

The Great American Slow Cooker Book: 500 Easy Recipes for Every Day and Every Size Machine

By Bruce Weinstein, Mark Scarbrough

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The ultimate in slow-cooker books--with 500 recipes, each adapted for three sizes of appliance. From breakfast to soups, mains to grains, vegetables to desserts, this guide is the only book you'll ever need to master your slow cooker or crockpot.

Millions of people are turning to slow cookers for their weeknight meals yet often can't find recipes that match their exact machine. Adapting recipes meant for a different-size cooker doesn't work--getting the right level of spice in your Vietnamese soup or keeping pulled pork tender requires having ingredients in the right proportion. But now, Bruce Weinstein and Mark Scarbrough have decoded slow cookers, and each of their recipes includes ingredient proportions for 2-3 quart, 4-5 quart, and 6-8 quart machines, guaranteeing a perfect fit no matter what machine you own. Each recipe is labeled for its level of difficulty and nutritional value, and they cover every kind of dish imaginable: delicious breakfast oatmeals, slow-braised meats, succulent vegetables, sweet jams and savory sauces, decadent desserts. This is the slow cooker book to end them all.

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Editorial Review

About the Author
BRUCE WEINSTEIN and MARK SCARBROUGH are the creators of the bestselling *Ultimate Cookbook* series (on subjects as diverse as pizza, ham, candy, shrimp, and peanut butter) and have most recently published *Goat: Meat, Milk, Cheese* and *Grain Mains.* They were nominated for a James Beard award in 2011, and are regular contributors to Weight Watchers.com and *Eating Well, Cooking Light*, and the *Washington Post.*

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introduction

If you've got a slow cooker, raise your hand. Yep, we thought so. Almost everyone. Over 80 percent of U.S. households own this appliance. To put that into perspective, more people in America own a slow cooker than own a coffee maker.

And it's not just households. We live in rural New England, near a small general store—the type that serves coffee and pastries all morning, and lunches until mid-afternoon—with loggers, retired bankers, plumbers, and trust-fund ne'er-do-wells sitting higgledy-piggledy around the room at wooden tables. There's always a slow cooker or two on the counter, stocked with some spiky chili or a warm, smooth vegetable soup.

If truth be told, the slow cooker is the best device for preparing a deep, complex stew; a hot-breakfast-is-ready-when-your-alarm-rings miracle; a dinner-is-ready-when-you-get-home wonder; a surprisingly successful cake or steamed pudding; and fare as diverse as a dried-fruit compote (perfect on ice cream or oatmeal) or a hot toddy punch that'll knock your lights out when you need them so knocked.

Even so, why did we decide to tackle a slow cooker book? We got tired of recipes that cut us out of the mix. For years, we had a 7-quart model. (Yes, for two people. Yes, we're big eaters. If you invite us over, double your recipe.) We'd look through books and articles to discover that, while some of the recipes were made for the bigger models, most were made for the 4-quart slow cookers—despite the fact that these smaller guys represent just one slice of the bigger pie. We couldn't very well make such puny fare in our ginormous machine. So we slimmed down and bought a 21/2-quart model, mostly for oatmeal and hot cereals on cold mornings, but also to keep the servings more in the range of normal. Again, our slow cooker didn't fit most of the recipes out there. A standard braise swamped it. Slow cooker recipe yields didn't seem to be changing, despite the fact that so-called nuclear households were shrinking (just 2.48 members these days), while blended and extended families were steadily growing. That 4-quart, mid-range model is no longer a one-size-fits-all for the American scene.

So we decided to do something about it. We decided to write a book in which almost every recipe can be made by a range of models: small ones that are 2 to 31/2 quarts; medium ones that are 4 to 51/2 quarts; and large ones that are 6 to 8 quarts. We set aside a year, blew off our waistlines, and crafted a book that can be used by anyone, no matter what model is in the cabinet. And thus, almost anyone who has a slow cooker can use almost all of these recipes.

We're not leaving anyone out—or ignoring any situation. Maybe you, too, need a smaller model for those nights when the house has quieted down to just the two of you—and none of your old recipes work. Or

maybe you need a gargantuan vat of a slow cooker meal because you've suddenly found yourself in a world of potluck dinners and church socials. We hear your pain. We've got your back.

If you're new to this game of cooking (welcome!), or if you've just received your first slow cooker as a wedding or graduation gift (congratulations!), you'll want to start simple: a classic Minestrone (page 000) or perhaps Garlic-Roasted Chicken Drumsticks (page 000), or Mushroom Sloppy Joes (page 000). If you're an old hand around the kitchen, someone who knows the difference between parsley and chervil, you'll want to head for the Oxtails Braised in Red Wine with Carrots and Prunes (page 000) or even the Pork Mole Rojo with Plantains (page 000). In any event, let's start cooking.

why you should use a slow cooker

It's true: you won't see many slow cookers on the top food shows. But you will see them in many professional kitchens around the country. Chefs love the way the appliance blends the flavors of a soup or sauce, then holds the concoction at a safe temperature for hours.

You need to get in on the game. There's no other appliance that retains as much natural moisture in - dishes—not your oven, not your grill, not your smoker. No wonder, then, that slow cookers make the best braises, the creamiest soups, and the finest stews. Think of this appliance as an old-fashioned take on ultra-modern sous-vide cooking: hours at a low temperature under a tight lid. Chicken comes out moist and flavorful every time. Carrots stay plump and juicy. Pulled pork is outrageous.

That said, you don't need to try to do what a slow cooker can't. You won't find a roasted beef tenderloin here. Or fried fish. But you will find cakes—yep, a slow cooker holds that moisture so well that it can turn out some of the finest coffeecakes around. And it makes pudding in a flash, no stirring needed. If you really want to go over the top, wait until you try our recipe for Salmon Poached in Olive Oil (page 000). That alone might be a reason for this appliance.

There are no perfect solutions in this world, nor perfect appliances. But there are ways to get around the machine's sticking points. Here's how.

solving some problems

Times have changed since those first slow cookers came off the assembly line in the 1970s. More important, slow cookers have changed. For better meals in this post-disco world, we've got to make some adjustments.

By and large, twenty-first-century slow cookers run hotter. A friend of ours says that she can never get a - low-bubble simmer in her new-model slow cooker. She's resurrected her vintage, harvest-gold one from the back cabinet and now spends her life scouring garage sales to find replacement parts. Despite such heroic efforts to stave off progress, she might as well face the facts and modify her expectations.

In reality, temperature's not the pressing concern; food safety is. Nobody should have a vat of chicken soup sitting below 140°F for hours: all sorts of bad bacteria will sprout to life. Since the cooking temperature of modern slow cookers was ratcheted up to address this problem, we need to make a bunch of modifications. Specifically, we need to

1. Up the liquid to compensate for a slightly more intense bubbling.

2. Completely forget about veal chops and other cuts of meat that dry out quickly.

3. Go for cheaper cuts like brisket and pork shoulder (which taste better anyway).

4. Set a more precise time marker on the recipe; the old days of the big swings in recipe timings ("cook on low for 9 to 12 hours") are, like bipartisan compromise, a fond memory.

Modern slow cookers come in multiple sizes. As this appliance began to fan out across the land in the 1980s and '90s, its size both grew and shrank to meet everyone's needs. So what happens if you have a 4-quart and the recipe calls for a 6-quart? We solved that problem by offering almost all of our recipes in three sizes: a chart of ingredients that states what you need for a small slow cooker, a medium slow cooker, and a large model.

By the way, it's not just math to convert a recipe to different size yields: some spices have an exponential affect. For example, you can't just double or triple the ground cumin without annihilating other flavors. Likewise, doubling or tripling the oil can lead to a greasy mess. Two cups of broth may be right for a small cooker; eight cups would swamp a large model.

In modern slow cookers, the flavors meld, but not always in a good way. Frankly, a slow cooker stew can be like melted crayons. You start out with pink, green, blue, and yellow; you end up with brown. That doesn't sound like a rousing endorsement (unless you like brown). But there's no use in not facing facts—flavors can lose their spiky or shallow notes. A few tablespoons of minced oregano leaves will brighten a pot of ragù on the stove; they'll dissolve into an herby haze in a modern slow cooker, little more than the notion of oregano. What's more, bold flavors, whether acidic or sweet (tomatoes or carrots, as well as maple syrup and lemon juice) can TKO the lithe subtleties of thyme or parsley. Cinnamon will knock out black pepper; brown sugar, blueberries. In other words, the ends of the flavor spectrum vanquish the middle. So we put velvet covers over certain flavor sledgehammers, like salt, vinegar, or ground cardamom. And we goose the shy flavors to get them to speak. (We're looking at you, thyme.) In fact, we goose more than we cover. Life's too short for pallid food.

Our Charts Have Wiggle Room

If you've got a 6-quart model and you need to feed four, with one serving of leftovers for lunch tomorrow, use the ingredient amounts for the medium slow cooker (4- to 5½-quart) in your model if (and it's an important if) you're making a soup, stew, or braise. However, you cannot swap sizes for gooey casseroles, baked goods, or puddings. Of those, you'll just have leftovers for the days ahead.

Stock Up on Herbs and Spices

If there's one thing this book will do, it will help you build a better spice cabinet. You'll need a good range of choices to complete some of these recipes. We may have nixed lots of gourmet ingredients in this book—-no Shaoxing, no foie gras—but we didn't stint on the dried herbs and spices. Slow cookers can wear them out; we beefed them up for battle.

Top Seven Tips for Slow Cookers

•Lift the lid as little as possible. Modern slow cookers restabilize the temperature more quickly than old models, but peeking is still discouraged unless you see a problem.

•Stir only when the recipe asks you to. The less action, the better.

•Don’t overfill the cooker. Half to two-thirds full is best, although some soups can fill it up more without dinging their success.

•Thaw frozen ingredients. Use frozen or even partially thawed ingredients only when specifically requested by the recipe.

•When in doubt, overseason but undersalt. Slow cookers eat the flavors of herbs but amplify the taste of salt.

•Treat the cooker gently. To keep ceramic inserts from cracking because of abrupt temperature changes, place a kitchen towel under an insert before setting it on a cold, granite counter.

•Clean the cooker thoroughly between uses. Don’t use steel wool. We fill ours with water, set it aside to soak, and then wipe it out before putting the canister in the dishwasher. Read the instructions for your model to see if it’s dishwasher-safe.

our commitments to you

When we set out to develop the recipes for this book, we laid down some ground rules—which we came to see as the book’s promises.

Only real food. Yes, slow cookers came on the scene in a time of canned this and cream of that. The appliance moved on, adding features and becoming energy efficient. Unfortunately, many recipes didn’t. They still call for processed ingredients: dry soup mixes, taco flavorings, and other chemical miasma.

We shun most processed food. Yes, we occasionally call for canned broth, tomatoes, and even some frozen vegetables. But we’ve left out most convenience products and condiments that would up the fakery of these dishes. We’ve read the labels and decided on products that are no different in their convenience form than if we’d made them ourselves. So pickle relish and prepared horseradish are in; marinated chicken tenders and fat-free Italian dressing are out. We’ve gone real—or as real as we can without milling flour and canning tomatoes. There’s no “cream of” anything here. But we’ve kept our rule in check. For example, a bottled Italian dried spice blend is no more than the sum of the dried spices themselves. It’s in.

Only ingredients from your local supermarket. These recipes do not require a trip to a high-end grocery supermarket or a specialty grocery store. We won’t call for ajwain seeds or goat shoulder. Sure, there are Asian-style braises here, even a massaman curry; but we only call for the Asian condiments found in the typical international aisle of a North American supermarket, like hoisin sauce, rice vinegar, coconut milk, and soy sauce. But that doesn’t mean we can’t produce a tongue-snapping, Sichuan-style dish.

We live in backwoods New England. The closest grocery store is a long drive down country roads. It’s not a high-end store but also not a mom-and-pop joint; it’s a large supermarket that caters to a rural population. We geared every recipe to that store. Yes, there may be a few things at our supermarket that aren’t at yours. But we doubt it, unless you live in an even more rural spot than we do. (Do you, too, stake flapping plastic bags on tall poles to chase the moose away from your elderberry bushes?)

Modern American dishes. This is a book for a distinctly American appliance, but that doesn’t mean we have to stick to hamburger casseroles. These days, we live among many cultures, each with its own tradition. And we can relish each other’s food: Chinese braises, Indian curries, Southern stews, Yankee pot roast, Jewish brisket, Polish sausage. Our recipes run the gamut of American cultures, from the new to the old-fashioned. In that way, we can celebrate the new American century.

Only basic kitchen gadgetry. When slow cooker recipes step away from the cream-of-whatever, they can devolve into culinary esoterica. We're always amazed at recipes that require us to build some sort of - aluminum-foil pyre inside a slow cooker. Frankly, we don't see the point. Yes, we might be able to lift a chicken out of its juices as it roasts. But if truth be told, we're not really worried about air circulation in a slow cooker. It's not worth the time to raise a bird up when it will not get crisp in the cooker the way it would in an oven. Yes, some of the meat will sit down in those juices as it cooks. But is that a bad thing?

We wanted the slow cooker to be the appliance at hand. Yes, some recipes require a standard blender or an immersion blender. No more than a handful ask for a food processor. And yes, a few baking recipes do call for one specific piece of equipment: a 1-quart, high-sided, soufflé or baking dish. But those items are available at our local supermarket among the cookware equipment. (Don't worry: in many of these baking recipes, we advocate pouring the batter right into the cooker itself.) Let's embrace convenience without compromising our principles.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Sarah Tomczak:

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Brandi Anderson:

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Doreen Wolf:

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