SOLAIRE™
INFRARED GRILLING

How to Choose the Right Infrared Grill

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Grilling is a time-honored tradition in our nation. Whether you use gas or charcoal, firing up that grill is a relaxing, enjoyable way to spend an afternoon or evening. That said, there's a better option on the market today than either gas or charcoal.

Infrared grilling is taking the world by storm. Infrared grills give you better flavor, heat up in just 3 minutes and can cook your food twice as fast. You will also find that these are more convenient, use less fuel and can drastically cut down on flare-ups.

However, if you want to enjoy the benefits of an infrared grill, you're going to need to know how to choose the right one. Here, you'll learn just how to do that.

How Will You Use Your Grill?

The first step is to determine just how you are going to use that new grill. For instance, will it be built into an outdoor kitchen area? Will you want a wheeled cart that can be moved easily? Will the grill be bolted down or use an in-ground post? Perhaps you desire a portable grill, alone or in addition to a backyard grill.

The Importance of Grill Construction

You want that new grill to stand the test of time and hard use, don't you? Just because you're buying an advanced grill, it doesn't necessarily mean that it has the construction quality you want. What should you look for?

First and foremost, you want to make sure the infrared grill that you purchase was designed from the ground up to be an infrared grill. Industry standard is to take a conventional gas grill and drop in an infrared burner or two and push it out the door. This "standard" will cause your food to be overcooked and dried out, leaving a bad taste in your mouth about your purchase.

Make sure the grill is made with 304 stainless steel and that all seams are heli-arc welded. If you see mechanical fasteners, then run away. Next, you should ensure that the grill's body is made of 18 gauge stainless steel (for a fixed-mount grill, that is; portable options should be 20 gauge stainless steel to reduce the weight for better portability).

The hood is an important concern, as it's the part of the body that will take the most wear and tear. The hood should be manufactured with double-walled construction and the handle should be of stainless steel, to help ensure that it will remain in good condition. When you give the handle a good sideways shake, it should feel solid.

Changing out your burners is another consideration. Make sure that the grill you purchase is designed so that the burners are interchangeable between infrared and conventional at the drop of a hat. The grill should allow you to choose between all infrared, some infrared and some conventional, or all conventional. Removal and replacement of each burner should take mere seconds with NO tools required (even one screw can prove to be extremely frustrating and time consuming).

Warranty is yet another concern. Make sure that the grill comes with a lifetime warranty on the stainless steel construction, as well as on the grilling grids and the main burners (of course, that won't save you in the case of abuse and neglect!).

You will want to make sure of a few other features, as well. A battery-powered push-button electric ignition is a must-have, as are metal temperature control knobs (plastic won't wear well – unless they are high temperature phenolic). Folding side shelves are excellent additions, as they give you a place to set food (or cold beer!), but take up less room when you're not grilling. Also, make sure that the grill comes with a conversion kit, so you can switch from propane to natural gas.

Problems That Should Make You Reconsider Any Grill

Of course, while there are many things that your grill SHOULD have, there are some that it SHOULD NOT have.

For instance, many of today's grills have lights mounted inside the hood. This sounds like a good idea until you realize over time this becomes another place for grease buildup as well as an electrical hazard. Your lighting accessory should either be battery operated or completely separate from the grill.

As infrared burners are a source of direct heat (versus indirect conventional grilling), the infrared burners should point directly at the grilling surface so that the items being grilled receive the optimum radiant heat energy of the burners. There are some manufacturers installing angled infrared burners, saying that they reduce the clogging of the burners caused by the drippings. Fact is the heat at the surface of the infrared burner is so intense that the drippings instantly vaporize back up into the food as flavor (which is where most of your flavor comes from when charcoal grilling and why so many die-hard charcoal grillers are switching to infrared grilling).

Folded flaps, screws, rivets and spot welding inside the firebox are also items that should make you reconsider your grill purchase. Why? These all lead to moisture and grease buildup that can kill that new grill in a short time.

How Large Do You Go?

Everyone wants a big grill – in this case size certainly does matter! However, if all you are considering is the manufacturer's listed grilling capacity, you should think again. While this will tell you the grilling surface available in square inches, it also includes the warming rack, which isn't actually grilling space!

Therefore, the best choice is to actually look at the grill in person. Imagine cooking your average meal on it. Is there enough room for everything you would normally grill? Do you anticipate needing more space on a regular basis? This will help you find the perfectly sized grill for your home.

Also, remember that because intense infrared heat can grill in about half the time of a conventional grill, an infrared grill has twice the effective grilling area of a similarly sized conventional grill. With a proper infrared grill, less truly is more!

Questions on Cooking Surfaces

The question of cooking surface is certain to arise while you're trying to find the right grill. You'll find several different options out there, though not all of them make good choices. What's the right choice?

Actually, your best choice is always stainless steel. This helps to ensure that you have the longest lasting surface possible. Stainless steel is the most durable material out there, and it's a cinch to clean, unlike some other types of cooking surfaces.

You're also going to want to consider the grates. The individual tines should be wide and placed quite close together, in order to provide better searing of the food. If you see grates with thin rods that are set rather far apart, you should avoid them. These do not cook well and it's all too easy for food to drop between them (and then you have to clean it up!).

You also want grates with channels, either U or V shaped, to capture the juices and to control the drippings onto the burner. Uncontrolled drippings, like what you will get with round rod grates, result in large flare-ups. You might as well buy a conventional grill.

All about the Heat Factor

With any grill purchase, you'll probably be concerned with heat. How much do you need? You will also encounter the term "BTUs" in your quest for information about heat. Don't worry, this stands for British Thermal Units and is just a measure of how much gas a grill uses in the space of an hour.

Of course, the number of BTUs shouldn't be your primary concern. This doesn't tell you anything about how fast the grill heats up, how intense the heat will be, or how long it takes a steak to be done. BTUs is more a measure of the cost of operation than it is of grilling performance.

As mentioned, BTUs shouldn't be your primary concern. Rather, you should consider the temperature range of the grill in question. You want to be able to control temperatures with extreme precision and you need a temperature range from 500 to 1100 degrees at the cooking surface.

You should note that quite a few grills are either ON or OFF – they have no temperature control at all. You will also need to make sure that you can adjust the temperature to accommodate whatever it is you'll be cooking, whether it's meat, fish, veggies or fruit.

Even more important than the temperature is the intensity of the infrared system at the grates. Quite a few manufacturers set their surface too high above the burners, which does nothing but waste heat and slow down your cooking time. Or worse, the grate is too close to the burner, which chars the outside of your food while leaving the inside raw.

To check what that particular grill is capable of, ask your salesperson what the Infrared Intensity Index is. However, don't be surprised if he or she has no clue. If they give you nothing but a blank stare, you can use this handy equation to figure it out on your own.

(Maximum BTU of one burner) divided by (burner tile width) x (burner tile length) x (distance from burner tile to top of grilling grate). (Note: all measurements are in inches). The result should be about 50 BTU/cubic inch for a properly designed infrared grill.

Rotisserie Considerations

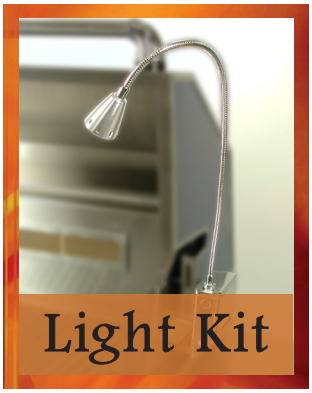
Rotisserie cooked foods are delightful and there's no reason that your infrared grill shouldn't allow you to have this feature. However, you'll need to ensure that the grill is setup properly to enjoy the benefits of this cooking style.

First, the rotisserie burner should be at the back of the grill, built into the body. It should be controlled with a separate thermocouple safety control valve. You will also want to make sure your grill comes with a heavy-duty electric motor, which is wired separately from the rest of the grill. This will help reduce the chance of electrical hazards.

The grill should come with a stainless steel spit rod, capable of handling 50 pounds or more, as well as stainless steel forks and a stainless steel counter-weight.

It's All about the Accessories

No grill is complete without those all-important accessories, and this applies to any infrared grill, as well. However, you'll have to ensure that the accessories are available from the grill manufacturer, and not a third party, to ensure the right fit and function. What accessories can you find?



Light Kits – Lighting kits are excellent accessories that can help ensure you are able to enjoy cooking out no matter the time of day or night. However, don't purchase anything with lights wired into the grill, because this can lead to electrical hazards and it makes changing them out a real pain.

Smoker – Do you love the taste of real wood smoke? If so, then you should consider a wood chip smoker to go along with that grill.

Steamer/Fryer – What surf and turf dinner is complete without the "surf"? A steamer/fryer accessory brings you the ability to steam lobster, fry shrimp or just fry up a mess of fries to go with those burgers.

BBQ Tray – Who wants the hassle of basting? A BBQ tray makes self-basting a pleasure! It catches drippings from your rotisseries as well as converts infrared energy into convection heat for indirect cooking.

Griddle – Want to cook breakfast on your grill? Now you can cook anything on a griddle, from breakfast to sandwiches, without a single hitch in your plans.

Portable Grills – What's the fun of having a grill if you can't take it with you? You'll find some grills available in marine-grade steel, perfect for use on the boat. You'll also find stands for portable grills, rail mounts for the boat and even carrying bags for the grill and the propane tanks.

Conclusion

Now that you know how to choose the right infrared grill, you can quickly narrow down your search and begin enjoying all of the benefiits of infrared grill ownership for years to come.

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