

HOW MIGHT JIM MORRISON LIGHT A BIG GREEN EGG FIRE?

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In August 1966 Jim Morrison, the lead singer in the Doors, sang *Light My Fire* and ran it up the charts. Little did I know then that almost 50 years later that song would come prancing into my head as I wrestled with mastering the art of lighting a Big Green Egg charcoal fire and maintaining a specific temperature. I'll borrow from his metaphorical lyrics and adapt them to lighten up this detailed description about temperature control on a BGE (Big Green Egg).

My first four cooks went perfect for high temperature steak grilling, and moderate temperature for pizza making. But then low and later cooks went south. So I set about trying different ways to capture a specific temperature like 225°F, 325 °F, 450 °F, and 600 °F. My goal is to not only reach a specific temperature to wait for the fire to become stable and rock steady. By the 15th trial I finally was able to light my own fire consistently from 225 °F to 600 °F. Hopefully, this document will help you get there in just a handful of practice firings. This document can get you started as you learn to feel your way around the glowing charcoals, grid, and temperature gauge.

The first thing to realize is that unlike a knob on a gas bbq, changing the vents on a charcoal cooker does not result in an immediate change. Without learning patience, one ends up fiddling with settings and chasing that pit temp up and down. Here is the golden egg rule that if following works for me every time:

After coals ignite and stick near your egg to watch as the fire builds. As the thermometer moves to within 100 °F degrees of your cooking temperature goal begin closing the vents to slow down the temperature rise. Across the final 25 minutes you can then fine-tune the vents to zero in on a specific goal like 225°F

It takes time for the fire to mature and settle down. In fact, once you allow more time on the front end for the fire, your cooking will get easier and easier. This is why I always start my charcoal fire a good hour before I plan to put the meat on. While waiting I might prepare a sauce, set out tools, or work on a side dish. The smell of the smoke will whet the guests' appetite. Wayne Nelson teases their nostrils further by tossing in a few onions into the firebox

COME ON COOKIE LIGHT MY FIRE...TRY TO SET THE EGG ON FIRE ♪

Now we begin a slow ignition process. The temperature gauge proceeds in fits and jumps, and then the wheels spin begin to spin as the locomotive takes off.

Step 1—Clean Ash And Clear Vent Holes, Add Charcoal & Wood...5 minutes

Use the ash tool to stir old coals around. This will help to knock down the ash, especially around vent holes. Then remove old charcoal ash from the bottom.

Add single layer of new charcoal. When cooking at 325°F or below mix in about 3 wood chunks. Repeat this layering until charcoal comes just beyond the fire bowl line as shown by the **dark blue arrow** in image. For longer cooks like a brisket or butt, you can fill it higher, almost to the fire ring, as shown with the **red arrow**.

**Step 2—With Dome Up, Bottom Vent Open 3-4 inches, Ignite Charcoal...10 minutes.**

There is **no cover on the top dome vent**.



Visualize a triangle and then light at those three points when cooking 300+°F. As it starts, circle around with your lighter to create an even fire.



After 20 minutes, hot spot in the center appears. It will enlarge over time for a long cook.

I ignite my coals using a Looflighter heat gun. For long slow or low-temperature cooks I light it in only in one spot in the center because I know it will gradually spread outwards over time. For shorter, hotter cooks, relying on direct heating over the coals, I light it in 3 positions or the 3 points of a triangle. This creates a more even fire and it quickly gets to temperature and works well for cooks at 325°F or more degrees.

I place the electrical igniter down in the coals. As it begin to glow and spark I raise it a little away from the coals, and rotate it in a circular pattern that begin in the middle and gradually

moves out towards the 3 points of the triangle. If I'm lighting only in the center then I move the heat gun in a small 4-inch circle.

I have also simply placed the BGE igniter-heating element for 8 minutes in the center of my lump, one layer of coals down. When the temperature is 20 or more is below freezing I avoid using the heat gun since could crack the porcelain. Instead I rely on one or more wax igniters placed beneath the charcoal. When I'm not in a hurry, I actually enjoy using the BGE igniter instead of the Looflighter.

For cooks below 325°F I follow Wayne's advice and mix splits of wood in with the charcoal. For hotter fires I use wood that has been previously soaked for a few hours. I place these in must before I add the grate.

Let the newly ignited lump charcoal burn for a few minutes with lid open as you turn off your igniter and ready your work place. Then close dome lid and proceed to the next step.

YOU KNOW WE COULDN'T GET MUCH LOWER ♪♪

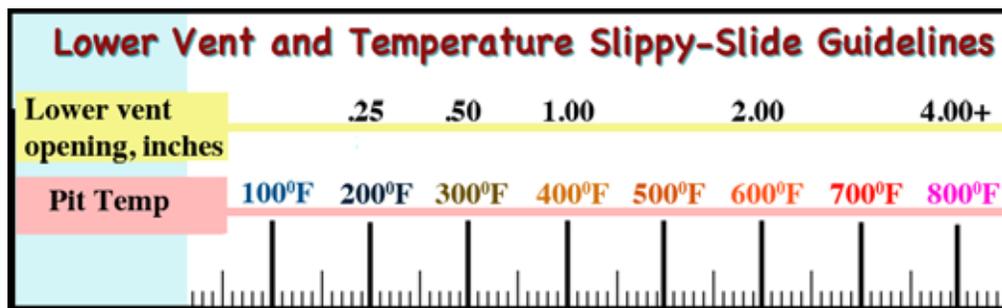
Our train is running down the track, now we must slow it as we head into our temperature curve.

Step 3— Ball-Park Your Temperature Setting And Let Fire Settle In...20 minutes

After closing the dome, add daisywheel to the top. Slide top adjuster off to the side to maximize airflow.

Stick around and monitor the temperature gauge. When it goes to within 100°F of your target adjust both the bottom vent and daisywheel vent. It will usually take about 10 to 20 minutes depending on your target. Don't get distracted, and keep your eye on the gauge because if it gets too hot it is hard to bring it back down.

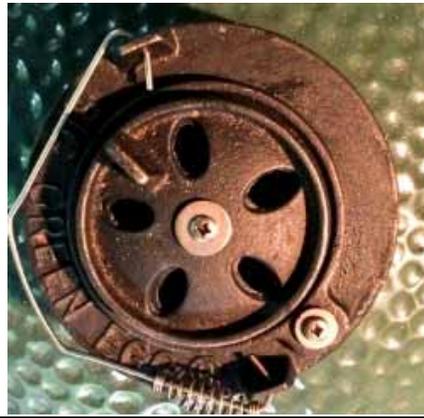
Use the following guidelines to chose an opening for the bottom vent. For example, to reach a 325 °F I will close the bottom vent to about ½ inch while the daisywheel small vents are full open



All measurements are for a LARGE green egg. If you are using a smaller or larger one you should adapt or experiment according to what achieves the best results.



After closing dome, place Daisywheel so the letters are towards the back. Then slide daisywheel forward to maximum open position.



Once it gets to within 100°F slide daisywheel shut, but leave vents open, until the next step.



At first bottom vent is open about 4+ inches or a little over halfway open.



When you get to within 100°F, close bottom vent. Here it about 3/4 inches for a 350°F cook.

After about 30 minutes the fire spreads and settles when you can fine tune it to 250 F.



Daisy wheel half open



Lower Vent 1/2 inch open



The Promised Land

THE TIME TO HOLD BACK IS THROUGH , TIME TO ZERO IN ON THE FIRE ♪

Getting the cooker to a specific spot like 325°F becomes a back and forth dance with the vents and temperature gauge as partners. The key is to make small changes to vents and then wait, wait, wait before making another change. It is like a slow waltz that can take up to 45 minutes as you move from a general temperature of 350°F to a final cook of 325°F. As the fire grows stable it will then last many hours without much further adjustment.

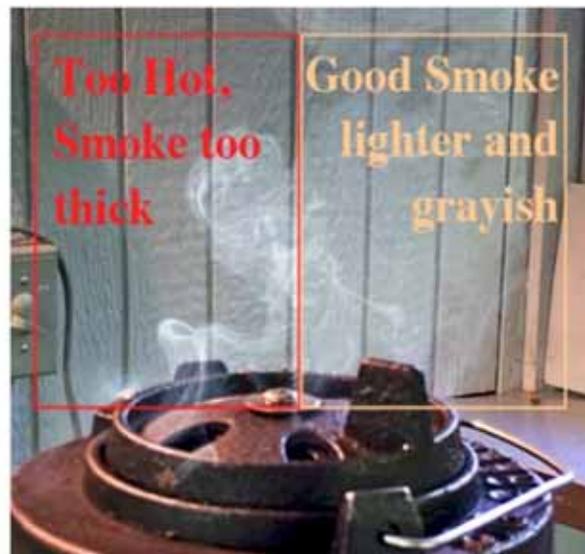
Step 4—Fine Tune Specific Temperature, Wait, Watch...20+ minutes

To make **big temperature adjustments over 50 °F adjust the bottom vent about 1/8 to 1/4 inch at a time**. To make smaller changes slightly change the daisywheel vent on top. I typically adjust the bottom vent the most.

Then wait to see where the temperature settles. **Don't adjust more than every 15 minutes or you end up chasing the temperature all around**. This is why it can take an additional 30+ minutes before you reach a stable, rock hard temperature. However, most times the entire process will take no more than 50 minutes total to get to this point. As a rule of thumb I start my Big Green Egg 1 hour before I plan to put the meat on.

It is also important to realize the next time the charcoal, ambient temperature and humidity may require slightly different vent openings. It is a process you are mastering and not specific openings.

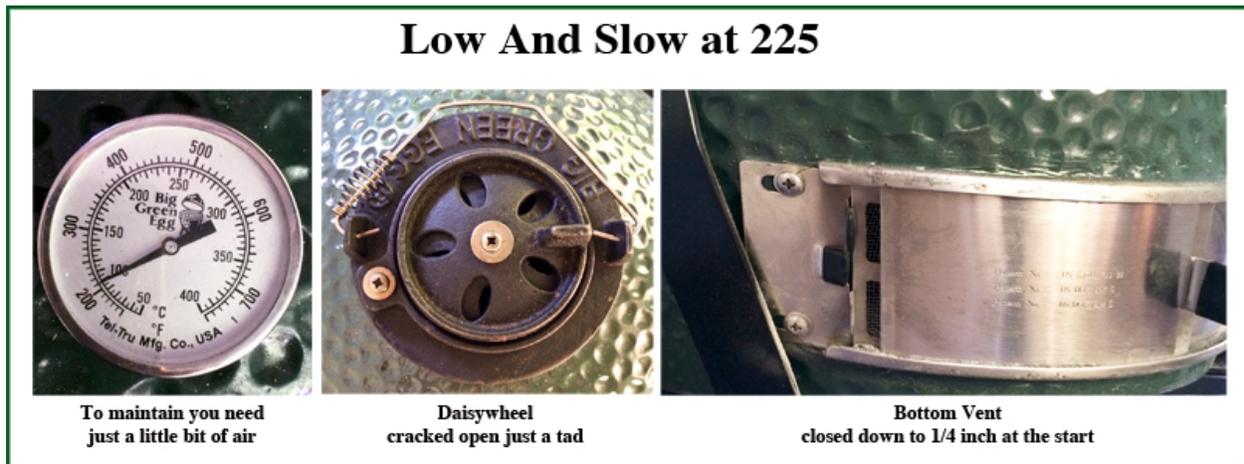
Wayne Nelson urges the cook to observe the smoke because you want it to go from thick, puffy, white to just a light, wispy bluish rising come from the top vent. The thicker smoke can result in an acrid smoke flavor.



ADDITIONAL TIPS FOR LOW-AND-SLOW CHARCOAL FIRE ON A BGE

Searing a steak 800°F is easy on a BGE. Just open all vents, ignite, and move quickly since it only takes a few minutes on a side. Cooking chicken or vegetables or fish around 325°F is a more leisurely cooking experience. But to take it down to a reliable and steady 225°F for a low and slow cooks takes all the big green talent you can muster.

Finding the sweet spot for 200 °F or 225 °F is the Holy Grail for my BGE. It takes a bit of practice and is best done without food until you can consistently produce and hold the temperature for 5 hours. If the previous comments will not get you there, then try these additional tips.



I chose to first practice just getting the BGE to 225°F without food using the settings you see in the picture. Then I followed up with a practice cook beginning with bacon smoke cooked indirectly above a pan. After 2 hours I opened the lid to remove the bacon, insert an Adjust Rig, which allowed me to cook lower than the felt line with direct heat. The cooker went to 325°F and I was never able to get it back to 225°F so I finished it at 300°F. In reviewing this with Wayne Nelson we determined that the lid was open too often for too long. Here are some tips learned the hard way.

1. Plan ahead how you want to set up your charcoal fire. Will you use wood, perhaps a plate setter or use an *Adjustable Rig* to elevate with a drip pan beneath? The first tip is to keep it simple and have it equipment ready to go. Then right after ignition set up the insides of the egg for your cook. Otherwise, when you open the dome and fiddle with equipment, search for a pan, or fish wood chunks out of the bag you add too much air, and the temperature can quickly run away from you. With everything ready to go, you try to limit the lid opening to 20 seconds if possible.
2. To cook at 225°F degrees make sure you light only one spot in the center. This way you start with a slow burn rather than a hot and fast burn that results from multiple ignition points.
3. To increase control over the low temperature close the bottom vent before opening the lid. Then after you close it return the bottom vent to the previous position.

4. During ignition, you can start up more slowly if you begin with the daisywheel even though the dome is up. You can always slide the daisywheel part way off to maximize airflow. But can take practically no time on a dry day with new charcoal to get to 100 °F. Also, I like to limit the bottom vent to 3 inches—rather than 4 for a slow and low cook.
5. Once your BGE goes from 0°F to 100°F immediately close down the bottom vent to ¼ inch and slide the daisywheel over the top, nudging it only half open. At around 200°F you may also want to cut these openings further.

References

Special thanks to Wayne Nelson at ThirdEye BBQ. He is my go-to guy for everything Big Green Egg. For info on his unique tools and approach see http://thirdeyeq.com/About_thirdeye.html

For all kinds of fun reads see his cooking blog at *Playing With Fire And Smoke* at <http://playingwithfireandsmoke.blogspot.com>

Martin Kimeldorf is a retired teacher, author, and photographer living in the Pacific Northwest. Now he works only for the love of learning and teaching. He has written over 35 titles related to job finding, leisure wellness, community service, photography and posing, cooking.

His next project to be released in 2015 is *Meditations On The Q, Recipes and Musings For The Gourmet Barbecue Life*. This game-changing work combines material from his previous books *Grill Play* and *Smokey Pleasures*. The new work combines reflections and techniques, humorous observations and succinct directions. While this new work lays emphasis on ceramic charcoal cookers (e.g. Big Green Egg) and dedicated smokers (e.g. Cookshack) the gourmet recipes can be used with any gas, charcoal, or electric device.



If you'd like to be notified about the release of *Meditations On The Q* please write Martin at **Kimeldorf@comcast.net**.