

# FORTUNE MAGAZINE



PHOTO: ADAM FRIEDBERG

Freshly enameled Weber kettles are ready for packing in Huntley, Ill.

## Where Weber grills are born

The iconic grill has been a backyard staple in America for years. Now it's trying to catch fire in India.

BY RYAN BRADLEY, SENIOR EDITOR [@FORTUNEMAGAZINE](#) - LAST UPDATED AUGUST 03 2012 06:17 AM ET

It doesn't look like much of anything when it arrives -- just a big flat circle of steel: A "blank," it's called, appropriately. Carried by a robot, the blank gets doused in lubricant, stamped in a toggle press, welded, trimmed, coated with electrically charged enamel, and heated to 1,700 degrees F before it looks as it should. Like the bell of a jellyfish. Or a UFO. Or a Weber Grill.

Apart from the robots, the speed at which the kettles are made, the electrostatic paint, and the fact that some will end up halfway around the world, the grills aren't all that different from the one George Stephen, a Chicago metalworker, first fashioned out of the steel bottom of a Coast Guard buoy. The neighbors wanted one of their own. Stephen, a part-owner of the Weber Bros. Metalworks, opened a grill-making business in 1952.

There were barbeques before Stephens made his kettle, but the U.S. didn't collectively cook out the way it does today. This year nine out of 10 Americans were at a grill, near a grill, or enjoyed food from a grill on the Fourth of July. Seven out of 10 of us own a grill, and of those seven, a third own at least one more. About half of all grills sold in America are charcoal grills, and most of those are Webers. Grilling, it seems, is an American birthright. But before Weber started, it wasn't. We had to be taught. Mike Kempster was the man behind most of the lessons.

A 41-year employee and an executive vice president at Weber-Stephen, Kempster started with store demonstrations in the 1970s. Soon there were pamphlets and cookbooks, classes, and radio shows, and Weber grew to be the largest charcoal grill brand in North America, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. In the U.S. today, grilling is a \$2.2-billion-a-year business, according to the Hearth, Patio, and Barbecue Association.

One time, about 30 years ago, Kempster was on WGN, the big Chicago radio station, just before Thanksgiving. He told listeners that if they called Weber, someone would send them instructions on how to grill a Thanksgiving turkey. "We had every person in the company who wasn't answering phones sending out instructions," he says. Weber now has a hotline with, in peak season, 190 people. The hotline gets about half a million calls a year. The most common question: "I'm burning everything, what's wrong?"

Back in Huntley, at the assembly plant, the bowl, lid, wire grate, legs, and wheels get packed in a box, which is packed into 40-foot-long container, which is picked up by a flatbed, trucked to a train, hauled to Seattle -- or Long Beach -- and shipped across the Pacific, where it is unloaded in Tuticorin, India, and trucked northeast, up the Mysore Plateau and into the center of Bangalore, where it gets assembled in a patio behind the Weber Experience Center. The grill is there to teach Indians how to grill. "What's that?" they ask, and Shiva Kandaswamy tells them, gives them some tongs to hold, a coal to light, and they stand together next to a hot kettle in contemplation of this new pastime. They are not in a backyard. Indians do not have backyards, Kandaswamy says. "We have removed 'backyard' from our language and replaced it with balcony, terrace, and garden."

"There are positives and negatives to the market," he continues. The negatives: "Indians are mostly vegetarian, we don't spend time outdoors, and men don't cook." Also: "Do-it-yourself is not a big concept in India." The positives: "We are already used to grilled food. We grill okra, eggplant, pizza. I grill fish, folded in a banana leaf. We are opening another center in Delhi, next year. We are not just selling a kettle -- we're selling an experience." Weber's smallest model, the Smokey Joe, is especially popular. It's also a top seller in China, Weber's newest market, where the "tuck 'n' carry" 14 1/2-inch grill fits on a Beijing balcony.

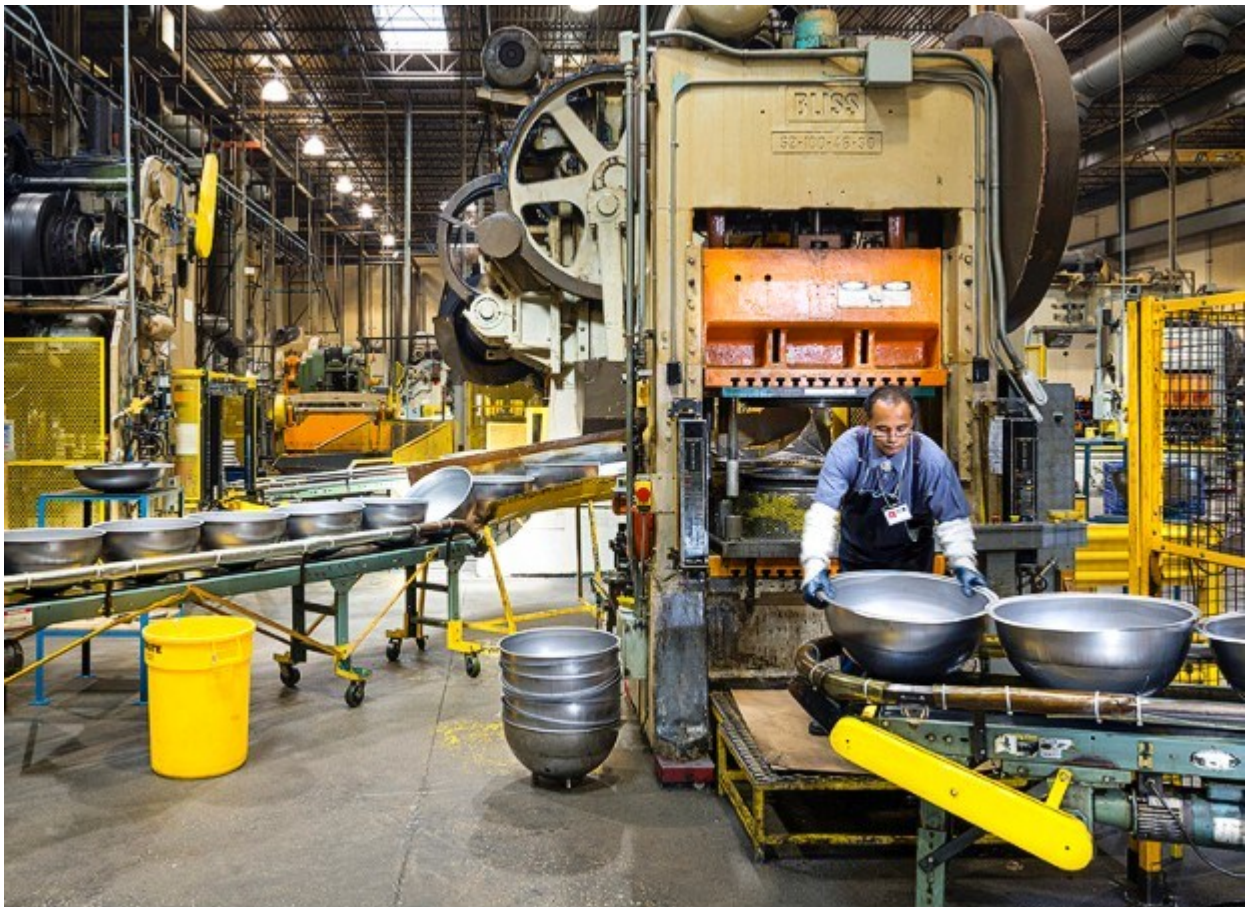


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A flat, circular steel "blank," coated in soap, travels through an 800-ton press and comes out a bowl. A worker grabs the bowl and moves it to a trimming station, where the edges are shorn down.