



The Outdoor Mexican Kitchen

Eating alfresco has always been popular, at least partly because it harkens back to days before our current stressful, high-density urban living. In recent years more and more people have discovered that cooking outside

provides the same benefits and enhances the experience. In the process, the practice has evolved from the use of a single grill to elaborate outdoor kitchens.

Because most of my cooking is Mexican food and because I knew that outdoor cooking and kitchens have been part of the culture of Northern Mexico for hundreds of years, when I decided to build my own I looked there for inspiration. I drove south from Nuevo Laredo where I knew I would pass several *ranchos* with some interesting outdoor kitchens visible from the highway. I stopped at each one and snapped photos with a telephoto lens. (In those days that activity was not considered either suspicious or impolite). I then developed a rough floor plan showing the items I wanted to include and gave the photos to a masonry contractor who hailed from that part of Mexico. In the process, I realized that an outdoor Mexican kitchen should have roughly the same equipment as any other, except that it's helpful to be able to cook thin pieces of meat at a very high temperature so they are crispy on the outside and not overdone on the inside. And while most barbacoa in Mexico is cooked low and slow in sealed pits, nearly all smokers can be easily adapted to do a good job on those items. The result is the facility shown in the photo, which includes a built-in offset smoker, a direct smoker a wood or charcoal grill that can be raised or lowered, a commercial gas cook top with a large stainless steel griddle, an infrared gas grill and an electric smoker.

That kitchen has been great fun and also proved the old saying, "If you build it they will come." After it was featured in the local paper and in *Southern Living*, Bobby Flay chose it as the location for his San Antonio show, in which I participated. But that's not important; the point of this blog is what I learned in the process! Over the years, I have used all the kitchen's features, but some of the more expensive ones infrequently. I have concluded that, while it's great for entertaining in style, the actual cooking can be done just as well at a fraction of the cost.

Sure, you can equip your kitchen with an Argentine char-broiler, an Italian wood burning oven, a Texas-style barbecue, an Indian tandoori oven, a Chinese smoker, a Brazilian churrasquería grill, and

commercial griddles, gas burners, and a deep fat fryer. They can be terrific, but a satisfying alfresco kitchen can also be as simple as an inexpensive grill with side burners. Of course, most of us want a bit more than that, and that's infinitely doable and affordable, especially over time. The following suggestions are based on my own experiences, and some of the items appear in the blog on my favorite kitchen equipment.

Perhaps the most important lesson I learned is to buy appliances that are both effective and durable. I can't tell you how many just halfway decent grills I've used and then replaced when they wore out. But that doesn't happen anymore. Sure, I spend more on each item, but they deliver superior performance and last for many years. For example, serious cooks who, as I once did, buy inexpensive stamped metal grills will immediately realize and appreciate the differences. With quality equipment something does go wrong, instead of junking the whole thing, the faulty part can usually be replaced at a reasonable cost. Please note that I have no relationship and receive no payment from any of the following manufacturers. Also, I realize that there are many other pieces of equipment that may work as well or maybe even better than the following. The reason they're not included is because I've never used them.

Grills

For most people, the grill is the most important appliance, and I have several. The Portable Kitchen (www.pkgrills.com) is the best charcoal/wood grill I have ever used, and its heavy duty aluminum body will last a lifetime at a cost of about \$370.00. I have only had to replace the relatively inexpensive steel grate and grill about every ten years. The design and dampers allow for accurate temperature control, and I have never found anything that produces better steaks. It can also be loaded with hot-burning mesquite to put a crisp golden-brown sear on thinner items without overcooking them.

I often grill thin hamburger patties, Mexican-style steaks, and shrimp. When I do those things, and especially when I'm in a hurry or a bit lazy, I turn to my infrared gas grill by Texas Pit Crafters (www.texaspitcrafters.com). Their smallest model is big enough for me. It's definitely pricey at \$1,295 but will last for many years. It also delivers over 1200 degrees, which is the only way to grill thinner items so that they will be well browned on the outside and still tender on the inside. It also works well on meat up to one inch and the heat can be lowered to accommodate even larger pieces. Another benefit is that preheating only requires five minutes, rather than the usual fifteen.

A really fun piece of equipment is my Santa Maria-style, Braten Campfire grill made by Engelbrecht (www.grillsandcookers.com). It allows you to raise and lower the grill with a simple crank, enabling you to put the grill as close or as far from the fire or coals as necessary. (Yes, you don't have to wait until the wood burns to coals before cooking, and the results produce a unique and tasty result). You can build a base with a firebox for it, or set it on the ground directly over a campfire. It's a bargain at \$295.00.

Smokers

You will probably only need one smoker. If you are headed for the competition circuit or don't mind staying up half the night and feeding the fire with a lot of wood, go for a heavy duty, offset Texas-style smoker. I used to do that but got it out of my system. I next used a series of electric water smokers. They did just a fair job and their cheap construction meant that they were headed for the landfill after a couple of years. My next purchase was a small electric smoker made of heavy duty stainless steel, the

Cookshack Smokette model. (www.cookshack.com). It allows me to cook brisket and ribs as good as any I have ever had and with no more than 3 ounces of wood! All you do is add the wood, insert the probe in the meat, set the unit's temperature to anywhere from 140 – 300 degrees and wait for the alarm to go off. I bought mine years ago for about \$650. They are now up to \$850.00 and I would gladly pay that to replace mine. But it's so well made that I don't think I'll have to.

Please note that a lot of manufacturers, including Cookshack, offer pellet-style grills, some of which also act as smokers. While they may be well made, as long as you use them you will have to buy the pellets designed for them, which can be both expensive and irritating when you run out. On the other hand, any little chunk of the right kind of wood works with the Smokette.

Burners

I often look at my commercial cook-top with two burners and a stainless steel griddle and wish I'd known about the Iwatani portable butane stove burners before I bought it. (www.amazon.com). Lightweight and easy to use, these little jewels deliver all the heat to a skillet or griddle that anyone needs. I use mine for everything from deep frying *chiles rellenos* to making and heating tortillas. At about \$85, and delivering 15,000 BTUs, you can probably afford a couple of them.

Where to put the kitchen and other considerations

Many people find it convenient to keep their grills on a patio just outside their regular kitchen for easy access to that facility and to quickly bring food inside during inclement weather. In locations with mild winters, people often combine their outdoor cooking area with a dining space. Unless you're an outdoor cooking purist, it's nice to have electricity to provide lighting and power for a few of your appliances. An ice chest takes care of most temporary refrigeration needs. It's also important to have a roof because driving rain, hail, and the summer sun take a toll on even the best equipment. Also, an unexpected downpour will ruin your meal in a hurry.

Other than the above, my advice is to use your own creativity to plan something that will make you happy and reduce stress, even if it's only a couple pieces of equipment and a table and chairs beside your garden, lit by a shop-light attached to an extension cord!