

# THE SANTA MARIA SCHOOL OF BARBECUE



Grilled Chicken  
with Chimichurri  
(recipe p. 108)



Spring-fed Alisal Lake  
is at the heart of The  
Alisal Guest Ranch  
and Resort in Solvang,  
California.

AN EXPERIENCED HAND AT THE GRILL LEARNS NEW TRICKS  
AT ALISAL RANCH IN CALIFORNIA'S SANTA YNEZ VALLEY.

BY PAULA DISBROWE FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY BY VICTOR PROTASIO

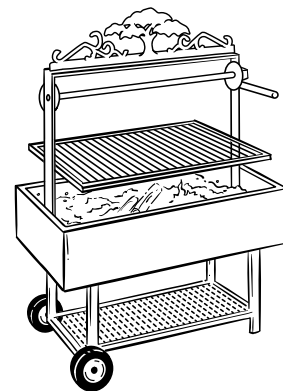


**I**N BOTH LIFE AND THE KITCHEN, most of us tend to claim (through desire or mutual acquiescence) certain tasks as our own. In your home, for instance, perhaps you have become “the pie baker” or “chili king” or, regrettably, the only person who cleans the cat box. But if you’re not careful, these roles can ossify and define us for a lifetime. For my part, in 2002, when my husband, David, and I accepted jobs to cook on a ranch in Texas Hill Country, we quickly signed onto tasks that suited our strengths. I ruled the kitchen in the lodge, shaking skilletes, whisking vinaigrettes, and swatting the occasional scorpion. David fired artisan loaves and pizzas in a wood-burning oven and did the grilling out back. In the many years that followed, we changed jobs and homes and became a family with two

little native Texans, but our dinner assignments remained constant. Luckily, my last two cookbook projects—both devoted to grilling and smoking—gave me the permission and lucky charge to take over at the grill. If I came to the method late, I embraced it wholeheartedly. Today I char everything from cocktails to carrots to slabs of fresh cheese and have adapted live-fire cooking through the filter of my experience, personal style, and the hustle of modern urban life. (David, for his part, now owns a bakery.)

These days I’m confident over a bed of glowing coals, but I still feel a twinge of impostor syndrome amidst, say, whole-hog cookers and the competitive barbecue circuit, or the “campfire” genre of preservation-minded cooks (many sporting chaps and impressive mustaches). So when this magazine offered to send me to The Alisal Guest Ranch and Resort in California’s Santa Ynez Valley for BBQ Bootcamp, a retreat for guests wanting to up their grilling game, I decided to confront that feeling head-on. I packed my boots and boarded a plane to Los Angeles.

Framed by towering trees, Alisal’s stately guest check-in area created a glamorous vibe. As I dropped my bags and followed the scent of woodsmoke, it occurred to me that there are far worse places to enhance your education: Lawn chairs lined up in front of grills transformed the creek-side setting into a stunning outdoor classroom and a window into the area’s rich history. The 10,000 acres that make up the Alisal (meaning “grove of sycamores”) have been cattle country since the early 1800s. Initially, the large land-grant



A Santa Maria-style grill, with adjustable cooking grates

## 4 KEYS TO SANTA MARIA TRI-TIP

### GET IN THE ZONES

Santa Maria-style grilling is in part defined by the grill itself: massive metal contraptions with adjustable cooking grates that can be raised and lowered with hand cranks. By building a two-zone fire, I was able to achieve the same results on my trusty PK Grill, the charcoal cooker I use at home. Raising a rack farther from the fire is akin to moving something to indirect heat (the cooler side of the grill) so it can finish cooking at a lower temperature. Begin by searing the meat over direct, medium-high heat, and finish it with a gentler, indirect heat until it reaches an internal temperature of 130°F.

Traditional “Santa Maria BBQ” Oak Wood-Grilled Tri-Tip (recipe p. 109)

### SEASON IN LAYERS

After the meat is seasoned and marinated, you’ll want to lightly season and baste the meat throughout the cooking process: Basting makes the meat more tender and keeps the exterior moist so it can absorb the seasonings. To keep the vinegar from overpowering the beef, don’t baste after the final flip.

### GIVE IT A REST

An essential step of grilling any protein: When the meat comes off the fire, allow it to rest for at least 15 minutes to let the juices settle before thinly slicing the meat against the grain.

Alisal’s Piquito Beans (recipe p. 108)

### MATCH GRAIN TO GRATE

A tip from chef and master of Santa Maria-style ‘cue Frank Ostini: Place tri-tip on the grill with the grain of the meat running parallel to the grates (the grain runs perpendicular to the long side of the triangle-shaped cut). Fast grilling over high heat would “smash” the grains together and make the cut more tough, so be sure to cook tri-tip low and slow.

Mild Tomato Salsa (recipe p. 108)

LOCATION PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY ALISAL GUEST RANCH AND RESORT; ILLUSTRATION: MATTHEW CASERTA

FOOD STYLING: CHELSEA ZIMMER; PROP STYLING: CLAIRE SPOLLEN



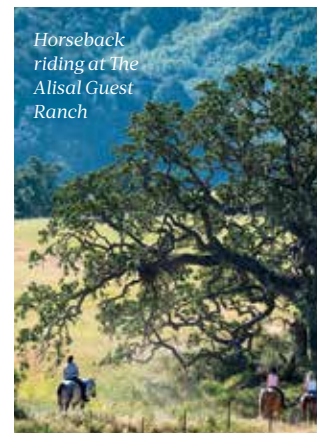
holdings belonged to Mexican families. But after a drought in the 1860s, the property became available to westward-traveling settlers. In 1943 Charles Pete Jackson Jr. purchased the ranch and converted the rustic cattlemen's quarters into well-appointed cottages. But one thing remained constant amidst all of these changes: a style of grilling so specific to this part of California that it has its own name—Santa Maria-style barbecue. And it was this that was the subject of the first cooking class.

Anthony Endy, Alisal's executive chef, and Frank Ostini, chef-owner at The Hitching Post II and winemaker at Hitching Post Wines in nearby Buellton, built adjacent fires as they explained that Santa Maria barbecue originated in the mid-19th century, when ranchers hosted Spanish-style cookouts for their vaqueros. The meal classically features tri-tip seasoned with a peppery spice blend and basted with a garlic, vinegar, and oil mixture while it cooks over an oak fire, served with sides of brothy pinto beans, tomato salsa, a green salad, and grilled bread. As Endy and Ostini's dueling demos unfolded, the aroma of their efforts—sizzling beef and chimichurri-slathered chicken—became increasingly seductive. Luckily, bottles of Pinot were being uncorked (the ranch sits in the heart of Santa Barbara County, one of the best wine regions in the country) and outdoor tables were being adorned with steak knives.

So went the next couple days. There were classes on spice blending with chef Endy, who talked about the right ratio of salt to aromatics (it's 4-to-1) and the difference between garlic powder and garlic granules (he prefers the less processed taste and texture of the latter). **Chefs Brendan Smith and Rachel Greenspan from Bettina Pizzeria in Santa Barbara showed us how to stretch pizza dough and prepared crisp, bubbling pies in a horse trailer that had been converted into a wood-burning oven.** But my favorite lesson was taught by chef Valerie Gordon (of Valerie Confections in Los Angeles), who grill-baked desserts in the ambient heat of a Big Green Egg. Gordon's brownies, baked in lavishly buttered cast-iron skillets, acquired a flavorful, chewy "bark" and carried a whiff of charcoal fire.

On the final morning, our group met at the barn for an early trail ride. The smell of freshly cut hay and the singular thrill of swinging my leg over a saddle were achingly familiar. As we rode into the cool morning air, I was transported back to my cowgirl chapter, when my days were far from the frenetic pace of a city.

A few days later, I was home in Austin and firing up a dinner inspired by my time in California, to which I added some moves of my own. I drizzled tri-tip with olive oil and generously seasoned the meat with salt, pepper, and herbs from my garden. To help the seasonings permeate the meat, I made 1/2-inch incisions on both sides of the cut (one of my favorite tricks). I built a fire, and when the coals were glowing red and covered with a fine gray ash, I added a few oak chunks, knowing they'd smolder and perfume everything in reach. I've often heard that when you master a new language, you begin to dream in it. Watching smoke curling upward, into the apricot-streaked Texas sky, I was wide awake, but happily, exhilaratingly fluent in the language of fire and smoke. —Paula Disbrowe is the author of the new cookbook *Thank You for Smoking. This May, she returned to Alisal Ranch as an instructor.*



Horseback riding at The Alisal Guest Ranch

THE BROWNIES, BAKED IN LAVISHLY BUTTERED CAST-IRON SKILLETS, ACQUIRED A FLAVORFUL, CHEWY "BARK" AND CARRIED A WHIFF OF CHARCOAL FIRE.



## SKILLET BROWNIES ON THE GRILL

ACTIVE 10 MIN; TOTAL 1 HR 10 MIN; SERVES 8

After cooking dinner, bake these brownies on the grill by adding a few more lumps of charcoal to maintain a grill temperature of around 350°F. The result? A warm, fudgy center with a smoky brownie "bark" around the edges.

- 3/4 cup (about 3 3/4 oz.) plus 1 Tbsp. all-purpose flour
- 1/2 tsp. kosher salt or fleur de sel
- 1/4 tsp. baking soda
- 7 oz. unsweetened chocolate, chopped
- 1/2 cup (4 oz.) salted butter, plus more, melted, for greasing skillet
- 2 Tbsp. canola oil
- 3 large eggs
- 1 cup packed light brown sugar
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 2 tsp. vanilla bean paste or vanilla extract
- Vanilla ice cream (optional)

1. If using a charcoal grill, open bottom vent of grill completely. Light charcoal chimney starter filled with briquettes. When briquettes are covered with gray ash, pour onto bottom grate of grill, and then push to one side of grill. Adjust vents as needed to maintain an internal temperature of 350°F to 400°F. If using a gas grill, preheat to medium (350°F to 400°F) on 1 side. If using an oven, preheat to 350°F.

2. Whisk together flour, salt, and baking soda in a small bowl; set aside. If grilling, place a heatproof bowl on unoiled grates over the side without the coals (or the unlit side of a gas grill). If using an oven, heat a medium saucepan over low. Add chocolate, butter, and oil to bowl or saucepan; cook, stirring constantly, until melted and smooth. Remove from heat. Let cool slightly, about 5 minutes. Add eggs, brown sugar, granulated sugar, and vanilla to chocolate-butter mixture; stir together until smooth and thoroughly incorporated. Add flour mixture; stir gently until just combined.

3. Grease a 10-inch cast-iron skillet with melted butter. Pour in batter, spreading in an even layer.

4. If grilling, place skillet on grates over the side without the coals (or the unlit side of a gas grill). Grill, covered, until a wooden pick inserted in center of brownies comes out almost clean (it will have crumbs but should not be wet), 40 to 45 minutes. If using an oven, bake in preheated oven about 35 minutes. Remove from heat; cool in skillet 10 minutes. Cut into wedges and serve with ice cream, if desired.