

The Washington Post

Travel

Move beyond skewers and s'mores on your next camping trip



(The Washington Post Illustration/iStock)

By **Kate Silver**

September 14 at 7:00 AM

For some of us, the concept of campfire cooking calls to mind hot dogs char-bubbling on sticks and gooey s'mores scorching the roofs of our mouths. But for Sunny Jin, the campfire cooking menu is a little more involved: cast-iron-seared foie gras over oak embers; beer-simmered bison roast; marshmallows soaked in Scotch and warmed fireside.

Jin is executive chef at the Resort at Paws Up, the luxury ranch resort in Greenough, Mont., near Missoula, that coined the term

“glamping” more than a decade ago. There, on the working cattle ranch among the glampsites and luxury home accommodations, campfire cooking is de rigueur and Jin, who has worked at French Laundry in Napa Valley, Calif., and at El Bulli in Catalonia, Spain, is something of an ember-cooking expert. In addition to Jin’s own fire-inspired gastronomy, the resort is home to the Campfire Chefs series, which brings in award-winners from around the country to work their magic over an open flame. “Nothing is really off limits for us,” Jin says. “We’ve done full-on five-course tasting menus along the riverside.”

Jin says the key to a successful campfire cookout is preparation, planning and connecting with the natural world. He shared these tips on how to level up your campfire game on your next outdoor adventure.

Don’t be intimidated by the campfire aspect. When asked if there are any foods to avoid cooking while camping, Jin draws a blank. “If you can think about something that you want to try in your regular kitchen, I guarantee you there’s a way to do it out in the middle of a field or along a riverside, just with a better view,” he says. Braising, searing, sautéing, roasting — it can all be done over the embers.

Finesse your fire. First rule of campfire cooking: Don’t douse the logs with lighter fluid, Jin says. For one thing, it could burn out quickly; for another, dinner could taste like chemicals. A good fire takes patience, so plan 30 to 40 minutes to get it going. Jin says to start with pine needles, build up to smaller twigs and then kindling. When that gets going, start adding the logs. Allow the flames to dwindle so that you’re cooking over embers. “That’s about the same as cooking over your gas range versus using a blow torch on your food at the bottom of your pan,” Jin says.

Invest in the right equipment. You don’t need to spend hundreds of dollars on gear, but there are a few items that can help improve your wilderness spread, Jin says. First, he says, buy a portable grill with folding legs so that you have a platform to cook on. “Then you can do some grilling, roasting, slow-basting and searing off to the side while you’re having some snacks that are

over the direct heat,” he says. He also suggests purchasing an inexpensive nonstick sauté pan to be used solely on camping trips. (It will get dirty from the fire.) The pan will heat and cool more quickly than a thicker pan, allowing you to have more control while cooking. He also suggests taking along chopsticks, if you have them, rather than forks. “When you’re done, throw them in the fire,” he says.

Pack versatile ingredients. When Jin prepares for a camping trip, he says he’ll cut up a bunch of vegetables, such as onions, peppers, asparagus, zucchini and squash, and use them one night for trout stir fry — if he catches a fish — or fajitas if he doesn’t. The next morning, he’ll toss any leftover vegetables into a breakfast hash. “It takes a lot of effort out of the equation and offers variety,” he says.

Stock up on spices. Make sure you bring along salt, pepper and your favorite spices to bring out the flavors of your meal. Jin says he cleans out old medicine bottles and makes them into a camping pantry. “They’re amazing for carrying herbs, they’re nearly indestructible and they take up very little room,” he says.

Eat from the land when you can. Jin is a fan of fishing and hunting, and he also loves foraging to add variety to his campfire meals. He says that one thing he never leaves at home is a mesh bag so he can harvest while hiking. In coming weeks and months, he plans to feast on spruce tips (the first growths that peek out with the warming spring weather), morels and huckleberries that he forages. “It’s really rewarding when you can figure out how to be living in more of a minimal state,” he says.

Put food safety first. Ice can be cumbersome when you’re trying to pack light, but hot, muggy outdoor temperatures and raw meat aren’t the best bedfellows. Jin’s advice: Be creative with what you freeze. “I’ll have a large Tupperware of raw meats,” he says. “But instead of filling my coolers with ice, I’ll take my steaks, hamburgers, hot dogs, whatever and I’ll freeze them so they basically act like cool packs.” As they defrost, they hit the grill. He also freezes his beverage of choice — Gatorade — so it keeps things cool and he can drink it as it liquefies.

Get s'more creative. S'mores are something of a science at the Resort at Paws Up, where the staff includes a dedicated "s'moreologist." Jin encourages campers to get experimental when making the classic campfire dessert. While chocolate, marshmallows and graham crackers are an excellent combination, consider them a launching point. "Start thinking about other ingredients that are near and dear to your heart," says Jin. He loves layering on Reese's Peanut Butter Cups to add more flavor. Or, as mentioned earlier, he'll soak some marshmallows in Scotch. "Put it over the fire so it gets that nice smoky, barrel-aged flavor, and it actually starts to melt the marshmallow and heat it up and warm it without charring it," he says. "It's fantastic."

To Jin, the connection with the natural world that he craves can mean catching dinner from the lake, using a twig as a s'more skewer or collecting forest fruits for a cobbler cooked over the fire in a Dutch oven. "The more you start to open your eyes a little bit, you start to realize it's kind of hard to starve when you're in the middle of the woods."