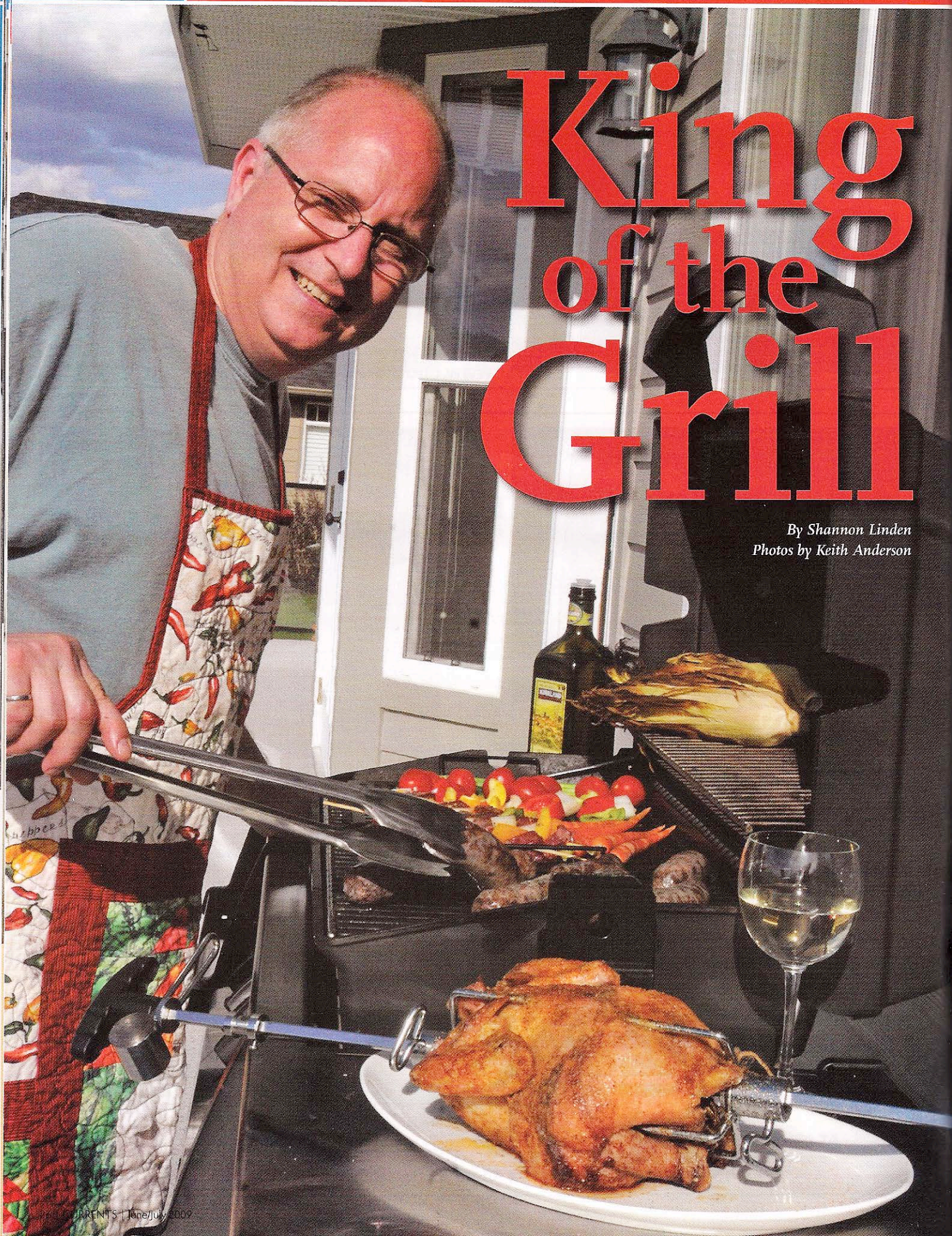


King of the Grill

By Shannon Linden
Photos by Keith Anderson



Paul Blanchet is a competitive man. Vice-president of iCompass Technologies (a Kamloops company providing web-based services) he's often boss of the boardroom, but get him near a grill and this guy is on fire.

A perfectionist with a zest for the spice of life, Blanchet is passionate about cooking — barbequing in particular.

Never mind a degree in engineering, he holds a bachelor of barbeque science from Greasehouse University, U.S.A.

"It's my BS degree," he laughs.

But spend some time in Blanchet's kitchen and sniff the truth: barbequing is no joking matter.

A competitor on the cook-off circuits in both the U.S. and Canada, he appreciates that plenty of cash is up for grabs, but for barbeque competitors it's the chef's pride that's really at stake.

While a dinner party for eight might send some of us (no names mentioned) over the culinary edge, pleasing crowds is what really gets him cooking.

"I love the challenge," he says. Preparing 400 pounds of meat on 10 different barbeques for 250 people isn't easy, but he finds it fulfilling.

"My engineering projects are longer term. I don't see success until months down the road but this passion for cooking — it brings instant gratification."

Blanchet says it's the life that's wrapped around the food that appeals to him.

"I'm fascinated with the history, culture, ethnicity and interesting ingredients reflected in different foods."

Yet for this Canadian, finding his own signature style meant going south.

Light My Fire

Along with his University of British Columbia colleagues, Blanchet cut his culinary teeth in the kitchen at Gage Tower residence.

"Each of us was responsible for a meal a week," he says, grinning. "Living with a bunch of engineers, it was always a competition."

But it was a career move to the United States that saw Blanchet's cooking really heat up.

"My wife, Linda, and I would be driving around Kansas City and we'd see throngs of people milling about parking lots. Every weekend, it was the same. Finally we had to find out what all the fuss was about."

The fuss, it turned out, was fire. The folks of Kansas were cooking. Claiming to have the best barbeques in the world, these Americans pride them-

selves on the fine art of smoking their culinary creations to succulent perfection. Not to be confused with grilling (quick cooking over direct heat), barbeque chefs like to take it "low and slow." In other words, baste that beef over indirect, low heat, for a long, long time.

"You hit the border of Canada and mention 'barbeque,'" Blanchet says, "And we all think grilling. But you go anywhere in the U.S. and they know the difference."

"Barbeque is unique," he explains. "This kind of food is so delicious. The flavour that comes out of the cooking is so dramatically better than the norm."

Grilling is Grate — Barbeque is Smokin'

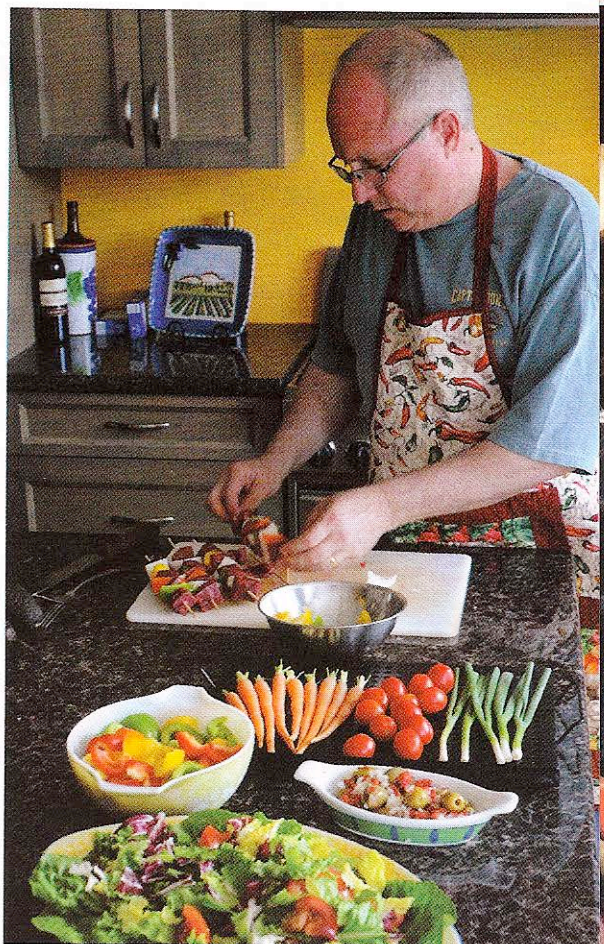
Grilling — searing meat on a grate over high temperatures to seal in flavour — is best suited to more tender cuts of meat like pork loin, tenderloin and good steaks, while barbequing (or smoking) lends itself well to the cheaper cuts of meat, like pork shoulder, side ribs and beef brisket.

But what if you're like me? I look at a beef brisket and back away — slowly — intimidated by a cut of meat.

"Beef brisket is easy and it's phenomenal on the barbeque," Blanchet insists.

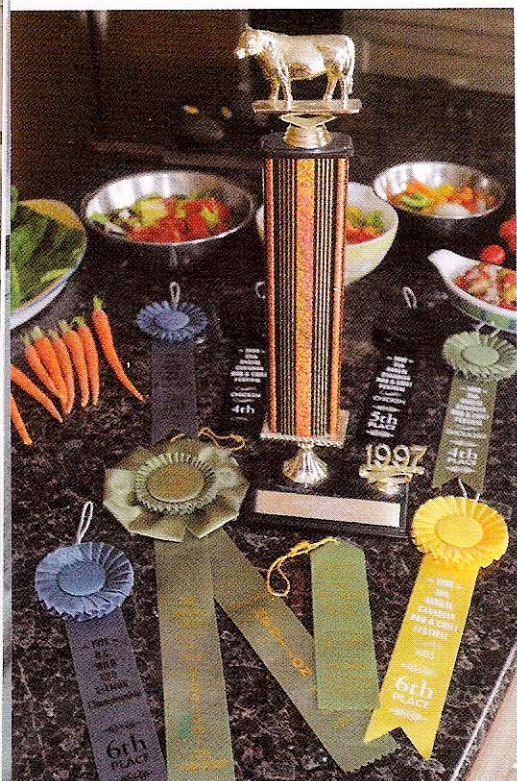
"It's made up of a lot of gristle, which turns to gelatin and gets nice and tender when you cook it low and slow.

"Knowledge is power, even in the kitchen," he assures me. "Read cookbooks, take courses, talk to people in the know. Learn as much as you can."



Paul Blanchet prepares for a barbeque feast — thorough prep-work means he'll have everything at his fingertips when he gets out to the grill.

"Knowledge is power, even in the kitchen. Read cookbooks, take courses, talk to people in the know. Learn as much as you can."



Barbeque kudos — Blanchet's proficiency at the grill has won him numerous awards.

That's what Blanchet did. He took a course in Kansas with internationally recognized barbeque chef Blanchet Kirk.

"The day after my course at DuBrulle Cooking School ended, I entered a competition. I used my own creation — a rub — and I won a ribbon. I was hooked."

So smitten, this father of two plans to spend some of his spring cooking off in Kelowna, in that city's third annual Smoke on the Water competition.

Sadly, nothing of the sort exists in Kamloops — yet. But add that goal to Blanchet's list.

"I'd love to bring a barbeque competition to Kamloops," he enthuses. "The city is perfect for it."

Don't Get Burned

When it comes to high heat, you have to be willing to stand by your pan.

"The worst thing you can do is let the grill get too hot, too fast. And you can't walk away," Blanchet warns.

"You have to keep watch over your meat because it cooks so fast."

An innocent stroll inside to top up your Pinot

Noir could result in a disappointing dinner.

The challenge for barbequing, on the other hand, is keeping the heat consistent.

"When you're cooking for six to eight hours or more, just a few degrees can ruin your meal. You have to watch the temperature of both the

barbeque and the meat. Consistency is key."

Grilling loyalists will insist propane, because of its high heat, is better than natural gas, while mesquite, because it burns 60% hotter than regular bricks, is best for your base. But new technology means natural gas barbeques (which many homeowners opt for) have gotten better in terms of temperature control, for both grilling and barbequing.

As for the small equipment, according to Blanchet tongs and a spatula are the screwdrivers of the barbeque world.

"Start with the basics," he says. A flipper for burgers is also handy and stainless steel or ceramic bowls are musts (don't use aluminum, it reacts with marinades.) And a good thermometer is your best friend.

"Experts can tell by touch," Blanchet explains, "But most people will need a thermometer (especially for bigger cuts like roasts) to gauge when dinner is done. And finally, you'll need a good sauce or a rub."

So, What's the Rub?

Rubs are dry mixes of spices and salt, hand rubbed over the surface of meat.

"Rubs are designed to enhance flavour," Blanchet says,

"But because of the salt, they can dry meat out so they're best applied shortly (15 minutes) before grilling." They also work wonderfully on vegetables.

"For the vegetarians out there, onions, corn on the cob, portobello mushrooms and peppers do really well on the grill."

Blanchet advises using olive oil (butter burns) and grilling rather than roasting vegetables as they tend to turn mushy when barbequed.

Marinades are meant to tenderize and flavour tougher cuts of meat but shouldn't be left on for too long because the acid ingredient is another mush-maker. Finally, a sauce, like a rub, is best applied for the short term.

"Sauces will burn before the meat is cooked," Blanchet explains, "So only apply them in the final minutes of cooking."

Smiling through the Smoke

'Tis the season to tempt the neighbors with the succulent scents that swirl through the smoke from your barbeque. While most of us aren't experts like Blanchet, we can take heart that practice makes perfect.

Before he took his course at DuBrulle, Blanchet claims his attempt at barbeque turkey (now one of his specialties) resulted in "the most hideous looking bird" he'd ever seen. Neglecting to open the chimney on his new smoker barbeque, that fowl came out, well, foul. The bird was baked sooty black and deemed inedible.

Along with skill and passion, you need a sense of humour to be King of the Grill. ●

"When you're cooking for six to eight hours or more, just a few degrees can ruin your meal. You have to watch the temperature of both the barbeque and the meat. Consistency is key."

Paul Blanchet's #1 Award-Winning Rub

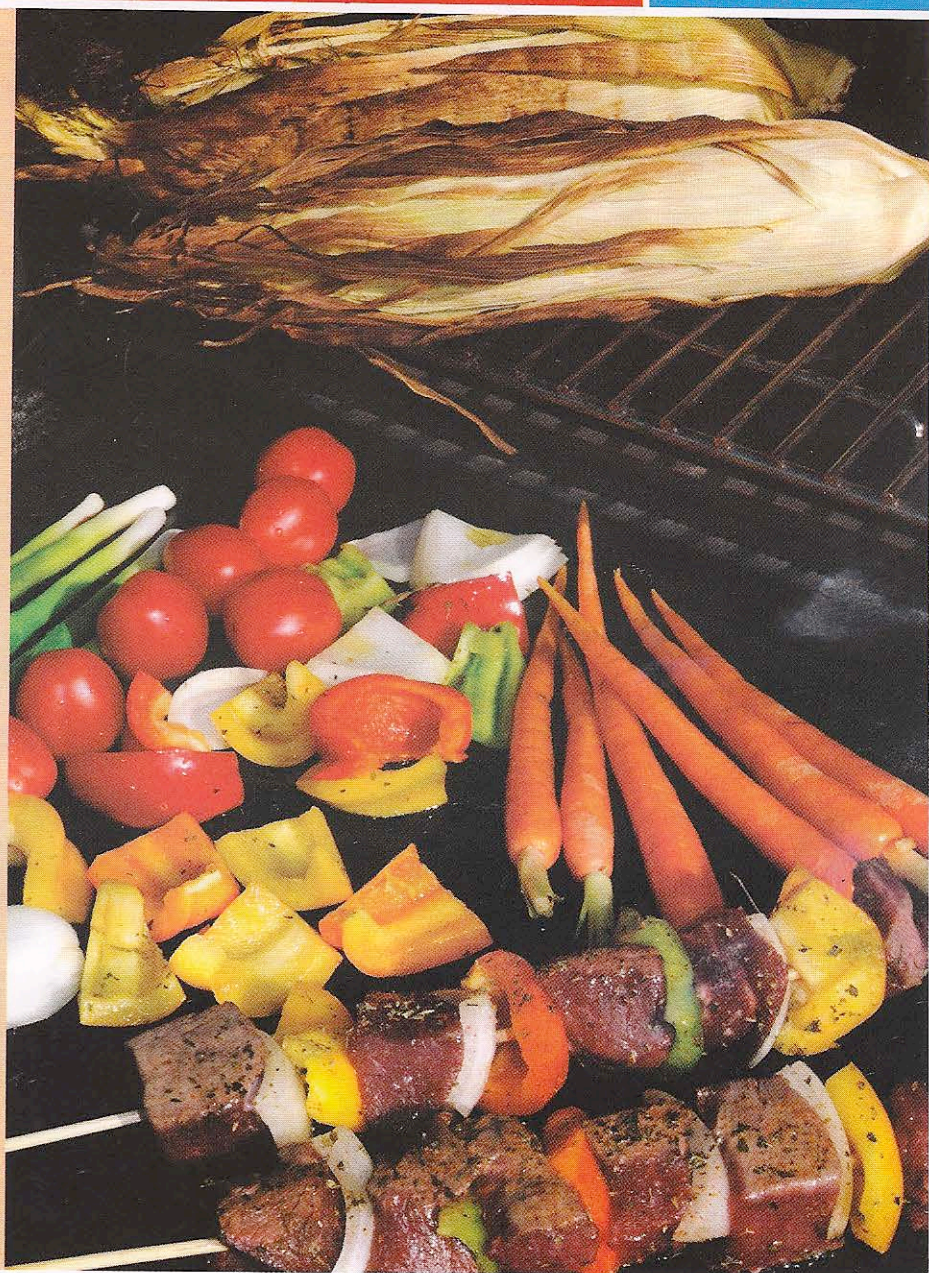
250 ml - 1 cup - granulated cane sugar
 125 ml - ½ cup - seasoned salt
 60 ml - ¼ cup - onion salt
 60 ml - ¼ cup - garlic salt
 125 ml - ½ cup - paprika
 60 ml - ¼ cup - chili powder
 30 ml - 2 Tbsp. - ground pepper
 5 ml - 1 tsp. - celery powder
 10 ml - 2 tsp. - mustard powder
 5 ml - 1 tsp. - coriander
 2 ml - ½ tsp. - cinnamon

Mix all ingredients in a bowl and sprinkle evenly over surface of meat, approximately 15-30 minutes before cooking. Store remaining rub in an airtight container for up to six months.

Paul Blanchet's Simple Secret for Succulent Salmon

Salmon is a delicious and healthy choice for a summer meal. Blanchet likes the following marinade, applied 30 to 45 minutes before barbecuing, followed by a light sprinkle of your favourite rub or Creole seasoning before grilling:

1 full measure olive oil
 ½ measure lemon juice
 ½ measure lime juice



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