

Cottage Memories

Chronicles of A City Boy's Life In The Country

UP IN SMOKE

The wife likes a good barbecue, especially during Christmas Holidays. I suspect my being outside contributes to making it good, not the quality of my grilling. Maybe she still hopes that practice makes perfect. I can hear her and any guests cheering me on from inside, wine glasses in hand. Outside, I'm slowly turning my bod into smoked meat.

Barbecuing is a year-round escapade for me. Four seasons of swarming insects, pop-up downpours, blinding blizzards, sunburn and frostbite. Whenever I sneak inside to get another beer, someone sounding suspiciously like the wife, always yells: "Fire!" So I hurry back to my solitary outpost to avert calamity.

So far, I've only singed low hanging branches. But considering the roaring flames, smokey clouds, and fire extinguisher residue, I thank Lady Luck that anything remains edible. Or that a forest fire's been avoided yet again. The wife has water bombers on speed dial just in case.

But I'm always a spark away from towering inferno. My handy hose drenches flame and meat alike. Huge billows of smoke and the piercing shriek of indoor smoke detectors alert neighbours of another barbecue fiasco underway. A MNR fire risk warning sign mysteriously appeared recently near my property. The wife keeps it set at high.

Nonetheless, I consider myself a griller in progress. I practice with BBQ tools, books and other accoutrements, including fire-retardant apron. I've even taken a fire department course to stop a cottage from burning down. That conflagration would be my most memorable barbecue yet.

Barbecuing probably began with cavemen squatting around a fire. It harkens back to their macho spirit of hunt, chase and kill. Like

my ancient ancestors, what do I care if my meat is dirty, bloody, hairy or all hacked up? That's what scorching's for.

Other perils lurk around my BBQ. I'm cornered by our scavenging Siberian Huskies, ready to chomp on a wayward morsel or hand that smells like it. A loose shelf hangs precariously off the grill, often painfully dislodged onto my big toe. The deck railing's cluttered with my array of condiments, spices and sauces – frantically knocked asunder while being deployed to mask the real taste of my cooking catastrophes.

My grill is rarely cleaned. So crusty build-up narrows the spaces where fewer pieces fall through to burn faster than the rest. But I still sear my pinkies, mining around in the blazing coals with my too-short tongs for some lost tidbit.

The automatic starter never works, especially when I run out of propane. I've poured buckets of water on the tank to check the condensation line that's supposed to indicate fuel level. But all I get is soaked feet. So in constant fear of running on empty, I barbecue fast to avoid sunstroke or hypothermia. Standing in my puddle of water and gashed-toe blood. I bet the cavemen were more comfortable.

My BBQ lid won't stay up or sticks when closed. Its handle comes off in my hand. The temperature on one side is cool, the other Hades. When I give my spatula too jaunty a flip, meat disappears down a gaping maw or over the railing into the dirt for a more earthy flavour. And when I squash a fly with that flipper, remnants get wiped on pant leg or meat. I prefer clean trousers.



Some barbecuing misadventures are easier to hide. Cheap cut? Char it. Too much dirt? Blacken it more. Fly remnants? Scorcharooney. With judicious manipulation of third degree burning, I can make everything look and taste the same. All smothered in garlic or tabasco or teriyaki or sweet and sour, with my secret dash of dirt rub. Or, when my grilling involves the fire extinguisher, all of the above. Cooking meat rare was problematic until I discovered that after it's dog-licked, a quick sear seals the rawness.

Burnt offerings ready, I make a triumphal entrance. But the table's always so crowded with other dishes that there's no room for my fast-food platter of arson treats. Guests either pretend not to notice or suddenly aren't hungry. I don't get many repeats.

The wife says we should get a smoker for Christmas. Isn't that already my expertise? But with everything going up in smoke anyways, perhaps I should try something new. Maybe it's time to barbecue more than just hot dogs.

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