

On the Grill



Most Common Mistakes

The smell of a barbecue grill marks a change in the seasons

Nothing says “so long, winter” like crackling charcoal under a hot grate.

Spring and summer is a time of long-awaited outdoor get-togethers with savory, fresh-made food. But everything can take an ugly turn if you aren't meticulous about cleanliness, the quality of your tools and perhaps the most overlooked element of great grilling – preheating.

Grizzled grillers don't make these kind of basic errors – and you don't have to, either. Here's a look at the most common mistakes, and how to avoid them:

USING THE WRONG TOOLS

Grilling involves an admittedly large number of critical elements. But you can do everything else right and still fumble before reaching the goal line if you have low-quality tools.

Are your tongs and spatula warped and rusted out? Is the grill brush clogged with last season's residue? Upgrade to sturdier, longer-lasting new grilling tools, preferably made out of stainless steel.

Look for long-handled or extended versions, which offer maximum safety for reaching across a hot grill. Dishwasher-safe models make cleaning up easier than



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ever before.

NOT CLEANING THE GRILL

It's a pain, of course, but the grill should be maintained before and after each and every use. Burn off grill residue, either by turning burners to high or building a large fire underneath. Scrape off excess

grease and ash from under the grate. This allows flames to flow more freely. Sometimes these blockages snuff out the fire completely. Deep clean the entire thing two or three times a year, scrubbing everything by hand while keeping an eye out for dried-on food particles, rust or grease build up.

IMPATIENCE WITH PREHEATING

You wouldn't put food directly into an oven before it's had time to preheat. The same common sense approach should be taken with grills, which typically need at least a quarter hour to warm up. Putting food on too early can put you at risk of undercooking, and spreading

food-borne illnesses. Experts typically recommend that food is cooked to an interior temp of 300 to 400 degrees. Purchase and make use of a temperature gauge to make sure. The very approach to lower the heat once your food is added, something known as “low and slow” cooking. This creates a juicier result.

Which Grill Is Best?

Options abound these days depending on what's cooking

Make the best choice before taking your indoor cooking skills to decks, patios, campsites and parks.

Most outdoor grills heat with either charcoal or gas. More recently, grills utilizing electricity and pellet-fueled options have begun to proliferate.

There are pros and cons with each, often relating to what you're planning on grilling up. Here's more information for those who are still trying to decide:

GAS GRILLS

If you're looking for an experience that most closely matches working in an every-day indoor kitchen, gas grills are the best choice. They offer a no-fuss, less-mess experience because there's no charcoal or other burning materials to manage. They also offer more uniform temperatures because they're fueled with the push of a button, either by natural gas or propane tanks. This is one of the most favored choices for people who often cook outside, since clean up is easier.

CHARCOAL GRILLS

What gas doesn't offer is the rich, aromatic flavors associated with cooking over charcoal. They come in an eye-popping variety of shapes and sizes, across every price point. The extras add in more cost, but can



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also make for a smoother cooking experience. Charcoal grills may use briquettes or lumps of charcoal; some favor different types of wood for a savory boost. You'll have less control, but that's also considered part of the experience. Clean up is a bit more of a hassle, too. But nothing tastes quite like these flame-kissed meals.

ELECTRIC GRILLS

Electric grills offer ease, control and convenience – without the fire risks associated with gas, charcoal or wood. They're more earth-friendly and apartment or condo dwellers may find these to be a great option if no-grilling rules are in place. They aren't the right choice, however, for anyone

looking for the smokey flavors typically associated with barbecue – whether we're talking meat or vegetables. They can also end up costing you more.

PELLET-FUELED GRILLS

One of the latest updates to the grilling experience is using pellet fuel. It takes advantage

of another green process where hardwood pellets are formed from scraps of wood. The upside, versus electric grilling, is that they offer the authentic flavors that so many desire. The downside, versus charcoal, is that the complicated forming process makes this option more expensive – and often harder to find.

Tips For Cooking Game

You bagged the big buck – now what?

Wild game requires a different approach at the grill than store-bought meats.

You don't want to go through all that it took to bring this choice harvest home – from days (or weeks) spent on the hunt, to preparing and cooking – only to stumble at the very end.

We'll discuss common mistakes in grilling game, with a focus on preparing the meat and how to cook it:

COMMON MISTAKES

The first rule of grilling game is to pay close attention to the recommended cook time. Keeping it over the flames even a matter of minutes too long can leave you with gamey, rubbery results. Don't cook wild birds whole, and pay close attention to areas where you shouldn't leave fat and skin – in particular on certain breeds of geese or duck. Everything starts with how you shoot. You're looking for a quick kill, since that can impact the taste of the meat. Outdoor Life magazine also notes that inexperience and impatience plays a role. Practice makes perfect; don't give up after one bad experience at the grill.

MEAT PREPARATION

Meat should be kept cold or on ice for 24 hours after its has been harvested, so that the rigor mortis process can play out. Some savvy grillers rec-

ommend letting the meat rest longer, uncovered in a refrigerator. This allows more blood to drain and evaporate, and that's what gives wild meat the "gamey" flavor which some people complain about. Butcher the meat when ready, deboning and trimming to remove everything that isn't

muscle – including fat, connective tissues, hair and silver skin. Next, bag and mark everything so that you can quickly identify the cuts and date for future trips out to the grill.

COOKING METHOD

Different cuts of meat

require their own unique approaches. Tender cuts are time honored favorites over fire, while tougher meats should be cooked with less heat and left a little longer. Braising those tougher cuts, including neck, shank and shoulder, in a sauce sets them up well for use in stews, chili

and soups. Cut the hindquarters into strips across the grain for use in sandwiches, salads and kebobs. Searing is key before grilling game birds. You want to scald the first layer of the meat in a hot pan before putting it over flame, locking in flavor and moisture.



Safety On the Grill

Don't let a fun day be ruined by injury or damage to your home

The U.S. Fire Administration estimates that grilling-related incidents alone cause nearly \$40 million in damages annually.

That doesn't take into account the personal injuries that are associated with improper grilling techniques. The risks include painful or sometimes disfiguring burns, or even a potentially catastrophic explosion.

The USFA has compiled some important safety tips to familiarize yourself with before lighting the next match out in the backyard:

GENERAL GUIDELINES

Keep your cooking area clean, removing fat and grease buildup on both the grill itself and in the areas below. These deposits can create fire hazards. Never leave a grill unattended. Place it well away from the eaves of your home and overhead branches. Never grill inside an enclosed area. The fumes can be toxic, and this greatly increases the risk of fire. Keep children and pets at least three feet away at all times.

LIGHTING THE GRILL

Charcoal grilling is so popular because of the flavor boost it provides, but it's still a potentially dangerous process. The best way to prepare coals



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for grilling is to close the lid and create a chimney effect by opening an access point. If you're struggling to get underway, only use lighter fluid to ignite the fire – never when the coals are already actively burning. The rush of fuel can create an out-of-control rush of flame. Keep these fire-starting materials away from chil-

dren. Remember that hot charcoals are still a danger, long after the flames have died down. Once they are completely extinguished, then dispose of used charcoal in a metal container.

SAFELY USING GAS

On-board lighting systems for gas grills mean you can

quickly get the flames going, and then maintain a more consistent temperature. But these grills require a more in-depth knowledge of how the grills are connected with home gas lines and how to connect and operate with propane tanks. They also require regular maintenance, including the application of a light solution

of soap and water to the connecting hoses. If bubbles are seen, turn off the gas source and call a professional in to service the grill. If you smell gas while cooking, leave the area immediately and call the fire department. Do not move the grill, since that could create a spark – and then an explosion.

Turning It Down – Way Down

Cold smoking infuses your food with flavor for cooking later

There are strict temperature ranges involved with this method, which can also be used as a preservative.

It typically takes 12-14 hours, at temps between 40 and 120 degrees. In some cases, foods may be cold smoked for weeks. The food isn't actually cooked as hot smoking does; instead this process acts as a flavor enhancer.

But there are important things to keep in mind before taking up cold smoking, including which foods are best suited and what you'll have to do next:

BEST CHOICES

Foods best suited for cold smoking include meats, cheeses, fish, fruits, vegetables and even nuts. Cheese is typically cited as the easiest food to cold smoke, especially when placed over flaming apple, pecan, cherry or maple wood.

Look for fresh, high quality meats when preparing to cold smoke. All meat should be salted, fermented or cured since cold smoking at around 100 degrees isn't warm enough to inhibit microbial growth.

You can also cold smoke veggies, sausages, ham, and many types of seafood. Just remember that preparing seafood in this way could create higher incidents of botulism and listeria if not done correctly.



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WHAT YOU'LL NEED

Separate smoke generators and attachable cold-smoker accessories are priced right for the budget-minded cold smoker. Some higher-end smokers are available commercially with their own separate chamber to keep food away from the heat source. The cheapest way to get started is by burning sawdust or

wood chips. Wood pellets are usually a little more pricey. Be prepared to refrigerate and continue this process the following day, if needed. Cold smoking requires precision and patience, and you'll have to invest money and time to achieve the correct setup. Then it's critically important to follow expert recipes – to the letter.

TIME TO GRILL

Some experts estimate that the ideal cold-smoking temp is no higher than 86 degrees, while others target a temperature of 72 degrees in order to keep the food from starting to cook.

Whatever level of heat you initially choose, cold-smoked foods should be properly stored and then grilled to typi-

cally recommended internal temperatures before consumption in order to limit the risk of food-borne illnesses. Immunocompromised people including the elderly, pregnant women and the chronically ill should avoid eating cold-smoked fish products since they're particularly susceptible to listeria contamination.

Tired of Beef?

We all can grow bored with the same old burgers and steaks

Luckily, there is a broad range of alternative for those who still want to grill.

Some are old favorites, like chicken or fish. Others are newer, more trendy options like turkey-based patties or plant-based substitutes.

But if prepared well, they all provide a nice change of pace:

CHICKEN

Skinless white-meat chicken is high in protein and low in fat, calories and saturated fats. It's perfect for marinating, as it readily absorbs sauces. Just be mindful of using too much salt, sugar or oil. Dark-meat chicken on the other hand, can be cooked bone in with the skin in order to capture flavor and keep it moist, just remember to remove the fatty skin before consuming for the best health benefits. Remove it before grilling then apply your favorite sauce, or keep it on and serve with sauces on the side.

FISH

Fish, especially salmon, is a great alternative to tired every-day barbecue choices – and as a very lean source of protein, it's the healthiest option of all. Salmon grills beautifully, while offering critically important heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids. Rub with



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a mixture of spices and brown sugar for a special treat, or follow your own recipe.

TURKEY BURGERS

This is a healthy option, if you read the fine print. Many turkey burgers are actually higher in fat than the typical store-bought lean beef versions because the skin is ground in

with the meat. So study the label, making sure your turkey burger is “lean.” There’s not that much difference in terms of calories, as long as the patties are of similar size; it’s really more about exploring different flavors. As always, limit the use of condiments since they often add tons of unneeded extra calories.

MEAT SUBSTITUTES

Again, these options are more about trying something new rather than necessarily eating healthier. The Impossible burger, for instance, has about the same amount of fat and saturated fat as animal proteins – and the carb levels can also go

through the roof. Some so-called “veggie meat” burgers have roughly the same amount of carbohydrates as a slice of bread, and then they’re placed between two more slices of bread.

The good news is, many of them are quite tasty and a great way to shake things up at the grill.

Grilling Like An Expert

If you're just getting started, there's a lot of learn

We turned to experts at Weber, Bon Appetit and Cook's Illustrated to find out more.

They shared some recommendations that are tried and true, while others provided a nice change of pace even for veteran grillers.

How do you choose the right cut? How should it be seasoned? What's the ideal temperature? You could spend all of the warmer months experimenting, or simply follow these tips and start immediately grilling like an expert:

GETTING STARTED

Experts with the Weber grilling company and Bon Appetit recommend letting meat warm to room temperature before putting it on the grill. Choose meats that are 1 1/2-to-2 inches thick so that they can char on the outside without losing tenderness on the inside. Dry the meat with paper towels before seasoning and putting it on the grill, and then dry the meat again before serving. Turn the meat over once, but avoid the temptation to press it into the grill. You'll lose valuable juices.

RECOMMEND TEMPS

People throw around terms like "rare" and "medium well" when discussing how they'd like their steaks cooked. But what does that really mean? There are precise internal

temperatures associated with achieving these levels of "doneness." Rare steaks are cooked to 115-120 degrees, while medium rare goes to 120-125 degrees. Medium steaks climb up to 130-135, while medium-well cuts are cooked to 140-145. In order to cook a steak to "well done," it should be 150-155 degrees.

How long it takes to reach these temperatures depends on the thickness of the cut. Keep an internal thermometer on hand at all times when you're over the fire to avoid a guessing game.

FINISHING TOUCHES

Most people think of sauces first when the subject of

improving the taste of a steak comes up. But Cook's Illustrated suggests adding a sprinkle of salt after they come off the flames. The salt dissolves into the juices, providing a truly satisfying crunch. They also recommend double-thick ribeyes, though this trick works on just about any cut of meat. Weber sug-

gests leaving the meat on until there is a dark brown crust, then taking it off the flames just before it reaches the desired temperature – since it will continue cook to another five degrees warmer even after being removed. The meat should rest for 10 minutes before cutting, according to Bon Appetit.



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