

12/25/08 - Slow Cooker Basics Part 1

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In today's world, families are always busy. Whether it is your schedule or your children's, a good home-cooked meal can be hard to come by. Enter the slow cooker. It provides families with another way to prepare delicious meals for their household. The best part is that you don't even have to be there while it's cooking.

Slow cooker is another way to say "crock pot." Most of us are used to hearing the latter, but the terms are interchangeable meaning the same thing. Now, if you are considering using a slow cooker (and I suggest that you do), there are a few things you should know before you start to enhance your chances of creating a successful meal. Yes, even a slow cooker meal can be horrible if some basic tips are not adhered to. No one wants to come home with a hearty appetite and find a pot full of mush. Yuck!

So let's start with the purchasing of a slow cooker. You can crock pots in various sizes. From as small as one quart to as large as five quarts, you're sure to find one that fits your needs. If you come across a larger one, that's even better. Depending on your family size or the amount of people you'll be preparing meals for with it, you may find the larger the slow cooker the better it will work.

Slow cookers also come with removable inner pots that allow for easier serving at the dinner table. A removable inner core allows everyone to sit and relax as they spoon their food onto the plate instead of standing at the stove. Some even come equipped with a non-stick inner pot, making clean up less messy.

Temperature settings vary among slow cookers. Many offer a range of temperature settings to meet the needs of the cook. Some have as little as two setting (high and low) and others include five settings that vary from high (two hours) to really slow

cooking (ten hours). There may also be a warm setting in case the food has finished cooking but any accompanying side dishes still need to be prepared. This setting is also great for times when everyone isn't ready to eat their meal just yet.

Be careful with your heat settings, however. As with ovens, temperatures and settings on the dial are a rough estimate. Don't be like me who, at the expense of my meal, overcooked a roast the first time. Even though I had it set to the eight hour setting to cook throughout the day, my slow cooker has a high temperature and cooks boneless meats quickly. I could have put it in the cooker when I got home and still had a delicious meal in less than two hours.

Just goes to show, you live and you learn. To avoid such a food crisis, test your slow cooker on the weekend when you are at home. Start a meal in the late morning hours, using the lowest setting and see how long it actually takes for the meal to cook. You may need to make adjustments to cooking times when you are away based on what you discover.

A slow cooker can be an extremely useful tool for busy families and even single people alike. With the suggestions above you'll get used to preparing meals with your slow cooker while you're not around in no time.