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## Women do the most cooking at home. So why do men get to hog the BBQ?

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*Come on, baby, light my fire.*

We can be pretty sure Jim Morrison wasn't referring to BBQ when he wrote those famous lyrics – but he may as well have been. As the weather starts to warm across the country, throngs of people will take to the great outdoors to bask in the sun, crack open a cold one and, inevitably, fire up the grill.

It's a pattern we all know well. But it tends to overshadow another often overlooked pattern, concerning *who* is holding the tongs?

Traditional masculinity continues to have a stronghold on BBQ. Even as other forms of cooking are (unfairly) treated as “womens’ work”, cooking meat on an open flame is largely framed as an activity for men.

How might we explain these gendered dynamics?

## **Which came first, the human or the fire?**

According to English anthropologist Richard Wrangham, the ability to control fire, and therefore cook food, was the key driver in human evolution. In Wrangham’s words, “we humans are the cooking apes, the creatures of fire”.

Gender division in food and cookery is nothing new. Our prehistoric ancestors structured their society around food. There’s a common perception these early societies were simply split into two groups of “man the hunter” and “woman the gatherer”.

Reality, however, was far more nuanced, with many experts suggesting communal wellbeing overrode distinct gender division. And increasing evidence suggests that, despite their child-rearing responsibilities, women would have hunted, just as men would have gathered.

Today, it is women who do the majority of household cooking in Australia.

## **The original barbies**

In terms of food preparation, butchering predates cooking, and can be traced back to about 2.6 million years ago.

Filleting meat into smaller pieces made it easier to chew and digest large mammals such as mammoths, which allowed meat to become part of our diets early on. There is indirect evidence that *homo erectus*’ anatomy diverged from non-human primates some 1.9 million years ago because of this shift in diet.

While it’s unclear exactly when humans started to control and manipulate fire, evidence of cooking in the Levant region goes as far back as 780,000 years.

There was even an entire mammoth economy around the end of the last ice age (27,000 years ago), which involved procurement, carcass transport, butchery, food preparation and storage.

Meat was cold-smoked in smokehouses, allowing it to be consumed fresh, or stored long-term. But experts are divided as to who did the cooking. Did the hunters bring their catch back to the group to cook, or did they cook it at the kill site? The general consensus is it was probably both.

## **Why are BBQs such a sausage fest?**

Not only do women do most of the cooking today, they also spend the most time hunting and gathering (from the supermarket). However, this gap is narrowing – particularly in certain demographics.

The genderisation of food remains strong in the retail industry, and extends to advertising and marketing. When did you last see an ad that showed a woman in charge of the BBQ?

Barbecue cookbooks consistently have covers featuring men. There's not a single woman to be found on the covers of the top 50 best-selling BBQ and grilling books on Amazon.

And just as you're more likely to see cake mixers on special for Mother's Day, you're more likely to see BBQ-related products on sale for Father's Day.

This gender divide is also noticeable in the professional hospitality industry.

Chef Lennox Hastie of Sydney's Firedoor restaurant is someone who knows a thing or two about fire. Hastie told us:

*There's no denying that, historically, fire has been wrapped up in a kind of rugged mythology – primal, elemental, often masculine. But some of the oldest, most enduring fire traditions have always been in the hands of women – it's the industry that's been slow to catch up. [...] Fire doesn't care who you are. It doesn't respect ego. It requires attentiveness, intuition, patience – qualities that aren't gendered.*

Although deliberate fire starting, or arson, is a male dominated crime, there's no evidence men are biologically wired, or pathologically driven, toward fire-setting.

Their over-representation in arson may be better explained by social, behavioural and psychological risk factors, including peer influence, antisocial personality traits, and a lack of emotional regulation.

## **Peacocking at the grill**

Backyard BBQ as we know it is a relatively recent thing, gradually infiltrating our lifestyles in the 1950s and becoming firmly embedded with the introduction of the gas BBQ in the 1960s.

In many ways it is the modern equivalent of the Sunday roast; it fulfils the role of social and cultural ritual and reflects aspects of prestige, generosity and patriarchy. All of this plays into hegemonic masculinity, which frames men as the dominant sex in society: the provider, the carver, the griller.

In contrast, everyday cookery tends to be seen as domestic work, more in service of family wellbeing than a show of social status. It is an unpaid and often undervalued part of the invisible labour that still falls largely on woman.

It's difficult to give precedence to just one of the multitude of theories that try and explain mens' dominance over the BBQ. But there is a high chance historical social stereotypes and gendered expectations have a role to play.

Either way, best to keep a fire extinguisher handy.