

HOW TO SMOKE MEAT

By Jeff Phillips

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This is for those of you who are so clueless that you are not even sure where the meat goes in your smoker. If you have questions like:

- Where does the charcoal go?
- Where does the wood go?
- Do I use wood or charcoal?
- Do I build the fire in the big part or the smaller part?
- What in the heck is a water pan?

When I say clueless, I am not being ugly.. I get questions from some of you that prove to me that some of you need a pre-basics course and that is perfectly ok.

All of us have to start somewhere and some of us have some prior knowledge while others do not.. to get started let's back up and learn some technical terms from the dictionary of Jeff.

Smoking Terms

Charcoal: chunks of fuel that normally comes in 2 different types, briquette and lump.

Lump charcoal: Real hardwood burned down to odd shaped chunks in a controlled environment. This type of charcoal burns hotter and cleaner than any other charcoal and unlike briquettes is free of additives.

Water Pan: A pan for holding water in some smokers especially the bullet smokers. It is believed by many that the water heats and releases steam which helps regulate the temperature of the smoker to normal smoking temperatures.

Firebox: A term used to describe the part of the smoker where the fire is built. This is most generally used on horizontal smokers also called Offset smokers.

Smoke chamber: The larger part of a horizontal offset smoker. This is the area where the smoke and heat does it's job of smoke cooking the meat.

Damper: A common term for vents that allow air to enter/escape and thereby affect the airflow within the smoker.

Intake: The damper on or near the firebox which allows the user to open/close thereby allowing more or less air to the fire. More air= hotter fire/Less air= cooler fire.

Chimney: The round tube like device coming out of the smoke chamber which allows the smoke to escape from the smoker. Also called "the stack".

Rain cap: A cap on the very top of the chimney which can be opened/closed in varying degrees to allow more or less smoke to escape. Also serves to keep rain out of the smoker which is how it got its apt name.

Smoking: Cooking at temperatures less than 250 degrees with the addition of smoke from various hardwoods.

Cold smoking: Applying smoke to meat in very low temperatures so as to smoke the meat without necessarily cooking it. Usually around 90 degrees Fahrenheit.

Hot smoking: Cooking foods with smoke at temperatures ranging between 190 and 250 degrees. The goal is to cook the meat while also flavoring it with smoke from various hardwoods.

Grilling: Cooking at very hot temperatures normally in excess of 400 degrees Fahrenheit.

Wet: Normally applies to ribs when they are basted with some type of sauce or marinade during smoking.

Naked: A term given to ribs when they are served with no sauce on them. Normally the sauce is served on the side and can be used if desired. Most naked ribs are coated with a dry rub prior to smoking.

NOTE: The next time you are in you favorite "Q" joint, order ribs and ask to have them served "Naked". Hopefully you will get ribs with no sauce and not wet ribs served by a naked waiter/waitress;-)

Rib Rub: A concoction of spices made especially for ribs to flavor them and/or compliment the sauce. Most rib rubs also work great on other meats as well such as pork shoulder and brisket.

Creosote: A nasty chemical that forms when the natural ingredients that make fire are disrupted such as shutting a vent to choke the fire. Creosote can also form on meat that put into the smoker too cold. For this reason it is recommended that you let meat sit on the counter for about 30 minutes prior to smoking to allow them to raise in temperature a little and reduce the risk of creosote. creosote is burny tasting and can make the lips and tongue feel numb when ingested.

Getting Down to Smoking

Ok, first things first.. I am assuming you have some type of smoker. It may be electric, charcoal or gas but it has some type of fuel source and with the addition of chips or chunks it produces smoke and makes the neighbors drool.

Let's start with charcoal since that is the most common..

How to Use a Bullet Smoker

Many people [email me](#) to ask where everything goes inside a bullet smoker.. here is the order of components from top down:

Dome Lid
Top Rack
Bottom Rack
Water Pan
charcoal Pan

For the bullet smoker such as the [ECB](#) (El Cheapo Brinkmann) you will want to fill the charcoal pan up with charcoal and leave the door slight ajar to let air into the fire. Allow me to recommend a [charcoal chimney](#) for best results.

For the smoke you will want to [make a pouch of chips](#) using aluminum foil and soaked chip of your favorite hardwood.

With the charcoal pan full of glowing coals, a smoke pouch on top, fill the water pan with about 2 inches of water and place bottom grate into position. If you are only smoking a small item then will want to go ahead and put on the top grate as well.

Once smoker reaches about 225 degrees, place meat on bottom grate (if you are using it). Then place top grate into position and place meat on top grate. Quickly place dome lid onto smoker body and let the magic begin.

The trick is to not take the lid off unless you absolutely have to. These smokers will hold heat fairly well if the lid remains intact. Open the door in varying amounts to let more or less air into the smoker. Remember.. more air = hotter fire/less air= cooler fire.

There are also some mods that will help this smoker to operate better... keep reading.

Mods for the Bullet Smoker

Without getting too technical, you can drill 5-7 quarter inch holes in the sides of the charcoal pan to let more air into the charcoal.

You can also drill 5-7 quarter inch holes in an area that is about 3x3 in the top of the lid to allow smoke to escape easier. Cut out a 4 inch round circle from light gauge metal and attach at one edge of the holes so you can move it back and forth to cover the holes in varying amounts depending on how much smoke flavor you want.

How to use a Vertical Brinkmann

There are also the various vertical smokers with a door that opens in the front giving you easy access to all of the grates, charcoal, water, etc. The main one that comes to mind is the [Vertical Brinkmann](#). These units are about 18x18 and stand about 4 feet high.

The door opens in the front giving you access to the charcoal pan, the water pan, and the food on either of it's 2 grates.

These units have a charcoal pan about the same size as the bullet smoker however, the interior of the smoker is larger than a bullet smoker which means you could have a problem getting it hot enough.

I always use a full chimney of lump charcoal in the charcoal pan to get things started which will get it up to around 225. later into the smoking event, I will add some lump charcoal to the charcoal pan a few chunks at a time with a set of tongs. I have also been known to dump some lump charcoal into the very bottom floor of the smoker for added heat.

In my opinion these smokers are not well suited to long smokes such as [brisket](#) and [pork shoulder](#). They do quite well for things that take less than 5-6 hours such as [ribs](#) and [chicken](#).

The vents at the top should be left about half way open and the bottom vents should be wide open unless it starts to get too hot (unlikely with this smoker) in which you can close them a little to limit the air intake to the fire and cool things down a bit.

You will need to add more charcoal about every hour and since it takes about 25 minutes or so to get more charcoal prepared in the [charcoal chimney](#) you will need to get a little rythm going. About 30 minutes into the smoke time, go ahead and prepare another batch of charcoal so that it will be ready when the temperature starts to drop.

If you have trouble keeping the temperature in tow, just add minimal water to the pan (about an inch should be enough for about 1.5 hours) and be prepared to add some charcoal to the floor of the smoker if need be.

How to Use Horizontal Smokers

Horizontal smokers are normally made up of a large round cylinder connected to a smaller round cylinder. The large one is the smoke chamber and the smaller one is the firebox. Most of the time the firebox is lower than the smoke chamber(offset) to allow the heat to rise naturally into the smoke chamber. These smokers are sometimes referred to as offset smokers for this reason.

I have also heard these called "stick burners" which simply means it uses real wood instead of charcoal.

In my opinion, this is possible but not the best option. You will not find too many competitors that use wood instead of charcoal. The best flavor comes from wood that has been burned down to coals so whether you have a burn barrel and do that yourself or you buy lump charcoal.. that is without a doubt your very best option for flavor and fuel.

The advantage of horizontal smokers are that you have plenty of room for cooking and more than enough room for charcoal. The disadvantage is that they are known for being uneven temperature-wise. In other words, they tend to have hot spots by design. To correct this problem you can create and install a baffle just under the grate to better distribute the heat and thereby eliminate the hot spots in your smoker.

The best design I have seen for a baffle had slots or holes cut in them of varying sizes. Less openings at the firebox end where it is the hottest and more openings as you get away from the firebox toward the cooler end.

Another thing that tends to help some is sitting a pan of water at the hole or cutout where the heat is allowed to enter the smoke chamber. This will act as a baffle as well as create steam which will naturally seek to even out and regulate the temperature in the smoker.

Every horizontal smoker is different and with all the varying sizes it would be impossible to tell you exactly how much charcoal to use.. I would start with about 6 to 8 pounds for a medium sized smoker and you can always add more if you need it. You can also dip some out into a metal container if you absolutely need to drop the temperature real quick.

If you do not have a baffle installed, it is best to do most of your cooking in the center of the grate, halfway between the firebox and the far end. Too close to the firebox and you will burn the outside of the meat, too far away and it won't get done. Somewhere in the middle for starters should work fine.

Air flow is more important in this type of smoker than any other due to the design. Set the intake damper by the firebox to about 1/2 open and set the rain cap on the chimney to about the same. This should allow plenty of air into the firebox to keep the fire good and hot and allow the smoke to enter the smoke chamber, kiss the meat gently and exit out the chimney without getting stale and causing any harsh chemicals to form on the meat or smoker walls.

You may find on future smokes that the settings need to be adjusted a little.. and that is part of getting to know your smoker in an intimate way. Take good notes and make adjustments as necessary just don't ever close the vents all the way or you will be asking for lots of trouble in a very bad way.

No airflow = formation of creosote. Never close the intake or the chimney beyond 1/4 closed at any time for any reason.

Add charcoal as needed to maintain your target temperature. For smoke you can use chunks of seasoned wood, sticks, etc.. I have had great success using a coffee can filled with chunks and covered with aluminum foil with a few holes in the top. Place the can right down in the coals for quick smoking action.

How to Use Electric Smokers

Electric smokers are a decent way to go if you are looking for cheap, easy and more of a set-it-and-forget-it type of smoker. Most of these are fairly small, have no control knob and are easy to operate. You simply plug it in, insert a [smoke pouch](#) on top of the element, place the meat on the grates, place the lid on top and you are free to do as you please for a while or until you need to add another smoker pouch.

Most of the ones I am familiar with look like the bullet smoker and are of a similar construction. You will have the following components from top down:

- Lid
- top grate
- bottom grate
- water pan
- element
- lava rocks
- floor of smoker

Most electric smokers are made to hold temperatures in the 250 degree area.. a little hot for my liking but something that easy you really can't complain about.

Keep the smoke flowing until the meat reaches about 140 degrees and you should turn out some rather good tasting barbecue.

Don't forget to unplug it when you are done.

How to Use Gas Smokers

I have written a good [tutorial on using the GOSM](#) or [Great Outdoors Smoky Mountain smoker](#) so I don't

want to reinvent the wheel here but I will delve into the very basics.

I recommend opening the propane tank to full open and using the knob on the smoker to control the temperature if possible. Set the smoker to a good medium setting and try to get it maintaining about 225 degree for most items.

Fill the water pan with about an inch or so of water which should last about 1.5 hours in normal conditions.

Place a coffee can of wood chunks directly over the flame or use the metal box that most likely came with the unit. The difference is in the fact that the coffee can will begin to smoke within a minute while the metal box will take a while. I use a coffee can in mine that has been cut down a little to make it fit properly.

Once the smoker is maintaining about 225 degrees, place the meat on the grates and shut the door. You can expect to get about 30 hours per 5 gallon tank of propane in a unit similar to the GOSM.

How to Smoke a Fattie

You know those round chubs of Jimmy Deans sausage that is so good in the morning sliced, fried and put on a fresh buttermilk biscuit? Well, remove the plastic and metal rings on the ends and place it on the smoker grate for about 3 hours.

This can be sliced and used on biscuits, crumbled up in sausage gravy for an amazing dish or you can just slice it and eat it with breakfast eggs. Regardless, no matter how you do it, it is one of the best things you can do in your smoker.

TIP: you can baste with a little apple juice every hour or so to keep the outside from drying out too much.

How to Use a Charcoal Chimney

1. Fill the chimney with lump charcoal.
2. Stuff a sheet of newspaper in the very bottom.
3. Set chimney on hard, fireproof surface such as concrete or your charcoal pan.
4. Light paper in bottom with Bic lighter or whatever you have available.
5. Wait for coals to start glowing.
6. Pour charcoal into charcoal pan.

How to Make a Smoke Pouch

Soak chips for at least 30 minutes. when they are done soaking, tear off an 18x18 square of foil and place on level surface. Put 2 handfuls of chips in center of foil and fold each of the 4 sides over so as to form a pouch. Poke a few holes in the top using a fork or other sharp object. Place on top of glowing charcoal for great smoking action.

I like to make up several smoke pouches and have them ready so that I can keep the smoke going with no lag time while I make another pouch.

Using a Thermometer for Accuracy

To check temperature with any smoker I recommend a good thermometer. The ones I have learned to love are the [digital meat thermometers](#) with a probe and a 3 foot metal cable. They run around 15

dollars but are worth their weight in gold in my opinion.

You can push the probe into the thickest part of the meat in whatever you are cooking. The metal cable attached to the probe is flat and easily runs through the door even with it closed or you can run it out of a vent or other opening.

The cable attaches to the monitor which sits on top of the smoker and gives you real-time readings on the temperature of the meat you are cooking. Most of them also have an alarm to alert you when a target temperature (set by you) is reached.

Now they have some that are [remote](#) so that the cable attached to a sending unit on top of the smoker. You have the monitor on your wrist or belt and know what the temperature is even if you walk off to do other things around the yard, in the garage or whatever.

These can be purchased at Amazon.com or you may also be able to find them at places like Walmart, Ace Hardware, Lowes, Home Depot, etc..

TIP: Do not let the metal probe touch any other metal or it will fry the probe and you will have to get a new one. Replacement probes run around 5 dollars but there is shipping cost from the company and the hassle of having to wait for a new one to arrive. As with any tools, just be careful and you should be fine.

How Long to Apply Smoke

Meat will continue to absorb smoke for as long as it is exposed. for this reason it is sometimes ok to smoke the entire time and other times you will want to stop prior to the meat being fully cooked.

You must understand that certain woods are stronger flavored than others. Mesquite is one of my favorites but I would never use it throughout an entire session. Apple on the other hand, I would happily use it from start to finish.

I have a rule that I follow and it usually lends great results. If I am using a medium to strong wood, I stop smoking when the meat reaches about 140 degrees and only apply heat from that point forward until the meat is done cooking.

These medium to strong woods include:

- mesquite
- hickory
- walnut (very strong, not recommended)
- oak
- cherry

Some woods that I have found to be lighter in flavor are:

- pecan
- peach
- apricot
- plum
- alder

The strength of the flavor is somewhat subjective in that it is relative to its seasoning process. Wood that has been dried for 6 months to a year will be stronger in flavor than wood that has been in the dry for 2 years or more. sometimes this history is not known making it hard to gauge the result and this is why I do not recommend applying smoke past 140 degrees most of the time.

Smoking Times

This is the times and temperatures that I use but please understand that they are only guidelines.

All smokers are different and add in the other variables like weather conditions, wind, ambient temperature, etc. and things can vary by as much as an hour or more.

Learn to tell doneness visually as well as with temperature and time and you will be a much better chef at the smoker.

Type of Meat	Smoking Temp	Time to Complete	Finished Temp
Brisket (Sliced)	225 degrees	1.5 hours/pound	180 degrees
Brisket (Pulled)	225 degrees	1.5 hours/pound	195 degrees
Pork Butt (Sliced)	225 degrees	1.5 hours/pound	175 degrees
Pork Butt (Pulled)	225 degrees	1.5 hours/pound	190-205 degrees
Whole Chicken	250 degrees	4 hours (approx.)	167 degrees
Chicken Thighs	250 degrees	1.5 hours	167 degrees
Chicken Quarters	250 degrees	3 hours	167 degrees
Whole Turkey 12#	240 degrees	6.5 hours	170 degrees
Turkey Leg	250 degrees	4 hours	165 degrees
Meat Loaf	250 -300 degrees	3 hours	160 degrees
Spare Ribs	225-240 degrees	6 hours	172 degrees
Baby Back Ribs	225-240 degrees	5 hours	168 degrees
Smoked Corn	225 degrees	1.5 - 2 hours	N/A
Smoked Potatoes	225 Degrees	2 - 2.5 Hours	N/A

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