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Barbecue Basting Brushes

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In an upcoming issue of *Cook's Illustrated*, we're taking a look at pastry brushes, tools that many of us reach for not only to brush an egg white on pie crust but also to slather barbecue sauce on our grilled chicken. But with their short handles, pastry brushes do a poor job of protecting a cook's hands. We wanted a good barbecue basting brush that allowed us to both neatly and safely baste our food, even over the highest grilling heat.

When we went shopping, we found numerous options: brush heads made of silicone, nylon, and boar's bristles and handles measuring from 6 to 15 inches and made from bakelite, wood, stainless steel, and enamel-like plastic. We chose seven types, gathered testers around lighted grills, and asked each tester to use each brush to apply a light oil mixture to bruschetta and a viscous barbecue sauce to chicken pieces. We also simulated normal wear and tear by leaving the brushes next to the grill, exposing them to flare-ups, and putting them through numerous washings. In the end, we determined three features that characterized a comfortable and safe barbecue basting brush: bristle material, handle material, and handle length.

Bristle Material

Bristles made from silicone were the clear favorite. Nylon- and boar-bristle brushes both shed bristles. In addition, neither could handle high heat; nylon bristles melted and boar's bristles became singed. Finally, both nylon and boar's bristles were damaged when run through the dishwasher. The nylon bristles came out bent and clumped, while the boar's bristles clumped and remained damp. Washing by hand worked well for both the nylon and silicone bristles, but the boar's bristles retained food odors and color even after several washings.

We have one reservation about silicone: While boar's bristles retained enough oil to coat a slice of bruschetta in one stroke, oil slipped off both the silicone and nylon (we didn't have the same problem with the more viscous barbecue sauce). That said, the thin, close-set bristles of our favorite silicone brush did retain enough oil to limit the number of additional brush strokes needed for coverage to a few--not the case for the silicone brush with thick bristles or for the nylon brush.

Handle Material

We judged brushes with handles made from heat-resistant bakelite, rubber, and plastic to be acceptable; brushes with stainless steel handles became too hot when left near the grill, and those with wood handles could not be put in the dishwasher.

Handle Length

It seemed obvious that handle length (measured from handle end to the point where the bristles begin) can be too short, placing hands dangerously close to the flames; we determined 8 inches to be the minimum length needed to comfortably brush an item at the back of the grill. We were a little surprised, however, to discover that a handle can be too long; brush handles measuring more than 13 inches didn't allow enough precision and control.

Results

Only one of our samples, the Precision Grill Tools BBQ Silicone Basting Brush, had all the features we required. In addition, it had a uniquely angled head (see photo below) that gave us greater control and precision. The other silicone sample, the William Bounds, was too long to be comfortable and had too few bristles to hold on to the oil mixture. We can't recommend the non-silicone samples--all but one shed

bristles, which we judged to be a fatal flaw, and the Weber was uncomfortable and very difficult to clean.

Items are listed in order of preference.

Recommended

Precision Grill Tools Super Silicone Angled BBQ Basting Brush: ASIN#B0009RH4V2, \$9.95

Bristles: Silicone

Handle: 13 inches/bakelite and silicone

Dishwasher-safe: Yes

With its angled brush head and good handle length, this brush let testers baste each food item comfortably and precisely, no matter the shape of the food or its location on the grill. The brush was easy to clean, both in the dishwasher and by hand. (The head can be removed to wash any sticky sauce stuck at the seam of the brush base.) The brush head had enough narrow silicone bristles to do an excellent job of picking up sticky, viscous barbecue sauce and an acceptable job of picking up the thinner oil mixture. This brush was also heat-resistant.

www.Amazon.com (sold on Amazon as BBQ Basting Brush, Elizabeth Karmel)

Not Recommended

Weber Style Professional-Grade 1-Inch-Round Basting Brush, Item #32904, \$9.99

Bristles: Boar

Handle: 7 1/2 inches/wood

Dishwasher-safe: No

With its bristles tightly gathered in a round shape, the Weber did an excellent job of picking up the oil mixture and applying it to the bruschetta in just one swipe, but the bristles were too compact to effectively apply the thicker barbecue sauce. The handle was too short to comfortably reach the chicken pieces on the back of the grill. And, despite numerous washings, we couldn't remove all the stain and odor of the barbecue sauce from the boar's bristles. (The wooden handle is what keeps this brush out of the dishwasher.)

www.amazon.com

Cuisinart Basting Brush with ABS Handle, Item #89435, \$7.99

Bristles: Nylon

Handle: 8 1/2 inches/molded plastic and stainless steel

Dishwasher-safe: Yes

This brush left several almost invisible plastic bristles behind on the food. We can't recommend putting it anywhere near the heat—its nylon bristles curled up when just over 3 inches away from the flame. It also cleaned up poorly in the dishwasher; the bristles came out of the dishwasher bent and misshapen.

www.amazon.com

KitchenAid Basting Brush, Item #KG042Wh, \$7.99

Bristles: Nylon

Handle: 7 1/2 inches/enamel-like material

Dishwasher-safe: Yes

This brush gave us the same problems we had with the Cuisinart: Some bristles fell out, they melted when brought close to the flame, and they clumped when washed.

www.amazon.com

William Bounds Silicone Basting Brushes, Item #388496 (Barbecue), \$19.95; Item #360875 (Basting), \$14.95

Bristles: Silicone

Handle: 15 inches (barbecue), 6 inches (basting)/stainless steel

Dishwasher-safe:

Despite their silicone bristles, the William Bounds brushes had three design flaws. The bristles have little balls at the end, designed "to release an even flow of liquid," according to the company. But with so few bristles and each bristle being so thick, the brushes couldn't hold enough oil to create any kind of flow. In addition, the brushes' stainless steel handles became hot when left lying near the grill. We also found the 15-inch handle of the barbecue brush too long. To get any kind of brushing motion going, testers had to hold the brush straight up, which made it difficult to maneuver. The basting brush, identical to the barbecue brush except for its 6-inch handle, was judged too short.

www.surlatable.com

OXO Good Grips Basting Brush, Item #38581, \$5.99

Bristles: Boar

Handle: 10 inches/rubber

Dishwasher-safe: Yes

The handle was great—good length, comfortable, and heat-resistant. Another nice feature was the angle at which the head was set; when the brush was put down on a tray or countertop, the bristles didn't rest on the surface. But these advantages could not compensate for the number of shed bristles we found on the food and in the oil mixture. In addition, at 2 inches, the brush head was so broad that we had trouble applying the barbecue sauce evenly and precisely. And with so many bristles, the brush remained damp after cleaning, even when left overnight to dry.

www.amazon.com