Barbecue Spit Encyclopedia Article

Barbecue Spit

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The origin of the barbecue spit has been traced to the smokejack that was popular in Europe during the Renaissance. It is uncertain whether the smokejack was invented in Switzerland or Italy. A famous Renaissance cookbook contained sketches of smokejacks in the papal kitchens, and Montaigne (1533-1592) made note of the machine when he visited Switzerland in 1581. Smokejacks were like inverted windmills that were built into chimneys. Panes of wood above the flames of the fire were rotated by the smoke and steam of the fire below. The vanes rotated a spit on which a roast was skewered. These machines were first to channel heat into mechanical power. There were no significant changes in the design of the smokejack, except for the introduction of bevel gears. Some great houses in Europe still have their nineteenth-century smokejacks. Benjamin Franklin, ever a source of innovation, applied electricity conveyed through a Leyden jar to revolve a disc attached to a shaft on which a fowl was spitted. In April 1749, Franklin held a famous electrical picnic at which he cooked a turkey on his electrical smokejack. This machine is closer to the barbecue spits of today. Barbecues now range from standard portable charcoal grills for home or camping use,to built in gas grills connected to residential gas lines.Portable grills may be powered by charcoal,propane,or electricity. Elaborate accessories are available including fish cookers, smokers, fryers, and manual or electrically powered spits.In many areas of the country, grills are seen as part of an extension of indoor living, even to the extent of creating complete outdoor kitchens if the climate permits.