

Dutch Oven Basics

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The 150 year celebration of the Oregon Trail has stimulated renewed interest in dutch oven cooking. Die hard dutch oven fans have been competing in cookoffs for years. If you want to give it a try, here are a few tips to help you have success.

Selection

Determine functions and capacity you will probably use most frequently. Choose between cast iron and aluminum. Cast iron ovens are heavier, thus less apt to burn food. Cast iron must be seasoned. Aluminum ovens are lighter, easier to carry, and do not require seasoning, but do tend to burn food easier than cast iron.

Before buying the oven, be sure lid fits level and snug. Check for uniform thickness of sides, bottom, and lid. Avoid large metal runs. A grainy texture and small runs can be corrected with proper seasoning.

Seasoning

Cast iron dutch ovens must be "seasoned" to prevent rusting. Seasoning seals the oven, prevents sticking, and makes oven easier to clean.

1. Scrub oven with hot water and mild soap, rinse, and dry completely.
2. Cover inner and outer surfaces with a thin layer of cooking oil.
3. Place lid and pot on a rack in a conventional oven. Bake at 350F for 30 minutes (or until oil is no longer sticky).
4. Repeat steps 2 and 3 four or five times. Oven should have a shiny, hard finish. allow oven to cool in conventional oven overnight.
5. Be sure oil is not sticky or it may turn rancid. Rancid oil may be removed in a self-cleaning oven.

Cooking

Dutch ovens may be used over charcoal briquets, coals of a camp fire, buried with hot coals, or used on conventional stove burners. Charcoal is the most popular method and is used in competitions. Use good charcoal that burns uniformly and gives consistent results. Charcoals must be spaced and arranged uniformly beneath and on top of the oven. To acquire a temperature of 325F with Lodge ovens, use the diameter of the oven **plus** 3 for the top number of briquets. Use the diameter of the oven **minus** 3 for the bottom number of briquets. For example use 17 briquets on top and 11 on the bottom of a 14 inch pot.

For Maca ovens use the diameter of the pot **plus** 6 for the top number of briquets. Use the diameter **plus** three for the bottom number of briquets. Example, use 21 top briquets and 18 bottom briquets for a 15 inch oven. Generally, two briquets equal 20-25F. Add or subtract as needed to adjust heat.

After two-thirds the recommended cooking time, remove from bottom coals and finish cooking with top coals only.

Cooking with hot coals from a campfire is less exact and requires trial and error. Move some hot coals away from the main fire (be careful not to bring them into contact with anything flammable). Place oven on the hot coals. Place additional coals on the lid. Use one of the tests below to estimate temperature.

Estimating Oven Temperature

Two old-fashioned methods of estimating heat may still be used today. Hold your hand close to cooking surface. Count the number of seconds it takes for the heat to become unbearable.

Hand Estimation of Temperature

Time in Seconds	Temperature
6-8	250F-300F
4-5	350F-400F
2-3	400F-450F
less than 1	greater than 500F

A second method uses flour. Sprinkle a small amount of flour on cooking surface and allow to brown five minutes. Color of remaining flour indicates oven temperature.

Flour Color to Estimate Temperature

Color of Flour	Temperature
unchanged	less than 250F
light brown	300F
golden brown	350F
dark brown	400F
black	greater than 500F

Burying the Oven

To bury the oven, prepare the food for cooking. Brown meat, add vegetables and liquids, heat over fire until very hot or boiling. Cover tightly with lid. Dig a hole approximately four to six inches deeper than oven height. Be sure no roots or other flammable items are in or around hole. Place a layer of coals one to two inches thick in hole. Add the oven with contents. Cover with a

layer of coals. Then cover with dirt. Contents will simmer and stay hot several hours. When ready to eat, unbury the oven, brush dirt and coals off lid before opening the oven.

There is no limitation as to what may be made. Soups, stews, and casseroles may be prepared by browning the meat, adding other ingredients and liquid, and cooking for recommended time. Meats, chicken, cornish game hens, and baked products may be prepared by using a rack which elevates the product and prevents scorching. Other baking dishes may be placed on the rack and foods baked as though in a conventional oven.

Dutch ovens may be used to raise yeast doughs. Place the dough in the oven and place the oven in a warm place, such as on a rock in the sunshine.

Cleaning

Wipe excess food from oven immediately. Food deteriorates seasoning. Cool the oven to prevent cracking. Cold water on a hot oven or hot water on a cold oven could cause cracking. Many people think you must use sand to clean the oven. The easiest way to clean a dutch oven is to wash it with a mild detergent, rinse, and dry thoroughly over low heat. never set an empty aluminum oven over direct flame as it may melt. You may need to reseason cast iron ovens periodically, but you will not contaminate food with microorganisms found in dirt and sand.

References

Digest Books, 1974. *Campground Cooking*. Editors: Farmer, Charles and Kathy.
Larsen, Joan S. 1991. *Lovin' Dutch Ovens*. LFS Publications, Salt Lake City.

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