

# Dining



# Out

At long sweaty, mosquito-bitten, hotter-than-Hades last, winter has arrived at the tippy end of Florida. It's the time when those of us who brave the summer here venture back outside. One can actually breathe! We feel playful and energetic. So forget spring, this is our time of renewal! Gathering friends and family in the out-of-doors is one of the best ways to enjoy our amazing Southwest Florida winter weather. Al fresco dining as we

Americans love to call it is quite something else in Italy. On your next trip over to the Bel Paese (the Beautiful Country), skip the temptation to request dining "al fresco" as to Italians, this means to be in jail or prison! Yes, we have taken this expression, incorrectly, to describe eating in the fresh air rather than indoors. But as true Americans, we don't really care, we stole the term and use it with gusto (more Italian - we can't help ourselves!).



When we have the chance, which means the weather is cooperating, outdoor entertaining spots can be the most relaxing, romantic, and charming venues. In Florida, we eye the calendar watching those muggy months of summer fall away to the fresher "r" months: December, January, February, March, April. On a good year, we even get the r-less May to cooperate. There was a time (harkening back to

my childhood here) when outdoor dining meant barbecuing. And BBQ only. There was a grill. In the backyard. Sitting all by itself. Men would eventually stand around it turning the steaks or burgers over and over again, way too many times, while women labored over potato salad and cole slaw indoors. And for pete's sake, don't forget the baked beans! >>

That's all changed with the advent of complete outdoor kitchens. Many of the homes I design include fully-equipped cooking and cold storage areas by the pool. There are large screen TVs and draft beer coolers. Comfortable cushioned chairs with large dining tables encourage folks to "linger longer". And if there is a game on tv, barstools are in high demand! There is simply no reason to be inside. Until the "r" months are behind us for another year.

A favorite dining-under-the-stars dish in our home is fresh caught swordfish with a gremolata which is parsley, fresh garlic, olive oil, and lemon zest. Swordfish is great for grilling as it is a firm fish and will stay intact during the cooking process. The cook time is very short and the results are amazing, especially when the gremolata is schmear on the fish. Gremolata was traditionally used for osso bucco, a hearty veal shank dish from Milan, but it's truly amazing with swordfish, but can also be used to compliment roasted vegetable and pasta dishes. For crunch, add in toasted pine nuts. My own twist on this delightful accompaniment, as well as recommended cook times for grilled swordfish follows this article. Try it and you'll be hooked. (Punny?)

Backyard BBQ was known for beer drinking and horseshoes. These days, and particularly with the Naples crowd, outdoor dinner parties have become more like smaller scale wine festivals. Throughout the so-called "season" (more accurately the "r" months), we host outdoor dinners at which we pair wines with all manner of grilled foods. Meat, fish, vegetables. Open pairing, as we like to call it, is a lot of fun. Simply open several bottles of wine that have pairing possibilities and let your guests decide for themselves. The aforementioned swordfish can pair well with a chenin blanc, a rose', or even a pinot noir. The type of fire will also play a role in the pairing: wood, charcoal, or gas. Sauces and garnish also have an effect. Lively conversations with opinions emboldened

by the wine itself have ensued around a large stone table in our pool gazebo. Fortunately, there is no video.

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Thank goodness for outdoor refrigeration. No more schlepping in and out of the house. In under 15 minutes, I can pull fresh food from my outdoor fridge and prepare an amazing watermelon and feta salad with mint from the garden. HOT TIP: It's hard to grow herbs and lettuces in hot and sunny SW Florida, but inside the pool screen cage is a perfect spot. The screen takes the edge off the burning sunlight and also keeps out critters. We yanked out all the ferns in the pool area planters and now have fresh flavors all the time with basil, cilantro, parsley, several types of lettuce, squash, tomatoes, and rosemary growing by the pool. This week, we are grilling goat cheese stuffed squash blossoms we picked from our planter! I think sometimes about the unfairness that was the separate in-home kitchen. When having full-time help became unfashionable and unaffordable, women were put away on the other side of that kitchen door, not to be seen again until they were ringing the dinner bells in American homes. Then the wall came down. Open kitchens are now en vogue and are the anchor to what we (somewhat amusingly) refer to as Great Rooms. Yes,

Great Rooms. Even in condominiums. Even in small condominiums. Although a misnomer, it somehow makes us feel better. But most importantly, the connection between the person slaving over the stove and those watching the game is now as direct as it can be. In fact, the indoor kitchen has become the number one gathering place in American homes. So why not do the same with our outdoor living spaces? >>



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When the creepy bufo toads hibernate, and the humidity level descends to somewhere below steam oven setting, and the months once again have an “r” in them, it’s our time to make the Great Outdoors our Great Room. The complete outdoor kitchen has brought families back together. Friends take joy in sharing the chopping, mixing, and pouring that

takes food from ingredients to memorable meals. Whether you are drinking, dining, just relaxing, or all of the above, know that we are so fortunate to enjoy beautiful Southwest Florida outdoor spaces in which we create lasting memories. And count our blessings. ■ - Jenny Provost

