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GEAR & GADGETS

The Only Grill You'll Ever Need Is Less Than \$200

Pricier gas grills, pellet smokers and even pizza ovens now crowd the backyards of some American chefs. But with the right technique and accessories, the Weber Kettle can outperform them all.

By Chris Kornelis

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MELISSA COOKSTON can still remember her parents trying to cook over “a towering inferno” of fire in their Weber Kettle Grill in the 1970s. To help dispel their own memories of hot dogs flavored with heavy notes of lighter fluid, many of today’s backyard gourmands rely on pricey gas grills, pellet smokers and pizza ovens all designed to provide a much more manageable fire at the push of a button or a twist of the knob.

The problem, however, has never been the Kettle, said Cookston, an award-winning pitmaster based in Hernando, Miss., and author of “Smokin’ In the Boys Room” (2021). “My parents,” she said, “didn’t know how to use it.”

Experts like Cookston say you needn’t crowd your backyard with extravagant modern appliances just to smoke brisket, bake pizza or sear vegetables. With the right technique and a few key accessories (see below), the Weber Kettle that you or your parents might already own can deliver results on par with those promised by the fancy gas grills and ceramic eggs that stand guard outside your local hardware store.



You don't need a pellet smoker to produce succulent ribs, a pizza oven to produce perfectly blistered pies, or a gas grill to easily sear vegetables. The Weber Kettle can do it all with aplomb. ILLUSTRATION: KENDYLL HILLEGAS

“Honest to God,” said Meathead Goldwyn, the Chicago-area-based founder of AmazingRibs.com and author of “Meathead: The Science of Great Barbecue and Grilling” (2016), “I can knock your socks off on a Weber Kettle.”

People like Goldwyn, 73 years old, have had plenty of time to practice. The Weber Kettle was invented in 1952 by a metalworker named George Stephen Sr., who took a bulbous steel buoy designed for the water, cut it in half, attached legs and punched in air holes, creating a portable grill that kept food out of the wind and rain. A more refined version arrived as postwar Americans were settling into suburban homes with backyards fit for hosting and caught on fast.



Alton Brown

“Instead of filling up the garage with more expensive stuff, learn to use what you’ve got. If you have to do more than buy a Weber Kettle to start your grilling experience, rethink things.” —Alton Brown, co-host of “Iron Chef: Quest for an Iron Legend”

Easier-to-use cookers were eventually invented, including a Weber gas grill in 1985 that produced fire without any hassle. The first electric pellet grills from Traeger, which could maintain their temperature for lengthy periods without oversight from a cook, emerged in the same decade. Today, many Traeger appliances are even built with Bluetooth, so you can monitor your slowly Maillard-ing meat with your phone.

The desire for such machines is understandable, said Alton Brown, the Atlanta-based former Food Network personality who now co-hosts “Iron Chef: Quest for an Iron Legend” on Netflix. It can feel

like you need fancy machines to keep up with the other home cooks on your Instagram feed, he added, noting the pressure “to keep upping our equipment to be more and more perfect.”

Experts say the Weber Kettle is a capable cooker that punches way above its weight.

The cost of perfection? Weber's new Genesis gas grills start at \$1,000. The new Traeger Ironwood starts at \$1,800. The Gozney Rocbox, a well-designed pizza oven that can heat to 950 degrees Fahrenheit, costs \$499. Even the large Big Green Egg—similar in shape to the Weber Kettle, but built from material its manufacturer says lets it heat faster and retain high temperatures longer—will set you back \$1,100. And that's before you spend a few Benjamins on a stand to hold it off the ground.

By comparison, the simple Weber Kettle, with its three sturdy legs and sub-\$150 price tag, looks pretty good. And if you don't already have an 18-inch (\$119) or 22-inch (\$139) model in your garage, you can likely find one on Craigslist for \$25.



Morgan Bolling

“It’s so versatile. I can’t sear meat on a smoker, but I can sear meat on a Weber Kettle and I can smoke meat on a Weber Kettle. It allows me to do everything.” —Morgan Bolling, executive editor, creative content, at Cook’s Country magazine

Resourceful sorts can find Kettles for less. “I’ve pulled rare and obscure colors out of dumpsters. You hear it all the time,” said Troy Redington, 44, an entrepreneur based in southern California who founded the Weber Kettle Club in 2012. “I’ve seen rare, old yellow Kettles in the back of scrapper trucks. They’re everywhere.”

Even if you do pay full price, the capable cooker punches way above its weight. Bryan Roof, editorial director of Cook's Country magazine and a cast member on “Cook's Country From America's Test Kitchen,” has three grills in his backyard: a Weber Kettle, a Big Green Egg and an offset smoker. He said his dedicated smoker doesn't yield better meat than the Kettle. And compared with the Egg, he added, the Kettle provides “a truer barbecue flavor when done right.”

Cookston also says the Kettle wins out against pellet grills, also called pellet “smokers,” when it comes to taste. Somewhat ironically, she says, because pellet grills get their heat from compressed sawdust nuggets, they don't provide the flavor or smokiness you get cooking with charcoal on the Kettle.

“Don’t be intimidated if you’ve just got a Weber Kettle versus a guy with a big fancy pull-behind trailer with flat-screen TVs attached. It’s all about how you perform and cook your food.” —Rodney Scott, James Beard Award-winning pitmaster



Rodney Scott

The Weber Kettle isn't perfect. It doesn't hold its temperature as well as a Big Green Egg, especially in cold weather. It doesn't fire up as quickly as a gas grill. It isn't as easy to use as the fix-it-and-forget-it Traeger.

But while it is convenient to unload the chore of fire management to an app you don't really have to monitor, Brown says you also might lose out on what makes grilling fun in the first place. "You think I'm going to fire it up by Bluetooth? No, I don't want that," he said. "I want to stand out by the grill, get smokey, have a drink, and not do anything else for a while."

Anything That Pricey Appliance Can Do, the Weber Kettle Can (Usually) Do Better

With the right accessories and cooking methods, you can smoke ribs, sear vegetables and bake pizzas using the grill you might already own

To sear vegetables better than a Big Green Egg kamado grill...

Meathead Goldwyn says it's hard to create hot and cool cooking zones with the Big Green Egg. The Slow 'N Sear attachment (\$115) helps the Weber Kettle excel at this, holding half your coals in a specific area, so that you get your steak or veggies to temperature in the cool zone, until it is time to finish it in the hot area.



The Big Green Egg (\$1,100, AceHardware.com) is a popular kamado-style grill which heats quickly and retains that heat well.



With the Weber Kettle, it is easier to direct that heat to specific areas of the grill surface, especially with the help of the Slow N' Sear.

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To smoke ribs as effectively as a Traeger pellet grill...

Pellet grills can hold a specific internal temperature for hours, but so can a Weber Kettle if you employ “the snake” method. To start, stack two rows of coals in a semicircle under the grill grate. Add two rows on top, plus a pan of water for moisture. Light the coals on one end, and the rest will catch like dominoes.



Traeger's pellet grills like the Ironwood (from \$1,800, Traeger.com) are easy to use smokers that take basically no time to setup.



Experts say using the "snake" method with the Weber Kettle gets you similar results without the price tag.

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To blister pies as well as a Gozney Roccbox pizza oven...

Troy Redington often cooks frozen Tombstone pizzas in his Kettle without any accessories. "It blows peoples' minds," he said. If you're less confident, the KettlePizza (\$250) fits between the Kettle's cook surface and lid and is designed to help you get a more even cook on your homemade 'za.



Pizza ovens like the Gozney Rocbox (\$499, Gozney.com) promise neapolitan pies in your backyard.



But the Weber Kettle can get plenty hot, and an apparatus like the KettlePizza can make it easy to slide pizza in and out.

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Friends of the Kettle

Judicious use of these accessories will help you learn to tap the full potential of your charcoal grill



PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

1. START SMARTER

Instead of squeezing lighter fluid to ignite coals dumped into the center of your grill, start your fire in an apparatus like the Weber Rapidfire Chimney Starter (\$26) with a little crumpled newspaper. Once the coals are glowing, group them under one side of the cooking grate so that you have two temperature zones in your grill. That way, you can control how much heat you're applying to any given item, whether a burger you want to sear quickly or a whole chicken that needs more time.



PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

2. TEMP WATCH

Thermometers are essential to gauge both the temperature of your food and the temperature of the cooking surface. You can buy a cheap one, but the splurgy ThermoWorks Signals BBQ Alarm Thermometer (\$239) has four probes. Leave a couple in the meat itself and one on your cooking surface to track the temperatures of both on the app.

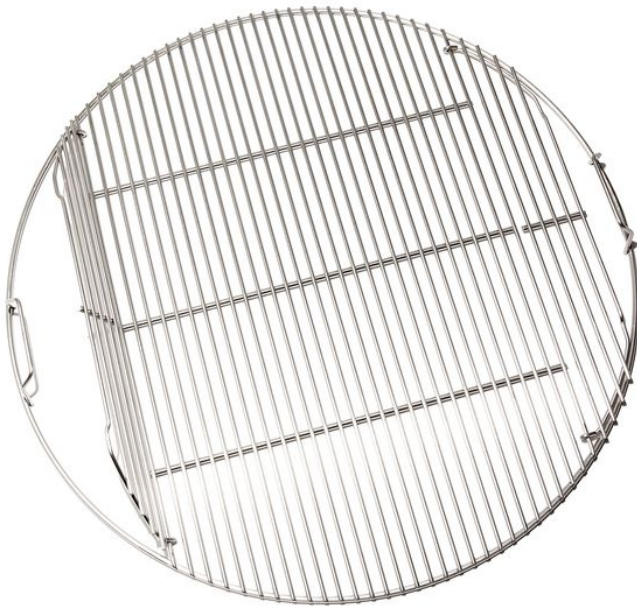


PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

3. REACH INSIDE

Just as the name suggests, Weber's Hinged Cooking Grate (\$40 for the 22-inch)—which comes standard on some models—has hinges on two sides so that you can flip the grate up to add more charcoal as needed. You might never use it cooking fish or chicken, but it is critical when you're using your Kettle as a smoker to cook meats low and slow and need to add more coals every few hours.

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