

The Big Green Egg

By PHIL BAKER, Daily Transcript Technology Correspondent
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Each year at this time I review a kitchen or cooking gadget. Last year I reviewed a clever toaster from Breville with buttons labeled "a Bit More" and "Lift and Look."

The previous year I tested a terrific espresso machine, the Vibiemme from 1st-line.com. But it's been a costly ritual for me, because my wife, Jane, liked the toaster so much that she bought one and I bought the Vibiemme, because I couldn't bear to go back to store-bought cappuccinos.

This year I chose to review one of the most interesting cooking gadgets I've ever come across -- and something I already purchased. It's called the Big Green Egg, a wood-fired smoker and barbecue grill in one. While the product has been available for years, it's become a recent sensation with sales soaring in comparison to the flat sales of gas grills.

The design is an improvement on the Kamado grill, an ellipsoidal-shaped smoker that originated in Japan. After World War II, servicemen brought them back and they became popular for slow-cooking meats, such as brisket and pork. They're able to maintain a steady temperature of about 250 degrees Fahrenheit for an entire day. But because they were made from clay, they couldn't operate at high temperatures and would eventually become brittle and crack.

Ed Fisher of Georgia invented The Big Green Egg more than 30 years ago. Since then, he's incorporated NASA-developed materials so that the grill can withstand temperatures of 1,200 degrees. As a result, it can be used either to smoke meats for hours at a time at 200 degrees or to sear a steak at 750 degrees in minutes.

The ceramic enclosure, based on a formula used for space heat-shield tiles, acts as an insulator, making it highly efficient. The natural, hardwood lump charcoal can last for 12 hours while smoking meats, burning cleanly with little residue. Eighty percent of the charcoal remains intact after cooking and can be reused; thus a 20-pound bag can last several months. Because of the tight seal between the cover and body, moisture is sealed inside so that meats do not dry out while cooking. The temperature is established by adjusting openings at the bottom and top to control airflow.

The product has been sold mostly by word of mouth, with little advertising. In recent years, a huge Internet presence has developed, including a forum that was created by one of its customers. There are now more than 12,000 members discussing everything from recipes to accessories. There are 1,800 dealers in the United States, and the product is sold in 23 countries. It's most popular in the Southeast, but growth is fastest in the West. The company has sold more than 1 million Big Green Eggs and the company has just 21 employees.

A recent demo, called an "Eggfest," was held in San Diego for the first time, at Fixtures, a new superstore specializing in kitchen, bath and outdoor fixtures. Chefs from Nine-Ten, Kitchen 540, J-Six and Stingaree each cooked on their own Big Green Egg, demonstrating their ability to make turkey, ribs, steak and a variety of trimmings. Fixtures has become the showcase dealer in the area for Big Green Egg and offers cooking classes and demos.

I first learned of the product from a friend earlier this year. He raved about the ease of use and ability to make almost anything on it, from ribs to chicken to pizza. When I purchased mine a couple of months ago, my wife was skeptical. After all, my cooking skill had only progressed to hotdogs and hamburgers and an occasional steak on a gas grill. I promised her this would be different. I was intrigued with the product's versatility and unusual design, as well as the opportunity to develop my cooking skills.

So how has it gone? I've been cooking regularly for the first time since college. I've made ribs, steak, chicken, fish and brisket on the BGE, and the results have been great. Food is much more moist and tasty than using a gas grill. I still have some learning to do, as, of course; it's not just about the grill, but the ingredients and preparation. But I'm improving with practice and my wife is thrilled to be able to arrive home and ask what's for dinner.

One cautionary note: There are a number of similar-looking products on the market that are susceptible to cracking and, based on discussions on the Internet, come from companies that have not honored their warranties. Big Green Egg, on the other hand, has a reputation for going beyond its warranty to keep its customers satisfied.

The Big Green Egg comes in four sizes, ranging from mini to extra-large. The large size, which I use, costs \$749. Once you buy the Egg, there's a never-ending list of accessories you can buy, including a large ceramic stone called a plate-setter that allows you to do indirect cooking. I think it's all the accessories that make this product even more appealing to the gadget lovers.
www.biggreenegg.com.

Baker is the author of "From Concept to Consumer," holds 30 patents and is an Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year. Phil can be heard on KOGO AM the first Sunday of each month. Send comments to phil.baker@sddt.com. Phil's blog is blog.philipgbaker.com.

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