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A BURNING KIND OF LOVE

by: Skip Hollandsworth



Illustration by Chip Wass

Why men who can't boil water find the grill irresistible

When Dean Fearing was a 10-year-old boy in eastern Kentucky, his dad handed him a fork and told him to turn over the steak that was smoking away on a Weber grill. "Right at that moment, my life changed forever," he recalls. "I knew I had met my destiny."

Today, at his [namesake restaurant in the Ritz-Carlton hotel in Dallas](#), Fearing spends up to 12 hours a day preparing what he calls "elevated American cuisine"—such delicacies, cooked over a mesquite-burning fire, as Apricot Barbecue Glazed Bob White Quail and Maple-Black Peppercorn Soaked Buffalo Tenderloin. It's a high-profile and well-paying job, "and if I'm honest with you," Fearing says with the grin of a man who knows he's lucky, "it's just a glorified form of the grilling I did when I was a kid."

The Fourth of July weekend is one of those times in which every American male feels moved to enact a gender-based ritual that's been virtually unchanged for generations. While the women stay inside and prepare [coleslaw and three-bean salad](#), men stand amid the sizzling and the smoke, cooking meat in all its cholesterolic glory. "It's that rare moment when a man gets to embrace his caveman instincts, throwing raw meat on top of a fire," says [Al Biernat, another Dallas restaurateur](#) who grew up grilling under his father's watchful eye. "This is his moment of triumph, his rare chance to say to the world, 'I'm a real man.'"

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Some university-trained culinary historians—yes, there are academicians who study men and their grills—say outdoor grilling became popular when suburbs proliferated in the 1950s. Feeling useless around the house, men saw barbecuing as a way to contribute to their family's domestic bliss without seeming too feminine. Plus, as many of them were World War II vets, firing up the grill had the thrilling potential for danger. They could douse a kettle of charcoal with lighter fluid, strike a match, and step back to watch a ball of flame erupt into the sky. "If you can't stand the heat, go back to the kitchen!" could well have been the rallying cry of these husbands, some of whom even took to wearing—gasp!—aprons.

Outdoor grilling continues to be a red-hot American industry, with more than 15 million grills sold in the U.S. each year. During the spring and summer months at home-improvement stores across the country, traffic clogs the parking lots as male drivers gawk at the curbside displays of the newest models, some of which cost up to \$10,000 and bear the dimensions of small tanks.

[One entrepreneur has created a company called Man Cave](#), which sells BBQ accessories at single-sex backyard get-togethers called "MEATings." Like [Tupperware](#) parties for women, these

gatherings consist of men assembling to purchase equipment and debate weighty topics, like spatula versus meat fork, gas versus charcoal, the maximum number of beers to consume between the lighting of the fire and the first flip, and what to do with a burger that falls on the ground. (My two cents: fork; charcoal; two; and wipe it off, toss it back on the grill, and let the fire take care of the dirt.)

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In Dallas, where I live, grilling is so popular that on Saturday nights, steak smoke hangs over the city like storm clouds. Some men show up at parties towing their own setups behind them on trailers. Their tricked-out grills sport four or five surfaces so that the cook can stand in one spot and simultaneously sear [meat, fish, and vegetables](#).

And woe to any Dallas man whose idea of grilling is to toss several pieces of marinated chicken onto the flames, walk away, and return 10 minutes later to check on them. When I did so in the presence of friends, one of them remarked that I clearly did not possess the valued "G" gene (for grilling)—a devastating insult for a Dallas male, second only to being called a disloyal Cowboys fan. Another evening, in one of the most humiliating experiences of my adult life, I noticed my wife sorrowfully staring at me from the kitchen window as I manned the grill outside. On my watch, a once-juicy tenderloin had begun to resemble the scorched remains of a prairie fire. A few minutes later, she came out and gently removed the meat fork from my shaking, flame-scarred hand. "It's okay, honey," she said. "You're still a man in other ways."

I recently visited Fearing to confess my grilling shortcomings and to get some help. After he stopped laughing, he gave me a few tips for this July 4th weekend. **One critical step that many men overlook in their rush to fan the flames: seasoning. Prior to cooking, create a savory blend of sea salt, freshly ground black and red pepper, spices, and herbs.** Then pour the mixture "like thick falling snow over every bit of the meat," he advised. "Never, ever do a puny little sprinkle."

"And if I still fail, then what?" I asked. "Will you be at your restaurant?"

"No," he replied; after all, it's a holiday weekend. He'll be busy doing what he always does when he's off duty—standing in his yard, pouring briquettes into a cast-iron grill that looks a lot like the one he first used with Dad back in Kentucky, and cooking up a feast for his loved ones.

"Grilling's an addiction," he sighed. "A beautiful addiction."

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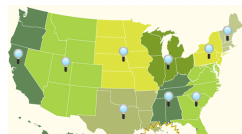
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