



Above left: Surrounded by rolling vineyards, the *Hilltop Dining Room* at the Carneros Inn is a likely place to find grapevine-grilled dishes on the menu. Yet executive chef Kimball Jones notes, "It's hard to get big pieces of grapevine unless you are pulling out vines, but green cuttings in December are great. I put them on top of mesquite to get a nice wet smoke."  
Above right: Kalamazoo Outdoor Gourmet recommends soaking grapevine chunks overnight in wine, tea or beer, which imbues more flavor in the grilled food than water alone.

If Noah was, as scholars say, the world's first vintner, then grilling over grapevines could also date to Biblical times. Certainly the practice hasn't waned in popularity since, especially in "viticulturally active countries like France, [where grapevine cuttings] are in great supply," says TV host and *The Barbecue!* Bible author Steven Raichlen, who includes a recipe in his tome for snails grilled over grapevine cuttings from *L'Hostal* in Castelnou in southwest France. "[Cuttings] are sold in practically every gas station in the French countryside." Nor is the technique considered bourgeois. "I recently dined at *Cordeillan-Bages*, a Michelin two-star restaurant in Pauillac [Bordeaux], where tournedos of beef smoked over grapevines were a specialty of the house," he notes.

This long-lived European tradition has caught on here, as well. Across the country, upscale, sophisticated restaurants have installed wood-burning grills and ovens, making them the backbone of their menus. Kimball Jones, executive chef at *The Carneros Inn* in Napa, California, and co-author of both *Sharing the Vineyard Table* and *The Casual Vineyard Table*, is launching a new restaurant in August. Its tentative name is *Farm*, an ideal fit for a chef whose driving philosophy is an interconnection with the land. It will feature a wood-fire oven and grill and will offer dozens of grilled and oven-smoked dishes. Special wine country twists include grilling with wine barrel wood chips and grapevine cuttings. "I live in the middle of a vineyard, so I just go into the backyard and prune some branches," Jones says. "It's hard to get big pieces of grapevine unless you are pulling out vines, but green cuttings in December are great. They dry out during the summer and those cuttings need to be soaked. I put them on top of mesquite to get a nice wet smoke." In effect, the vines are harvested twice and yield far more than just their grape clusters.

After the harvest takes place each year in early October, Jones says the vineyard team hosts a memorable party. "Pits are dug and loaded with vine cuttings made from the previous year's crop. When the wood burns down to glowing coals, the grilling begins. The food is simple, abundant and good." Jones grills pork kebabs and Mission figs and grapes on grapevine skewers, "which contribute a wonderful smoky quality to the dish." Another favorite is squab skewered on grapevines. "Soaking the skewers in water before cooking prevents them from burning on the grill." While he admits that the smoky character of grilled foods is a bit difficult to pair with wines, Jones suggests wines aged in oak, like a Groth Cabernet Sauvignon or a fruity Zinfandel such as Ridge's Lytton Springs or PlumpJack Syrah.

Wherever wine is grown, of course, good food is nearby. Take the annual "Good Life Series" of events at Cakebread Cellars in Rutherford. Culinary director Brian Streeter fires up the grill in the outdoor kitchen for the "Ring of Fire Grilling Class," where up to 16 students can master Mediterranean, southern barbecue and Asian grilling and smoking. "A big benefit for us is that grapevines are right here. I use them as kindling in a wood-burning fire to give a quick burst of heat at the end of grilling — for example on a crisp pizza for smoky undertones, or for a nice char on hanger steak with smoked tomato ketchup."