

Putting Your Slow Cooker to Work

If you have enough discipline to think about dinner at breakfast time, your reward can be a meal that's ready when you come home. The slow-cook method not only improves the variety and flavor of the foods you serve, but it can cut the time you spend in the kitchen almost in half. The slow cooker doesn't replace the stove top or the oven because it cooks foods in a certain way. Main dishes, casseroles and soups are particularly adaptable to this method of cooking.

If you have enough discipline to think about dinner at breakfast time and the willingness to learn the cooking pattern of your slow cooker, you can produce a successful home-cooked meal that is ready at precisely the right moment!

A slow-cooker is a glazed earthen-ware bowl housed in an outer casing. Between these is a wraparound element. A tight fitting dome lid allows condensation to run down inside forming a water seal and aiding in the retention of flavor and heat. Electric slow cookers first became popular in the 1970's because of its economy of fuel consumption and suitability for cooking inexpensive cuts of meat. Its low temperature is designed for long hours of unattended cooking.

The typical slow cooker holds four to six quarts, but there is a one-quart model designed for singles or students. There is also a twelve-quart roaster oven that not only slow cooks but performs a variety of other cooking functions as well. Handle your slow cooker with care. Follow the manufacturer's cleaning instructions. Be careful of extreme changes of temperature, as the inner-crock may easily break. Handle it gently and it will last forever.

The seal between the lid and the rim of the pot should not be broken during cooking until it is time to test the doneness of your recipe. The heat inside the slow cooker builds up slowly and every time you uncover the pot, you lose enough heat to slow the cooking process thirty minutes or more. Because the slow cooker doesn't allow steam to escape, the food inside retains all the moisture originally there. Ingredients should not dry out or burn, so there is no need to peek or stir your recipe.

Generally, low means the food will be cooking at 200 to 240o F. High means the foods will be cooking at 300 to 340o F. Some models have a variety of settings between low and high. As a rule of thumb, cooking on low takes about twice the amount of time it takes to cook the same recipe on high. The high setting can cause caramelization of foods and allow them to dry out.

Ideally, the initial temperature of the slow cooker should be as high as possible. In the case of meat, this can be done by braising the meat before cooking. Vegetables can be placed in the pot of boiling water and this water can be used to make stock. Or simply pre-warm your pot with boiling water. Because vegetables cook more slowly in the slow cooker, recipes suggest you put them in the pot first and meats on top.

It may take several hours for the food in your slow cooker to reach 125^o F when cooking at relatively low temperatures. This is the temperature at which heat begins to destroy any bacteria present. Until the temperature reaches 140^o F, some bacteria can survive. Food safety experts say that a slow cooker should heat to 125^o F. within three hours and to 140^o F within four hours. The temperature must be maintained at 158^o F for at least one hour to kill all bacteria.

Before purchasing a slow cooker, review consumer buying guides, such as Consumer Reports, to ensure that the model you intend to purchase reaches the food safety recommended temperature of 125 degrees F within 3 hours on the low setting.

To reduce any bacterial risk while using a slow cooker follow these simple guide- lines:

- Keep raw ingredients refrigerated until they are to be put in the cooker.
- Use only good quality ingredients.

- Thaw frozen meat or poultry before cooking.
- Cut vegetables in small pieces to ensure rapid heat transfer.
- When cooking meat, the water or stock level should almost cover the meat to ensure effective heat transfer.
- Do not overload the slow cooker. Half full is the design of most slow cookers.
- Do not leave cooked food to cool down in the pot. Either consume it immediately or cool the food rapidly and refrigerate.
- Never reheat leftovers in the slow cooker.
- Always follow the manufacturer's instructions.

Learning the pattern of your slow cooker is the only thing you have to learn to produce a successful meal. Once you understand your cooker's particular timing, you will know how to adjust your recipe timing instructions so your home- cooked tasting meals are ready at precisely the right moment!

RECIPES

Slow-Cook Barbecue

Prep Time: 3 to 5 hours

Yield: 4 to 5 servings 1½ lb. boneless chuck steak, 1½ inches thick

1 clove garlic, peeled and minced
¼ cup wine vinegar
1 tablespoon brown sugar 1 teaspoon paprika
2 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
½ cup ketchup 1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon dry or prepared mustard
¼ teaspoon black pepper

Cut the beef on a diagonal, across the grain into slices 1 inch wide and place in slow cooker. Combine the remaining ingredients and pour over the meat. Mix the meat and sauce together. Cover and cook on low for 3 to 5 hours. Serve on toasted hamburger buns with a mixed garden salad.

Rice with Mushrooms and Onions

Prep Time: 6 to 8 hours

Yield: 2 to 4 servings 1 cup converted rice

1 cup converted rice
2 cups water
2 teaspoon salt
3 tablespoons margarine
½ cup fresh mushrooms, cleaned and coarsely chopped
1 large onion, peeled and finely minced

Place all ingredients except mushrooms, onions and 1½ tablespoons margarine in slow cooker. Cover and cook on low for 6-8 hours. Just before serving, melt margarine in a large skillet over medium heat; sauté the onion until translucent. Add the mushrooms and sauté until all the moisture is gone, about 3-4 minutes. Add the rice and mix well with the onions and mushrooms. Serve hot.

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