

BBQ Time! But Do You Need a Smoker, Too?

By Chef Dan Leff

Like most guys, I like new kitchen toys ... but only if it's something I'm going to use on a regular basis. This is what has kept me, for years now, from buying a smoker. I've used a big old Weber kettle grill for years with some success, as a smoker.

Improvised smokers are not hyper-efficient – part of the fun is the messy involvement of stoking the coals and tending the meat. Here's my method for doing just that ...

1. Start by soaking the wood chips. I prefer apple-wood or hickory. Alder wood is good too, but is most often used with salmon. Soak the chips in water with some apple juice mixed in for a sweeter finish, or some soy sauce for a slightly darker glaze.

2. For the coals, use real mesquite wood charcoal, preferably by Lazzari. A friend of mine once told me that "regular" charcoal briquettes use pulped bits of rubber tires and other junk. After having inhaled plenty of toxic smoke while tending various BBQ pits where nobody ever heard of Lazzari, I can tell you ... this is true.

3. While the chips soak, start the coals. Some people love tons of lighter fluid, others use the "chimney-starter" method. I am quickly becoming more fond of the chimney method, as it means fewer chemicals in with

the smoke. Let the lit coals ash over almost 100% - they will need to burn for several hours so don't let them burn too fast!

4. Just before the coals are ready, get the drip pan

ready. An aluminum half-roasting pan filled with liquid must be placed under the meat as it smokes to prevent flare-ups, if the meat is going directly onto the grill (more on this later). For the liquid, use the wood-chip soaking liquid. Get two large stainless steel bowls + a colander ready. Pour the wood chips into the colander set over one of the bowls. Set the colander with chips into the other bowl to let the chips keep draining off liquid. Don't worry about having too much liquid. If the meat will be smoking for a while, you'll likely need to refill the drip pan to keep it from scorching.

5. A certain amount of flavor and aroma can be obtained just based on what's in the drip-pan liquid. Don't hesitate to put in fresh herbs and garlic, dried chilies (especially chipotles), dried citrus rinds, or even star anise (this last one work well with a little soy sauce in the pan, for a touch of Asian flavor).

6. With meat ready, coals nearly white-hot, wood chips pre-soaked and drained, drip pan + liquid standing by, get ready to go to work. Grab a pair of long metal tongs and a long, grill-sturdy spatula and be ready to work carefully during the next steps ...

7. Using the long spatula, divide the pile of coals into two equal mounds, moved to the sides of the kettle grill.

Drop the aluminum drip pan into the space between the piles of hot coals and quickly fill it with the soaking liquid, as full as you can (but try not to spill any water onto the coals!). The drip pan will often wind up sitting on top of some of the coals – these coals will stay active longest, and will ensure that some of the liquid in the drip pan boils away – thus the need for extra liquid.

8. Get ready to work very quickly now. Have the chips, wire grill cover, and meat readily at hand. Sprinkle the soaked chips onto the hot coals. Place the grill cover the top, and place the meat onto the grill, directly over the drip pan.

9. By now, the chips should be smoking heavily. Make sure all the vents on the kettle (and the kettle cover) are open all the way. The smoke will quickly inhibit the coals if there's not lots of circulation (don't worry, the meat will pick up plenty of smoky flavor - the smoke won't be "lost"). Cover the grill and let the meat cook – resist the urge to lift the lid often.

10. It will probably be necessary to uncover the grill every 30-45 minutes to get the coals to revive a bit.

After 1-2 hours, it will likely be necessary to poke the coals to keep them lively. Not all of the chips will be smoking, it will be necessary to move the "dead" chips onto live coals to keep the smoke going.

11. For poultry - Chicken can take up to 1-2 hours for breasts and thighs, 3 hours or so for a whole bird. Turkey parts

take somewhat longer. Whole turkeys may require an infusion of fresh coals and chips and will likely take at least 4 hours.

12. For red meats - Pork ribs and loins take about 2 hours. Ribs can get dried out and must be marinated thoroughly ahead of time. Lamb is excellent when smoked - a whole leg of lamb will go for about 3-4 hours, individual lamb chops for about an hour. Beef is not often smoked, except for brisket (which takes a VERY long time).

13. For seafood - scallops and shrimp will smoke quickly, in about 30-45 minutes. Fish can smoke for about 45-60 minutes.

14. Please remember that all times are APPROXIMATE and will vary greatly with your product - both the coals and the meat!

On "In-Pan" Smoking

This is a method I use when the meat can run the risk of drying out. Pork ribs (which can become tough and chewy) and whole chickens (which can sometimes suffer from dried-out white meat) do well with this technique, as will turkey breasts.

For ribs, have them in a sturdy pan that's deep enough for the ribs to rest almost completely covered in marinade. Rather than establishing a drip pan, place the pan right onto the coals at the bottom of the grill. It's important that liquid the ribs are in gets hot enough to

come to a boil, for safety reasons. Heating the liquid is needed to kill any residual pathogens that might be found in the raw meat. The best way is to work in thirds

- For the first third of the cooking time, the pork should sit in it's pan, covered, right on the coals.
- For the next third, remove the pan from the coals (use a pair of long tongs, a sturdy spatula, and have a couple of oven mitts on), and place the grill rack back on the kettle. Place the pan of ribs back on the rack and let cook uncovered – this is needed to get the smoky flavor in.
- For the final third, cover the pan of ribs again. Much of the liquid will be gone, so this allows the ribs to finish in the now-thickened marinade. This will ensure the tenderness of the ribs, and intensify the flavor.

For chicken, the pan should always rest on the grill rack and should always be uncovered. The beautifully-bronzed birds turn out via this method. In the pan, place a little liquid, preferably a mixture of chicken stock and citrus juices. Fresh herbs and garlic can be placed in the pan, this will lend an extra note of flavor. This added liquid will keep the bird from drying out.

An easy side dish – Two-way Potato Salad with Champagne Mayonnaise

If you're working on the grill, this recipe uses a little of the grill space to cook half the potatoes.

Ingredients:

- 1# Yukon gold potatoes, preferably small
- 1# Red potatoes, preferably small
- Mayonnaise or Aioli
- About ¼ cup champagne vinegar
- Chopped green onions (optional)
- Salt, pepper, and olive oil

Directions:

1. Cut the red potatoes in half (quarters, if large) and toss with oil, salt and pepper. Roast on the grill until tender and well-browned.

2. Meanwhile, poach the Yukon gold potatoes in salted water, in their skins. When tender (test with a knife), drain and allow to cool slightly. Cut the pieces in half (or quarters, if larger – try to make them the same size as the Red potatoes).

3. Whisk some champagne vinegar into the mayonnaise or Aioli. Mix into the cooked potatoes – this recipe works best if the potatoes are still somewhat warm, as they absorb the flavors better. Season with salt and pepper as needed – if desired, mix in some chopped green onions for color and texture.



Smoking Chicken in front of Moraga Hardware and Lumber