

Top 12 Grilling Mistakes to Avoid

Some of the most common practices are also the wrong ones.

BY ELIZABETH BOMZE

1 Using lighter fluid

Lighter fluid can impart a chemical flavor to the food.

➤ **BEST PRACTICE** Light coals in a chimney starter.

Method: Place wadded-up newspaper in the bottom chamber and briquettes in the top. Light the newspaper. When the top coals are covered in ash, dump the coals into the grill.

2 Packing too much paper into the chimney

Doing so blocks airflow, so the coals will take longer to ignite—or will not ignite at all.

➤ **BEST PRACTICE** Don't place more than two sheets of newspaper in the bottom chamber at one time.



3 Pouring the coals before they are fully ignited

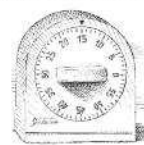
If the coals aren't hot enough, they won't cook food at the right rate. Or, worse, the fire can die out.

➤ **BEST PRACTICE** Don't pour the coals until the top layer is partially covered with ash—a sure sign that they're ready.

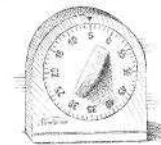
4 Skipping the preheat step

Meat placed on a cooking grate that's not sufficiently hot will stick aggressively because its proteins form a chemical bond with the metal.

➤ **BEST PRACTICE** Wait to add food until the metal is very hot. This will break the bonds (which are thermally unstable), preventing sticking. It will also produce much better color and char.



Charcoal Preheat Time:
About 5 minutes



Gas Preheat Time:
About 15 minutes

5 Using one fire setup for all tasks

The fire setup—how much charcoal or how many burners you're using and where the heat is located in relation to the food—allows you to control the heat level and the rate of cooking. Using the wrong setup can cause food to burn before it's cooked through or cook through without developing any flavorful browning or char.

➤ **BEST PRACTICE** Use one of our three favorite fire setups.

SINGLE-LEVEL FIRE

Best for: Small, quick-cooking foods such as sausages, shrimp, fish fillets, and some vegetables.



Charcoal Setup:
Distribute lit coals in even layer across bottom of grill.



Gas Setup: Turn all burners to high, cover, and heat grill until hot. Leave all burners on high.

HALF-GRILL FIRE

Best for: Foods that you want to cook gently but also sear, such as bone-in chicken parts and pork chops.



Charcoal Setup:
Distribute lit coals in even layer over half of grill.



Gas Setup: Turn all burners to high, cover, and heat grill until hot. Leave primary burner on high and turn off other burner(s).

CONCENTRATED FIRE

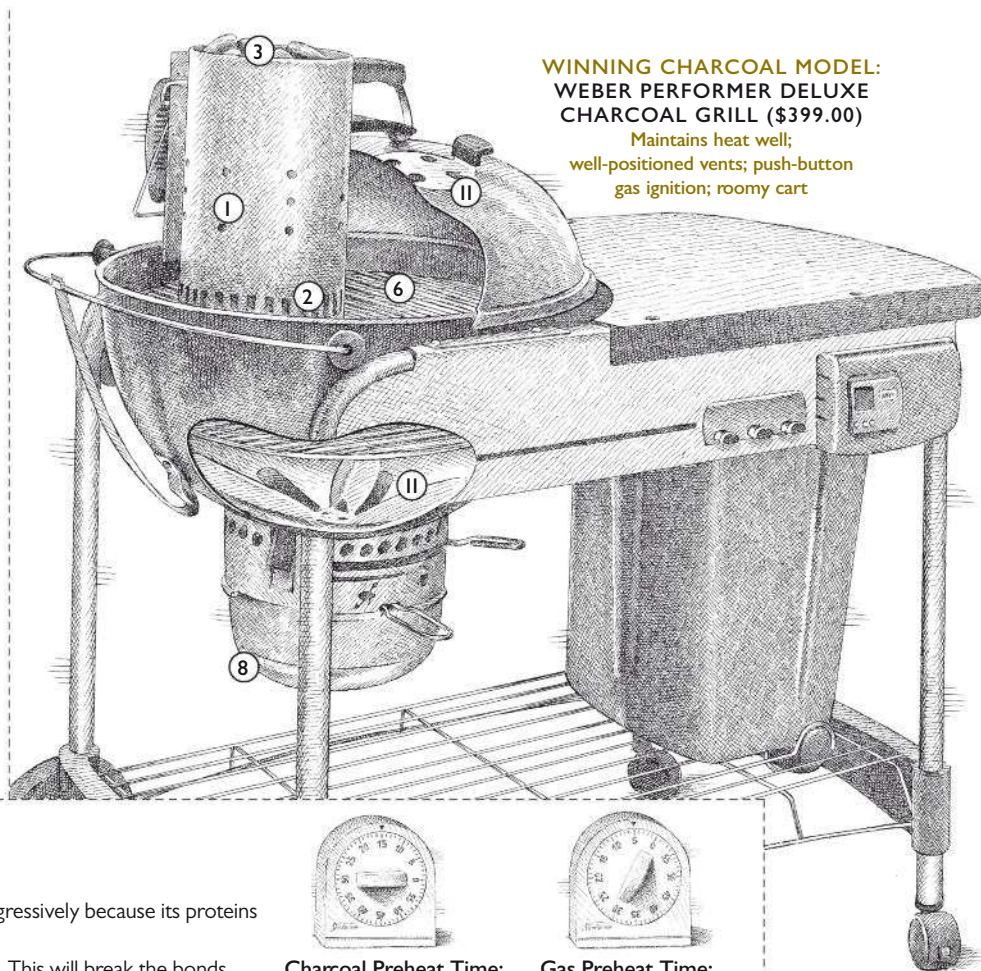
Best for: Quick-cooking foods on which you want substantial char, such as burgers or thin steaks.



Charcoal Setup: Poke holes in bottom of large disposable aluminum pan, place pan in center of grill, and pour lit coals into pan.



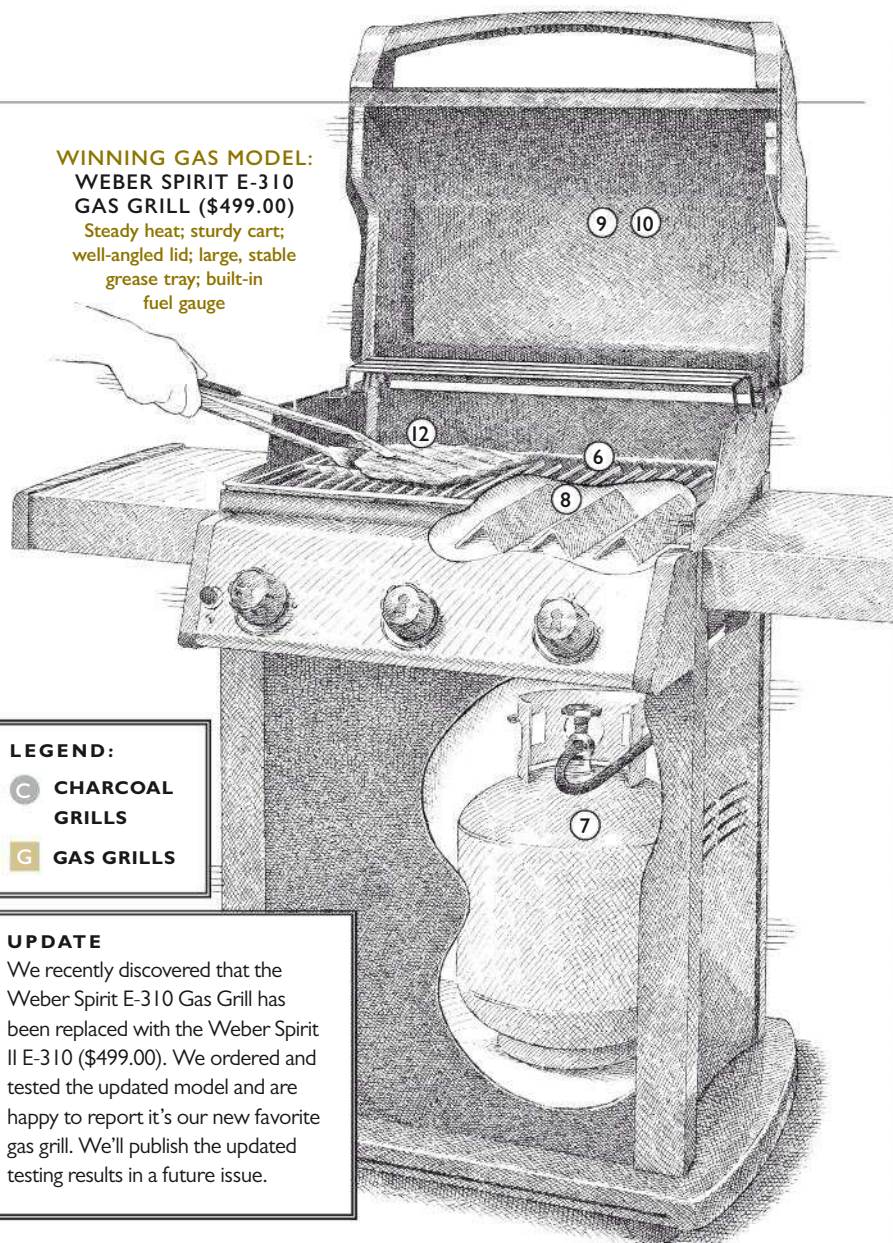
Gas Setup: Concentrated fire setup is not possible on gas grill. To maximize heat, turn all burners to high.



WINNING CHARCOAL MODEL:
WEBER PERFORMER DELUXE CHARCOAL GRILL (\$399.00)

Maintains heat well;
well-positioned vents; push-button gas ignition; roomy cart

WINNING GAS MODEL:
WEBER SPIRIT E-310
GAS GRILL (\$499.00)
 Steady heat; sturdy cart;
 well-angled lid; large, stable
 grease tray; built-in
 fuel gauge



LEGEND:

- C** CHARCOAL GRILLS
- G** GAS GRILLS

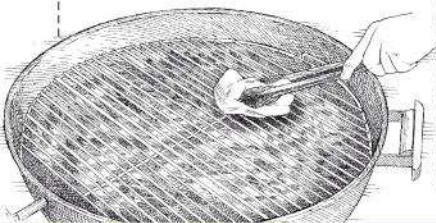
UPDATE

We recently discovered that the Weber Spirit E-310 Gas Grill has been replaced with the Weber Spirit II E-310 (\$499.00). We ordered and tested the updated model and are happy to report it's our new favorite gas grill. We'll publish the updated testing results in a future issue.

C **G** 6 Not oiling the cooking grate

Most cooking grates are made of steel or cast iron and must be oiled before grilling to keep food from sticking.

➤ **BEST PRACTICE** Using tongs, dip a wad of paper towels in vegetable oil and thoroughly wipe the preheated, scrubbed cooking grate before adding food.



G 7 Not checking the propane tank

You don't want to end up with an empty propane tank in the middle of grilling—especially in the case of a lengthy project such as brisket or ribs.

➤ **HOW TO CHECK THE TANK**

If your grill does not have a built-in fuel gauge, you can buy an external one—for example, the intuitive Original Grill Gauge (\$13.99). Or try this hot water trick: Boil 1 cup of water and pour it down the side of the tank. Feel the metal with your hand. Where the water has warmed the surface of the tank, it is empty; where the tank remains cool to the touch, there is still propane inside.



C **G** 8 Cooking on a gunked-up grill

Food debris, grease, and smoke that build up on various parts of the grill can cause sticking and impart off-flavors to food; full grease traps can ignite; and built-up grease on the interior basin and underside of the grill lid can carbonize and turn into a patchy layer that flakes off and lands on your food.

➤ **HOW TO CLEAN YOUR GRILL**

Grill grates: After preheating the grill, scrape the cooking grate clean with a grill brush.

Interior basin and lid: Lightly scrub the cool grill and lid with steel wool and water.

Ash catcher (charcoal only): Empty the cooled ash regularly.

Grease traps (gas only): Remove the cool shallow pan from under your grill and scrub it with hot soapy water. To make cleanup easier, line the pan with aluminum foil before use.

G 9 Leaving the lid open

Because gas grills deliver less heat output than charcoal models, grilling certain foods with the lid up allows too much heat to escape. **Note:** You should never light a gas grill with the lid down, which can trap gas and cause a dangerous explosion.

➤ **BEST PRACTICE** When directed in a recipe, keep the lid closed to trap as much heat as possible.

C **G** 10 Lifting the lid too often

This is equivalent to frequently opening the oven door. Heat will escape, which prolongs the grilling time.

➤ **BEST PRACTICE** Use a probe thermometer, which allows you to monitor food's doneness without opening the grill.

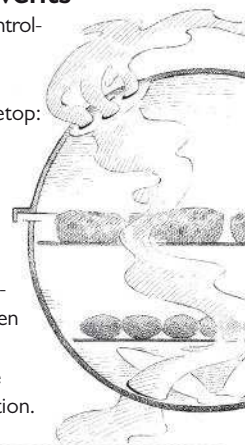
C 11 Ignoring the grill vents

If you're not using the vents, you're not controlling the heat output.

➤ **HOW GRILL VENTS WORK**

Grill vents are like the dials on your stovetop:

They allow you to manipulate how hot the fire gets and how the food cooks. Charcoal grills have top vents on the lid and bottom vents on the underside of the basin. (Gas grills have vents, too, but they are not adjustable.) In general, opening the vents completely allows more oxygen to reach the fire so that it burns hotter and faster; partially closing the vents lowers the temperature and prolongs the fire's duration.



C **G** 12 Turning the meat too soon

Meat will stick to the cooking grate until the meat's surface is hot enough to release (see "Skipping the preheat step"). Lifting meat before it naturally releases will tear it.

➤ **BEST PRACTICE** Sear the meat without moving it until a substantial crust forms around the edges. If the meat doesn't lift easily, continue searing until it does.