In my three years living in New York, I have marveled at how people here make homes in small spaces, how they barbecue without the lush, expansive backyards of my youth.

There are holes grilling on tiny balconies in public housing projects in the Bronx, families co-opting public space with charcoal and spécial sauces.

The traditional barbecue season begins this weekend, but many started cooking out in the first stage days of May. John and Mirta Daalling, who live in Brooklyn, showed up around dawn on May 1 to claim a picnic table near the band shell on the west side of Prospect Park. "We literally woke up at about 5:30 to load the truck," said Mr. Daalling, who retired from what is now Verizon in 1999.

This time, they were celebrating the birthdays of their 60 or 70 relatives celebrating the baptism of their three grandchildren.

The Daallings, who have been married for 35 years, said their last big family barbecue was about 25 years ago, with 40 or 50 relatives celebrating the baptisms of their three children, John, Michael, and Anarina.

This time, they were celebrating the birthdays of their daughter-in-law Adrienne, 27, and granddaughter Heaven, 2, above right. "It takes a lot of work and it's very expensive, but it's nice because that's the time you get to show up around dawn on May 1 to claim a picnic table near the band shell on the west side of Prospect Park," said Mr. Daalling, who retired from what is now Verizon in 1999.

The traditional barbecue season begins this weekend, but many started cooking out in the first stage days of May. John and Mirta Daalling, who live in Brooklyn, showed up around dawn on May 1 to claim a picnic table near the band shell on the west side of Prospect Park. "We literally woke up at about 5:30 to load the truck," said Mr. Daalling, who retired from what is now Verizon in 1999.