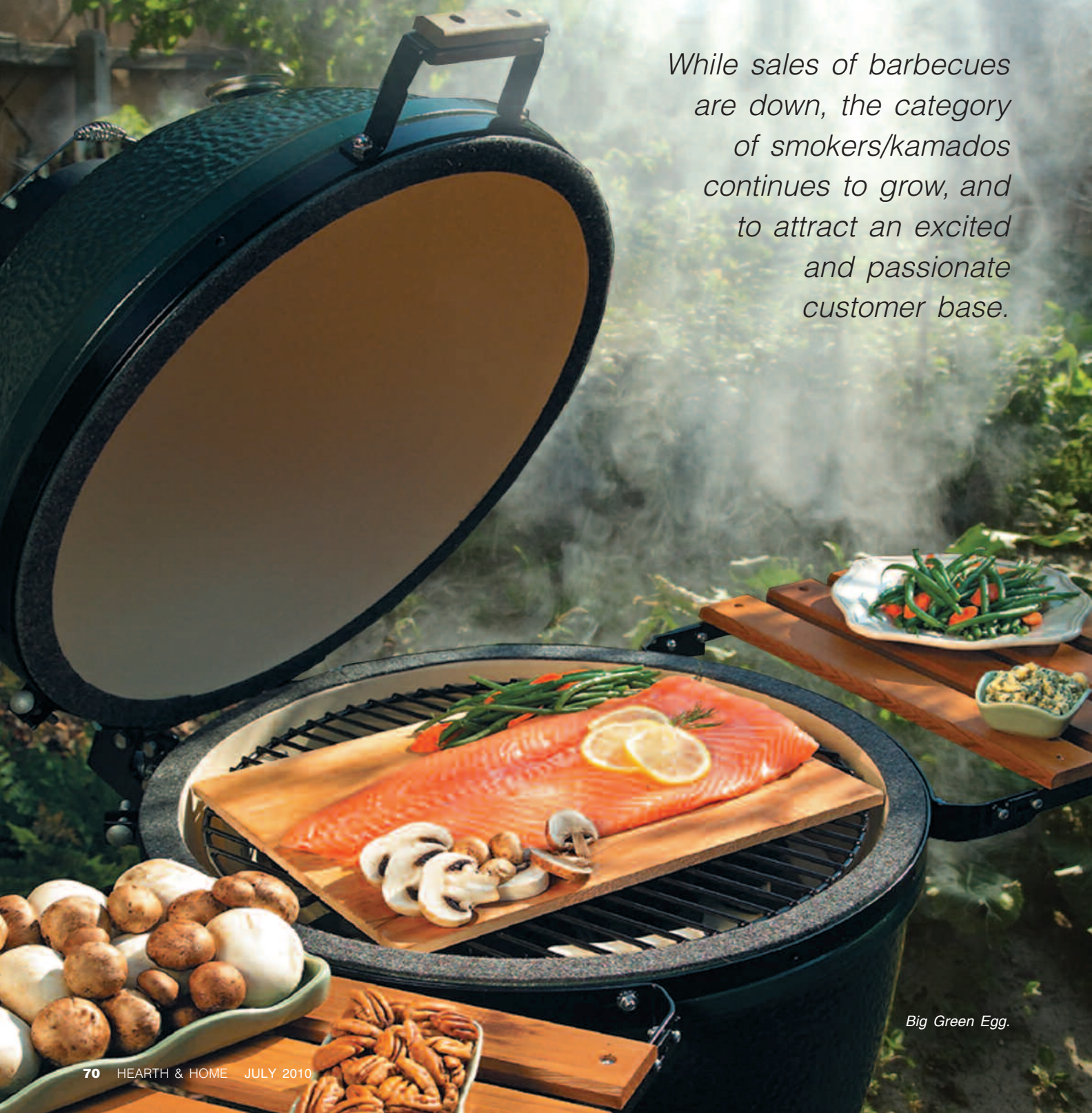


# Good for Business

*While sales of barbecues are down, the category of smokers/kamados continues to grow, and to attract an excited and passionate customer base.*



*Big Green Egg.*

**T**he smoker and kamado category might just be the brightest spot in the barbecue industry. Despite grill sales being down across the board, manufacturers and retailers report interest in smokers and kamados is at an all-time high, and sales are climbing in some cases.

George Booth, owner of Adventures in Heat in Clarence, New York, says smoker and kamado fever is spreading nationwide, even in snowbelt locales such as his suburban Buffalo community. According to Booth, the Weber Smoky Mountain Cookers and Primo ceramic kamado cookers he sells have become the most popular cooking appliances in his store.

The number of smoke enthusiasts grew so large and fervent in his area that Booth began to host a barbecue and smoking event called Oinktoberfest in his hometown. The Kansas City Barbecue Society-sanctioned cook-off extravaganza now attracts 100-plus competition teams from all over the Northeast and thousands of attendees.

George Samaras, president of Primo, says that kind of buzz is indicative of what's going on all over the country. According to Samaras, Primo's sales are up despite the economy. "I think the customer base has changed," he says. "Money is tighter, but we are hearing that many people are putting their restaurant budget toward buying our grill. So now they can have good food and the cooking becomes entertainment, too. Our factory is running seven days a week."

Samaras partially credits the growth to greater consumer awareness of ceramic kamado cookers in general. "Having more companies in the category has helped," he notes. He adds that offering table surrounds and other complementary products has further increased sales. "(The table surrounds) look like furniture and fit in better with an outdoor kitchen or Outdoor Room. They have been very popular."

In fact, outdoor island manufacturers report that it's becoming increasingly common for homeowners to want a charcoal-fueled ceramic kamado grill built into their outdoor kitchen along with a gas grill. The Select Outdoor Kitchens island company even won a Vesta Award for its cabinet base surround designed specifically for a ceramic kamado.

Category leader Big Green Egg is

also looking to accessories and other complementary products to continue its growth trend. The company launched 20 new accessory products ranging from what marketing manager Jodi Burson calls "fun and gifty stuff" like EGG-shaped salt and pepper shakers and corn holders, to more serious and practical

endorsements from these third-party experts and it's having a positive impact on our sales.

"We're achieving critical mass," she continues. "People are not just seeing it for the first time anymore; it's not as novel. Those who might have been hesitant about being early adopters, are



*Osage from Select Outdoor Kitchens.*

gear used to cook the recipes in the company's newly published cookbook.

"The Big Green Egg Cookbook" features hundreds of recipes for dishes including breakfasts, appetizers, entrees, sides, desserts and vegetarian offerings, and is "designed to show people the versatility of the EGG," says Burson. Retailers report the new book has a synergistic relationship with accessory products, with its sales fueling the sales of Big Green Egg grilling baskets, paella pans, pizza stones and more.

"The company had another record year last year," Burson points out. "We're growing faster than we ever have. For years, the EGG was considered a quirky product that people didn't understand. But now, through our experiential marketing efforts on the NASCAR circuit, at professional bull riding events, Bassmaster Elite fishing events, and on television programs targeting food enthusiasts and outdoor enthusiasts, people are starting to see the product in multiple places. People trust the

now willing to take the leap because it's past the point of being a brand new concept."

It's ironic that recent purveyors and purchasers of this appliance with a 3,000-year-old history could have been considered "early adopters." And while ceramic grills still cannot be called



*Kamado Joe.*



*Bull Outdoor Products' Kamado.*

“mainstream,” the road has clearly been widened and paved by the early companies and their loyal fans.

Now kamado manufacturer newcomers are reaping the benefits. Introduced last year, Kamado Joe's sales “exceeded our expectations,” reveals company president Bobby Brennan, who predicts con-

developed a library of marketing materials, such as advertising templates and point of sale displays, for dealers to access. “We’re trying to form partnerships with our retailers and distributors and introduce tools and products that help them sell more,” Brennan explains.

Both the Bull Kamado cooker with its rich brown exterior, and the Bayou Classics Kamado Cooker with a unique mottled glazed finish, have been out a couple of years and sales have grown. Viking also has been marketing a stainless-steel-finished kamado for the last several years.

After four years of tweaking and test marketing, the Saffire Grill and Smoker is being rolled out nationally this year in a choice of red or black finishes. “We have continually made modifications and improvements to the product and the time is finally right,” says company president Steve Benson.

The product offers some advantages



*C4 Cooker with cart and sideburner from Viking.*

tinued growth for the company in 2010. “This category is still in its infancy and people don’t know about it. We can’t even see the peak right now.”

While Kamado Joe is still available in only one size – “large” – Brennan has expanded offerings to include black as well as brick red finishes, new table surrounds, charcoal and other accessories. In addition, the company has

over other ceramic kamados, according to Benson. For example, it comes fully preassembled and only the base and bamboo side shelves need to be attached to the body; everything else, including the hardware and the daisy damper wheel, is already affixed to the unit. Another improvement, according to Benson, is that all the hardware and leg bases are made of stainless steel, and



*The Smokin' Tex Gourmet Sous Chef.*

each unit features a built-in, stainless-steel chip feeder that slides in through an opening in the cooker’s base. This allows wood chips to be added during cooking without lifting the lid and removing the cooking grid.

An unusual entry in the category is the Big Steel Keg. Introduced last year by In-Zone as the Bubba Keg, the cooker is a sort of hybrid, combining the traditional shape and features of a kamado-style cooker but made of steel. Although it boasts the same insulating ability of ceramics, the metal reduces the weight of the product considerably, making it more conducive to tailgating; an optional trailer hitch is available. According to the company, the price is also about half that of a traditional kamado.

Is the kamado field getting too crowded? Not according to Brennan. “We don’t believe our competitors are Big Green Egg and Primo – they do a great job,” he notes. “We think our competitors are gas grill companies. Consumers don’t even realize how much better barbecuing can be flavor-wise. You can’t beat a ceramic cooker for taste. So for that reason we think there is lots of room to grow.”

The metal smoker category is already plentiful with dozens of manufacturers offering everything from inexpensive bullet-shaped charcoal units, to mid-priced offset charcoal units, to premium, programmable smokers that rely on electricity to consistently maintain temperatures.

The Smokin’ Tex Gourmet Sous Chef is a brand new smoker that falls into the last category. The size of a dorm-room refrigerator, the Gourmet Sous Chef may be compact, but still holds up to 25 pounds of meat for smoking. It runs on electricity for just pennies per hour with

## Smokers & Kamados

temperatures ranging from 100 to 250 degrees. The product also can be used as a warming oven. The kit retails for \$499 and is a good value complete with standard food racks, a delicate foods rack, a cold smoke plate, a pan for catching grease drippings or adding wine or juice to further flavor foods, a wood chip tray and even a cover.

“It’s great for beginning smokers,” explains “Diz” Dizdar, company vice president. “It’s so simplified; you put the food in, set it and there’s nothing else to do, almost like the concept of crock pot cooking. It’s so easy and it’s extremely tolerant – you don’t have to get it exactly right and the food still comes out delicious.”

Danny East of Master-built says electric smokers are outpacing sales of traditional charcoal-fueled smokers at his company. “We’re doing really well with our smokers, especially the electric models,” he points out. “People like the convenience; they are easy and consistent. Once people try them they realize how much better food tastes and how good it smells while cooking. I think the smoker growth trend will continue at least another four or five years.”

“Another factor fueling the growth of smokers,” he continues, “is that today people consider the cooking process fun. Before, people would run outside to quickly

cook the food and then bring it back in to eat. Now people want to be outdoors for entertaining and the cooking or smoking is part of the party.”

It’s not just electric smokers doing well. Napoleon introduced its Apollo 3 in 1 Smoker Grill last year to great response. The versatile charcoal cooker can be used as a low-and-slow smoker or a direct-heat grill. Weber recently unveiled a larger version of its Smokey Mountain Cooker, a traditional bullet-shaped, metal charcoal smoker, to considerable success. “There has been tremendous consumer interest in the product and sales have been very good,” notes Tom Wenke, senior vice president of sales for the company. “Our smoker has a big following on online forums; people are very passionate about it.”

The Virtual Weber Bullet is an independently run online forum dedicated to the Weber Smokey Mountain Cooker, or WSM in Virtual Weber Bullet lingo. With over 4,800 registered members and hundreds of thousands of posts, the online fraternity swaps stories, boasts about recipes and shares photos of their latest smoked dishes like most people show pictures of their kids. The group celebrated the “official” start of summer with WSM Smoke Day on May 29 this year. The sixth annual event invited Weber Smokey Mountain Cooker owners all over the globe to fire up their smokers that day and post descriptions, recipes and photos of what they cooked on the forum.

However, Weber has not cornered the market on passionate online posters. Other brands of smoker and kamado owners regularly and frequently interact online, trading tips, techniques, recipes and photos of their



*Bubba Keg.*



*Apollo 3 in 1 Smoker Grill from Napoleon.*



*Smokey Mountain Cooker by Weber-Stephen Products Company.*

latest culinary endeavor. Primo has over 5,700 posters on its online forum, and Big Steel Keg has a growing group of followers who regularly communicate online.

But it’s Big Green Egg that, arguably, could have the most dedicated and enthusiastic fan base of any product in the category – online or in person. Besides frequent posting on the very active BGE forum, the company’s dedicated fans – called EGGheads – gather at one of the



*Primo ceramic kamado cooker.*

more than two dozen EGGfests held around the country for cooking, eating and celebrating the EGG.

No matter what style or brand of smoker or kamado they own, smoke enthusiasts tend to spend money on their sport. They regularly return to the retailer for charcoal, wood chips or chunks, tools, accessories and gourmet products at a rate that no gas grill comes close to.

You don’t need to clear the smoke to see that smokers and kamados are good business for retailers today. 🏠