



## Recipe for Success: The Sizzling Business of Grilling



The backyard grill business is sizzling.  
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By Liz Webber

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For many Americans, summer is synonymous with backyard barbecues. From Memorial Day to Labor Day -- and throughout the year for a growing number of enthusiasts -- millions of families fire up their grills for quick and easy meals that hearken back to a simpler time. And for entrepreneurs with a flair for the open flame, opportunities abound.

"Barbecue is as old as finding out about fire," says Bill Kelley, owner of barbecue sauce company Smokin' Willie's. "It's the oldest way of cooking that man has."

Of course, Smokin' Willie's, based in Northridge, Calif., is a bit younger than that. Kelley began bottling his mother's recipe in 1999 and soon started offering other original sauces and spice blends. Success in the local market drove the business to become a full-time operation in 2005. Kelley's specialty sauces can now be found in Southern California supermarkets and Whole Foods stores.

Smokin' Willie's success parallels significant growth in the barbecue and grilling industry in recent years. Grills alone have become a \$2.3 billion business, with the market jumping to \$4 billion when accessories are included, according to the Hearth, Patio, and Barbecue Association, an Arlington, Va.-based trade group. The overall industry grew by 44 percent from 1992 to 2005.

In addition, more people own grills now than ever before. More than 80 percent of American households owned a grill in 2005, up from 72 percent in 2003, according to the association. Almost a quarter of households own more than one grill.

This growth is fueled in part by Americans' increasing interest and investment in outdoor rooms and cooking areas. "The whole outdoor kitchen trend is growing, which of course your grill is centerpiece to that," says Diedra Dorsa, a spokeswoman for the Hearth, Patio, and Barbecue Association. In 2004, Americans spent almost \$70 billion on outdoor areas like patios and porches. A survey by the Propane Education and Research Council found that 86 percent of Americans would include a gas grill in their outdoor room.

Rasmussen Gas Logs and Grills, a Whittier, Calif.-based manufacturer, has capitalized on the increased popularity in outdoor renovations. "The outdoor kitchen is becoming very much the thing to have in your backyard," says Rett Rasmussen, the company's vice president. In keeping with that trend, most of Rasmussen's Solaire infrared grills are designed to be either a built-in fixture or a standalone cart model. The company also offers a portable version.

Rasmussen's family business, which began as a fireplace manufacturer in 1907 and moved into the gas log industry in the 1950s, started selling the Solaire line in 2000. However, these are not your grandfather's grills. Unlike traditional grills that place food high above the heat source and essentially cook food by surrounding it with hot air, Solaire's infrared grilling surfaces cook food directly, distributing heat more evenly and preventing food from drying out. The common grilling technique is like "socks in a clothes dryer," Rasmussen says. "It sucks out all the moisture."

Many upscale steakhouses use infrared grills, and Rasmussen promises that same level of quality on Solaire grills. He likens his company's products to a Rolls-Royce, because of the emphasis on quality manufacturing (all done in the United States, unlike some of their competitors, he adds).

If a Rasmussen grill is like a Rolls-Royce, then Jay Curry's barbecue business is more like an

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American Chopper. The smokers Curry creates through Spicewine Ironworks, a Columbia, Mo.-based outfit he runs with his brother Steve and friend Randy Ham, are heavy-duty cookers the trio customizes with trailers and personalized paint jobs.

To many Americans, barbecue means something very different than a cookout on the grill. Spicewine's smokers follow the definition of barbecue as a slow-cook process lasting several hours. Serious barbecue enthusiasts participate in a growing number of cooking competitions held nationwide -- a trend that's brought more than a few customers to Curry's business.

While traditionally popular in the South, this type of barbecue is spreading. "It used to be barbecue was specific to certain areas of the country," Curry says. "Now we're seeing a lot of interest in Florida. I'm seeing a really big interest also in the New England area."

Don Armstrong, who's portable Grill-a-ma-Jig brings barbecue beyond the backyard, agrees. "I've sold everywhere from New Jersey to New Hampshire," he says.

Tired of lugging their heavy barbecues to campsites near their home in Orcutt, Calif., Armstrong and friends Scott Carpenter and Mike Johnson designed a fold-up steel barbecue pit that uses either wood or charcoal. "We took them camping and people walked by and said, 'I want one,'" Armstrong recalls. The partners formed a business they called D & S Creations and started filling orders.

The Grill-a-ma-Jig's portability caught on to another growing development in barbecue and grilling. "The thing that surprised us most is that our product appealed just as much to women as it did to men," Armstrong says. "Initially, I had more women buying them than men."

Indeed, more and more dads are turning over the spatula. A recent survey by the Propane Education and Research Council found that women are now grilling more often than men, with two-thirds using a grill to cook at least a couple times a week, compared to 57 percent of men. With many more women cooking on the grill today than a generation ago, 34 million women use their grills more than once a week in the summer and 3.4 million use it every day.

"Women have expanded into the grilling scene I've noticed," says Kelly of Smokin' Willie's. "They're not letting men have all the fun."

Overall grill usage has doubled in the past 20 years, according to The NPD Group, a global market-research firm. About a third of Americans cooked on the grill at least once during an average two-week period in 2006, versus 17 percent in 1985.

And grilling is no longer solely a summer activity. "Grilling is an all-year experience," says Dorsa of the Hearth, Patio, and Barbecue Association. Nearly 70 percent of grill owners use their grills year-round, with fall grilling growing by 6 percent in the past 10 years.

No matter where or when they do it, there's no doubt that Americans love barbecue -- and entrepreneurs continue to capitalize on the growing demand. "I think what's appealing is cooking outdoors," Dorsa says. "Somehow, the food tastes better too."



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