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BAR-B-HEAVEN

Don't we all love it – a sultry summer evening, the wonderful smell of meat and herbs cooking gently over the ash grey coals of a barbecue, condensation glistening on an ice cold jug of Pimms, lounging in a deckchair while the man of the house handles the cooking with all the expertise of Masterchef.

Dream on! – it'll probably rain, the steak will be incinerated, the chicken raw, the burgers bursting with bugs and you'll have to send the children inside to avoid the frequent outbursts of bad language from the cook. The reality seldom matches the dream but you can make the barbecue dreams come true with a few simple precautions.

It's alarming that the number of reported cases of food poisoning in the UK has rocketed from 20,000 in 1985 to over 100,000 last year. Bearing in mind that only 10 percent of people bother to report episodes of food poisoning, this is just the tip of a frightening iceberg of around a million cases a year. Though it's popular to blame restaurants, fast food outlets and the greasy spoon cafes, the truth is that the majority of food poisoning happens at home and summer barbecues are one of the most common causes.

Top of the "least wanted" bugs list are *Campylobacter Jejuni*, the most frequent cause of diarrhoea, which contaminates 90 percent of fresh and frozen chickens, and *Salmonella* which is also endemic in the British chicken flock, in badly produced eggs and seafood. Both of these bugs are killed by cooking at the right temperature but food infected with them will also contaminate other foods which come into contact with, knives, plates, work surfaces and chopping boards. *Campylobacter* produces symptoms within 2-6 days of consumption and *Salmonella* will lay you low within 8-36 hours.

For most healthy adults a minor bout of food poisoning is an unpleasant inconvenience, but for the very young, the elderly, pregnant women and anyone whose immune system is weakened by illness, severe food poisoning may be fatal.

THE BUG FREE BBQ

Clean hands, clean utensils, a clean grill and separate plates, utensils and chopping boards to separate raw and cooked foods are essential. The most vital piece of equipment is a meat thermometer and few people I know actually own one, and even those that do seldom use them. But this is the key to killing off the deadly bugs. Don't serve meat to your friends and family until you've checked the temperature at it's centre and it has reached 145 degrees F for roasts, steaks and chops of beef, veal or lamb if you want them medium rare, and 160 degrees F for medium. All pork should reach at least 160 degrees, chicken breasts or drumsticks 180 degrees, chicken or turkey burgers 165 degrees, and beef burgers 160 degrees.

The E.coli bacteria is exceptionally dangerous and most frequently occurs in burgers – if you're at somebody else's cook-out party never let your kids eat burgers without breaking them open to make sure there is not the slightest trace of pink – but even this is not as 100 percent safe as using the thermometer. It's fine to eat undercooked steak or roasts as the E.coli is on the outside of the meat and is killed by the cooking temperature. Once you mince the beef the bacteria is spread throughout the finished product which is why all burgers must be cooked right through.

I've tried a variety of thermometers and my favourite – coincidentally one of the cheapest – is a large dial version which is easy to read and costs only £5.45 from Lakeland Ltd. tel 01539 488100.

The safest way to deal with larger pieces of meat and poultry is to part cook them before finishing them on the barbecue to get that wonderful outdoor flavour – but make sure partially cooked food goes straight from the oven, grill

or microwave onto the barbecue. If you're marinating raw meat, fish and poultry do it in the fridge. Make sufficient marinade to keep some separate if you want to use it to baste on the barbecue and never pour any leftover marinade which has had raw food in it over the finished dish.

For years there have been persistent stories that barbecued meat can be carcinogenic. Professor Mike Pariza at the University of Wisconsin, America has been researching this area for the last 20 years. Apparently a chemical called benzopyrene is produced when wood or charcoal burns and barbecued meat may absorb small amounts of this carcinogenic substance. Much less is produced from charcoal than whole wood and even less when you allow the flames to die down and cook on the heat of the remaining coals. According to the professor these risks are absolutely minimal but if you're determined to avoid them, don't eat the skin of barbecued poultry or sausages, or place the meat on a sheet of foil before cooking.

Fat dripping from your meat onto the hot coals may produce another group of carcinogenic chemicals called nitrosamines, but the amount reabsorbed by the food from the smoke of burning fat is infinitesimal and unless you're eating three meals a day off the barbecue for six months of the year this doesn't represent a threat to health.

Eating in the fresh air is a wonderful thing to do and a gathering of friends and family round the barbecue is one of the best ways I know to enjoy the rare wonders of a perfect English summer day. Stick to the rules and nobody need suffer.

RECIPES

To start: nothing tastes better cooked on the barbecue than fresh sardines, They're extremely healthy thanks to their content of heart protective fatty acids, rich in protein and also very cheap. If you're not good at dealing with fish then ask your fishmonger to gut and clean them. Wash well, dry with kitchen paper, brush each sardine with olive oil, and sprinkle with coarse sea

salt before cooking. They'll only take 2 or 3 minutes each side, turn once and allow at least three or four per person depending on size. Serve with chunks of crusty bread and a salad of thinly sliced ripe tomatoes drizzled with olive oil and sprinkled with torn up basil leaves.

For the main course here's something different. People throw up their hands in horror at the thought of veggie guests coming to a barbecue party. Here's a dish which everyone will love and if they're not quick the veggies won't get a look in before the meat eaters scoff the lot, so make more than you think you need. Marinade cubes of tofu in a mixture of olive oil, soy sauce, finely chopped garlic and lots of fresh herbs – rosemary, tarragon, sage, thyme – whatever your favourites are. Leave in the fridge for at least two hours. Then place on a skewer, alternating with chunks of red and green pepper, mushroom, onion and courgettes before cooking. A mass of vitamins, calcium, and no saturated fat. This is one marinade you can use to baste the kebab while cooking.

Finally, cut a whole ripe peach in half, remove the stone, place a teaspoon of honey and a knob of butter where the stone was, put the two halves back together, lay a sprig of basil on top, wrap tightly in foil and leave on the barbecue for half an hour. You'll be amazed by the succulent and aromatic flavour – if you want to be really indulgent serve with a dash of peach liqueur and a dollop of whipped cream.

IF IT STRIKES

If the worst happens and you get a bout of food poisoning, you should go to the doctor, though most people don't. If you think you know what caused it, try to keep a sample of the food in a sealed container in the refrigerator so that your local Environmental Health Officer can have it analysed and check on the original source. If you work in the food industry in any capacity, you must see your doctor and tell your employer, to make sure that you are not a carrier of the infection. Babies, small children and the elderly must get medical

attention for any severe episodes of diarrhea and vomiting, and the same is true for healthy adults if it continues for more than a day or two.

It's vital to replace lost fluids, and though you can buy special preparations from the chemist, you can make your own by adding one teaspoon of salt and 8 teaspoons of sugar to a litre (one and threequarter pints) of boiled water, and try to drink 150ml (quarter pint) every 15 minutes. When you do feel like eating – usually not in the first 24 hours – stick to the BRAT diet, bananas, rice, apples and white toast, for at least 48 hours before going back to normal food.