

12 BBQ Tricks and Tips from Pitmasters

BY REBECCA PAHLE MAY 2020



We are all ready for Summer to be in the air, and that means the smell of barbeque should be too. Break out your tongs and hone your skills with these BBQ tips from the experts.

1. DON'T USE A GAS GRILL

There are a lot of different ways to cook barbecue—direct heat, indirect heat, with charcoal, with wood chips, with split logs—but one thing that most experts agree on is that a gas grill *isn't* the way to go. “The smoke is an

ingredient in itself,” writes chef and TV personality Valentine Warner. Without it, you get the heat, but you’re missing out on the nuanced flavor.

2. USE WOOD FROM FRUIT TREES FOR EXTRA FLAVOR.

Speaking of nuance—to change up the usual flavor, try adding fruit tree wood chips to your charcoal. Fruit woods are “mild in flavor and high in sap, and generally have fewer impurities in them,” writes Myron Mixon in his book *Everyday Barbecue: At Home with America’s Favorite Pitmaster*. “You can choose from whatever is easiest to find near you: apple, cherry, grape, and my personal favorite, peach.”

3. SOAK WOOD CHIPS IN WATER BEFORE COOKING.

Another tip from Mixon: soak wood chips in water for “at least an hour or, even better, overnight” before draining them. Then wrap them in an aluminum foil “burrito” and put them in your grill. The water content makes the chips produce more smoke, which increases your flavor.

4. DON'T CHECK THE TEMPERATURE REPEATEDLY.

The proper technique for cooking barbecue can be summed up with three words: “low and slow.” Be patient. “Try not to check the temperature more than every half an hour at most since it cools things off when you do,” writes John Shelton Reed and Dale Volberg Reed in *Holy Smoke: The Big Book of North Carolina Barbecue*. “There’s really no reason to open the cooker for the first couple of hours unless you think things are going too fast. As the saying goes, if you’re looking, it ain’t cooking. After that, every hour or so

you can mop the meat with your sauce and check the temperature while you're at it."

5. LET THE MEAT SIT BEFORE EATING.

After removing your meat from the grill, let it sit for a few minutes. "This seals the juices and keeps the meat from drying out," writes Mixon. "Do not cut until you are ready to immediately serve and eat." Another juice-saving tip, from the Academia Barilla *Barbecue: 50 Easy Recipes*: don't poke holes in your meat while it's cooking. Instead, "to turn meat, do not use forks, but barbecue tongs or spatulas."

6. AVOID LIGHT FLUID-FLAVORED MEAT.

If you're using lighter fluid to get your charcoal fire started, says fiery foods expert Scott Roberts, make sure that the fire is completely out before you introduce meat into the mix. If the fire's not out, then there's still some lighter fluid that hasn't been burned away, and you do not want that taste on your food. You'll know it's time to start cooking when "the charcoal [is] mostly an ash-gray color with a little bit of glowing red underneath." It should take about a half an hour.

7. LAY DOWN ALUMINUM FOIL FOR EASY CLEAN-UP.

You may like cooking, and you may like eating, but nobody likes cleaning up afterward. To expedite the process, Roberts suggests to "line the inside bottom of your cooker with a couple of sheets of aluminum foil before you

put your briquettes in. This will give you a quicker and easier clean-up of the gray coals and ash once you're done barbecuing.”

8. KEEP YOUR EQUIPMENT CLEAN.

This one's for barbecue newbies, or those who have just invested in a new smoker. Before you use it for the first time, explains award-winning Texas barbecue master in Aaron Franklin in *Franklin Barbecue: A Meat-Smoking Manifesto*, build the biggest fire you can and let it rage for 45 minutes to an hour. Doing so “seal[s] up the pores of the metal and incinerate[s] any remains and by-products—oil, grease, metal shavings, and any other gunk—of the manufacturing process... This is also a good thing to do if you haven't used your cooker in a long time and don't clean it regularly and the inside is covered with rancid grease or mold.”

9. SOAK WOODEN SKEWERS IN WATER TO AVOID BURNING.

If kebabs are on your summer menu, make sure to soak them in cold water for at least 30 minutes before use to keep them from burning. That tip comes from *Brazilian Barbecue & Beyond*, by the minds behind Brazilian barbecue joint Cabana, who add: “If using metal skewers, wipe them with a piece of paper towel dipped in vegetable oil to stop food from sticking to them.”

Jamie Purviance, author of *Weber's Way to Grill: The Step-by-Step Guide to Expert Grilling*, notes that if you'll be doing a lot of cooking, you can soak a bunch of skewers for an hour, drain them, freeze them, and pull them out a few at a time as needed.

10. PROPER AIR CIRCULATION IS KEY.

Meat shouldn't touch anything—other than the surface it's sitting on, of course—while it's cooking. Other meat and the sides of the cooker are both a no-no. “Before you buy your smoker, take a look at how big a full 12-pound brisket measures and then think about how many you can get on the cooker you're looking at,” suggests Franklin. “And you don't want the meat smushed up against the edges either. It needs to have space around it for airflow.”

11. STAY AWAY FROM GROCERY STORE LOGS.

Prefer smoking meat over wood fires to charcoal? It may be convenient to use the firewood sold in your local grocery store, but, Franklin cautions, it doesn't produce the best results: “A lot of it is kiln dried, meaning that even the most pyro-challenged among us will have no trouble starting a fire with it, but the pieces will burn so fast and with so little smoke that you won't get anywhere when you cook with them.” To tell if a piece of wood has been kiln dried, pick it up and feel how heavy it is; “if the log feels unnaturally light in your hand, it's going to burn like gasoline.” Craigslist and the classifieds, Franklin argues, are better options for those serious about finding logs for their 'cue.

12. USE ALUMINUM FOIL AS A GRILL BRUSH.

If you're not quite so serious about the craft of barbecue, to the point where you don't have all the tools on-hand, don't worry. In place of a grill brush, writes *Taming the Flame* author Elizabeth Karmel, you can just “crumple a sheet of heavy-duty aluminum foil until it's the size of a navel

orange and pick it up between locking chef tongs. The tongs will act as the handle. Holding onto the ball of foil, brush away.”