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THE GOODS

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Grilling, for the Easily Distracted

BACKYARD chefs are often judged solely on the succulence of their barbecued meats. As a result, a summer cook-out can be a stressful affair; overdone ribs and roasts can mar a grill master's culinary reputation.

Christian Fitzgerald said he was once prone to barbecue disasters because of his chatty nature. "I'd ruin whatever I was cooking, just because I was spending time with my friends," said Mr. Fitzgerald, who lives in Highlands, N.C.

After burning one too many dinners, he resolved to develop a cooking device that would let backyard chefs tend to their guests rather than their meats.

That device is the Orion Cooker, a cylindrical, stainless steel gadget that resembles something out of the Apollo space program. Powered by charcoal, the Orion envelops meats in waves of hot air, also known as convection currents.

According to Mr. Fitzgerald, this not only eliminates the need for turning, but also preserves juiciness and reduces cooking times. He estimates, for example, that the Orion can cook a 20-pound turkey in two and a half hours, and six racks of baby back ribs in 75 minutes.

When he started working on the Orion about seven years ago, Mr. Fitzgerald was unhappily employed as a pharmaceutical salesman; he yearned for a job that he said would give him "the opportunity to go do demonstrations at football games." With that goal in mind, he made a rough sketch of a cooker and took it to a metal fabrication plant in Atlanta.

The plant's employees helped him to refine the design — they suggested the cylindrical shape — and then created six prototypes. Mr. Fitzgerald sent these cookers to friends, along with a three-page questionnaire.

The feedback from the questionnaires helped Mr. Fitzgerald to identify several design flaws. One was the placement of the handles (initially on the sides, where they became perilously hot). Another was the cooker's unwieldy size (which has since been halved).

He had also lugged a prototype to football tailgate parties and barbecue shops, where he cooked meats for passers-by in exchange for their opinions. Mr. Fitzgerald heeded one stranger's suggestion to create a channel near the drip tray where wood chips could be added to imbue



The Orion can cook a 20-pound turkey in two and a half hours. The creator of the cooker started working on its design seven years ago.

the meats with smoky flavor.

By 2003, Mr. Fitzgerald felt that the cooker was ready for market. He contacted a childhood friend, Russell Carbonara, an investment banker, to help him start a company, **FC Industries**, based in Smyrna, Ga. Mr. Carbonara quickly found a manufacturer in China to make the first 240 cookers. The two men also signed a licensing agreement with the National Wild Turkey Federation, with an eye toward selling the cooker to the group's 500,000 members. As part of this strategy, the two men named their product the Gobbler.

But working with the federation didn't lead to many sales, Mr. Carbonara said. The two men decided to rename the cooker the Orion, after the mythical Greek hunter, and to try to sell it through retail stores

rather than through mass mailings and catalogs.

The Orion was first picked up by Bass Pro Shops, a nationwide chain, in June 2004. Mr. Fitzgerald was then invited to demonstrate the cooker for executives at Home Depot, who rolled it out in their stores this year. Mr. Carbonara estimates that FC Industries has sold about 20,000 Orions, a figure that the company wants to at least double in 2007.

The Orion Cooker comes with a recipe booklet with creations like Grandpa Fitz's Turkey and Boston Butt marinated in Mello Yello soda. Not a single vegetable is mentioned, unless you count ketchup. A skewer of tomatoes and peppers, no matter how nicely charred, apparently doesn't win a backyard chef many plaudits. □