

Summer is the best time to enjoy the grill

by Mark Pavilons

The one smell associated with summer is BBQ. Backyard cooks, who hit the grill with gusto, help make summer an experience.

I happen to be a meat-lover ? no excuses. My German mother created some amazing, traditional dishes over the years, and most, if not all, included meat.

Food is a universal need and yes, it's personal and everyone has their own unique taste.

We're bombarded with food advertising on TV ? an average viewing night will reveal dozens of food-related ads. Food corporations spend billions on commercials because they tend to trigger quick impulse cravings and build lifelong customer habits.

I know when I see a commercial for pizza, and witness that long, cheese pull, I'm sold!

Fast food, candy, and packaged goods generally have strong profit margins and competition drives these companies to continuously run commercials simply to maintain or capture market share. Food and beverage companies allocate a massive chunk of their marketing budgets to television to ensure their brand remains at the top of consumers' minds.

Humans love meat because our brains and biology are wired to crave energy-dense foods. Meat provided the concentrated proteins, fats, and micronutrients our ancestors needed to evolve large brains. This ancient drive is triggered by the savory umami flavor and the rich fat that make meat so inherently satisfying.

Our passion for meat is driven by a mix of biology, history, and sensory triggers.

From an evolutionary survival standpoint, our early ancestors were omnivores.

Meat was an easily digestible, calorie-packed source of fuel. Because our brains consume roughly 20% of our resting energy, nutrient-dense meat was critical for our survival and development.

Taste receptors on our tongue are explicitly designed to seek out umami ? a deep, savory flavor that signals the presence of protein to the brain.

When meat is cooked at high heat, amino acids and sugars come together to create complex, irresistible aromas. This chemical process enhances flavor and triggers pleasure circuits in the brain.

Meat has been strongly associated with celebrations, traditions, and community building.

We no longer require hunting for survival, but these biological and psychological rewards remain deeply embedded in human physiology.

According to statistics, half of all habitable land on Earth is used for agriculture. Two-thirds of that land is used for livestock grazing, while the other third goes to crop production. But only half of those crops end up in human mouths. The rest is used either for manufacturing purposes or, far more frequently, to feed livestock.

If we take livestock crops into account, a whopping 80 per cent of all agricultural land on Earth ? or around 15 million square miles ? is used to support livestock grazing, either directly or indirectly.

Naysayers will stress that we don't need to consume as much protein as we do and that meat production negatively impacts the environment, degrades soil and increases water pollution.

In this 'woke' era, some struggle with eating meat and the thought of killing animals.

Fair enough. That's an individual choice. We have to feed the planet and I don't really see an alternative at this point.

My taste buds and appetite have taken a whack recently as a side effect of my chemo treatment. Much to my chagrin, I'm inundated by ads, blogs and recipes on social media of a cornucopia of meat dishes - everything from the best chicken wings to the perfect sirloin. It brings tears to my eyes.

My wife helped hone my BBQ skills, but it took literally years to get good at it. She's still the grill master, but I'm a close second. I'm still learning.

I read what I can and try to decipher the best recipes and best results.

Lately, I'm drawn to depictions of medium rare prime rib. I've had this at several functions I've covered over the years - it's one of my favourites. But lately, meat prices at the grocery store - and even higher in restaurants - put this delicacy out of my reach.

My son and I have frequent discussions on the 'beauty' of a perfectly cooked steak - of any cut. I think he appreciates the skills and artistry involved. I admire the perfect sear and cook.

And you don't have to look far to catch a glimpse of meat-lovers and cooks.

TV reality shows abound, ranging from home cooks, to BBQ pros, to moms and dads in a game-show style setting. I've been following the likes of Gordon Ramsay for years. I really can't pinpoint the attraction, it just draws me in.

If you're a cook, you can learn many new tricks, methods and techniques to treat your family.

My oldest daughter made me steak and eggs, post-Father's Day and it was one of the best meals I've had in a long time. I think a lot has to do with effort. Putting together a perfectly made plate is not always easy. When it comes together, it's magical.

They say a way to a man's heart is through his stomach. That may be true in some cases. I know if I'm presented with some of the aforementioned dishes, I'd be bursting with joy.

My wife and I have been lucky to have enjoyed some amazing meals, both locally at some of King's finest restaurants, and abroad. For our anniversary last fall, we experienced some great meals at Blue Mountain eateries. We've dined on conch fritters in the Bahamas. We've eaten some of the best dishes at The Keg and she's cooked some prize-winning meals for our family.

Food is a necessity. But it's also an experience. It brings people and families together. It soothes us and we're all familiar with our favourite 'comfort foods.'

You may not be a huge meat-eater and that's okay. You may love perfectly grilled zucchini and roasted cauliflower (I do).

For me, the smell of the grill and the taste of a marvellous porterhouse makes me smile - or days.

Enjoy the summer and revel in the grill!