

The Grill of Victory

Is charcoal or gas the greenest way to barbecue?

By Laura D'Amelio

In the name of the environment, we've worried about gas in our cars, gas in our houses and gas from bovines, but what about gas from your grill? The summer months team with activities involving outdoor meals. But like many decisions we make, the choice between using gas or charcoal can affect the environment and wildlife.

Barbecues emit pollutants that contribute to smog. According to Environment Canada, these pollutants come from both the fuel and food used to cook. Grilling meat at a high temperature creates a type of carcinogen called heterocyclic amines. More carcinogenic hydrocarbons are formed when fat drips through grills,

flames and smokes, depositing itself back onto the food.

But most of the pollutants that find their way into our air come from barbecue fuel. Charcoal gives off carbon monoxide and particulate matter, including tiny soot particles. The partner of charcoal, lighter fluid, releases toxic, volatile organic chemicals through evaporation. When burned together, the charcoal and lighter fluid contribute to ground-level ozone, created when volatile organic compounds, nitrogen oxides and hot weather combine.

Ground-level ozone is a risk to people with lung and heart conditions but can also make breathing hard for children and adults who spend a significant amount of time outside. This type of ozone also affects the lungs and hearts of wildlife. And it reduces the amount of photosynthesis that occurs and causes leaf damage in the vegetation they eat.

In any case, according to Ross Mikkelsen, owner of Calgary-

If you choose briquettes over charcoal, you'll add more to your dinner. Briquettes contain coal dust, starch and other additives that bind the ingredients together, all of which are released when they are burned.

based Barbecues Galore, "The percentage of charcoal barbecues sold in Canada is very small, mostly due to our climate. Gas is more convenient."

Cleaner-burning natural gas or propane is considered an ozone-free alternative to barbecuing. But charcoal is made from trees, which take carbon dioxide from the atmosphere as they grow. When the charcoal is burned, the carbon

THE VERDICT

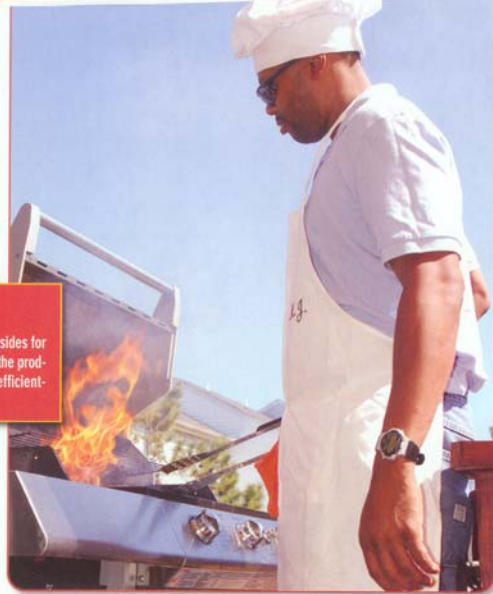
Both gas and charcoal barbecues have downsides for the health of wildlife and humans. Research the products you choose and use your barbecue as efficiently as you can.

dioxide is returned to the atmosphere, making the use of charcoal carbon neutral. If the trees are harvested sustainably, it actually makes charcoal better than gas.

"North America has a high percentage of domestically produced charcoal," says Mikkelsen, adding that charcoal products available in Europe are produced from tropical forests, something that raises concerns about transportation impacts and unsustainable practices. While Mikkelsen recommends that consumers do thorough research, the charcoal products he's familiar with come from Quebec and Argentina; some use leftovers from the manufacture of hardwood flooring.

"In the U.S., the main source of charcoal is American white oak from sustainable sources," says Tony Gottschalk, manager of the Hearth, Patio and Barbecue Association of Canada. "But there is no requirement for manufacturers to label the sources in North America."

Wood is a renewable resource, whereas propane — a derivative of natural gas processing and crude oil refining — is a non-renewable fossil fuel. Extracting natural gas



Ditch the lighter fluid for greener alternatives such as an electric lighter or a chimney charcoal starter, a large metal cylinder where you load charcoal in the top and crumpled newspaper — which you light to start the charcoal — in the bottom.

and either burning it directly or using propane releases greenhouse gas and air pollutants and also affects ecosystems in areas where it is extracted.

Your barbecue probably affects wildlife far less than your driving habits do, but making smarter choices about how you use your barbecue can lessen the effect on you and wildlife. Mikkelsen suggests outdoor chefs learn how to use their barbecue efficiently. If your barbecue has a lid, keep it closed during cooking to preserve heat. Spread food across the whole grate, and turn off the barbecue as soon as you are finished.

"If you have a decent barbecue, put it on for 10 minutes and it should be up to temperature," he says. Most people leave their grill on after cooking to aid in cleaning, but Mikkelsen recommends leaving the grease alone. To save fuel, clean the grill as you warm it up next time you barbecue.

Most importantly, be aware of the times when your barbecue can affect your health and others. Environment Canada recommends you don't use it during smog days. ☺

Laura D'Amelio is a Toronto-based freelance writer. To read more of her work, visit www.lauradamelio.com.