Nuclear Picnic by Dave Barry

Today's culinary topic is: How to light a charcoal fire. Everybody loves a backyard barbecue. For some reason, food just seems to taste better when it has been cooked outdoors, where flies can lay eggs on it. But there's nothing worse than trying to set fire to a pile of balky charcoal.

The average backyard chef, wishing to cook hamburgers, tries to ignite the charcoal via the squirt, light, and wait method, wherein you squirt lighter fluid on a pile of briquettes, light the pile, then wait until they have turned a uniform gray color. When I say "they have turned a uniform gray color," I am referring to the hamburgers. The briquettes will remain as cold and lifeless as Leonard Nimoy. The backyard chef will keep this up—squirt, lighting, waiting; squirting, lighting, waiting—until the bacterial level in the side dishes has reached the point where the potato salad rises up from its bowl, Bloblike, and attempts to mate with the corn. This is the signal that its time to order Chinese food.

The problem is that modern charcoal, manufactured under strict consumer safety guidelines, is one of the least flammable substances on Earth. On more than one occasion, quick-thinking individuals have extinguished a raging house fire by throwing charcoal on it. Your backyard chef would be just as successful trying to ignite a pile of rocks.

Is there a solution? Yes. There happens to be a technique that is guaranteed to get your charcoal burning very, very quickly, although you should not attempt this technique unless you meet the following criterion: You are a complete idiot.

I found out about this technique from alert reader George Rasko, who sent me a letter describing something he came across on the World Wide Web, a computer network that you should definitely learn more about, because as you read these words, your 11-year-old is downloading pornography from it.

By hooking into the World Wide Web, you can look at a variety of electronic "pages", consisting of documents, pictures, and videos created by people all over the world. One of these is a guy named (really) George Goble, a computer person in the Purdue University engineering department. Each year, Goble and a bunch of other engineers hold a picnic in West Lafayette, Indiana, at which they cook hamburgers on a big grill. Being engineers, they began looking for practical ways to speed up the charcoal-lighting process.

"We started by blowing the charcoal with a hair dryer," Goble told me in a telephone interview. "Then we figured out that it would take longer if we used a vacuum cleaner." If you know anything about (1) engineers and (2) guys in general, you know what happened: The purpose of the charcoal-lighting shifted from cooking hamburgers to seeing how fast they could light the charcoal.

From the vacuum cleaner, they escalated to using a propane torch, then an acetylene torch. Then Goble started using compressed pure oxygen, which caused the charcoal to burn much faster, because as you recall from chemistry class, fire is essentially the rapid combination of oxygen with the criterion to form the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (or something along those lines).

By this point, Goble was getting pretty good times. But in the world of competitive charcoal-lighting, "pretty good" does not cut the mustard. Thus, Goble hit upon the idea of using—get ready—liquid oxygen. This is the form of oxygen used in rocket engines; its 295 degrees below zero and 600 times as dense as regular oxygen. In terms of releasing energy, pouring liquid oxygen on charcoal is the equivalent of throwing a live squirrel into a room containing 50 million Labrador retrievers. On Goble's World Wide Web page* you can see actual photographs and a video of Goble using a bucket attached to a 10-foot-long wooden handle to dump 3 gallons of liquid oxygen (not sold in stores) onto a grill containing 60 pounds of charcoal and a lit cigarette for ignition.

What follows is the most impressive charcoal-lighting I have ever seen, featuring a large fireball that, according to Goble, reached 10,000 degrees Fahrenheit. The charcoal was ready for cooking in—this has to be a world record—3 seconds.

There's also a photo of what happened when Goble used the same technique on a flimsy $2.88 discount-store grill. All that's left is a circle of charcoal with a few shreds of metal in it. "Basically, the grill vaporized," said Goble. "We were thinking of returning it to the store for a refund."

Looking at Goble's video and photos, I became, as an American, all choked up with gratitude at the fact that I do not live anywhere near the engineers' picnic site. But also, I was proud of my country for producing guys who can be ready to barbecue in less time than it takes for guys in less-advanced nations, such as France, to spit.

With the 3-second barrier ever been broken? Will engineers come up with a new, more powerful charcoal-lighting technology? It's something for all of us to ponder this summer as we sit outside, chewing our hamburgers, every now and then glancing in the direction of West Lafayette, Indiana, looking for a mushroom cloud.  

* Editor's Note: Dave Barry's article was originally printed in The Boston Globe Magazine, June 25, 1995. It came to my attention via a fellow web-surf. To find George Goble's nuclear picnic, the address is http://ghg.ecn.purdue.edu. And while you're on the web, visit the Shot Peening Universe at http://www.shotpeener.com.

Tidbits

- It is a mistake to allow any mechanical object to realize that you are in a hurry.
- One of the things wrong with doing nothing is: You never know when you're done.
- Starting over begins when you say to yourself that what's finished is finished.
- A rut is a grave with the ends kicked out.
- Pavlov's Principle: When the bell rings, there had better be some supper.