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Grrrill power

PASTIMES | Cooking out is at an all-time high, and these women help fuel the craze

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BY SANDY THORN CLARK

Tonya Dominguez, Candy Carswell, Mary Beisemann, Sarah Raymond and Catherine Mayhew don't know one another, but they all have one thing in common: the thrill of the grill.

They all are chicks ... er, women ... who love to grill, although the term "chicks" is politically correct for Mayhew, author of the first grilling book written by a mom for moms, who is a proud member of the all-female competition barbecue team Chicks in Charge.



Personal chef Candy Carswell likes experimenting with marinades, rubs and sauces for steak (especially ribeyes), chicken, fish and pork.

(Oscar Lopez/For the Sun-Times)

These are women so serious about their hobby that Chicagoans Dominguez, Carswell, Beisemann and Raymond grill all year long. For Dominguez, that means grilling in the back-yard of her Marengo home when the wind-chill factor is 20 degrees below zero and shoveling a path through 12 inches of snow to her grill (to the amusement of her husband, Joe). It means that Carswell elicits looks of disbelief from her father as he watches her "shaking, shivering and freezing" while grilling outside her Maywood home.

Mayhew, the Brentwood, Tenn., author of *Handy Mom's Guide to Grilling: The Fast, Easy Way to Smokin' Meals!* (Cool Springs Press, \$19.95), a 191-page compilation of advice and recipes for grilled foods, non-grilled side dishes and leftovers, grills because it's relaxing. "It's not a bubble bath with champagne, but for me it comes darn close," confides the grilling guru/master judge.

The female grill enthusiasts are enthralled with a pastime that continues to increase in the United States, according to Harry Balsler of NPD Group, a Rosemont market research firm. In any two-week period in 2007, 38 percent of all households fired up a grill; in any two-week period during summer, 50 percent of all households fired up a grill -- percentages, Balsler notes, that are the highest they have ever been. Seventeen percent of the women polled say they "always" do the grilling; 41 percent of the men polled "always" do the grilling.

Mayhew says the reluctance of some women to grill is "fear -- a fear of fire. Not that you think you'll catch yourself on fire. No, it's the fear that you can't start the fire or control it. It's also fear of failure."

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Here's a glimpse of four avid Chicago grillers who have overcome such fears:

Tonya Dominguez, manager of a payroll department, says flavor is the reason she grills/smokes all year long. She enjoys being creative with chicken, Cornish hens, steak, pork, turkey, asparagus, zucchini, potatoes, tomatoes and carrots for the couple's blended family of five children.

Her favorite: salsa verde made with grilled tomatillo, tomatoes and peppers. Most unusual: grilled frozen garlic bread. Advice: "Don't be afraid to try grilling anything you think would be good."

Candy Carswell, a personal chef who operates Candid Catering and is working to get frozen Linda Lu's Collard Greens mass-produced, likes experimenting with marinades, rubs and sauces for steak (especially rib eyes), chicken, fish, and pork.

Single and a fan of ultimate griller Bobby Flay, she also grills broccoli, corn on the cob, squash and tomatoes for friends and family. Her favorite: an "overnight" marinade of mustard, honey, crushed red pepper, Worcestershire sauce and garlic that makes steaks juicy and tender. Advice: "When grilling burgers, flip one time. The more you flip, the more you ruin the meat."

Mary Beisemann, sales and marketing director for Entourage in Schaumburg, went without an oven in her Palatine home for one year, relying instead on grilling -- even when she's had to knock a foot of snow off her two grills. The divorced mother of two teenage sons grills the usual -- hot dogs, burgers, baby brats, kebabs, pork tenderloin (perfect for Christmas Eve with a rub of salt, pepper, garlic, cinnamon and cumin or curry served with a sauce of maple syrup, cinnamon and plumped raisins), turkey, corn on the cob, tomatoes, potatoes -- and the unusual -- homemade bread and pancakes. Advice: "Don't be afraid to experiment, but make sure you have a backup if it fails."

Sarah Raymond, a chef at Sweet Baby Ray's in Wood Dale with a four-year degree from Kendall College, grills ribs (of course); salmon; shrimp; mini-burgers with cheddar and bacon or blue cheese or balsamic vinegar; fish tacos; whole beef tenderloins marinated five hours in olive oil, balsamic vinegar and herbs, and corn on the cob with chipotle, pesto or sea salt butters on her grill of choice, a Weber, at the Itasca home she shares with her husband, Larry Paul Raymond II.

Most unusual: grilled strawberries, pineapple and pound cake. Advice: "Use tongs or spatula to prevent puncturing food with a fork and losing juices."

Sandy Thorn Clark is a local free-lance writer.