

Your Oven: Kitchen Ally or Public Enemy Number One?

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By Skip Lombardi

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As Thanksgiving approaches, newspapers, mega-stores, and food producers have recently begun their annual advertising assault to get your turkey dollars. Yet I suspect that huge numbers of people are living in dread and anxiety because they're uncertain about how their turkeys will turn out. Some will produce turkeys that are a long way from being fully cooked, while others will produce overcooked, tough birds in need of resuscitation.

Has this been a problem for you? Do you follow a recipe to the letter, dutifully preheating the oven, timing the recipe precisely, only to have your dish come out nearly raw, or burned beyond recognition?

I suggest that for an investment of approximately \$5.00, you can improve your chances for cooking well-roasted foods by 90%. Another investment of approximately \$10.00 will bring your chances to near perfection. And when I use the term investment, I mean that your \$5.00 will pay you dividends in the form of well-roasted food for the indefinite future. I'm talking about thermometers; specifically, oven thermometers.

If your oven is more than ten years old, the cooking temperature could vary—in the worst case—by as much as fifty degrees from the temperature you've set on the dial. So if a recipe tells you to cook a roast of beef at 375 F., you could be cooking at anywhere from 325 F to 425 F. and have no way of knowing, until you discover that when you remove your dish from the oven, what you've cooked is overcooked, undercooked, or somewhere in between. But not well cooked.

For approximately the price of a meal for one at McDonald's, you can feel assured that your oven is set at the temperature you're seeking, even if you've had to set the dial at 350 F. in order to arrive at a temperature of 375 F. The typical recipe that calls for, say, cooking something for fifteen minutes per pound, was very likely tested in an oven calibrated to cook at the expected temperature, or an oven fitted with an inexpensive oven thermometer.

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Oven thermometers are readily available at the local chain hardware store, or in the kitchen gadget aisle at the local mega-store. The two most popular types, are coil (or dial) thermometers, and liquid, in which a colored liquid—usually alcohol—expands in glass as it heats, and registers the temperature on a scale. In both cases, the thermometers will have a kind of hook at the top that will enable you to hang them from one of the racks in the oven.

When you've bought your thermometer, it's a good idea to put it into boiling water for about five minutes, to see that it registers somewhere close to 212 F. If not, it may have some mechanism for adjustment, or you can simply return it to the store for another.

To test your oven's thermostat, hang the thermometer from the middle shelf, and pre-heat the oven to 350 F. If your thermometer reads 350 F. you're home free. But if the thermometer is, say, ten or twenty degrees off one way or another, try the experiment again, setting the oven to 375 F. If the temperature is off by the same factor, then you'll know to set the thermostat with that factor taken into account when

you want a particular temperature; 360 F. in order to get 375 F., e.g.

Equipped now with an oven thermometer, and having calculated the necessary adjustment on your oven to produce the desired cooking temperature, I recommend an additional \$10.00 investment in an instant-read meat thermometer. By inserting this type of thermometer into meats as they are cooking, it will provide you with—as the name suggests—an instant reading of the meat's internal temperature. This is an extremely useful device, because it helps you to account for the vagaries of cooking that go beyond simply knowing that your oven is set to the correct cooking temperature. Your standing rib roast of beef may look photogenic after two hours at 375 F., but until it reaches an internal temperature of 130 F. for medium-rare, it isn't fully cooked.

Gaining the confidence that your oven is set to the correct temperature is not then, the full story. It may be the case that the rear of the oven is hotter than the front, for example. You may notice, as you continue to experiment, that your roast browns far more quickly in the back than in the front. This is where you need to begin to improvise. Very likely, it will simply be a matter of turning your roasting pan one hundred eighty degrees midway through cooking. It could also be the case that you'll need to cook foods on a lower rack of the oven. But knowing that you're cooking at the correct temperature is 90% of the battle. The sorts of problems I've mentioned will be obvious—as will their solutions.

Finally—and this doesn't have to do with ovens, per se—is the issue of carry-over cooking. Nearly any recipe you read for roasted meat of any kind, will instruct you to let the meat rest for a period of time before carving. During this resting period, the meat will continue to cook in varying amounts. For example, a standing rib roast of beef will add about five to ten degrees to its internal temperature while resting for approximately twenty minutes. Therefore, it's a good idea to remove your dish from the oven at about five degrees shy of your target temperature. Again, this is a task that would be impossible without an instant-read meat thermometer.

You could certainly buy more sophisticated timers for your roasting tasks. One popular model that retails for between \$30.00 and \$40.00 is digital, magnetic, so that it sticks to the oven door, and has a fireproof probe that can go into the meat roasting in your oven. And you can program it to beep when

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your meat has reached the desired internal temperature. Another, more expensive model, has a remote timer that you can carry up to seventy feet from the oven, and it too will beep to remind you that your meat is done. But you can get wonderful results with the least expensive models too.

So make a small investment in your oven. It will repay you with huge dividends in confidence that your roast will be medium rare; that your chicken will have a wonderful crust, yet be moist and juicy; that your meat loaf will make you a legend in the kitchen. And when your friends and family gather around your holiday table, they will proclaim this year's turkey to be the best one ever.

Skip Lombardi is the author of two cookbooks: "La Cucina dei Poveri: Recipes from my Sicilian Grandparents," and "Almost Italian: Recipes from America's Little Italys." He has been a Broadway musician, high-school math teacher, software engineer, and a fledgeling blogger. But he has never let any of those pursuits get in the way of his passion for cooking and eating. Visit his Web site to learn more about his cookbooks.

or send questions or comments to

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Small But Terrible Microwave Oven

By Low Jeremy

Not everyone will cook with microwave ovens. Although in every guides, there are instructions on how to use it for cooking. It will simply not work for everybody. For people who will not use microwave ovens for cooking but just wanting the benefit, the best option is small microwave oven.

Let's face it. Microwave oven does different things for fast people at home and in small offices. It offers very sophisticated function and quite revolutionary to have in the kitchen.

Small microwave oven is literally fit for small flats and apartments, where it is intended mostly for practical reheating purposes and very minor cooking. Popcorn is one of the experimental foods cooked in the microwave ever since it was invented, and up to now is one of the most cooked foods in the microwave.

Needless to say, small rooms could have conventional stoves for basic food preparation and small microwave to complete the benefit. One of the fancy things to do with small microwave is reheating coffee without mess at a desired temperature. Defrosting will also be faster and effective than you expect.

Shopping for small microwave oven is easy. You can avail the same function with different brands though the features will vary in some degree. Small microwave can go in combination with a toaster, which is an add-on to regular microwave. Microwave oven alone is not capable of doing what toasters can.

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Aside from the size, the place where you will locate your small microwave has to be considered. You can avail designs for built-in cabinets or placed just decide to place it in the kitchen counter while sacrificing a bit of space.

Small microwave oven is the option for starters. It is better to try having the item to start a nice kitchen. Although microwave oven is an optional commodity, you will never know how kitchen life is less in efficiency until you own one. Small microwave ovens are neat inside and out, safe if properly used and most of all ideal as kitchen help.

Cleaning a small microwave is never been easy compared to the other equipment in the house. It is recommended to wipe the area after use to keep its appearance smooth. Owning small microwave oven should educate you on its technological function. Remember it is inclined to be electronic and should be used according to instructions. Simple maintenance will work well to avoid costly repairs.

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