

matt jones

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Here comes the braai!

South Africa's answer to the barbecue, the braai, is a national institution that's enjoyed year-round. Matt Jones joins the country's hardy 'okes' and develops a taste for tjops and wors.

I have it on good authority from a no-nonsense Aussie bloke in Perth that one of the best sources for barbecue recipes is – ahem! – The Australian Women's Weekly *Essential Barbecue Cookbook* ("Reprinted by popular demand").

As the Aussies are up there with the Yanks when it comes to cooking in the great outdoors, this is just the kind of inside info (whispered quietly, with the wives out of earshot) that can send an impressionable Pommie chap like me scuttling off to the nearest bookshop.

But pass the tip to a South African 'oke' (bloke) and he won't thank you. In fact, the chances are he won't invite you to another helping of *tjops* (chops).

"A man's *braai* is his own territory and beware the chap who steps in to give advice or a well-intentioned comment," warns Angela Jones, a Jumeira housewife and mother of three whose lawyer husband Wayne is master of the coals in nature's kitchen.

So what does a *braai* have that an Australian or American barbecue doesn't?

"I guess South Africans have always been quite close to nature and so the rather more sanitised US or Aussie versions of the 'barbie' don't quite compare with the authentic smell of smoke from the wood of the *witstinkelhout* tree and the great African *bushveld* with all its sights and sounds," says Wayne Jones. "For those of us who have left those shores and have to make do with Dubai Zoo, the *braai* maintains that missing link with our heritage."

And are there any *witstinkelhout* trees in Dubai?

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“That’s just a made up name,” says Jones with a sparkle in his eye, perfectly illustrating a key ingredient that everyone should bring to a *braai*: a sense of humour that’s as dry as the *bushveld* in summer.

You’ll also need to be willing to endure or engage in a certain amount of good natured ‘chaaffing’ (ribbing). “The only thing the Americans and Australians can do is Vienna sausages and hamburger patties,” chaafs Christo Fourie, a multimedia project manager in Dubai. “The *braai* is a South African tradition, passed on from generation to generation. Each ‘*braaier*’ has his own preference and secrets to making the perfect fire. It’s all about tradition, style, presentation and flair.”

“There’s certainly an ancestral heritage in which youngsters are schooled in the ways of the past,” agrees Jones, that sparkle in his eye not entirely undimmed. “Top tips about the best wood, the way to stack the *braai* and so on are certainly gleaned from the ancestral tapestry of life. I pity those guys whose dads couldn’t do a Smokey Robinson to save their *tjops*.”

Indeed. But for all the good humour there’s an underlying seriousness to cooking the perfect *braai*. Christo Fourie admits to an element of old fashioned machismo in pulling it off. “I think it’s the challenge of preparing a piece of meat over an open fire that changes heat quickly, and the satisfaction of hearing other *braaier*’s comments about how soft your streak is, that it melts in the mouth when you eat it, or how good the *boerewors* tastes,” he says of its appeal. *Boerewors*, by the way, is no ordinary sausage.

“There’s certainly a whole sub-culture attached to the event,” says Jones. “It has become a real male meeting place, but with its own pecking order: you are welcome to stand by and share my fire, but never – never – try to proffer assistance as to how I am absolutely charring my meat.”

The literal meaning of ‘*braai*’, which rhymes with ‘eye’, is ‘to burn’. Its full name, hardly used, is ‘*braaivleis*’: ‘to burn meat,’ but the ladies are usually on hand to keep a discreet, but careful, eye on the extent of the burning.

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“I must confess that in general everything works out great,” says Christo’s wife Rene, an IT licensing specialist in Dubai. “But it helps to pop your head out and ask if the meat’s OK. Then they’ll turn it over again. If something looks as though it’s heading in the charcoal direction, you can always say a few words like, ‘That looks great, just how I like it, take it off, we’re starved, let’s eat!’ This always works.”

According to the Fouries, the secret to good taste lies in the coals, charcoal or wood selected, and a swiftly-concocted but innovative marinade with spices.

Hardy okes are willing to *braai* on any occasion at any time of the day or year. “Any celebration is an excuse to have a *braai*,” says Christo Fourie. “If we hear it’s raining in Africa, we’re allowed to *braai*. When the Lions win the Super 12, when the Bulls loose against any other team, when it’s the weekend, on birthdays, on holidays here or back home, all are valid excuses. The preferred time is between 0:00 and 23:59. Location: any location within bounds.”

“During a spell living in England, in November when the Springboks toured the British Isles it became customary for the South African okes to don their beanies (woolly hats), get outside and start *braaing*, much to the amusement of our English neighbours,” Jones recalls. “Summers in Dubai present no problem. They just cut down on the number of okes who are willing to cluster round the *braai*.”

The most unusual place Jones admits to having a *braai* in was two kilometres underground. “A slow Sunday shift as a student in the deepest gold mine in the world: a few bored boiler makers, a cast iron plate, a blowtorch and some *tjops* and *wors*... What better place to *braai*?” he says.

[Box 1:]

Keeping up with the Joneses:

“Get rid of your burgers and sausages and move on to more adult food,” says Wayne Jones. “Don’t give up if it doesn’t work out brilliantly the first time. Rome wasn’t burnt in a day. The thing is, when it goes well it looks pretty smooth and easy, but there’s a knack to it that only comes through a bit of trial and error.” The standard chicken on the Weber (dome-covered) *braai* is the easiest, nicest basic recipe. Just follow the steps to keep up with the Joneses:

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- 1) Get a nice juicy bird. Don't stuff it or anything (rather do stuffing on the side if you need to)
- 2) Let it lie in some tasty marinade ("I always find a combination of citrus and herbs, or sun-dried tomato and a bit of zest works well," says Jones) for a good few hours
- 3) Make a decent fire in a kettle *braai* (indirect method) – use briquettes not standard charcoal to allow the air to flow
- 4) Call up some mates
- 5) Get a nice long drink going
- 6) When the coals are coated with grey ash, plop your bird on the grid (between the two portions of fire) above a drip tray
- 7) Cover and cook for just under an hour. Coat with additional marinade periodically and perhaps turn once
- 8) Get some roasted veggies and couscous going (you can do these on the *braai* too – just add some extra cooking time)
- 9) Carve that most succulent bird!

[Box 2:]

Fourie's top tips for the perfect *braai*:

- 1) Always have a jug of water handy, should the fire get out of control
- 2) Don't *braai* on a fire you just lit: give the fire time to get busy with the coals. Timing is of the essence. If you wait too long to *braai*, your fire might be too cold, if you *braai* too early, the fire might be too hot and you end up burning your steak or tearing the skin on your *boerewors*
- 3) Don't turn the meat too often, but chicken and chops should be rotated as often as possible
- 4) Use tongs that don't have sharp edges that can tear the skin of the *boerewors*. Scissor-type tongs are the best to work with.
- 5) Finally, let's face it, it gets hot in summer in front of the fire and you tend to sweat a bit, so a small towel and an ice cold refreshment is always welcome.

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