

GRILL BABY GRILL

BY CHARLYNE VARKONYI SCHAUB
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Barbecue choices for South Florida's year-round outdoor cooking season are no longer simple

Buying a barbecue grill used to be a no-brainer. Your choices were simple — a grill that used charcoal or one fueled with propane.

These days grill options have evolved into a confusing number of choices. You can spend a few hundred dollars for a simple grill or thousands for a fancy gas grill with six burners and LED lights on the dials. You can show your team spirit with a logo on a gas grill. You can turn your backyard into a pizza parlor with a wood-burning pizza oven. Or you can join the cult of the lump charcoal-fired Big Green Egg.

"Every grill has its idiosyncrasies," says Steven Raichlin, Coconut Grove resident, author of *Planet Barbecue* (Workman, \$22.95) and host of *Primal Grill* on PBS (3:30 p.m. Saturday, WLRN).

"There are two basic strategies for buying grills. The first is to spend a little more for a grill that lasts a long time with a 10-year warranty. A good warranty is important in South Florida because it is

•TURN TO GRILLS, 4H

so hot and there is so much salty sea air. The second strategy is to buy a cheap grill that you will have to replace every two years. They are both legitimate approaches."

The fact that we South Floridians can cook outside year-round and might need a grill when hurricanes knock out the electricity is an incentive for taking the purchase more seriously.

Paula and Marco Castro of Weston wanted a contemporary outdoor kitchen built around a large grill so they could cook

items like picanha beef that they made in their Brazilian homeland. The Kitchenworks in Fort Lauderdale designed their outdoor kitchen with floating shelves, a 30-inch warming drawer, refrigerator, beer tap and a long counter so they can serve big parties. The 53-inch Viking grill is the largest available and features LED lighting on the dials and a handle assist that helps lift the heavy lid.

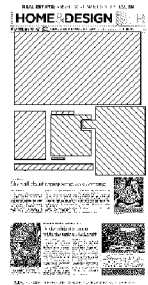
"In South America, we do barbecues all the time," Paula Castro says. "We do them morning through evening. It was important for us to have a big grill because we do several meats at a time. My husband uses the side burner to make Brazilian rice with eggs and bacon."

COMPLETE KITCHENS

More customers are looking for complete outdoor kitchens rather than just a grill, says Staci Ziccardi, marketing manager of Florida Builder Appliances, which sells Viking, Alfresco and other high-end brands in Miami, Pompano Beach and West Palm Beach.

"They have done the inside of their homes and now they are looking into outdoor entertaining more," she says.

And with that outdoor kitchen, Mark Livingood says



customers are looking for several options — halogen lights on the lid, LED lights on the knobs, infrared burners that can generate up to 29,000 BTUs and heat to 1,200 degrees, smoker trays and Alfresco's Versa burner. Livingood is vice president of sales for HADCO, wholesale distributor of Viking, Alfresco and Team Grill.

He describes the Versa burner, which costs \$1,500-\$2,000 depending on accessories, as a popular seller.

"It goes as low as 400 BTUs and as high as 60,000 BTUs," he says. "What is so neat is you can do wok cooking on it, prepare mussels, sauté shrimp or stir fry. You can use a huge stock pot if you want to cook crabs or lobster. You can add a teppanyaki grill so you can make Japanese steakhouse food like they serve at Benihana."

Bill Feinberg, kitchen designer and co-owner of Allied Kitchen & Bath in Fort Lauderdale, says economics plays a big role these days.

"Mostly people are asking, 'What can you build that won't cost me a fortune and will look great?'" he says.

Most clients, he says, are looking for a grill with a rotisserie so they can roast a chicken. And they want a cold area with room for a sink and cold beverage storage.

PIZZA OVEN

One of the latest trends to hit outdoor cooking is the wood-burning pizza oven. During a panel discussion at the Casual Furniture and Accessories Market in Chicago last September, editors at Garden Design and industry spokesmen reported that pizza ovens are getting popular nationwide.

The trend is slower catching on in South Florida. Kitchen

designers say homeowners are curious about them, but flinch at the cost.

Armand Rocco of The Kitch-works in Fort Lauderdale says he just finished a house in Boca Raton with an elaborate outdoor kitchen that included a wood-burning pizza oven.

"Many people inquire, but few people purchase them," he says. Pizza ovens require a substantial amount of room and money. It is a large product, which requires labor, tile and masonry and can cost \$10,000-\$20,000.

Architect Neal Aronson and his wife, designer Jodi Allyson, found a less expensive option when they built their Cooper City home in 2007.

"When we started researching pizza ovens, everyone claimed they did them, but when we asked them to show pictures of installations they couldn't produce them," Aronson says. "We couldn't find anyone in South Florida who had done one."

They found a kit for a wood-burning oven from EarthStone Ovens (earthstoneovens.com) for \$3,721 and hired a stone mason to install it. The total cost including installation and stainless steel hood was \$5,238.

Raichlin, the author and TV host, says he wouldn't use mesquite wood in a pizza or other wood-burning oven. His wood of choice is oak, which he describes as full bodied enough to stand up to beef and veal with enough finesse to not overpower chicken or fish.

Not everyone wants to spend a lot to grill and barbecue. Some are happy with a simple grill — gas or charcoal fired.

Raichlin recommends being honest about how you cook before you buy.

"It depends upon how many people you are cooking for," he says. "If you

are cooking for just you and your wife, you can use a smaller grill. But if you typically cook for half the neighborhood, you need a bigger grill."

He suggests buying a grill with at least three gas burners and a side burner so you can cook if a hurricane knocks out the power.

More folks are using a gas grill for weekdays when fast heating is required and a smoker or a charcoal grill for weekends. If you use a charcoal grill, Raichlin suggests a chimney starter so you can light the fire without lighter fluid. If you use charcoal, he says the best bet is natural lump charcoal, which has an irregular shape and is made from real trees as opposed to charcoal briquettes, which are made from coal dust, borax, petroleum binders and wood scraps.

Rocco cautioned prospective gas-grill buyers to make sure they're getting quality stainless steel. "The magnet is the big defining moment," he said. "If it's [quality] stainless, a magnet should not stick. If it does stick, it isn't stainless."

Rocco says some of the cheaper grills are also powder-coat painted in colors that look great but don't hold up well to the elements in South Florida.

If you are a sports fan, you may want a grill to show your team spirit. Team Grill offers gas grills with a triple-fired porcelain finish decorated with a choice of college or professional team logo. The grills come in sizes for the patio (\$499, \$999 and \$1,249) and for tailgating (\$399). For more information and local retailers, see teamgrill.com.

BIG EGG

Another option is the Big Green Egg, which is fueled by reusable natural lump charcoal. It is based on the design of the kamado grills that U.S. service-

men in Asia shipped back home after World War II. Big Green Egg fans love it because it can be used as a smoker (180 to 250 degrees), a grill (searing steaks at 750 degrees) and an oven to bake pizza, bread and desserts. Suggested retail is \$995. See biggreeneegg.com.

“People who use them say they get real good results,” Raichlin says. If barbecue is a religion, he said, the Big Green Egg people are a cult.

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JOHN STILLMAN

GAINING POPULARITY: This EarthStone pizza oven graces the patio of Cooper City residents Neal Aronson and Jodi Allyson.



BIG GREEN EGG

A STANDOUT:

This distinctive grill (\$995) has a cult following because of its many uses: grilling, barbecuing, smoking and baking.



FLORIDA BUILDER APPLIANCES

DREAM KITCHEN: This outdoor kitchen with Viking appliances features a grill with rotisserie and warming drawer, burners for wok or pot cooking, a beer tap and plenty of shelf space. Below, an option from Team Grill is from the Patio series. Prices range from \$399 for tailgating, \$799 for a midsize collapsible to \$1,000 for a full grill.

