

Back yard barbecuing goes up in smoke

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STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

Thomas Sfetkopoulos (from left), Sean Folkes, John JJ Bouwmeister, Adam Atkinson and Derek Hanson are members of The Vulcan, a Stouffville-based meat fraternity.

THRILL THE GRILL

► For more on smoking, check out our topic page at yorkregion.com

In an era when peanut butter and jam sandwiches come pre-made and without the crusts and four-course meals come in a box and take two minutes in a microwave to reheat, you would think a cooking method based on the concept of slow and low wouldn't work.

Think again.

There is a food revolution taking place and it's not being led by nutritionists, or moms, and it's not even taking place in the kitchen.

It's being led by male carnivores and snowbirds who want that down-home southern cookin' right in their back yards.

It's called smoking.

Stouffville resident John JJ Bouwmeister loves smoking meat so much, he recently started The Vulcan — a meat fraternity.

At its first meeting earlier this month, 139 guys devoured 280 ribs and 197 sausages, all cooked on a smoker.

Branches of The Vulcan are expected to start up in Peterborough, London and Barrie, Mr. Bouwmeister said.

Unlike grilling on a propane barbecue, which takes less than 20 minutes and consists of adding a little bit of salt and pepper or some other basic seasoning to a hamburger or steak, smoking meat takes time — time to prep the meat and time to actually cook it and “with that, you appreciate it more”, Mr. Bouwmeister said. “Just the overall aroma, nothing compares to it.”

What exactly is smoking meat?

It's a cooking method that utilizes indirect and low heat. It is traditionally used for large and tough cuts of meats, which are cooked over charcoal or wood chips, providing an extra layer of seasoning.

Smoking is typically done at temperatures between 190 and 250 F, some even say 180 to 275 F.

However, “too long at too low a temperature and you're looking for trouble,” said Larry Allbright, owner of The Meat Merchant in Stouffville and Uxbridge, of the possibility of coming away with under-cooked meat.

Being able to keep the temperature low and consistent means no peeking. Every time you open the smoker, count on adding another 15 minutes to the cooking time.

Use a digital thermometer to ensure your meat's internal temperature is where it should be. That list can be found on the Canadian Food Inspection Agency's website at bit.ly/N2GFVj

The concept of smoking meat is not new. It dates back to native people who cooked their hunted game over an open fire to not only tenderize it, but preserve it, as refrigeration did not exist back then.

Fast-forward to the 1800s and it is Ameri-

can settlers who start taking that concept to a bigger and more flavourful level by roasting entire animals, such as pigs, over a pit filled with coal.

As more immigrants called the American south home, they added their own flavourings to the process. Today, Texas, Florida, the Carolinas, Kansas and Tennessee are known as the places to go for the best barbecue.

But thanks to a Canadian population that hates snow and loves barbecue, the south's low and slow method is gaining in popularity up here.

The first step to going slow and low in your back yard is buying a smoker.

Smoking, while it seems somewhat simplistic, can be complicated and finicky, which is why the majority of people who smoke meat come from years of experience on the gas grill and now want to try something different.

Smokers come in just about every size and shape you can imagine, from the Green Egg to the Big Daddy double smoker and grill combo to ones that look similar to bank vaults.

You can choose from charcoal, electric or propane units, with prices ranging from a couple of hundred dollars to a few thousand.

First-time buyers may want to stick with what they can purchase and have serviced locally. For example, Markham's Home Hardware sells Traeger wood pellet grills, which start around \$800, according to Murray Wicks, owner of the store.

He also noted they are good for people who not only want to smoke, but also cook at high temperatures.

Weber is another popular brand and they cost around \$300. Those, Mr. Wicks said, are pure smokers, so if you want to still cook at high temperatures, you will need to keep the gas barbecue handy.

There are also units available from Brinkman, but Mr. Wicks cautioned they can be tough to operate, especially for the novice.

So you've got your smoker. What are going to cook on it? The most popular meats are: pork butt and pork shoulder, followed by pork ribs, beef brisket, chicken, turkey, sausage and fish, according to Kal Kennedy, general manager of Gormley's Kendale Products Ltd., which sells and installs smokers for restaurants.

You want to choose a meat with a decent amount of fat on it because it will dry out in

the smoker, according to Mr. Allbright.

“Just to go and grab a piece of meat and think it's going to work is 50/50,” he said.

He suggested working with a butcher. You will not only get information on your best choices for meat, but likely some recipe ideas, too.

The next step is deciding on your seasoning. Do you use a dry rub or a paste? How about a marinade?

A dry rub is a mix of spices literally rubbed onto the outside of the meat prior to cooking. The most common ingredients are garlic and onion powders, paprika, chili, salt, pepper and sugar.

A word of caution about smoking with sugar. It begins to burn at 260 F so ensure your smoker's temperature is below that, according to bbqcrashcourse.com. Your meat will otherwise have a bitter taste.

Store-bought rubs, such as Montreal steak, are also quite acceptable to use, experts say.

A paste is your choice of rub combined with a liquid, such as oil, butter, vinegar, fruit juice, beef stock or beer, which appears to be a favourite.

ENJOY IN MODERATION, CANCER SOCIETY WARNS

The one caveat to smoking meat is that it can increase the risk of colorectal cancer, according to the Canadian Cancer Society.

And it is the actual smoke that appears to be the culprit.

The fat from red meat, chicken and even fish drops onto the coals or wood and releases the smoke. The meat then absorbs the tar created by the smoke, which can lead to colorectal cancer, according to John Atkinson, senior manager of prevention of the Ontario division of the society.

“Whether it's small (such as in the back yard) or big (such as store bought and processed), it can increase the risk associated with eating these kinds of meat,” he said.

The society does not advise against eating smoked meats, it just wants people to eat small amounts of them.

“It's about moderation,” Mr. Atkinson said.

Mr. Atkinson also noted a lot of meat is already salted, so when it comes to seasoning, lay off the salt.



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