

Sure, throw hot dogs on the grill. But don't forget bananas.

By Elizabeth Karmel
The Associated Press

In this pandemic summer, who doesn't want to eat and cook outdoors? And if you're firing up the grill, don't forget dessert.

I am bananas for grilled bananas. Fast and easy, they become instant favorites and remind you of classic desserts. And there are so many variations: You can make grilled banana s'mores, grilled bananas splits, grilled bananas with peanut butter and jelly, grilled banana pudding, etc.

One of my favorite desserts used to be Bananas Foster — vanilla ice cream topped with rich brown sugar, buttery, boozy warm sautéed bananas, and toasted pecans. But I never eat it anymore. When I discovered that I could grill bananas and get nearly the same flavors without a sticky pan to wash — and I could save about a thousand calories as well — I never looked back.

The key to grilling bananas is leaving them in their protective skins. Slice a banana once lengthwise and once crosswise, so each banana is in four pieces. Because I like a bourbon-flavored Bananas Foster as opposed to rum, I sprinkle the cut side of the bananas with a bourbon that has predominant notes of vanilla and caramel.

Next, I make a simple "dessert rub" of white sugar, cinnamon, and a pinch of fine-grain sea salt. You can use this sweet rub to good effect on any fruit you are grilling. I toss a dusting of the rub over the cut side of the bananas and let them sit for five minutes. This is enough time to allow the natural sugars and the bourbon to absorb and dissolve the rub. Then it's time for the grill.

I generally grill the banana cut-side down for a minute or two to get grill marks, but that is not necessary. What is necessary is to let the banana cook skin-side down until it is slightly cooked all the way through, and the fruit begins to recede from the skin. The skin will be black, but the banana inside will be warm, slightly caramelized, soft, and fragrant.

Grilling the banana transforms the fruit from something that can sometimes be starchy and lacking in taste into a tropical flavor bomb. You peel the banana before serving, so it doesn't matter how black the skin gets as long as it still protects the banana.

When I am short on time but want to serve an unexpected crowd-pleaser, a Grilled Banana Sundae with Dulce de Leche and Shredded Halva is my quick and easy version of a grilled banana ice cream sundae.

Once the bananas are grilled, it's time to build the



INNOVATIVE IDEA. A grilled banana sundae is seen in Alexandria, Virginia. The key to grilling bananas is to leave the banana in its protective skin. (Elizabeth Karmel via AP)

dessert. In this case, a sundae.

I often make homemade dulce de leche by carefully boiling a can of sweetened condensed milk until the sugars in the milk cook and become a candy-like deep-tan caramelized sauce. But these days, you can buy excellent dulce de leche sauce and dulce de leche ice cream at the grocery store.

I then peel the grilled bananas and serve them warm on top of two scoops of my favorite dulce de leche ice cream. That alone is pretty darn good, but I don't stop there. I drizzle a little more bourbon on top and, if I am feeling indulgent, an extra spoonful of dulce de leche. And then my secret ingredient: A generous layer of shredded halva on top. You can eliminate the extra bourbon and the extra dulce de leche, but do not eliminate the shredded halva.

Halva is a Middle Eastern confection made with tahini (sesame paste) and sugar. It is my new "nut" topping for ice cream; I've put my beloved pecans and walnuts back in the cupboard.

I have eaten halva in chunk form for years, and am partial to the handmade variety from Hebel & Co. It has crispy shards of nutty sugar mixed into the creamy texture of the halva. And that is what led me to the shredded halva. It is all crispy caramelized shards, and for a lover of texture like me, a whole other level of greatness. It is like a more toothsome, nutty, sweet, and slightly savory version of cotton candy. The sesame flavor is delicate, and softly compliments the honeyed bananas and dulce de leche ice cream. But the best part is that the crunchy crisp texture makes you want to take another bite and another bite!

Grilled Bananas with Dulce de Leche and Shredded Halva

Serves 4

Direct/Medium-low Heat

- 2 bananas (not too ripe)
- 2 tablespoons bourbon, divided
- 2 tablespoons granulated white sugar
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- Pinch of fine-grain sea salt
- 1 pint best-quality dulce de leche vanilla ice cream
- Dulce de leche sauce, optional
- 2 tablespoons shredded halva (easy to order online)

Do not peel bananas. Slice them, in their skin, in half lengthwise and crosswise, so each banana yields four pieces. Set aside.

Sprinkle the cut sides with half the bourbon. Combine sugar, cinnamon, and sea salt and mix well. Cover the cut sides of the bananas with the rub by carefully spooning it on or by using your hands. Let the bananas sit for five minutes.

Place bananas cut-side-down on the center of a clean cooking grate, and place the lid on the grill. Cook for one minute or until grill marks appear. Using long-handled tongs, carefully turn over and let cook four to five minutes or until the skin pulls away from the flesh of the banana.

Remove bananas from grill and serve immediately on top of the dulce de leche ice cream. Top with a generous amount of shredded halva. Drizzle with extra bourbon and extra dulce de leche sauce, if desired.

Serve immediately.



ZERO POSITIVE TEST RESULTS. Utah Royals FC forward Raisa Strom-Okimoto (white jersey) battles for the ball during a National Women's Soccer League Challenge Cup match against the Houston Dash at Zions Bank Stadium in Herriman, Utah. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer)

Successful NWSL Challenge Cup featured crop of talented Japanese forwards

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scoring threat everywhere she played. In five years with AC Nagano Parceiro in Japan's J3 League, she scored 99 goals in 144 appearances. She also scored six goals in 24 games with FFC Frankfurt in Germany's Frauen-Bundesliga. With Japan's national team, she has scored 17 goals in 43 appearances.

In addition to her nose for the goal, Yokoyama is known for her excellent ball skills, both of which were in evidence in her four Challenge Cup starts. In games against Portland and Chicago in the preliminary round, she had some great opportunities, but was unable to convert them into goals.

And in her last two games, Yokoyama drew six total fouls, a great indication of her skill on the ball and the danger she presents. Unfortunately, she wasn't able to show more of her abilities after the Spirit fell to Sky Blue in the quarterfinals.

Another player we can expect to see more from is a legendary college forward with Asian roots. At the University of Hawai'i, Raisa Strom-Okimoto became the first Rainbow Warrior to earn Player of the Year honors in the Big West Conference. That was not surprising after a senior season in which she led the conference in scoring and tied for second with three game-winning goals.

Despite such a great college career, Strom-Okimoto didn't think she could go pro. But Utah surprised her with a tryout invitation before last season, and then surprised

her again by offering her a yearlong contract to fill in for players appearing in the World Cup. Though she didn't make many appearances, she impressed the team enough to earn a contract for this season.

Ready to prove herself, Strom-Okimoto already saw more minutes in the Challenge Cup than she did all of last season, when she totalled just 17 minutes in three appearances. At the same number of appearances in the Challenge Cup, Strom-Okimoto amassed a whopping 122 minutes, including two starts.

In her first start, she registered her first two shots, and then nearly registered her first assist. She played in two more matches, then watched helplessly from the bench as Utah fell to the Houston Dash, 2-3, in a tie-breaker shootout in the quarter-final match.

Utah definitely saw enough of Strom-Okimoto to give her more minutes in the future. And we will all look forward to seeing more from this impressive crop of Japanese forwards — and other Asian stars — when a regular season is held. We wish them all good health on and off the field.

The NWSL Challenge Cup kicked off June 27 and the championship match was played on July 26. The teams completed within a quarantine bubble in Utah.

During the tournament, more than 2,000 coronavirus tests were completed with no players, coaches, or other tournament staff testing positive. To view Challenge Cup game recaps and videos, visit <www.nwslsoccer.com/schedule>. To learn about the league rules in relation to coronavirus safety protocols followed during the competition, visit <www.nwslsoccer.com/2020-nwsl-challenge-cup-protocols>.

Going out? Stay apart.

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