

Choosing Your 'Slow Cooker'



Presented By The FRED67 Community

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How To Choose The Right Slow Cooker:

Are you ready to give cooking in a slow cooker a try? It's a wonderful way to prepare your family's meals without having to spend hours in the kitchen stirring pots. Make a pot of beef stew that tastes like you've slaved for hours over the stove, when all it really took was dumping a few ingredients in your slow cooker and turning it on. And since you're only using one pot, clean-up is a breeze as well.

Start with any slow cooker you currently have and make it work. See if you like the dishes it creates and if slow cooking works well for you and your family. If it does and you're ready to shop for a new model, use the tips below to guide you in your purchasing decision.

Slow Cooker Sizes

How many people are you feeding and are you planning on making mostly main meals, soups and stews for a family of four to six people, a six quart model will be your best bet. If you're doing a lot of cooking for crowds (church potluck anyone?), you may want to go with a bigger model. And if you're cooking for two, or only plan to make side dishes and desserts in the slow cooker, a four quart one will suffice. If you're not sure what to get, stick with the standard six quart version.

Popular Brands

There are quite a few different brands out there that make quality slow cookers. Favorites include Crock-Pot (of course...), Hamilton Beach, Cuisinart, and Kitchen-Aid. Sticking with a popular brand not only guarantees you'll get a quality product, it also makes it easier to find parts down the road, should for example the lid fall and break.

Used or New?

One question we haven't addressed yet is if you need to buy a new slow cooker at all. As mentioned earlier, start with what you got. After that, it's perfectly fine to look for a used model. You can find them very inexpensively at your local thrift store. Heck, you may even have a friend or family member who will give you theirs. So many people have a slow cooker sitting in the back of their kitchen cabinet and never use it. Ask around, you may get lucky. And if you do, don't be surprised if they ask for it back once they see, smell and taste some of the amazing meals you're making in it.

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What Bells And Whistles Do You Really Need?

There are some fancy slow cooker models on the market today. And there are some very affordable basic models that function with no more than a high or low cooking feature and they may do everything you need your slow cooker to do.

Think about what functions you really need. Retractable cords are nice, but it's also not that hard to tuck the cord under the slow cooker when you store it. Having a "keep warm" feature is helpful. Do you need a programmable timer so the chili can start cooking itself even if you're out running errands or just getting back to the office after a quick lunch? Take a look at what's on the market and decide what you can and can't live without. If this is your first slow cooker, start with a very basic model. You can always add another one with more features down the road.

Having more than one slow cooker is definitely not out of the question if you enjoy this way of cooking. You can fix pulled pork on one, and still have room for Mac and cheese or a squash casserole to cook away in the second one as a side dish. And smaller models come in handy for hot dips, appetizers and desserts. Multiple slow cookers really come in handy around the holidays when you're fixing a variety of different casseroles and the likes. If you can prepare a few of them in your slow cookers, you don't have to worry about using up precious oven time. And it's one more thing you can set and forget.

Head on over to Amazon or take a walk through the small appliance section of your local super store and see what your options and price ranges are. Take a look at the reviews on Amazon and see what folks like and what they don't like. Then make an informed decision and get your first slow cooker. When you get it to the house is when the real fun starts... cooking with it.

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Planning Your Slow Cooker Meals:

Do you know you'll have a day this week when you'll be running around all day? Do the kids have a full schedule of after-school activities that have you driving from one ball field to the next? That's the perfect day to plan a slow cooker meal.

Pick a one pot dish like beef stew, chili or a chicken and rice casserole with broccoli and get it going in the morning. Just put the ingredients into your slow cooker, turn it on low and go about your busy day. When you get home, be ready to walk into a home that smells like home cooked dinner. Grab some crackers, make some toast and dinner is ready to be served. It doesn't get much easier than that and all it takes is a little bit of prep work in the mornings.

If your mornings are too crazy or you just can't see yourself assembling a slow cooker meal at 7am (it really isn't that bad), do it the night before. You can either toss everything into a large plastic storage bag, or mix it right in your slow cooker crock insert and store it in the fridge overnight. In the morning just put it in the slow cooker and turn it on.

Of course this type of meal prep takes a little bit of planning. Start by trying a variety of different slow cooker meals and find out what your family likes and doesn't like. Pay particular attention to those recipes that don't call for a lot of prep work before everything is ready to go into the slow cooker.

Once you have your list of meals, write out the recipes and keep them somewhere handy. When you know you need to plan one or two slow cooker meals for the week, go through that stack of recipes. Make sure you shop for everything you need well ahead of time. Don't forget to check on seasonings, spices and other shelf stable stuff that you don't usually buy.

If you're already planning your dinners and making out your shopping list based on what you're planning to cook for the week, this will be an easy process. Just plan a slow cooker meals a few days per week. If you're not meal planning yet, give it a try and at least plan these particular meals.

Prep what you can as soon as you get back from the store. For example, if you know you'll make beef stew in the slow cooker tomorrow and it calls for browning the meat before you add it, go ahead and do that now. Then store the browned beef in the fridge until you're ready to assemble your stew in the morning. The same goes for chopping veggies. Believe me, you'll be glad you did in the morning.

Slow cooking and planning slow cooker meals is all about making it easy for you to get delicious home cooked meals on the table even on the busiest of days. Give it a try. I think you'll find it a huge help not to have to worry about throwing something together when you finally walk in the door at 7pm. And no matter what you make, it will be healthier and better for your family than the fast food you usually pick up on crazy days like this.

Whole Chicken And Your Slow Cooker Makes For Frugal Meals:

When money is tight or you're just in the mood to cook something you can then turn into a few different delicious meals for the coming days, look no further than a whole chicken and your crockpot.

Chicken is such a versatile meat and once it's cooked it's easy to add it to sauces, casseroles, salads... you name it. And it all starts with nothing more than a whole chicken from the grocery store.

Slow Cooking The Chicken

Get out your slow cooker and look around for some veggie scraps, onions, carrots or the likes. It doesn't take much. All you want is to line the bottom of your slow cooker with a few sliced vegetables so your chicken doesn't stick. Of course the vegetables will also add flavor.

A sliced onion will do, but this is also a great time to use up that celery that's starting to go limp, or that open bag of baby carrots that doesn't look fresh anymore. Slice your onion, break your celery into chunks and toss in your baby carrots. If you're in the mood for it, add a garlic clove or two to the mix for extra flavor.

Take your chicken out of the bag. Check for the little baggie stuffed inside the chicken with the neck, liver, gizzards etc. Toss those in your crockpot and rinse your chicken. Pat it dry and lay it breast side up on top of the veggies. Season with salt and pepper.

Close the lid and cook your chicken on high for about 6 hours or on low for 8 to 10 hours. You know it is done when the legs start to pull away from the body.

The chicken will be tender and falling from the bone. You'll also notice some cooking liquid in the pot. Pull the meat off as best you can, focusing on the large chunks of breast and leg meat. Set the meat aside, but leave everything else in the slow cooker.

Making Chicken Broth

What makes this a frugal chicken is that we're going to make use of every little bit, including the bones, skin and bits of meat that are left in the slow cooker along with the veggies. It's time to turn this into delicious, wholesome chicken broth. You can sip the broth as a hot drink when it's done or use it as the base for soups, stews, beans and the likes. This is good stuff and has a lot more flavor and nutritional value than the stock you buy at the grocery store.

When you're done pulling the meat off the chicken, add plenty of water to the slow cooker along with a splash of apple cider vinegar if you have it. The vinegar is optional and is there to help leach as many minerals as possible from the bones. Skipping it won't affect the flavor of your broth.

Turn the slow cooker on high until your mixture comes to a boil, then simmer the broth on low for a few hours. The longer you cook it, the more intense the flavor will get. I usually cook it overnight.

Get out a large bowl, pot, or heat-safe pitcher and a strainer. Ladle the finished broth through the strainer. Discard the bones and veggie scraps.

Allow the broth to cool until it is safe to handle, then pour it into containers. Glass jars work well, as do plastic freezer containers. If you plan on freezing your broth, leave some room in the containers when you fill them. You can even pour some of the broth into ice cube trays, freeze them and then use the little cubes of frozen broth when you're cooking veggies for added flavor and nutrition.

As the broth cools, you'll notice that it will thicken up and that there is a layer of fat on the top. That's what good homemade broth is supposed to look like. It has plenty of healthy fat and the main part of the broth has thickened up with the collagen you've cooked out of the cartilage of the chicken bones.

If you want low fat chicken broth, set the container in the fridge for a few hours. The fat rises to the top and solidifies. You can grab the whole solid chunk and remove it from the broth. Otherwise, stir it back in as you are heating the broth for cooking.

Get Creative

Serve a chunk of the freshly cooked chicken with rice and a salad or some steamed veggies the first night. After that it's time to get creative. By day two you also have some delicious chicken stock to work with.

Make a batch of chicken and rice soup with some of the shredded chicken, a cup of rice, the broth and whatever vegetables you want to add.

Add the shredded chicken to sandwiches (chicken salad anyone), serve it in tacos or burritos, add it to your favorite chicken casserole recipe, or make some creamed chicken. The broth makes a great base for any type of soup or stew and you can even cook your dried beans in it for another frugal and nutritious dish.

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Adapting Your Favorite Meals To Slow Cooker Cooking:

We all have favorite dishes that everyone in the family enjoys. Why not adapt them to the slow cooker so you can enjoy them even on the busiest of days or when you're not really in the mood to cook.

While not every single recipe lends itself to preparing it in the slow cooker, you'll be surprised how many dishes do. Soups, stew, and casseroles are a no brainer. But have you tried making your famous spaghetti sauce in the slow cooker? Just cook some pasta when it's ready and dinner is served. Or how about cooking your grandma's meatloaf recipe in the crockpot?

Obviously you can't make a traditional pizza in the slow cooker, but how about a mock pizza that has all your favorite pizza flavors and toppings. There's so much you can do with this one little kitchen appliance. You'll be amazed once you start to experiment.

Which brings up a good point. Adapting your favorite family recipes for the slow cooker takes a little experimenting. There may be some trial and error involved. If it doesn't turn out the way you want it the first time, don't give up. With a few tweaks, you might just come up with something everyone will love.

There are a couple of things you need to know before you start changing your recipes into slow cooker recipes. I'll share them below. Another option is to search for a slow cooker recipe someone has already made. Let's say you want to adapt your turkey chili recipe for the slow cooker. Look up a few different slow cooker chili recipes paying attention to ingredients and cooking time. Then give it a try with your ingredients, but possibly adjusting things like the amount of liquids you add and of course allowing for longer cooking time. That should give you a great starting point to play with your recipe until you get it just right for slow cooking.

Slow Cooking Conversion Tips

I promised to share some general tips that will work with most recipes for you. Use what applies to whatever dish you are converting into a slow cooker recipe and remember that these are just guidelines. They give you a starting point but it may still take some trial and error to fine tune your recipes.

Cooking Time - I'm sure I don't have to tell you that things take much longer to cook in the slow cooker than they do in the oven or on the stove. It's one of the appeals of slow cooking since that longer cooking time allows complex flavors to develop and even the toughest cuts of meat get nice and tender.

But how much is longer? Here are some rough guidelines:

- If you usually cook something on the stove or in the oven for 15 to 30 minutes, cook it in crock pot on High for 1 1/2 to 2 hours or on Low for 4 to 6 hours.
- If you usually cook something on the stove or in the oven for 35 to 45 minutes, cook it in crock pot on High for 3 to 4 hours, or on Low for 6 to 10 hours.
- If you usually cook something on the stove or in the oven for 50 min. to 3 hrs. cook it in crock pot on High for 4 to 6 hours, or on Low for 8 to 18 hours.

Cooking Liquids - The other thing you need to adjust is your cooking liquids. This is particularly important if you're adapting a recipe that you usually cook on the stove top. On the stove and to a lesser extent in the oven much of the cooking liquid evaporates. In a slow cooker on the other hand everything cooks slowly (so less steam) and the lid is closed the entire time allowing almost no moisture to evaporate. Cutting your cooking liquids in half is a good start for most recipes.

Dealing With Pasta and Rice - Yes, you can make pasta and rice dishes in the slow cooker. But you have to keep a couple of things in mind. For rice stick with the long grain plain variety that takes at least 20 minutes of boiling to cook. Stay away from pre-cooked and quick cooking rice.

Pasta can be cooked from the beginning in the slow cooker, but it comes out gummy in most recipes I've tried. What's worked better for me is to boil the pasta until it is about halfway done and then add it to the slow cooker for the last hour of cooking if I'm home around that time.

To be frank, sometimes it's easier to just cook the pasta and rice separate and then assemble everything on the plate or stir it in right before you're ready to serve dinner.



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Using Your Slow Cooker All Year Round:

Once you start digging out your slow cooker and using it to cook delicious homemade meals, you quickly become a fan. Many of us start to think about soups, stews, chilies, and all sorts of other delicious fare that lends itself to slow cooking (pot roast anyone?) when fall and cooler temperature come around.

We love our slow cookers during the cooler months of the year, but come spring, this amazing little kitchen appliance goes back in the cabinet. If you ask me, that's a mistake. Slow cookers are wonderful appliances year around. Yes, they are perfect for those hearty winter dishes that we used to cook at the back of the stove in the darker months. But believe me, that pot of beef stew tastes just as delicious in the spring or summer.

The main reason many of stews and roasts are winter dishes is because they had to cook and bake for a long time. In the hot summer months, we don't want to heat up the house any more than necessary. And running the stove or oven for several hours before dinner will certainly do that.

But guess what doesn't heat up the house? Your slow cooker. It puts up a lot less heat and it's portable. That means that on a really hot day when your air conditioner is barely keeping up, you can go plug in the slow cooker on the porch and have dinner cooking while you hang out in the backyard with the kids.

Your slow cooker also comes in handy anytime you're grilling in the back yard. No more slaving away in the kitchen fixing side dishes while everyone else gets to hang out in the yard and watch your husband grill burgers. Instead, you do a little prep work in the morning, start a side dish in the slow cooker (scalloped potatoes are always a favorite around here) and you can grab a beer and join the fun in the yard.

Of course those same dishes will also come in handy at the annual company barbecue, or the extended family 4th of July cookout. When you're asked to bring a side dish, cook it in the slow cooker and bring everything along. Just plug it in and those baked beans, or the squash casserole you made will still be piping hot when it's time to eat.

You'll find the slow cooker is also handy at potlucks throughout the year and let's not forget about the holidays. There's always a lot of cooking going on and you have to do a whole lot of planning to make sure you have room on the stove and in the oven to get it all cooked in time. How much easier would your holiday cooking be if you could have a couple of things simmering away in your slow cookers? You can start them in the morning and don't need to worry about anything until it is time to eat.

I tell you, there's no reason to pack away that slow cooker. Use it year around. Take it with you on vacation to cook simple meals your kids will love right in the beach house or motel room. Adjust the flavors and seasonings and the types of dishes you cook depending on the season. Take advantage of this cooking appliance throughout the year.



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