and it ages gracefully. It develops a sort of patina over time."

"This restaurant-style rack fits baking sheets and is great for holding food before and after cooking."

The Grill and Countertop

Since Bruce uses his grill year-round for work and play, he knew he'd need one that could hold up to constant cooking. "The problem with a gas grill is that as it ages, it gets harder to control the heat. Viking's controls work very well, even over time. My grill has taken a beating and it's still going strong." He opted for a four-burner Ultra-Premium 500 Series. "I use the rotisserie spit more than anything," he says. "It has a serious motor, and it's weatherproof."

His expansive custom-made concrete counter is about 12 feet long and 4 feet deep. "It's big enough to set up a buffet on one side and cook on the other. Having shelves underneath the counter to hold food creates even more space. For now, I'm using a restaurant-style rack. I just slide baking sheets of food right in. It's like having adjustable shelves, but better."

The Wood-Fired Pizza Oven

Bruce bought his pizza oven from Andrea Mugnaini, a California-based importer of pizza ovens from Tuscany. Domed on the inside (the shape concentrates and circulates the heat) and about 4 feet deep, it's made from refractory clay, which is designed to withstand extremely high heat; the oven reaches up to 900°F, something few indoor ovens can achieve. Stoking it—Bruce mostly uses oak from his property—takes an hour and a half to two hours. "I get it going while I prep everything else," he says. "For the incredible smoky flavor it gives food, it's worth the wait."

The pizza oven's exterior mirrors the Arts and Crafts design of Bruce's house. Clinker bricks (misshapen bricks often used during the Arts and Crafts movement) are interspersed among the river rocks that form the walls. The copper chimney cap is a miniature version of those that adorn his house.

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"We use our pizza oven for way more than just pizza," says Bruce.

"It's essentially an extra oven. For parties, we'll take thick porterhouse steaks, sear them on the grill, and then pop them in the oven for a hint of wood smoke. Or we'll toss clams, potatoes, or summer vegetables like squash, tomatoes, and eggplant into a cast-iron skillet and roast them in there." Of course, he makes pizza, too. His favorite topping? Homemade sausage.



The Layout

Convenience was a priority when Bruce designed his outdoor kitchen. "We wanted a space that would work for both entertaining and cooking; we've had more than a hundred people over, and this design works really well." The U-shaped countertop keeps the line for food flowing on one side but also keeps Bruce near the grill, pizza oven, and his indoor kitchen, which is just a few feet away. "Our outdoor kitchen is essentially an extension of our indoor one," he says, and he uses both when he grills. "In a professional kitchen, you prep your ingredients first, then you cook. I grill the same way. I knew I wasn't going to prep food or wash dishes outside, so that's why we don't have an outdoor sink or refrigerator. We just take the food out when it's ready to be grilled and bring in the dirty dishes when we're done. Having the two spaces so close means we don't have to schlep anything too far."

Photographs by Charles Miller; floor plan drawing by Nik Schulz





Bruce's Must-Have Grill Tools

Here's the inside scoop on the grill gear Bruce loves, and why. For mail-order sources, see *Where to Buy It*, page 94.



"I have some great **flat skewers** from a Middle Eastern market that are very long and about ½ inch wide, which prevents food from spinning around when flipped. I also like my **Pig Tail Food Flipper**. It's a clever tool with a spiraled end that lets you quickly turn food with just a flip of the wrist."



"A **grill basket** is a good investment. Being a lazy guy, I don't want to have to flip 28 individual vegetables if I can just flip a basket once. Plus, it's an absolute necessity for delicate items like fish."



"**Welders gloves** are another good item to have. Mine are Kevlar and heat resistant to 700°F; I can pick up glowing chunks of wood with them, which is pretty neat. And they're great for big hands.

"A **blow torch** is a helpful kitchen tool, too. I use mine to fire up the pizza oven and sometimes the gas grill, if the ignitor goes out. It's also great for making a caramelized crust on crême brûlée.

"For cleaning, a good-quality **grill brush** is essential. Rösle makes the Cadillac of them all."



See a video tour of Bruce's kitchen, inside and out, and enter to win his must-have tools at FineCooking.com/extras.

"I hate those thin, flimsy tongs that always seem to come with Father's Day barbecue gift sets. More often than not, they go out of alignment and don't close properly. What you need are heavy-duty **spring-loaded tongs**, and more than just one pair. Rösle makes the best. I also like their long-handled **spatula** for flipping burgers. The length ensures that your hands stay far from the hot grill."



"My ThermoWorks **instant-read thermometer** has taken a lot of abuse. It's designed more for a commercial kitchen than a home kitchen; I've dropped mine and gotten it wet, and it still gives me an accurate reading quickly. I like ThermoWorks **probe thermometers**, too; they hold up better and seem more reliable than others."

Melissa Denchak is an associate editor at Fine Cooking; Charles Miller is a freelance photojournalist and former Fine Homebuilding editor who lives in northern California.