



Backyard Oktoberfest

One grill, lots of sausage and sauerkraut, and a hundred friends

BY MOLLY WATSON PHOTOGRAPHS BY THAYER ALLYSON GOWDY



Bacon-butter potatoes and carrot salad



OPPOSITE The Oktoberfest spread put on by James Bullard and Emily Wilson in their San Francisco backyard. **TOP ROW** Sausages sizzle on Bullard's homemade brick grill; a cool beer; author Molly Watson prepares a plate with bratwurst and bacon-butter potatoes. **LEFT** Guests (from left) Asha Ghosh, Narasimha Rao, Jason Barbour, and Desiree Branganza enjoy the feast. **BOTTOM ROW** The host at the grill; Stetson Schott shows off his lunch; Sam Kaplan kills some time climbing trees.



FOOD STYLING: KAREN SHINTO; PROP STYLING: EMMA STAR JENSEN

JAMES BULLARD AND EMILY WILSON ARE BOLD PEOPLE. Every October they invite everyone they know to join their version of Oktoberfest. Yes: everyone they know.

“It’s a party party,” Bullard says, “with copious amounts of eating and drinking and everyone invited like when you threw a party in college.”

More than 100 people stop by their San Francisco house during the six-hour event, where they find a keg, coolers of soft drinks and more beer, a table laden with potluck offerings of salads and side dishes, a kitchen counter covered with buns and condiments, and a grill full of sausage.

“The party was inspired by my deep appreciation for sausages of all types,” Bullard explains. “We’ve had Georgian sausage, Portuguese, Czech. One year I found a huge coiled Polish sausage that weighed 10 pounds. I’m not sure it was meant to be grilled, but we put it on the grill, and it was a big hit.”

Bullard’s grilling adventures are not limited to sausage. One year he threw big chunks of salt-encrusted beef on the grill, Brazilian-style. Another year he grilled a whole slab of bacon. But there’s always lots of sausage, and there’s always plenty of beer. And if anyone goes home hungry, it’s not because of any lack of hospitality on Bullard and Wilson’s part.

“I usually buy about 100 pounds of sausage,” Bullard says, “and it all gets eaten.”

The party, now in its eighth year, is a real lesson in entertaining: The kitchen is small, the grill is smaller, and the yard is postage stamp-size. It is also a daunting climb down a steep set of stairs from the kitchen door. The space is not particularly well suited to hosting a huge party—indoors or out. But the generous spirit with which the gathering is thrown pulls even the most timid into the swing of things. As Bullard keeps the sausage supply steady, Wilson makes sure every guest meets someone new.

“I like having this big party every year and seeing everyone and how much the kids have grown,” Wilson says. “Friends bring friends, and they bring *their* friends. One year someone brought a friend who had just moved here from Wisconsin and thought nobody in California ate meat. She was pretty happy to see all that sausage.”

The crowd spreads throughout the house and garden. Since the party usually falls during the pennant race, one group congregates around the television in the bedroom upstairs, watching the baseball game and sending out emissaries for food and drink. Older guests tend to sit in the comparative calm of the living room. But most people meander between the dining room and the yard, carrying food to and from the grill, fetching another beer or more salad, bumping into old Oktoberfest acquaintances, and making new friends.

“One year there were so many people that it took me half an hour to get from the yard back into the house,” says friend and longtime Oktoberfest attendee Frances Kaplan. “It’s amazing.”

Although they like the coziness of having the party at home, Bullard and Wilson have also hosted the event in Golden Gate Park, where Ultimate Frisbee and other field games were part of

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the fun. The wild play is now limited to the kids—who scamper through the rose garden, climb the apple trees, and swarm leaping and diving into a front room that Wilson lines with futons and pillows—but the party has kept its raucous feel.

“The first year we had it in our house, someone called the cops about the noise,” Wilson says. “That really pleased James. But now we know our neighbors, so they all get invited too.”

To follow Bullard and Wilson’s example, simply buy an absurd amount of sausages and beer, send out an email to everyone you know, and hold on for the ride. Or you can cook several of the sausages and/or grill a chicken for a smaller group but in a similar spirit. Any of the following sides or salads—inspired by dishes their guests bring—would be a welcome addition to a fall potluck.

Grilled beer-cooked sausages

Bullard simmers his sausages in beer first, which makes for quick grilling and helps feed guests fast. We love these smeared with coarse-grain mustard on crusty rolls. The onions take on a lot of the ale’s flavor, including its slight bitterness. Leave them off your sausage if you’re sensitive to bitter flavors.

PREP AND COOK TIME 40 minutes

MAKES 12 servings

NOTES You can add up to 8 more sausages without increasing the amount of beer or onion.

6 bottles (12 oz. each) medium- to heavy-bodied ale (9 cups)

12 bratwurst

1 large onion, halved lengthwise and sliced crosswise

1. Bring beer to a boil in a large, wide pot. Add sausages and onions and simmer 15 minutes. Cover, remove from heat, and let sit until ready to grill.

2. Heat a gas or charcoal grill to medium (you can hold your hand 1 to 2 in. above the cooking grate only 4 to 5 seconds). Using tongs or a slotted spoon, transfer sausages to the grill. Cook sausages, turning once, until browned on both sides, about 8 minutes. Meanwhile, drain onions and set aside. Serve sausages hot or warm, with onions if you like.

PER SERVING 350 CAL., 75% (261 CAL.) FROM FAT; 16 G PROTEIN; 29 G FAT (11 G SAT.); 4.3 G CARBO (0.3 G FIBER); 633 MG SODIUM; 68 MG CHOL.

Caraway sauerkraut

Caraway seeds, onion, and ale transform the humble condiment of jarred sauerkraut into a stellar side dish. It’s good on a bun with a beer-cooked sausage or simply on its own, by the forkful.

PREP AND COOK TIME 45 minutes

MAKES 12 to 16 servings

NOTES Keeps up to 2 days, covered and chilled. Bring to room temperature or warm gently before serving. We found that most brands of sauerkraut had plenty of flavor without additional salt, but be sure to taste the finished dish and add salt if you like.

2 jars (32 oz. each) sauerkraut

2 tbsp. vegetable oil

1 onion, thinly sliced

2 tbsp. caraway seeds

1 cup medium-bodied ale



Beet salad



Ginger chocolate cookies

TOP ROW Guest Stuart Schott helps himself to the buffet; Ernest Wolf (top), Stetson Schott (center), and Nate Kaplan contemplate the joys of ginger chocolate cookies. **LEFT** Asha Ghosh maneuvers bun and plate.

FOOD STYLING: KAREN SHINTO; PROP STYLING: EMMA STAR JENSEN

1. Drain and rinse sauerkraut; set aside.
2. In a 4-qt. pot, heat oil over medium-high heat. Add onions and cook, stirring occasionally, until softened, about 3 minutes. Add caraway seeds and cook, stirring, until combined, about 1 minute. Stir in sauerkraut and ale. Reduce heat to medium-low and cook, stirring once in a while, until the mixture is hot and flavors are blended, about 30 minutes. Serve warm or at room temperature.

PER SERVING 35 CAL., 49% (17 CAL.) FROM FAT; 0.8 G PROTEIN; 1.9 G FAT (0.2 G SAT.); 4.3 G CARBO (1.9 G FIBER); 256 MG SODIUM; 0 MG CHOL.

Bacon-butter potatoes

These potatoes are rich and savory and particularly delicious when eaten alongside beer-cooked sausages.

PREP AND COOK TIME 35 minutes

MAKES 12 to 16 servings

NOTES You can finish these potatoes up to 2 hours before serving. Put them in an ovenproof serving dish and keep warm, covered, in a 200° oven.

2 bottles (12 oz. each) medium-bodied ale
(3 cups)

4 lbs. red-skinned potatoes

8 slices thick-cut bacon

¼ cup butter

1 small onion, chopped

½ tsp. freshly ground black pepper

Salt

1. Bring beer to a boil in a 5- to 6-qt. pot that can hold a steamer basket snugly. Meanwhile, cut potatoes into bite-size pieces and put them in a steamer basket. When beer boils, put steamer basket of potatoes in pot, cover, reduce heat to low, and steam until potatoes are tender when they are pierced with a fork, about 15 minutes.

2. Meanwhile, cook bacon in a frying pan over medium heat until crisp. Drain bacon on paper towels, chop, and set aside. Pour off fat in pan, but don't wipe out or rinse. Return pan to medium heat and add butter and onions. Cook, stirring occasionally, until onions start to brown, about 10 minutes.

3. Meanwhile, put potatoes in a serving dish, reserving beer in bottom of pot. Add ¾ cup beer and reserved bacon to onions, scraping up any browned bits from bottom of frying pan.

4. Pour bacon mixture over potatoes, add pepper, and stir gently to coat. Add salt to taste. Serve hot or warm.

PER SERVING 146 CAL., 38% (55 CAL.) FROM FAT; 3.9 G PROTEIN; 6.1 G FAT (2.9 G SAT.); 19 G CARBO (2 G FIBER); 124 MG SODIUM; 13 MG CHOL.

Carrot salad

This tangy salad adds zip—and lots of vitamin A—to any picnic or barbecue.

PREP TIME 20 minutes

MAKES 12 to 16 servings

NOTES The salad keeps up to 1 day, covered and chilled. A food processor makes quick work of the grating.

3 lbs. carrots

⅓ cup cider vinegar

About 2 tsp. salt

2 tbsp. chopped flat-leaf parsley

Peel and grate carrots; put in a large bowl. Toss with vinegar and 2 tsp. salt, adding more salt to taste. Add parsley and toss to combine. Serve at room temperature.

PER SERVING 33 CAL., 3% (1 CAL.) FROM FAT; 0.8 G PROTEIN; 0.1 G FAT (0 G SAT.); 8 G CARBO (2.4 G FIBER); 318 MG SODIUM; 0 MG CHOL.

Beet salad

Any beets would be delicious here, but we prefer the deep color of red beets with the rest of the menu. Roasting the beets before grating intensifies their flavor and is an easy, relatively mess-free way to cook them.

PREP AND COOK TIME 1½ hours

MAKES 12 to 16 servings

NOTES The salad keeps up to 2 days, covered and chilled. To reduce staining when handling red beets, we like to wear disposable latex gloves and use a dishwasher-safe cutting board.

3 lbs. beets

1 tsp. olive oil

⅓ cup cider vinegar

2 tsp. salt, plus more to taste

1. Preheat oven to 375°. Trim beets, drizzle with oil, and wrap in foil. Roast beets until tender when pierced with a fork, 30 to 45 minutes (time will vary depending on size of beets). Unwrap and let cool.

2. When beets are cool enough to handle, slip peels off and grate beets on the large holes of a box grater. Toss with vinegar and salt, adding more salt to taste if you like. Serve at room temperature.

PER SERVING 26 CAL., 4% (1 CAL.) FROM FAT; 0.8 G PROTEIN; 0.1 G FAT (0 G SAT.); 6 G CARBO (0.6 G FIBER); 332 MG SODIUM; 0 MG CHOL.

Ginger chocolate cookies

Part chewy molasses cookie, part homey chocolate chip cookie, part spicy gingersnap: These cookies—inspired by ones brought annually by an Oktoberfest guest—have it all. The Sunset staff ate our test batches as quickly as we could bake them.

PREP AND COOK TIME 1 hour

MAKES About 36 cookies

NOTES Keeps up to 2 days in an airtight container at room temperature.

¾ cup unsalted butter, plus more for baking sheet

2 cups flour

⅓ cup unsweetened cocoa powder

2½ tbsp. ground ginger

2 tsp. baking soda

1½ tsp. each cinnamon and freshly ground nutmeg

½ tsp. salt

1 cup packed light brown sugar

¼ cup molasses

1 egg

1 tsp. vanilla extract

8 oz. bittersweet chocolate, finely chopped

⅓ cup granulated sugar

1. Preheat oven to 350°. Butter a large baking sheet and set aside. In a medium bowl, whisk flour, cocoa powder, ginger, baking soda, cinnamon, nutmeg, and salt until thoroughly combined. Set aside.

2. In a large bowl, beat ¾ cup butter and the brown sugar until light and fluffy, about 3 minutes. Add molasses, egg, and vanilla; beat to combine.

3. Mix in dry ingredients gently but thoroughly, scraping down sides of the bowl as necessary. (Batter will be thick.) Stir in chopped chocolate until well combined.

4. Form batter into 2-tbsp. balls, roll each ball in granulated sugar, and place 12 balls on buttered baking sheet. (If batter is too sticky, dampen your hands with water when forming balls.) Dip the bottom of a cup or glass in water and use it to flatten balls to a thickness of about ¼ in., rewetting glass as necessary to prevent sticking.

5. Bake cookies 5 minutes, turn pan 180°, and bake until just set, about 5 minutes more. Cool on pan for 5 minutes, then transfer to cooling racks. Repeat forming and baking with remaining balls of dough.

PER COOKIE 133 CAL., 44% (58 CAL.) FROM FAT; 1.5 G PROTEIN; 6.4 G FAT (3.7 G SAT.); 19 G CARBO (0.6 G FIBER); 108 MG SODIUM; 16 MG CHOL. ■

Make-ahead plan

2 DAYS BEFORE THE PARTY

- Make sauerkraut

- Roast beets

DAY BEFORE THE PARTY

- Bake cookies

- Make beet salad

- Make carrot salad

MORNING OF THE PARTY

- Bring carrot salad, beet salad, and sauerkraut to room temperature

- Set out condiments and buns for sausages

- Chill beer or pick up keg

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Grilled beer-cooked sausages, caraway sauerkraut, and beet salad