

Slow cooker means return to traditional meals

By SALLY BAIR
Feature Writer

In these days of TV dinners and hurry-up meals, there's one appliance which is allowing busy homemakers to return to more traditional meals without spending the whole afternoon in the kitchen. It is the slow cooker, which is not new, but which is gaining in popularity.

The slow cooker offers an alternative in meal planning which just could mean wider variety in meals at your home.

Lancaster County Extension Home Economist Aggie Arnold-Norman says that the maxim "you are what you eat" is being taken more seriously these days. With housewives spending more time reading labels in an attempt to get the most for their money, one-pot cooking offers several advantages - thrift, nutrition, and ease of preparation.

The slow-cooker means that a nutritious, hot, one-pot meal can be waiting at dinnertime after a day at work or an afternoon of shopping.

One big advantage of the slow cooker, Aggie says, is that it is an energy saver. At its high setting, a slow cooker uses less electricity than a 100 watt light bulb; at its low setting it uses just 75 watts.

Aggie does caution,

however, that a slow cooker is not for those who like to "peep" while cooking, because that reduces the efficiency of the appliance and increases cooking time. Also, the slow cooker requires some forethought and planning since most recipes are designed for all-day cooking.

If you're looking for a slow cooker for yourself or for a gift, Aggie says there are basically three kinds available. There are crockery cookers, glass-lined cookers, and teflon coated aluminum cookers. Heating of the units is usually either through coils which surround the unit or with a separate heating unit underneath the pot itself.

One important question which is often asked regarding the slow cooker is whether it is safe to leave foods cooking for such a long period. Aggie explained that bacteria in food is killed when it is maintained at 165 degrees for two or more hours. Most slow cookers are designed with a low temperature setting of 200 degrees and a high temperature of 300 degrees, which is an acceptable range. Aggie said that in choosing a slow cooker its low temperature setting should not be less than 185 degrees for safety.

Aggie said, "Gravy and

sauce lovers have it made with slow cookers." Sauce is produced during the cooking and it can be thickened either with the addition of tapioca at the beginning of the cooking time or by using a cornstarch or flour and water paste at the end of the cooking time.

One feature of slow cookers which homemakers must adapt to is that it takes longer to cook vegetables than meat. Therefore, Aggie says, vegetables must be placed on the bottom and along the sides of the cookers so they are next to the heat source. Aggie also suggested that vegetables be cut in small pieces for best results.

One good use of the slow cooker Aggie said is for making soups. "You can't mess them up."

Sweet and white potatoes can be baked in a slow cooker and rice can be cooked effectively but it must be long grain or converted.

In the second of two workshops on the subject of slow cooking Aggie said she learned some interesting

uses for the slow cookers. Applesauce can be made easily in the slow cooker and there were stories of successes with pear butter, rice and bread puddings and tomato sauce.

There are some foods which require extra caution when used in the slow cooker. Pasta, for instance, must be cooked prior to being added to the appliance. Also, Aggie said, fish should not be cooked for long periods because it tends to toughen so it should be added during the last hour of cooking. Dairy products, too, must be added just before serving for best flavor and appearance.

Most slow cookers come equipped with cookbooks and there are other cookbooks on the market. But that doesn't solve the problem of how to make your family's favorite recipe into a slow cooker meal.

Aggie offers some guidelines as you make the adaptation. In the slow cooker don't use as much water or liquid as some recipes call for because

there is no evaporation. She recommends using half the amount of liquid.

For every 45 minutes a casserole should be in the oven, Aggie advises using the slow cooker for 6-10 hours on low or 3-4 hours on high. Anything up to 1 1/2 hours in the oven can be cooked in the slow cooker for 8-10 hours.

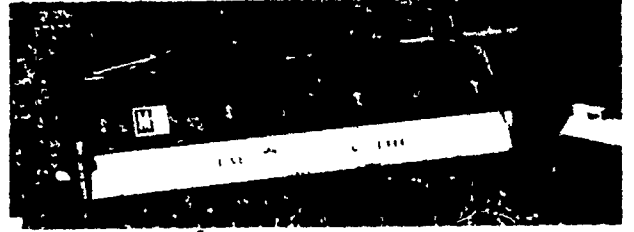
Be sparing with spices in

the slow cooker. Aggie says to try half the amount of herbs and spices because they will be concentrated in the slow cooker. If the taste is not strong enough more can be added at the end of the cooking time.

There is no need to saute vegetables for use in the slow

(Continued on Page 52)

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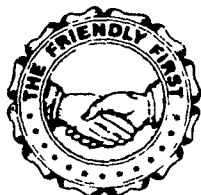
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