

SONOMA VALLEY FIRE DISTRICT

630 Second Street West, Sonoma, CA 95476 • 707-996-2102

CAN I USE A GRILL ON MY BALCONY, DECK, OR PATIO?

A Quick Guide for Apartment & Condo Residents • Plain-language summary of CFC §4104.2 (2025 California Fire Code)

If you live in an apartment, condo, or other multi-family building, your grill options are more limited than a single-family home's. The fire code exists because open flames on wood decks and stacked balconies are a leading cause of multi-unit fires. Here's the short version.

First: Are You Even Covered by This Rule?

- Single-family homes and duplexes: this rule does NOT apply to you. Grill away (subject to normal safety practices).
- Live in an apartment, condo, or townhouse that shares a building with other units? Keep reading: this rule likely applies to you, regardless of whether you own or rent.

Note: "Condo" describes ownership, not fire risk. Whether the rule applies depends on your building's construction and fire sprinklers, not on your deed.

Townhouse Exemption

A townhouse is generally distinguished from other multi-family construction because each unit extends continuously from the foundation to the roof and is separated from adjoining units by walls built to code. Where individual townhouse units sit on separate parcels with recorded property lines between them, each unit functions more like a one-family dwelling than an apartment or stacked condo unit.

For purposes of this standard, these townhouse units are treated as one-family dwellings and are exempt from the barbecue restrictions that apply to buildings with more than two dwelling units.

This exemption is not automatic just because a development is called a "townhouse" or "condominium." The actual building configuration, property lines, and code classification must support it. Confirm with property management if you're unsure.

Quick Reference: What's Allowed?

Grill Type	Allowed on Balcony/Patio?	Conditions
Electric grill	YES	Must be listed for the purpose and used per manufacturer instructions. HOA/lease rules may still say no.
Small camping-style propane (≤ 1 lb cylinder)	YES	Only the small disposable 1-lb camping cylinders qualify, not the 20-lb tank from a standard BBQ.

Grill Type	Allowed on Balcony/Patio?	Conditions
Standard propane (20-lb tank)	NO*	*Unless the building, balcony, and deck are fully sprinklered. Confirm with property management first: not every unit in a sprinklered building qualifies.
Charcoal grill	NO	Not permitted on combustible balconies, decks, or patios under any exception in this policy.

The Simple Version

- YES: Electric grills (in most cases)
- YES: Tiny 1-lb propane camping stoves
- NO: Regular propane tank BBQs (unless your building is fully sprinklered)
- NO: Charcoal grills, ever, on a combustible balcony/deck/patio

Why the 10-Foot Rule?

Open flames aren't allowed within 10 feet of anything combustible: wood decking, wood-framed walls, siding, fences, overhangs, or eaves. A stucco wall can still be combustible underneath, so appearance alone doesn't tell you whether an area qualifies.

Not Sure If Your Building Qualifies for an Exception?

- Ask your property manager or HOA whether your specific building, and specifically your balcony or patio, is fully protected by an automatic sprinkler system.
- Even in a sprinklered building, individual units may still be excluded: confirm before you buy a propane grill.
- **Even where the Fire Code allows something, your HOA, lease, or property rules can still say no. Those private rules control.**

Moving a Propane Tank Through the Building?

Tanks larger than 1 lb capacity (this includes standard 20-lb tanks) may not be carried through elevators, stairwells, hallways, or other shared indoor areas, even just to get them to a ground-floor common area.

Questions?

Contact the SVFD Fire Prevention Division at 707-996-2102, or talk to your property manager about your building's specific status. *This guide is a plain-language summary; the full Fire Prevention Bureau Standard and the 2025 California Fire Code govern in the event of any conflict.*