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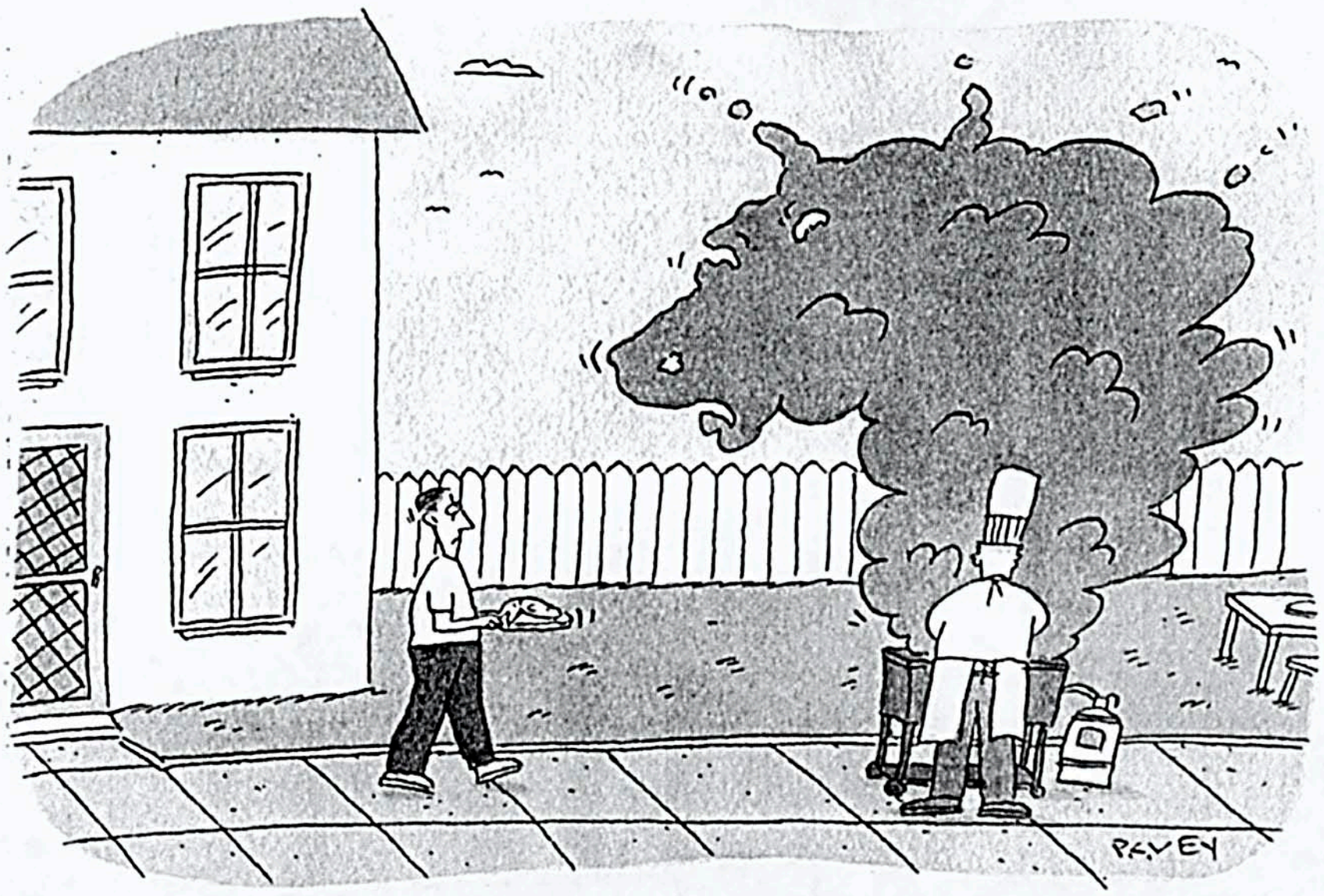

P. C. Vey

Your Grill Grease, My Stomach

By ROGER MUMMERT

I HAVE an etiquette problem that Emily Post doesn't exactly cover. The issue flares up like a brush fire throughout the extended grilling season that lasts from spring thaw to first snowflake here in the suburbs. I'm not a classic vegetarian. I eat fish, and my wife eats fish and chicken. The fact that neither of us consumes red meat hardly qualifies us as a particularly tough invite to someone's deck party, but as a courtesy we always inform our hosts beforehand of our special culinary needs.

Despite the warning, I'm often taken aback at the sight of our host preparing dinner. He lights the grill, which erupts into a grease-fueled flame so lofty that the weekend enforcement crew at the Environmental Protection Agency would be interested in knowing about it.

"Oh, you're the vegetarian guy," he says to me. "Not to worry. The wife got you some garden burgers."

I'm not naïve enough to believe that when I eat in a restaurant my food never touches meat back there behind the stainless-steel door. I'm even O.K. with my salmon filet sharing grill space with a chicken breast. But I am appalled to see my food being cooked in built-up meat grease.

I picture the life cycle of the grill of my nightmares. A month back, a thick porterhouse steak flamed up on it. Two weeks ago, some juicy burgers sizzled away. And just the night before, puffy hot dogs were hissing their fat into the fire.

With nary a scrub-down between these serial grillings, a deadly cocktail of meat juices has collected on the grill, congealed beneath a hot sun and been pecked at by flies and ants.

If I raise my concern with our host, the reply is invariably the same: "Oh, that?" he says with a happy nod. "It'll burn off!"

According to the "it'll burn off" theory, a backyard grill becomes a self-cleaning oven that produces an antiseptic surface that's ready for the next culinary adventure. But I look at it this way: You wouldn't cook a burger on a pan that has lain around, unwashed, on the stove for a week. What's the difference between that and a grill that bears the residue of

Confronting memories of hamburgers past.

last Sunday's steak dinner? Who knows what nasty cultures flourish in these patio petri dishes?

The greasy-grill syndrome is particularly exasperating because it's so easy to scrape down a grill after use. Once you've seen the amount of grill sludge that comes off this cooking surface, you can never again ignore it.

Which brings us to the etiquette question: How best to mention this concern to a happy host who is enamored of a grease-fired flame high enough to scorch an eyebrow?

"That's quite a flame there," is the sidle-up angle, which I've found is completely ineffective. The host is proud of the wild flareup, especially if it has ignited a backfire in the drip pan below the grill.

Then there is the not-so-subtle suggestion: "You know, the Weber Grill Web site recommends regularly brushing your flavorizer bars and replacing the drip pan...." This informative approach is more direct, but it, too, falls short.

"I'm not eating anything that's cooked in old meat grease," would probably get the point across, but that's a fantasy line I've never had the courage to use. Call me a coward, but I prefer to think of myself as a slave to tact — and I think I've found a tactful solution.

I first tried it out with our best friends. While packing up our contribution to a two-family Sunday barbecue to be held on their deck, I slipped a brand new grill brush into the grocery bag. It was intended to replace their existing grill brush, which had been worn down over many seasons to basically a stick with bacteria prongs.

"Why are you bringing that?" my wife asked.

"I'm giving them a new grill brush."

"As what?" she said, incredulously, "a housewarming gift?"

"Well, we're bringing wine, too."

When I presented the brush to our friends, there was an awkward moment of silence. But in the end, I think they appreciated the gift, be it ever so message-bearing. I ate my salmon in relative comfort as our friends chowed down on their burgers. They may have been a bit ruffled by my forward gesture, but we're still friends.

In fact, the brush presentation went so well that I've stocked up on new grill brushes, along with some frilly ribbons to really mark them as nifty gifts.

Now, whenever my wife darkens my plan to do nothing special on a weekend with the once-dreaded words, "We've got a barbecue to go to later," I'm fine with it.

"Great!" I reply. "I've got the perfect gift to take along." ■

E-mail: liorder@nytimes.com