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What is the best / proper way to clean out a smoker? Chemicals / cleaners to use that are safe?

When it comes to cleaning your smoker you will find it is almost like moving. Just a mention of the idea and your 'so called' friends will be running the other way. You will also find a small group of cooks that will say they never clean the inside of their smoker, you will ruin the 'seasoning'. I am not a part of this crowd.

I am of the opinion there are some regular steps and methods that should be put into place each and every time you use your cooker to help with clean up and to prolong its useful life. Let's start with the cooking grates.

We spray our grates with PAM or any similar cooking oil before each use. This definitely helps with clean up at the end of the cook. We also use a plastic tray that is slightly larger than the grates. We fill the tray with hot soapy water and soak the grates after the cook. Most times, the gunk comes right off with a hard bristled brush after 15-20 minutes of soaking. For the stuff that is a little harder to get off, ZEP Heavy Duty Oven and Grill Cleaner does the trick. Allow the grates to dry completely before returning to the unit.

The outside of the cooker, after it cools, can be wiped and washed with some warm soapy water, then rinsed and wiped with clean warm water. Be sure to notice any rust spots that might be developing when you are wiping the unit.

Completely remove as much ash and grease from the firebox of your cooker after each use. Allowing a build up of grease and gunk promotes rust and metal fatigue as well as creating a potential for grease fires which are no fun and can ruin your day in a hurry.

A full bore clean up of the entire unit should be done at least once per season. I would suggest late fall before storing for the winter. We disassemble the cooker as far as possible then spray everything with Simple Green, let it soak, then spray with a power washer. Some guys will haul their cookers to the local car wash for this step. Either way, use caution when operating water under pressure, damage can be done to exterior finishes or asphalt driveways if you are not careful.

After a complete unit cleanout, be sure to allow the parts to completely dry before reassembling. This is also a good time to replace any missing or broken bolts or nuts and to do a complete inspection of the unit. Any rust spots found on the exterior should be sanded and painted with a high temperature paint to prevent further deterioration. Once the cooker is back together, I like to load the fuel pan and do a burn before I use the cooker again.

Some simple preventive maintenance as well as with time spent with an annual clean up will go a long way in preserving the appearance and effectiveness of your unit. By keeping your cooker looking good and functioning properly you will prolong its life and maintain its overall value for years to come.