

The Best Setup And Add-Ons For A Weber Smokey Mountain Barbecue Smoker And Other Bullet Shaped Charcoal Smokers

"Seven days without barbecue makes one weak." –Anonymous

By Meathead Goldwyn

There are a number of bullet-shaped charcoal smokers out there and they are pretty easy to use. The best is the **Weber Smokey Mountain (WSM)** which now comes in three sizes.

[Click here for our ratings and reviews of the WSM models and where to buy one](#)

The **Apollo** has some design improvements but users complain about build quality. The bullets from **Brinkmann** are popular, but very poor imitations. They should be avoided.

Below, in brief, is all you need to get started. Later you can play with more or less wood, more or less coal, **vent settings**, etc.



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Seasoning and calibrating your smoker with dry runs

The first thing to do after you assemble your new grill or smoker is to **season it and calibrate it** by doing a few dry runs *without food*. This will burn off any manufacturer's grease, and give you a sense for how to set it up to hit the two important target temps that almost all my recipes use: 225°F and 325°F.

Of course, in order to do this, you *absolutely positively* must have a good **digital oven thermometer**. I don't care how much you spent, the bi-metal dial thermometer that came with it is cheap and unreliable and likely to be off by as much as 50°F. Worse still, it is in the dome, and the temp down on the grate where the meat sits is much different. Like a musician, you must master your instrument to make great food.

Harry Soo is one of the top cooks on the barbecue competition circuit and his team, **Slap Yo' Daddy BBQ** from Diamond Bar, CA, wins tens of thousands of dollars every year. He cooks on 18.5" Weber Smokey Mountains he bought on Amazon, not the \$15,000 big rigs most of the other teams use. He also teaches classes. Harry was conducted an extremely informative seminar on the operation of the WSM for the Pitmaster Club and if you are a member you can watch it here.

He says "The key step once your smoker arrives is to ensure you season it properly.

New WSMs will tend to overheat until you are able to season the inside. The fastest way to season is to do the following:

"Cover the water pan completely with aluminum foil and run a full load of lit Kingsford blue bag briquets and let it run as hot as it can with no water in the pan (over 350°F) to burn off any manufacturing residue. Clean out the ash.

"Fill the charcoal basket 1/2 full of unlit briquets. Hollow out the center so you can see the grate, making a donut of charcoal. Then put in a 1/2 chimney of lit Kingsford briquets in the middle. This will allow a slow burn for three to five hours on a 72°F day. Adjust the vents to get 275°F on the dome thermometer. Put in bacon strips, chicken parts, pork fat, or any other scrap meat you don't plan to eat. The key is to get fatty meats to generate lots of vapors. Toss in a couple of tennis ball size wood chunks to generate smoke.

"Repeat the above step at least twice before you cook meat that you want to eat. Remember to always empty the ash from the bottom and grease on the foiled water pan to avoid fires and any rancid old oil smell before you cook. Also, I never cook seafood and hotdogs on WSMs that will cook pork, beef, or poultry. Nothing destroys the aroma faster. That's why you should buy a second smoker if you plan to cook seafood or hotdogs."

After cooking Soo uses a wire brush to scrape off creosote and grease, but not the dull black coat that reduces reflection of heat waves. You want the interior dull, but you don't want rancid grease.

Cooking with your bullet

1) Clean out the ash from the bottom of the smoker. It is essential that nothing blocks the air intakes. Besides, ash absorbs heat. If you can, buy another spare bottom grate and lay it on top of the one that came with your WSM with the bars perpendicular, creating a checkerboard pattern. This will prevent coals and wood from falling through.

2) Open the vent on the top all the way, and open the bottom vents half way.

3) There are a number of methods to start and maintain the fire all better than the method recommended by Weber. If you light all the coals at once, as Weber recommends, they will burn hot at first and then cool off. Of course we want to get the pit to a target temp and hold it steady. The best way to set up your fire is with one of the many variations of the Minion Method, named after Jim Minion, a caterer who invented the technique.

Here are the best methods for you to try. **Do a dry run or two without food to figure out exactly how many coals works for you.** It is really important to use a good **thermometer** and keep a **cooking log** when using a WSM, at least until you understand how it works. And remember, **don't soak the wood** because wet wood just cools the fire, and for chicken and turkey, *you don't need any wood at all*, the

coals emit enough smoke. Click [here](#) to read why and **more about wood and smoke**.





The Original Minion Method. The original Minion Method says to pour unlit coals in the ring and pour a chimney of hot coals on top. As the hot coals burn out the new coals fire up. The Minion method is much better at keeping the temp steady because it lights new coals as the old ones burn out.

Soo's Donut. Soo uses a modified Minion Method that I call Soo's Donut. Get a 16 pound bag of plain old fashioned Kingsford briquets. They burn steady and relatively clean. Click here to [read more about charcoal types](#) and why Soo and I and many others prefer Blue Bag over all the others including the expensive "natural" lump charcoals. Fill a Weber chimney half way (40 coals), light them, and wait until they are all coated with white ash. The exact number of coals will vary depending on the brand you use and the weather.

Fill the ring with unlit coals into the fire ring, and dig a hole in the center all the way down and about 8" wide forming a charcoal donut. Bury 3 to 4 chunks of wood in the donut at different distances from the center. You can use chips or pellets, but I prefer chunks because they ignite and smolder slowly. Then pour the hot coals into the hole. The hot coals begin to burn out after a while but as they do, they ignite the coals near them and the new coals ignite the coals near them so the fire moves from the center to the edges.

The Fuse. I prefer this method for the large WSM because this unit tends to run hotter than the smaller unit and the fuse helps me keep the temp down to 225°F. Create a donut as above, but put a stack of bricks or a big rock in the center to keep the coals from falling into the hole. Then take a bite out of the donut about 8" so it is now a big C shape.

Fill a Weber chimney about 1/2 way and get the coals fully engaged. Pour the lit coals over one end of the C, not in the center. Space about three chunks of wood in a line near the hot coals. The lit coals will provide you with heat and smoke and slowly ignite the rest of the coals in the manner of a fuse, burning around the C, producing a nice even heat for a long time. The bricks absorb and emit heat helping hold temps steady.

The Pyramid. Build a pyramid of coals in the center of the ring. Put a [Weber paraffin cube](#) under the top coal and light it. It will start up more slowly but will not overshoot the target temp easily.

4) Place the cooking grates right on top of the hot coals to heat them up so you can

scrape them clean. Old grease and rust can taint the flavor of your food. Remove the clean grates.

5) Put together the rest of the smoker positioning the door so it is easily accessible. Line the water pan with heavy duty aluminum foil. This will make cleanup easier. Insert the water pan and fill it within 1/2" of the top with hot water. Try to use hot water since it will absorb less heat and help get the oven up to temp faster. Click [here](#) to read more about **what goes in the water pan**. Place the cooking grates in position.

Soo does things differently, so you can experiment with my method and his: "Don't use any water in the pan. Just cover the water pan with foil top and bottom. I foil it twice so I can remove the second layer after the cook and refoil it. That way, I don't have to clean my pan. Dry heat allows the **bark** to form faster on the meat. Once the bark forms, you can introduce moisture. I just spray the meat with water every hour. To test for properly formed bark, use your finger nail and scrape the meat surface. If the crust has formed, it will not come off when you gently scrape it with your fingernail. If the crust comes off, the bark has not set, so don't spray until it sets. Let it cook longer and check back in 15 minutes. When the bark is set, I then wrap the meat in foil for about an hour, take it out and let it dry a bit. I've won many awards with this technique."

6) **Normally I recommend you control temp with the bottom vents and leave the top open.** But the door on the WSM leaks so badly that the coals get air from there. So on this device, you need to close the top vent and the bottom vents together to lower temp, because the top vent creates the suction, called the draft, that pulls in oxygen through the door.

When the temp gets up to about 200°F, and it will get there quickly on a hot day, throttle back the vents to about 1/3 open and keep fiddling with them until you stabilize at about 225 to 250°F. Regulating temp may be a bit trickier on a new unit until it has built up a nice deposit of carbon on the inside. New units can run a bit hot because they are reflective. For recipes that call for 325°F, like my **Ultimate Turkey**, use more lit coals and more air. If necessary, leave the water pan dry or use sand in it. The sand becomes a big heat sink and helps stabilize fluctuations. **Click here to learn more about controlling temp with vents.**



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7) Insert a meat thermometer probe into the center of large cuts (it is next to impossible to get an accurate reading on ribs so don't bother, **there are other ways to tell when they are ready**). Make sure the probe is not in contact with the bone. Add the meat. If you can fit it all on one grate, use the top grate and remove the lower grate so it doesn't get all gunky from drippings. If you need to use both grates, put the faster cooking food on top so it is easier to remove. Be aware that the top rack meats will drip on the lower meats, so I never put poultry or fish under pork or beef. If you are cooking both beef and pork, I put pork on top. If I want both meats to finish together, I often swap the top and bottom shelves. They will progress differently because the top grate is usually 10 to 20°F warmer than the grate above the water pan. A pan of beans on the lower shelf is always a good idea.

Place an oven thermometer probe *near the meat but not touching the grate*. Keep it at least 1" away from the meat because there is a cold air bubble around the meat. Do not meter the temp at the dome. It is often 10 to 15°F hotter than the top grate. Thread the cables through a top vent hole.

One of the problems with the 18.5" bullet smokers is that they have 15.5" grates and many slabs of ribs, especially St. Louis cut slabs, don't fit. You don't have to cut them in half. The picture here shows one way to get two full slabs on a single rack in a Weber Smokey Mountain: Use rib racks and bend the slabs to fit. If you do this on both the upper and lower grate on a WSM you can get four slabs on. Another technique is to roll the slab in a circle and run a long skewer through the place where the ends overlap. Works great and keeps the ends from burning.

8) Now go drink a beer. After the smoke stops, you can add more wood if you know what you are doing. *There's always the risk of oversmoking, so until you really know your machine, don't add any more wood.*

9) Every two hours check to make sure the water pan has not dried out. When it gets low, carefully add hot water.

10) When you are done, close all vents to smother the coals and preserve them for the next cook. Just make sure you shake off the ash before you use partially burned

coals, and wipe your ash out.

11) When you store your WSM, leave the vents open and take the door off so it will not get moldy inside. Put a good cover over it and make sure it drops low enough to keep rain out of the lower seam. **Click here to read about what to do if your WSM gets moldy.**

And that's all there is to it. Go drink another beer. Just don't drink the bong water in the pan.

The temperature gradients

If you use a **good digital thermometer** (and you are, aren't you?), you will notice that the dial in the dome isn't accurate, that the dome temp is hotter than the top grate, and the top grate is hotter than the bottom grate. How much? That depends on the temp of the water in the pan, the ambient air temp outside, if it is sunny, or if it is windy. If it is hot and sunny, that dome can absorb a lot of heat, and if you just added water, the bottom shelf can be a lot cooler. On a nice summer day in the 70s, in the shade with no wind, the dome will be about 10 to 15°F hotter than the top grate which will be 10 to 15°F hotter than the bottom grate. Your mileage may vary.

A lot of WSM owners use the Maverick remote thermometers. They even drill small holes in the side to insert the probes. Don't worry, small holes won't screw up your thermodynamics.

Pimp your WSM



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Seal that crappy door with gaskets

The door on a WSM is a bit flimsy and the lid doesn't always fit tight. Those leaks make temp control a bit harder than it should be. These gaskets made of high quality Nomex with food safe adhesive, won't melt at high temps and boost efficiency. We applied these to our 22.5" WSM and it sealed up those problem areas nicely.

[Click here to order a WSM Gasket Kit from Amazon](#)



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Or get a gasket and hinge kit

The clever folks at Team Unknown got tired of looking for a place to put their hot lid, so they built a stainless steel hinge. Of course everybody who saw it wanted one so now they sell them. It has a clever little latch so when you open the lid it stays open and won't slam on your head when you stick it in there to smell your meat, and a pin that you can remove so you can take the lid off all the way. The pin has a bearing that prevents it from coming out accidentally. Mounting it took 15 minutes. The only problem? I needed to buy a new cover because the old one won't fit over the hinge.

While you're putting on a hinge, why not get better control over airflow? You can buy a Nomex gasket kit that seals the lid, the base, and the side door. Nomex is rated to handle temps up to 572°F, and it is held in place by RTV silicone rated up to 650°F.

Here's a kit with the hinge and the gaskets that will fit all sizes of WSM. I have both and they work.

[Click here to order the WSM Hinge & Gasket Kit from Amazon](#)

Better still: Replace that crappy door altogether

The biggest weakness to the WSM design is the side door. It is flimsy and it leaks, so you cannot control airflow properly and that means you cannot control temp. An inexpensive solution is to put gaskets around the door (above). A more elegant

solution is to replace it with the heavy duty stainless steel door from **Cajun Bandit**. They also sell a grommet kit for thermometer probes, a rotisserie, and a ring that allows you to make the WSM taller so you can insert more racks.

Add a thermostat temperature controller

The WSM is pretty even keeled and once you get the hang of it, keeping it burning at a steady temp is not too hard, but charcoal does burn out and the temp declines. You can compensate for this by controlling the other fuel, oxygen.



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A handful of companies build devices that cover one of the intakes with a fan. The fan is attached to a digital probe that is placed on the cooking surface. The other intakes are closed. You set the desired temp, and the fan controls oxygen to the charcoal. Some of these thermostats are quite sophisticated. They can control multiple cookers, change temps at desired times or temps, and even be controlled by your computer or mobile device. A few are inexpensive, yet effective, and one even operates on batteries.

[Click here to see our ratings and reviews.](#)



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Convert to propane

Live in a building where charcoal is not allowed? Tired of tending the fire? The folks at Afterburner **make conversion kits for WSM and other smokers.**

Hovergrill increases the cooking surface



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This is a quality stainless steel grate with legs can do three great things for your cooking.

1) It stands on top of your WSM's cooking grate adding a third rack. It also kits the Weber Kettle.

2) I place it below the cooking grate on my kettle when I cook steaks because I want to raise the charcoal to right below the cooking surface to get max heat focused on the meat. Click here to read more about **making steakhouse quality steaks.**



[Click here to order the Hovergrill from Amazon](#)



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Keep charcoal from falling through the grates

Add a second charcoal grate and place it on top of the original perpendicular so the grates form a cross-hatch pattern.

[Click here to order a charcoal grate from Amazon](#)



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Ribolator

There is clearly a lot of clever thought and engineering in this thing and the owner of the company is a real sweet guy.

There is a rod that connects to your rotisserie motor, if you have a rotisserie. If not you can get one here. Then there are two brackets that go on the rod, each with four arms. The arms hold slotted shelves that hold your food. Turn on your motor and round and round they go like a food Ferris wheel. Well this is the exact same concept used in large commercial restaurant smokers because the heat and smoke enter them from a small area at the back, and the Ferris wheel allows the food to move around in the cooking chamber in and out of hot spots so all of it cooks evenly. The Ribolator isn't going to improve quality of the meat on most cookers, but where it really shines is on the WSM where it can increase capacity.

That said, it can only handle narrow slabs that can be confined within the shelves. Wide spareribs bang into the other shelves and spill the contents out. And if you are only cooking one slab, you have to counterbalance the opposite shelf with rocks or

something. Then the meat drips on them.

[Click here to order from Amazon](#)



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Winter cooking

The WSM is not insulated and the metal is thin. In cold windy weather it helps to protect you smoker from the elements. The best method is to build a plywood box with hinges at the joint. Then get a roll of **Reflectix Double Foil Insulation**, which has a bubble wrap type interior clad in a foil sheathing. Here is a photo of a shield built by reader Jim Streisand by wrapping Reflectix around a spare wire dog crate he had. Notice the Maverick thermometer with a hole drilled for the probe. **See more clever cold weather solutions here.**

[Click here to order Reflectix Double Foil Insulation from Amazon](#)

Cold weather jacket

The **Cold Weather Jacket** is silicone coated jacket is designed to insulate your 22.5" Weber Smokey Mountain while cooking and it can easily be adapted for a Weber Kettle. Silicone coated, it is great for use in cool, rainy, and windy conditions

or as as a weather cover while not using your cooker. It has a flap that opens for reading the temperature indicator, grasping the handle, and adjusting the exhaust vent, and another flap through which you can attach a thermostat controller.

[Click here to order from Firecraft](#)



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