

Memorial Day Weekend Starts Summer

By John Clarke

While the calendar tells us that the official first day of summer arrives on June 21, most folks start their summer on Memorial Day weekend. The remembrance was set up to honor our servicemen and women who were killed in battle, and those should indeed be remembered and thanked for their sacrifice while we enjoy time at the beach or by the grill.

While some do enjoy chicken, hot dogs and hamburgers are always a crowd favorite for Memorial Day grilling. Your local markets offer several brands and types of hot dogs, and if you wish, you can always opt for bratwurst.

North Carolina is home to the Bright Leaf hot dog or, as some call them, red dogs. They are not all over the South and are rarely seen elsewhere in the country. Their distinctive fully red color is unique in the hot dog world. The red color comes from the addition of sodium nitrite, which is found in pickling salt. They got their name, Bright Leaf, from the number of tobacco warehouses along the road where their hog business was located. You can buy them in a pack of eight or even in a bag of one or two pounds. While perhaps not the most nutritious hot dog (is there one?), they are quite tasty and keto-friendly. Bright Leaf also offers a larger sausage-type dog called Red Hots, which is spicier than a regular dog. You should try them and gauge them for yourself. Many places here that serve hot dogs have them on their menu. They are favorites at some gas station eateries and are available at Beach Burgers in Atlantic Beach and Flip Flops on Highway 58 in Emerald Isle. Some places refer to them as Southern hot dogs.

To top your hot dog, you can come up with concoctions of all varieties that go beyond just mustard and ketchup. I recommend trying out the chili that is available in small cans at Food Lion. My favorite is Patterson's, and Food Lion and other markets here offer several choices, including store brands. Along with the mustard, ketchup and chili, you might want to add onions and coleslaw. Your bun may start to come apart with all these toppings, but they are all good. Have fun and experiment.

Over in the deli section of some markets, you can find specialty hot dogs made by Boar's Head and Dietz and Watson. They are more expensive—but not necessarily any better, but you be the judge. Nathan's Colossal dogs are eight to a package and weigh out at two full pounds, unlike the more expensive ones at 14 ounces or thereabouts. Does size or taste matter? It is up to you, but you might as well try them and eliminate those that are not up to your standards or choosing. If you are a Costco member, you can get their Dinner Franks, which come in a 14-dog pack weighing in at 3.81 lbs. They are very good and filling—and are just over 1/4 pound each.

Regardless of your choice, be it the old favorite Ball Park, Bright Leaf, large Dinner Franks or the delicatessen quality frank, make sure you grill yours and steer clear of boiling them as my mom often did. If you cannot get to the grill, try cooking them stove top in a cast iron skillet.

The choices you make may end up being a combination of flavor, size, mix of products (beef, pork, turkey, chicken) and bun size. I still have never understood why bun makers and hot dog manufacturers frequently have a mismatch in quantities in each package. I guess these are first-world problems.

Up next, hamburgers. Again, as my son loves to say, “always a crowd favorite,” and on the grill, superb. Now we get into so many choices and considerations that it boggles the mind. Hamburger comes in lump status, rolls (like sausage), pre-made patties, deli patties, deli grade hamburgers, hamburgers made with onions and other seasonings, and if you can ever find them on sale, Wagyu burgers. Wagyu meats come from the Japanese art of feeding the cow to get the most marbling in the meat. Wagyu-style steaks are *very expensive*, and the ground counterparts for hamburgers are equally so. Infrequently, you can find them on sale near their “sell-by” date. Talk to the butcher at the respective markets to see how and when they decide to price down based on sell-by dates.

Almost all chefs will tell you to use 80/20 ground meat (20% fat) for hamburgers on the grill. The fat makes the meat juicier, and if you choose lean versions, you will have less flavorful meat. If you have a flat grill surface to place on your grill you can make the smash burgers that are very popular now.

Many recipes are out there on YouTube cooking channels for something fun to do with ground beef, ranging from plain old burgers to meatloaf to crazy stuff like wrapping a hot dog in ground beef and then rolling in bacon. That one combines the best of Memorial Day fixings.

Corn on the cob is coming in season at most of the markets now, and it makes an excellent side dish steamed in a foil wrap or cooked indirectly over the coals. Since we are at the coast, shrimp on the grill can be another great appetizer for family and friends.

Enjoy your holiday cook and remember the fallen.

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