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FIRING UP THE FLAVOR

Smoked Summer Fare: Chicken, Steak, and ... Mac and Cheese?

Barbecue season has finally arrived in the upper Midwest, and with it comes countless chances to enjoy steak, chicken, and other tasty dishes on the grill. Just about every summertime entree you can imagine has its own national holiday in June, from National Rotisserie Chicken Day (June 2) to National Bacon Burnt Ends Day (June 29).

We are big barbecue fans in my family, and my wife and I expanded our repertoire last year by buying a smoker. We love playing with different recipes on our tricked-out Traeger Silverton pellet grill. We weren't planning to buy a smoker when we set out for Costco. We only intended to replace our old, rusted-out grill with a clean new model. Traeger was pitching its smokers that day, however. My wife and I are good with kitchen gadgets and already own an Instant Pot multi-cooker and a slow cooker. We liked the idea of owning a rust-proof grill that we could also use to smoke, roast, bake, and sear foods. The smoker looked like just another fun cooking gadget for us to enjoy.

It has turned out to be exactly that. We smoke ribeye steaks every Saturday night by warming the meat up in the smoker, then turning up the heat to sear it. Add salt and a little melted butter, and you have a great, flavorful meal. Smoked vegetables are really tasty. And for the holidays last year, I smoked a pork belly with apricot barbecue sauce, and the result was amazing.

Not all of our early adventures with the smoker have been hits. I tried smoking a brisket and it was a bust. Using a recipe for a larger brisket than the one I bought, I put the meat in the smoker and left for work. By the time I came home, it was done, alright — overdone and really dried out! Last Thanksgiving, I tried to smoke beets along with the turkey. The turkey turned out great ... the beets, not so much. I didn't smoke them long enough to capture the smoke flavor or cook them thoroughly.

My son, who is 11, is dying to try smoked mac and cheese. He is a mac and cheese fan, and he thinks preparing it on the smoker will make it better. He is also a fan of Garfield the cat, and since Garfield loves lasagna, it's probably only a matter of time before he wants to smoke lasagna. My 8-year-old daughter loves bacon, and she helps me prepare bacon in the smoker.



We often have chicken on Sundays, and season it with a honey rub or other rubs or spices from a company called Meat Church. I like following cooking blogs and recipes on Facebook and Instagram. We've also tried various types of pellets. The cherry wood pellets are very good, but Traeger's Gourmet Blend of maple, cherry, and hickory pellets is our favorite.

The kids usually tolerate my experiments. If the kids ever complain about my cooking, I remind them that their grandmother made me eat borscht. I'm still convinced that if a guy can eat that bitter-tasting soup, he can do just about anything. Even if my kids don't like my cooking, I tell them, "I've never given you anything nearly as bad-tasting as borscht." That usually quiets them down.

I've been doing a lot of the cooking at our house since our kids were born. I find it relaxing. After I spend all day as an attorney giving advice to people and making things happen, it's nice to just follow a recipe without having to tell anybody to do something or even think about it much. You just follow the steps in the recipe, and out comes dinner! It's a great way to end a day.

- Andrew M. Ayers



RENTAL RIDDLE

LANDLORDS RESIST SECURITY DEPOSIT RETURNS

Renters often worry (for good reason) about getting their security deposits back. Landlords hold all the cards and can devise countless reasons why they are entitled to keep your cash after you move out.

“When I was a renter, I never once received a security deposit back,” Green Bee Memphis, a Memphis Realtor, declared in a 2023 video on TikTok.

U.S. renters are among the nation’s most economically vulnerable people. According to the Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University, nearly half of all renters spend more than 30% of their income on rent and utilities, a level that housing experts consider burdensome. A record-high 22.4 million renters fell into this category in 2022, up about 2% from three years earlier. No wonder the 1 in 3 Americans who rent are concerned about getting their security deposits back.

Landlords tend to occupy the opposite end of the economic spectrum, and all states have enacted at least some legal protections for renters. State laws vary, but all require landlords to return security deposits to renters within 14–60 days after they move out, according to Nolo.com’s Legal Encyclopedia.

Kentucky, Washington, and Green Bee Memphis’s state of Tennessee, among others, require landlords to keep security deposits in a separate account maintained for that purpose. In Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts, Illinois, and other states, those accounts must pay interest that must be returned to renters.

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When landlords withhold security deposit refunds, they are typically required to give renters a list of damages to justify their decision. And they should not charge renters for routine cleaning or ordinary wear and tear — only for careless or willful damage or excessive filth.

Defining ordinary wear and tear can be difficult. For example, suppose a landlord installs new carpeting before a tenant moves in, and the tenant stays four years. In that case, the carpet will inevitably show some wear after the tenant moves out, but this is typically regarded as ordinary wear and tear — not a repair that tenants should be required to cover. Other examples offered by Nolo.com include linoleum stains from shower spray, which is ordinary wear and tear, versus broken tiles in the bathroom, which is damage. Similarly, dents in the wall where a door handle bumped constitute normal wear and tear, while a door ripped off the hinges is damage. Tenants should notify landlords in writing within 3–5 days of moving in about any damage to the apartment so they won’t be billed for it later.

One of the most common causes of tenant-landlord lawsuits is a landlord’s refusal to return a security deposit. Tenants who want to contest a landlord’s decision should gather evidence, including move-in and move-out reports and photos, and state their position in a dispute letter. If out-of-court efforts to settle a dispute fail, tenants usually can file suit in small claims court.

TAKE A *BREAK*

Do we have to do this right meow? We're missing Claw and Order.



Ingredients

- 3 boneless, skinless chicken breasts
- Salt and pepper
- 4 ears of corn, shucked
- 3 tbsp minced dill
- 3 stalks celery, finely diced
- 1 red onion, finely diced
- 1 1/2 cups blueberries
- 1 head of butter lettuce

Inspired by FoodNetwork.com

Dressing

- 3/4 cup crumbled feta cheese
- 1/2 cup half and half
- 1/4 cup mayonnaise
- 1/4 cup sour cream
- 1 tsp sugar
- Juice of 1 lemon

Directions

1. Place chicken in a large plastic bag and pound with a mallet to flatten to 1/4-inch thickness. Drizzle with olive oil and sprinkle with salt and pepper.
2. Heat grill, then grill chicken on both sides for about 4 minutes per side; set aside to cool before slicing.
3. Grill corn until the kernels begin browning, turning regularly for even cooking. Use a knife to shave the kernels off.
4. In a bowl, mix all dressing ingredients until combined.
5. In a large bowl, combine corn, dill, celery, and onions, then stir in chicken and top with dressing and blueberries as desired.
6. Separate the head of butter lettuce into "cups" to fill with salad and enjoy!

IT'S FATHER'S DAY!

Children Create Unique Dad's Day Gifts

Recently, people have been spending big on Father's Day, and many wait until the very last minute. Last year, Americans spent a record \$22.9 billion on Father's Day, up nearly 10% from the previous year, according to an industry survey. And more than half of consumers don't start shopping until the week before Father's Day, while 3.5% wait until the very last day before the holiday, according to another survey.

The second survey also revealed that over 75% of shoppers struggle to think of good Father's Day ideas. Most settle on outings, clothing, gift cards, personal care items, or electronics. Here are three low-budget ideas you can do with your kids that are sure to charm any dad, offered by What's Up Moms, a top parenting site on YouTube co-founded by vlogger Elle Walker.

Interview Cards

If your kids are preschoolers, have them answer questions about their father and record their answers on notecards. Things like, "How old do you think Daddy is? 100? What is one thing Daddy says? What does Daddy do for work? Why do you love Daddy?" The simplicity and innocence of your children's answers will warm Dad's heart more than any store-bought gift ever could.

Shopping Spree

Give each child \$10 to pick out something for Dad, all by themselves, then take them to the nearest big-box store. Walker's youngsters came up with a mirror, a pair of swim trunks, and crib sheets, and they clearly loved being empowered to make choices.

Photos From a Kid's Perspective

You may be surprised at some of the angles children choose and the tender moments they capture, "even if they're not wow-worthy," Walker says. Her daughter caught a captivating shot of her husband, Ross, napping with their preschool son resting on his shoulder.





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WHAT WERE THEY THINKING?

WEIRD STATE LAWS SAFEGUARD SALAMANDERS AND SEAWEED

Ignorance about the law is usually not a defense if you're caught in a violation. Some oddball state laws, however, are so strange that they could only be described as booby traps for the unknowing. Here are two legislative oddities sure to surprise any hapless offender.

76 Salamanders

A popular YouTube commentator has called out the state of Illinois for barring anyone from owning more than 75 salamanders. Why? Several salamander species are classified as endangered in Illinois, and the state regulates the commercial trade of these amphibians. The law assumes any resident who possesses salamanders valued at \$600 or more intends to market them commercially — illegally. The law estimates the value of a salamander at \$5, suggesting it actually prohibits owning 120 salamanders. But who's counting?

Nighttime Seaweed

From the annals of lawmaking history, a 1973 New Hampshire law banned any effort to "carry away or

collect for the purpose of carrying away any seaweed ... between evening and daylight."

The backstory: Farmers in New Hampshire once collected seaweed from the beaches to use as fertilizer, leading at least one town to ban nighttime harvesting to "give everyone an equal chance" at stocking up on seaweed. However, after a group of high school students singled out the law as the state's dumbest, lawmakers repealed it in 2016.

Not all states with stupid laws are culpable. Internet jokesters questioned South Dakota about a law supposedly barring people from falling asleep in a cheese factory. The actual law makes a lot more sense: It bans setting up your bedroom in a space used to prepare food for the public.

Noting the error, a Sioux Falls radio station, Hot 104.7, fired back at critics, creating their own new category of missteps: "Stupid questions people ask about South Dakota." Fair enough!

