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In Search of the Green Cookout

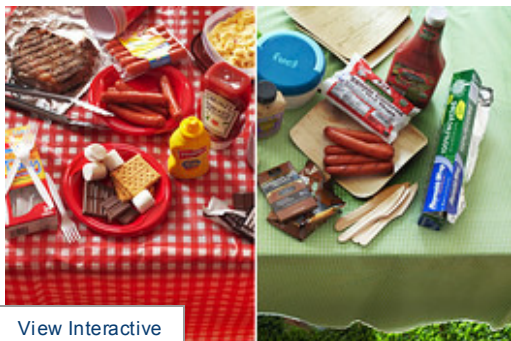
This Summer, You Can Stick With the Great American Classics, Or Serve Grass-Fed Beef and Organic S'Mores on Palm-Leaf Plates

By LIBBY COPELAND

For the growing number of consumers aspiring to live a more natural, environmentally friendly lifestyle, the summer cookout poses a particular conundrum. The whole ethos of the barbecue is low-cost relaxation, which usually means disposable plates (why wash when you can toss?), lighter fluid on the grill, and processed foods like hot dogs.

Planning a Green Cookout

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It's become somewhat easier to buy goods for what might be called the opt-out cookout at mainstream stores. Wal-Mart sells recycled aluminum foil, Target offers lightweight bamboo items perfects for picnics, Costco has additive-free charcoal briquets, and Whole Foods Market stores carry everything from grass-fed beef to compostable bowls to chemical-free bug repellent.

Still, recycled beige napkins don't have the same oomph as bright red ones, and grass-fed beef hamburgers don't have the fatty flavor American taste buds have grown used to. There's also the eco-price tag: products made from green materials like bamboo or recycled paper often cost much more

than conventional items. It is easy to spend twice as much buying products for an opt-out cookout as for a conventional one.



Even the professionals are discovering there's a learning curve to planning a green cookout. The small Colorado ski resort of Frisco has been striving for a more eco-friendly approach at town events. At its 17th annual Colorado BBQ Challenge last month, the town for the first time required all 80 plus vendors to use only service items that could be composted or recycled. About 35,000 people came to the event, says Suzanne Lifgren, the town's director of marketing and communications.

But there were complications. The town had to



Hector M Sanchez for The Wall Street Journal

Compostable forks, right, from Birchware's Amazon.com store cost \$9.99 for 100, pricier than generic plastic forks, left.

recruit 150 volunteers whose sole purpose was to help attendees sort their trash, showing them where to throw their compostable sugar cane cutlery and beer cups made from compostable corn-based plastic. (Hint: not in the cans marked "landfill.")

Forks made from bamboo or vegetable starch tend to come in off-whites and browns, all "kind of bland," says Manhattan-based event planner Cathy Riva. The bamboo forks she has come across bear tines that are "a little too short to pierce things." Ms. Riva says she tells clients to buy cheap sets of reusable metal cutlery for outdoor parties, but in many cases, "people are still using flatware that's

plastic."

"Everything in life is a trade-off," says Jay Mertz, a retired natural-foods farmer and fertilizer manufacturer who lives near Corsicana, Texas. Mr. Mertz, 70 years old, cooks out up to five times a week and drives about 65 miles to a Whole Foods Market in Dallas once a month to stock up on items like grass-fed beef and organic produce.

He tries to combine trips with other business in Dallas but the set-up isn't perfect—there's the cost of fuel, the impact of all that driving on the environment and the fact that some of what he's buying isn't local. He says he has used paper plates for parties to save the effort of washing dishes.



Hector M Sanchez for The Wall Street Journal

Some storage containers are labeled BPA-free and have recycling guidelines. Fuel, left, and Rubbermaid containers show n.

Still, many environmentally conscious barbecuers are choosing plates made from an increasing array of materials, including bamboo, metal, sugar cane and recycled plastic.

A line of compostable plates and bowls made from fallen palm leaves harvested in India, called VerTerra, is something of an It Girl in the eco-world. The products are sleek, modern and look like wood. They're available online and in Whole Foods Market stores. Whole Foods says it has seen "tremendous growth" in the year or so it's been selling them.

A colorful line of recycled, reusable plastic servingware called Preserve has enjoyed triple digit sales growth in the year it's been in Whole Foods Market stores. Target says the biggest eco-friendly trend it's seeing within dinnerware is in products made of bamboo, a fast-growing renewable plant. A Target spokeswoman declined to discuss sales of specific items.

Want to wrap organic corn on the cob in foil? Walmart sells Reynolds Wrap made from 100% recycled aluminum in addition to the standard fare by Reynolds. The recycled variety costs about a penny and a half more per foot. Walmart.com spokesman Ravi Jariwala says eco-friendly products sell so well online that the company has

Grilling Techniques Under Fire

To the perennial summer barbecue debate of gas vs. charcoal add this question: Which is better from an environmental standpoint? It

turns out to be complicated, hinging on issues like where various raw materials come from, are processed and shipped, and how efficiently people cook with them.

Within the charcoal market is a small but growing subset of purists who are choosing hardwood lump charcoal over conventional briquets, which are made with wood char and mineral coal and can include small amounts of limestone, borax and sodium nitrate. Lump charcoal comes in different sizes and some say it can be trickier to cook with. A few companies, including Kingsford Products Co., have introduced briquets made only with wood char and a binder, such as cornstarch, to offer purists what they say is cooking consistency without the additives.

When Kingsford introduced its natural Competition Briquets, the company expected them to be "somewhat of a niche product," aimed at hard-core, competitive barbecuers, says spokesman Drew McGowan. Instead, the Competition style—which gets hot more quickly, burns hotter and costs about a dollar more than Kingsford Original—has "sold tremendously well," and the company increased production beyond its original projections. All the wood Kingsford uses is scrap from housing, furniture and other industries, says Mr. McGowan, who declined to give specific sales figures

tripled the assortment of eco-friendly products available online compared to last year.

The problem of bland-looking eco-forks aside, there are times when an obviously eco-friendly product is preferred because it is browner. Meghan Butler, a spokeswoman for Seventh Generation, a maker of natural products carried by major retailers, says when it comes to recycled paper towels and napkins the company's brown ones tend to sell better than its white ones, which are whitened without chlorine. The brown color "provides a perceived eco-credibility to the conscious consumer," Ms. Butler said, via email.

Buying green can be especially pricey when it comes to meat. According to Patricia Whisnant, president of the American Grassfed Association, grass-fed beef generally costs about 40% to 50% more than the industrially processed meat in the supermarket, and is comparable in cost to dry-aged prime.



Hector M Sanchez for The Wall Street Journal

Plates of fallen palm leaves are more expensive than plastic.

Some opt-outers say they offset the cost issue by treating meat as a once-in-a-while food.

"It's certainly more expensive to raise any animal and give them pasture and give them time to develop and grow and not just have them on growth hormones and confined to a concrete slab," says Anngel Delaney, 39, the beer buyer at the Park Slope Food Coop in Brooklyn, N.Y., who pays for a share in a pig farm in upstate New York in exchange for regular installments of pork. "It's a

very valuable commodity and you don't need that much of it."

Many eco-conscious barbecuers say that often greenest thing to do is refrain from buying anything by using what they already have (cloth napkins or metal cutlery, for example) , or buy something once (used cutlery from a yard sale, for instance).

And sometimes even the best intentions fall short. Sometimes a person takes his car to a barbecue when biking would do, says Helge Hellberg, executive director of Marin Organic, an association of organic food producers in Marin County, Calif. "The worst thing often in this movement is our righteousness," he says. "Being so determined to do it right that we actually miss the point: fun."

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