

# smoking hot!

Don't let the macho sub-culture and all that gear get in your way — smoke cooking can be a surprisingly simple endeavor

## KNOW YOUR STUFF

### The techniques

We aren't going get into arguments about what does or doesn't constitute "barbecue," but when it comes to smoked foods, there are different techniques.

In smoke cooking, the technique most often used for foods like ribs or brisket, the food roasts slowly at temperatures of about 250 to 300 degrees while getting infused with smoke.

"Hot smoking," the method used for hams and some seafood, is a cooler, slower process, but it also results in a fully cooked product.

"Cold smoking," used for foods like cheese and Nova salmon, flavors the food with smoke but doesn't heat it above 100 degrees.

### The gizmos and gadgets

**Covered charcoal grills:** Versatile and easy to use for small smoked foods, but for large items, the fuel needs to be replenished frequently, and it can be difficult to control temperatures over long periods. Smoke cooking is readily done on a charcoal grill, but you need more specialized equipment for cold smoking. For occasional forays into smoking, though, this is your best bet.

**Gas grills:** Gas grills have an advantage in that they heat very evenly and you don't have keep replenishing the fire. Most of my sources were emphatic that gas grills are no good for smoking though, unless you have a top-of-the-line model with a smoker box that has its own dedicated burner. Otherwise, grilling expert Jamie Purviance explains, "The wood doesn't ignite. It's very frustrating."

Thanks to chef Rick Gresh, however, we came up with a solution. Gresh shared this technique he used at David Burke's Prime-house before the restaurant acquired a smoker:

Take a large can or an expendable old pot and punch some holes around the sides. Light a charcoal fire in it and let burn down to medium. Add wood chunks. Set your gas grill up for indirect cooking and put your homemade smoke burner inside next to the food.

"It works really well for small things," Gresh says.

**Charcoal smokers:** There are lots of different kinds, but the most

**The Smoking Gun adds a smoky flavor to just about any food.**



common for home use are the R2D2-shaped water smokers. You put charcoal and wood chunks in the bottom, a pan of water in the middle, and the food on top.

They're easy to set up and use, but good ones, such as the Weber Smoky Mountain, run about \$300. Less-expensive models tend to make it difficult to control the fire temperatures. However, if you are a do-it-yourself type, you can Google up modifications for turning an el cheapo smoker into a better one.

**Electric smokers:** Built along the same lines as the charcoal smokers, and ultra-easy, but they typically give you little control over the temperature, so cold or windy days can be frustrating. You have to use wood chips, which need to be replenished frequently.

You can find all sorts of instructions online for building your own smoker out of flowerpots or trashcans and a hot plate, but by the time you acquire all the parts, it may cost you nearly as much as a cheap smoker and work no better.

**Stovetop smoker:** Chef Carol Wallack of Sola in North Center is fond of this cooker, a rectangular pan with a tightly fitting slide-on lid.

"It's very cool," she says, and especially good for fish. You put wood chips in the bottom under a

rack, close it up and heat atop the stove. (You also can rig up a substitute with any pot lined with foil.)

**The Smoking Gun:** This nifty little \$80 device from Niles-based Polscience, the outfit that makes gourmet gizmos for such restaurants as Alinea, can add a smoked finish to any food — including things you couldn't smoke any other way, such as butter or bourbon.

The handheld smoker uses fine wood shavings. (Polscience sells jars of different types of wood manufactured in Park Ridge by Avvenues to Independence workers.)

If there's an equivalent to the microwave oven in the barbecue world, this is it. It only takes a couple of 30-second bursts of smoke and a few minutes' standing time to add a smoky flavor to most foods.

You also can capture the smoke in a container (say, under a glass dome) and serve it that way.

The smoke doesn't penetrate all the way through the food the way it would with slow smoking. "It's just a coating," says Polscience marketing manager Christoph Milz, but it really can enhance flavors nicely.

Milz sent me a list of 50 foods chefs have used the gun to good effect, including cocktails, soups, salad dressings, vegetables and desserts such as chocolate and meringue. We got great results on sliced cheese and hard-boiled eggs.

Right now, the gadget is sold through the Web site, *cuisinetechology.com*, but the company expects to have it in retail stores in August.



**Sola chef Carol Wallack is a fan of stovetop smokers.**

BY LEAH A. ZELDES

Is there a simple way to smoke food without a special smoker or extra gear?

"Yes, but . . ." said all the experts we consulted, and they immediately began talking about this or that or the other thing that would make doing so difficult and complicated.

"You'll have to keep replacing the coals," warned Jamie Purviance, a spokesman for Palatine-based Weber-Stephen Product Co., makers of the Weber Grill.

"It's a long process," said Ron Kaplan, a Highland Park barbecue enthusiast.

"A smoker is designed to a low temperature for far longer," said Steven Raichlen, author of *Steven Raichlen's Planet Barbecue* (Workman, \$22.95).

When asked why people made it so complicated, Kaplan, who owns seven different cookers, said that some of the appeal of barbecuing, especially for men, is in the gear. "Guys love tools," he said.

Thermometers, tongs, barbecue forks, charcoal chimneys, lighters and a variety of specialized tools all come into play, though only a few are strictly necessary, as well as a wide variety of smokers and grills.

Every barbecue expert has his or her patent method and opinions. Some insist on lump charcoal, while others are fine with bri-

at, are an  
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SEE SMOKE, PAGE 3A, INSIDE FLAP