

Easy being green when cooking outdoors

Kim Zarzour

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We hate to rain on your back yard party, but fresh-air cooking can be anything but wholesome.

Whether it's the carcinogens from charred meat, the fumes you inhale with chemical-laden charcoal lighter fluid or the truckloads of plastic cups and cutlery piling up in the landfill, lighting up the bar-bee can be toxic for you and the planet.

But it doesn't have to be.

With a few simple changes to how you grill, you can still enjoy goodies outdoors and do good for the outdoors (and your family's health) at the same time.

Step one: Choose the greenest cooking method.

Connie Wong, air quality co-ordinator with the Lung Association, says it's especially important we cook conscientiously on hot days such as we've had this summer, when air quality impacts those with breathing difficulties. She recommends using natural gas or propane; it produces less air pollution compared to charcoal grills.

Instant-light charcoal and lighter fluid can also add toxins to your food. A good alternative is the chimney starter, Ms Wong says.

BIC has a new product, called FlameDisk, that is an alternative to charcoal. It uses ethanol — a renewable resource — as the main fuel ingredient, is recyclable in communities where aluminum products may be recycled and claims to burn cleaner with low volatile organic compound emissions. It can be found at Walmart, Home Hardware, Sobey's and Mac's for \$5 to \$7.

If charcoal is your thing, Marwan Dib, executive chef at Newmarket's Nature's Emporium, recommends either pure lump wood charcoal or charcoal made with coconut husks. Produced from the Cocos-Nucifera tree, which is plentiful in Indonesia, the latter is available at Ontario Gas BBQ in Concord. Owner Duff Dixon says his store also sells Maple Leaf charcoal, which is made from government-sanctioned forestry cutting.

You can also investigate corn-burning grills, fueled by dried corn kernels, a renewable energy source, or the new hydrogen-powered grill (hionsolar.com/hyque.htm) produced by a California company selling it for \$495 US.

Solar-powered cooking is another option for your outdoor cookout. If you like the idea of the slow food movement, this method fits well since it takes hours to cook, but leaves a light eco-footprint.

Shoresh Jewish Environmental Programs in Thornhill has built a solar oven from reclaimed material — plywood, old windows and sleeping bags — and children build pizza-box ovens that get warm enough to melt cheese on a bagel, says director Risa Alyson Cooper.

But if you're sticking with the standard gas grill, environmentalists suggest you purchase one that will last, rather than a cheap, disposable unit, and take care of it. Cheryl Rak, with the Meat Merchant in Stouffville, suggests cleaning with a wire brush, vinegar and water and protecting your grill from the elements with a cover.

Community grills are another green option.

"For the amount of grilling we do, does it make sense that every house on the block has one?" Ms Cooper says. If you're already firing up the grill, she suggests calling the neighbors; it's a chance to share the heat



Solar Oven Tea . Ben Kofman (right) and other children from the Kofman, Gradus, Rosenberg and Umanski families check the tea they made with the help from a solar oven at the Kavanah Garden on Lebovic Campus Drive in Thornhill. *STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN*

and maybe some back yard conversation.

Step two: Choose earth-friendly fare.

"It's not just how you grill," Ms Cooper says, "but also what you grill."

To keep your eco-footprint small, Fiona Wood, with York Region Environmental Alliance, recommends vegetarian fare, using local, organic fruits and vegetables from farmers markets, community supported agricultural programs, or purchasing grocery food with Ontario-grown stickers.

In an ideal world, you'd grow your own organically, but that's not always possible. Joan Stonehocker, executive director of York Region Food Network, can't grow veggies in her shady back yard, so she and a friend share a community garden plot a 15-minute bike-ride away and fill it with a rainbow of produce to toss on the grill.

For those who prefer meat, Ms Rak suggests buying from a local butcher carrying meat sourced locally and ideally is grain-fed or organic. To keep grilling fumes to a minimum, choose meat that cooks quickly — hotdogs, sausages and sliders — she says.

For best results, make sure your meat is at room temperature. After marinating in the fridge, allow meat to sit out on the counter 25 minutes; this will allow for even cooking and quicker time on the grill, she says.

Barbecuing veggies at the same time as your meat also reduces grill time. Potatoes and corn can be microwaved to quickly "pre-cook" and then finished up on the grill.

Another way to minimize cooking time is to focus on fresh, Mr. Dib suggests. Try making salsa to top up quick-cooking fish, for example. A rack of lamb, cut into chops, (marinated with rosemary, lemon, olive oil and garlic) is another favorite fast-cooking meal, as are kabobs (try pineapple with pork in an olive oil, garlic, lemon/vinegar marinade).

Mr. Dib also likes to cook plate-free as they do in Thailand, wrapping food in banana leaves to hold the meal together and keep it moist. He also marinades his meat with antioxidant herbs, such as rosemary, to reduce the amount of chemical build-up on food.

If you're cooking fish or seafood, environmentalist David Suzuki offers this guide to more sustainable choices: david Suzuki.org/what-you-can-do/eat-for-healthy-oceans/?gclid=CKP96_j9srECFQ67Kgodq14AKw

More eco-smart options: substitute firm tofu in recipes that call for meat (marinate first, then cook over low heat) and for dessert, pop baked goods on the still-warm grill and close the lid to reheat while you dine.

Step three: hosting an eco-friendly cookout

Danielle Cawthorne, of Newmarket, keeps a big plastic bin filled with cutlery, plastic plates, bowls and cups collected from second-hand and dollar stores, ready for outdoor get-togethers.

"When the picnic is over, there's no fuss, all the dirty dishes go back in the bin and we take them home to wash."

Click [here](#) for some environmentally friendly recipes.

Here are some [health tips](#) to remember when grilling.

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