

And now, your host for today's festivities...

Beginning a two-part adventure today, so feel free to copy and paste if you want to read both pieces together tomorrow!

The first place I lived in when I moved out on my own was a small fourth-floor condo. It had more than ample room, including two bedrooms and baths and a washer/dryer inside. All it lacked was a patio, having only a small balcony.

I rented that place for 11 years before ending up in the house I now reside (happily for the past 16 years). This was a lucky find at the time; a foreclosure that apparently had some terrible owners. The bank had replaced all the carpets, repainted the place and redone all the cabinets. And the price was about \$30,000 less than similar homes in the area. All pretty nice, but the best part was the patio.

My home has a covered patio that stretches a roomy 30 feet across the back, facing east into a 100-yard green area of grass and pine trees. It's only about 10 feet deep, but it's ample room to set up tables and chairs and a barbecue. At last! I could finally have a barbecue grill. A real barbecue grill.

Of course, the first thing I did was have a housewarming party to introduce everyone to my new place. No different than a wedding or a baby shower, I got gifts. One of the most delightful surprises was from some close friends who got me my first gas grill, a lovely Char-Broil, complete with a side burner (which came in quite handy during post-Wilma hurricane week).

From year one in my new home, I began having barbecues of all shapes and sizes. Birthdays. Halloween. Summer fun. Just because. And since I learned about preparing for parties from

my Mom, things quickly got out of hand.

The ubiquitous phrase “you can’t please everyone” was the challenge I sought to undertake when hosting my barbecues. Since attendees could range anywhere from little kids to grandparents, that certainly increased the challenge, but I like to think I matched it.

If it were a big shindig barbecue, with the full gamut of guests, I liked to have some “warm-up” stuff inside the house on the dining room table. This would usually be individual serving trays of munchies: a tray of cheeses (hand cut, 3-4 varieties), a tray of veggies (hand cut, all colors), crackers, chips, dips, nuts, pickles (dill and sweet), olives (black and green) and usually one other special item (such as cold shrimp).

Then there’s the main course(s), which tended to be a standard of ribs, burgers and dogs, baked beans, corn on the cob, macaroni and cheese and whatever “mystery meat” I felt like making (perhaps chicken breasts or hot Italian sausage). Of course, you had to have the full slate of condiments (sliced onion for burgers, diced onion for dogs, yellow and brown mustard, sliced tomato, fresh lettuce, cheese for the burgers as requested). Occasionally, depending on the quantity of kids invited, I’d throw in some dogs in crescent rolls or chicken wings.

I would usually have a good assortment of drinks: iced tea, lemonade, sodas, water. Everything but beer, since I don’t drink and have little knowledge of which one “tastes great”. Most attendees were fine bringing their own as desired. Originally, I would also have a smattering of tasty, but sugary desserts for afters, but I changed a few years back to simply making a huge (hand-cut) fruit salad, trying to fit in just about every fruit that was freshly offered at the time.

Based on informal exit polling, I would have to say I did

indeed succeed at pleasing everyone...except myself. As the host, I would flit this way and that; checking on the grill here or the oven there and do you need more corn or is that dog cooked enough for you. I would always see something I could do a little better for next time. And next time would be better...except, I think I know a way it could be even better for *next* time.

A few years ago, a perfect storm (pun not intended) of Hurricane Wilma, retirement planning and general aging led me to remodel my home and kick off another series of barbecues with some interesting results. You'll get to read about those in tomorrow's post. If you want to improve the experience, grill up a couple burgers; grab your lap top and chow down while reading it on the patio.