

The Basics

Slow Cooker 101

A quick course in using a Crock-Pot to make delicious meals—while you're out

"AS LONG AS YOU REMEMBER TO PUT FOOD IN THE POT IN THE MORNING, then turn the dial to 'low,' you'll always have a hot dinner when you return from class," advised my mom as she sent me off to college with my first Crock-Pot. Mom's slow cooker not only kept me well fed while I earned two demanding degrees; it has served up countless delicious meals to my family ever since. Nowadays, whenever my schedule gets too hectic for elaborate recipes, I still follow Mom's advice and use the Crock-Pot—whether I need a satisfying weeknight supper or an elegant holiday meal. If you're new to slow cookers or just need inspiration to dust off the one at the back of your cabinet, here's a quick course to get you comfortable with slow-cooking, plus some recipes that make it easy.

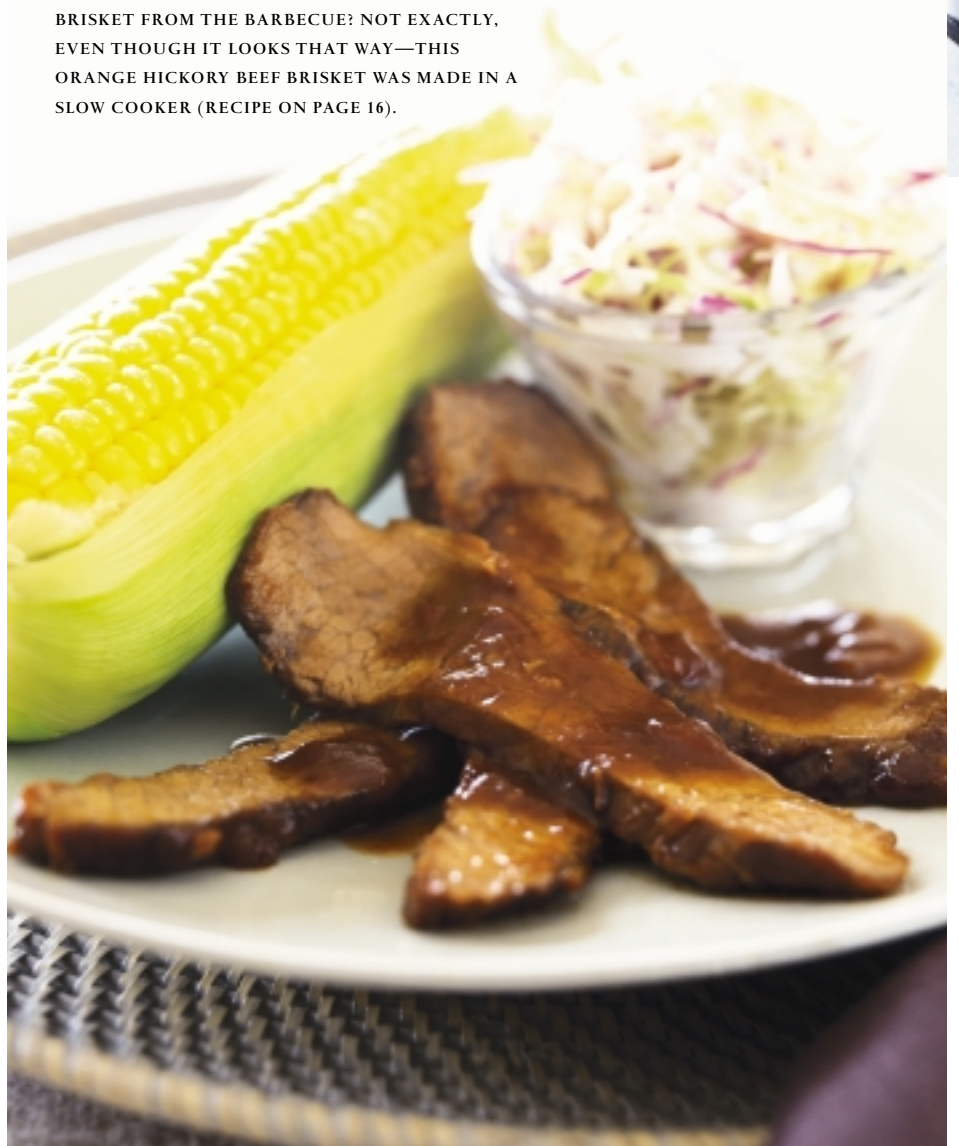
What is a slow cooker and how does it work?

A slow cooker is an electric cooking pot created for unattended cooking. Slow cookers are designed to braise—that is, cook food in a sealed, moist, low-heat environment (the low setting is 200°; high is 250° to 300°). As the food cooks, pressure builds up in the sealed pot to produce a gentle simmer. Over several hours, this slow-cooking process breaks down the tough fibers in hardy vegetables and fruits and softens the connective tissues in meat. The result: tender, succulent texture, even for normally drier cuts like beef brisket or turkey breast.

How do I prepare meat to be slow-cooked?

Be sure to trim extra fat (and remove the skin from poultry) before cooking begins. Here's why: As meat slow-cooks, any excess fat melts into the pot; if you remove the lid to skim the fat from the sauce, heat escapes, reducing the temperature and extending the cooking time. Don't worry about meat drying out—the moist heat pretty much guarantees tender, juicy results.

BRISKET FROM THE BARBECUE: NOT EXACTLY, EVEN THOUGH IT LOOKS THAT WAY—THIS ORANGE HICKORY BEEF BRISKET WAS MADE IN A SLOW COOKER (RECIPE ON PAGE 16).





Do I need to add any liquids to the pot?

You can make a roast in a slow cooker without adding liquid, but only on the low setting, which allows the slow release of moisture in the form of natural juices and fat (for this reason, meat that is well marbled, with thin veins of fat running throughout, is less apt to need liquid than leaner cuts). You do need to add a small amount of liquid—at least ½ to 1 cup—if you're slow-roasting on the high setting or cooking vegetables like potatoes, carrots, celery, or winter squash around your roast. As a rule, in a 5- to 7-quart slow cooker, stews require about 3 cups liquid, and roasts with gravy or sauce need 1 to 3 cups, depending on the amount of gravy desired.

Apart from water, a combination of any of the following can add flavor and body to slow-cooked foods and their resulting sauces:

- canned soups
- broth made from concentrated paste or boullion (less wasteful than using canned broth, you need so little)
- canned fruit or vegetables (tomato sauce, stewed tomatoes, or applesauce)
- condiments (ketchup, mustard, chili sauce, barbecue sauce, jam, salsa)

- fruit or vegetable juice (V-8, apricot nectar)
- alcohol (wine, hard liquor, liqueurs)

NOTE: Milk, cream, and sour cream tend to separate during slow-cooking, so don't add these until the last hour. Condensed cream soups make a great substitute since they hold up during extended cooking times.

Should vegetables or meat be browned before slow-cooking?

That depends on your taste buds and the amount of prep time you have. It's true that foods don't brown during slow-cooking. And browning them beforehand

in a little oil or butter will intensify their flavor. Browning also releases some fat from meats before you add them to the pot. Figure on 15 to 20 more minutes of prep time if you opt for this extra step.

What foods work best in slow cookers?

MEAT AND POULTRY. Beef chuck, round, or brisket; lamb or pork leg, shoulder, loin, or chops; veal shoulder, breast, or chops; skinless chicken or turkey parts, bone-in or boneless; boneless turkey roasts.

FRESH VEGETABLES. Potatoes, carrots, parsnips, onions, rhubarb, celery, winter squash, mushrooms.

CANNED OR FROZEN VEGETABLES. Tomatoes, beans, black-eyed peas, corn, mushrooms, olives. (To avoid delaying the cooking time, defrost frozen vegetables under cool running water and drain well before adding them to the pot.)

DRIED VEGETABLES. Sun-dried tomatoes, mushrooms.

DRIED FRUITS. Apricots, peaches, raisins, prunes.

Which foods are not ideal?

FISH. The delicate flesh disintegrates during prolonged low-temperature cooking.

SHELLFISH. Add only toward the end, to prevent disintegration. If cooking on low, add during the last hour; if on high, during the last half hour.

DELICATE VEGETABLES AND FRESH OR CANNED FRUIT, such as pineapple or peaches. As with shellfish, add these only toward the end of cooking—the last hour for the low setting, the last half-hour for high. With quick-cooking produce like berries, peas, and summer squash, don't add until the final 15 minutes.

LEFTOVERS. It takes too long to reheat the food to a safe temperature.

RICE. Rice breaks down with overcooking, but you can add it near the end of cooking if there's enough liquid in the pot. If cooking on low, add dry rice in the last hour; for high, add during the last half-hour. Short-grain rice is not recommended—it is too sticky for this cooking method.

PASTA. Since pasta falls apart with prolonged cooking, try boiling it to al dente (just chewy) on your stove and adding it to the slow cooker during the last half-hour.

DRIED BEANS. In most cases, dried beans will remain hard when everything else is done. You can boil them on your stove first until tender, then add them at the beginning of cooking. Even easier: Use canned beans that have been rinsed and well drained in a colander.

Basic method for a 5- to 7-quart

Select Solutions

Slow Cookers, Then and Now

THE FIRST ELECTRIC COOKING POTS were partly a marketing tool, developed in the 1930s when the National Enameling and Stamping Company (NESCO) teamed with a utility company to sell electricity to rural families who were cooking on wood stoves. In the early 1970s, Rival manufactured the first Crock-Pots—stoneware pots that were permanently attached to a heating case and offered, as they do today, two basic slow-cooking settings, low and high. Almost every major manufacturer of small electric cooking appliances

now offers a variety of slow cookers. Here's a little about the most common features:

Shape and Size. Though a few companies still make the original three-quart cylinder type, most slow cookers are four to seven quarts in capacity and round, oval, or square in shape. Five- to seven-quart cookers are the most popular because they're large enough to make both dinner and leftovers. This size pot can also cook five-pound roasts, or up to 14 cups of stew or soup, making it a great choice if you commonly cook for crowds. Rival and Hamilton Beach offer six-quart models with a divider so you can simultaneously cook two different dishes under one lid.

Pots. Most new models offer dishwasher-safe, removable stoneware or nonstick metal pots that can be filled and refrigerated up to 24 hours before cooking. Some can also be used for stove-top or oven cooking and are freezer safe.

Temperature Control. Beyond basic "low" and "high," a new innovation is Rival's Smart Pot series. These pots have programmable settings and automatically stay warm for up to four hours after cooking is complete. You can even program your favorite recipes or pick from 200-plus pre-programmed ones using the electronic display.

Visit major manufacturers' websites (www.crockpot.com, www.hamiltonbeach.com, www.nesco.com, and www.westbend.com) to find a cooker that's right for you.

slow cooker

Put vegetables and/or dried fruit in the slow cooker. Place meat on top. In a separate bowl, thoroughly whisk seasonings and liquids, then add to the slow cooker. (For large pieces of meat, make sure all surfaces have been smeared with seasoned liquids.) Cover and refrigerate pot up to 1 day, if desired. When ready to cook, set pot in slow cooker housing and set the temperature. For stew, beef brisket, or pork loin, set on low for 10 hours or high for 6 hours. For chicken or turkey parts or roasts, set on low for 8 to 9 hours, high for 3 to 4 hours. Add thickeners and any delicate ingredients during the last half-hour of cooking. At the end of cooking, skim off any fat that's been released before serving.

CAJUN PORK LOIN

MAKES: 6 to 8 servings

- 1 red, yellow, or white onion (9 to 12 oz.), chopped
- 3- to 4-pound rolled pork loin roast, beef brisket or tri-tip
- 1 teaspoon minced or pressed garlic
- 1 to 3 teaspoons Cajun seasoning
- 1 12-ounce jar chili sauce (1 cup)

Stir in during last half-hour of cooking:

- 2 tablespoons cornstarch mixed with 3 to 4 tablespoons water

Serve with: Steamed rice mixed with shredded carrots and corn, plus steamed green beans or zucchini.

Per serving: 403 cal., 48% (194 cal.) from fat; 35 g protein; 22 g fat (7.4 g sat.); 15 g carbo (0.5 g fiber); 761 mg sodium; 107 mg chol.

ORANGE HICKORY BBQ BRISKET

MAKES: 6 to 8 servings

- 2 cups chopped red, yellow, or white onion
- 3- to 4-pound beef brisket
- ³/₄ cup Safeway SELECT Hickory Barbecue Sauce
- ¹/₄ cup orange juice concentrate
- 1 teaspoon minced or pressed garlic

Mix together and stir in during last half-hour of cooking:

- 2 tablespoons cornstarch
- 3 tablespoons orange juice, orange liqueur (such as Triple Sec), water, or a combination

Serve with: Corn on the cob and coleslaw or potato salad from the deli.

Per serving: 616 cal., 66% (407 cal.) from fat; 33 g protein; 45 g fat (18 g sat.); 20 g carbo (0.7 g fiber); 358 mg sodium; 124 mg chol.

CRANBERRY AND HONEY MUSTARD TURKEY ROAST

MAKES: 6 to 8 servings

- 1 2- to 3-pound boneless rolled turkey breast
- 1 teaspoon minced or pressed garlic
- ¹/₄ teaspoon white pepper
- 2 teaspoons finely grated orange peel
- 1 16-oz. can whole cranberry sauce
- 3 tablespoons Safeway SELECT Honey Spice Mustard
- 2 teaspoons chicken soup base paste

Mix together and stir in during last half-hour of cooking:

- 2 tablespoons cornstarch
- 3 to 4 tablespoons orange juice, orange liqueur (such as Triple Sec), water, or a combination

Serve with: Rice pilaf and roasted potatoes, sweet potatoes, or winter squash.

Per serving: 235 cal., 3% (7 cal.) from fat; 28 g protein; 0.7 g fat (0.2 g sat.); 26 g carbo (0.8 g fiber); 401 mg sodium; 70 mg chol.

by HOLLY
RUDIN-BRASCHI