

02/01/09 - Potluck Creations in the Slow Cooker

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A slow cooker is a great addition to your arsenal of cooking equipment. It is definitely a help when you have no idea what to cook for dinner. Throw in a bit of this and toss in a little of that and you've got a meal of your own creation for a hungry family.

If you have an adventurous cooking spirit and a cabinet or pantry full of goodies, it's easy to create a slow cooker meal from scratch. I know you are shaking your head, but it is doable and your family will love it. In fact, why not let everyone get in on the meal to make it more interesting?

When putting together a potluck slow cooker meal, you need a base or main ingredient. Meat or beans make the perfect base. Although grains also make a good base for meals, they cook too quickly to be of any use to you in a slow cooker. Rice quickly becomes mushy when it is overcooked and pastas work best when boiled. Therefore, slow cooking these types of foods would potentially ruin them.

Your base is something that can stand up to the length of time required for crock pot cooking and the temperature. Chicken, turkey, beef, pork, and lamb are all good choices for a meat base. Most beans can stand up to the heating process of a slow cooker. Once you have made a choice for your meal base, wash it thoroughly and put it in the cooker. Don't forget to add a bit of liquid to the bottom before of the crock pot first.

The next step is to decide what will go well with the base chosen. Most meat types share the fact that they are compatible with many of the same vegetables. First, check the fridge. A bag of baby carrots, an onion, and some celery are staring you in the face. These we can use. Go ahead and toss the carrots right in on top of your meat or bean base.

Go ahead and start the cooker while you search for more ingredients. See that bag of red-skinned potatoes in the corner? The best thing about them is that they don't have to be peeled. Simply, wash the outer skin thoroughly and pop them into the cooker as well. No need to slice or dice them beforehand.

Remember that celery and onion from your refrigerator? Throw them in a skillet with salt, pepper, and cooking wine if you have it. Let the wine reduce and cook the veggies.

Now it's time to think about spices and seasonings. What will go well with your base? For kick, add some turmeric, cumin, and cilantro. Curry goes well with chicken or pork for a more Indian flavor. On the Italian side, choose rosemary, basil, oregano, bay leaf, and coriander. Remember, fresh herbs have a more distinctive taste than powdered spices, so if you have some on hand, use those instead.

About an hour before time zero, add your sautéed veggies and spices. Stir and smell the wonderful flavor. If there is still too much liquid left for your liking, turn the cooker up on high and remove the lid. The liquid will evaporate and you can return to low after the desired level of broth is achieved.

When someone in the house is getting hungry, who says you can't make a great meal from whatever you happen to have lying around? Put that slow cooker to work tonight instead of having fast food or slaving in the kitchen all day long over a hot oven.