

# THE MICRO WAY LANI BLOOMER



When you learn to cook in a microwave, you don't have to learn to cook all over again! But there are differences between cooking on a range and cooking with microwave power. Understanding these differences can mean good, juicy, tender food instead of unevenly cooked, dried out and burned food.

Let's start at the beginning. How does food get cooked in a microwave when there's no heat in the oven? When microwaves enter food, they cause the food molecules (tiny particles) to vibrate. As the molecules vibrate millions of times each second, friction causes heat to build up quickly, cooking the food. Rub your hands together and you can feel the heat friction produces. In a greatly oversimplified sense, your food rubs itself cooked in a microwave oven!

Microwaves heat food from the outside in to the center. Since they heat the edges of food very quickly, the outside of large food items may be cooked when the center is still almost cold! This is especially true when you cook on high power.

The biggest "problem", then, in

microwave cooking is this: To get the middle of food cooked without burning the edges. The microwave cooking techniques that differ from range cooking are based on solving this problem.

Here are seven important microwave cooking techniques. These are discussed in greater detail in microwave cookbooks and I will be giving you more information on each in future columns.

1. When you are cooking food on high power that you can't stir, arrange it in a doughnut shape whenever possible. If there's no food in the middle, it can't be cold when the edges are cooked! Put a meatloaf on a ring mold instead of a loaf pan. If you don't have a ring mold, use a casserole dish with a custard cup or glass set in the middle.

When freezing ground meat like hamburger, make a doughnut shaped patty with a hole in the middle so it defrosts evenly. (Do this for any quantity of meat, such as a half pound or two pounds, but not if you are freezing the meat in individual patties.) How many times have you defrosted ham-

burger and ended up with a lump of frozen meat in the middle surrounded by patches of cooked brown meat? A doughnut shape stops this! Arrange separate foods like potatoes or cookies in a ring for baking.

2. To get even cooking in your oven without using a doughnut shape, stir your food during the cooking time. This distributes the heat from the edges in to the center of the food. Stirring once or twice during the cooking or reheating time works well for puddings, casseroles, sauces, and gravy. But don't stir too much!

3. Larger food pieces like chicken parts can't be stirred, so these are rearranged during the cooking time. Rearranging means taking the pieces from the corners or edges and putting them in the center; then moving the center or least done pieces to the corners and the edges. If you have unevenly shaped food pieces, put the biggest ones around the edges of a container in the beginning. This may eliminate rearranging them.

If you don't want a hole in your food from the doughnut shape, what do you do with food you can't rearrange or stir, like cakes, roasts, or lasagna? There are two techniques to prevent burning the edges of these foods.

4. The first (and best) is to turn the power down on your oven. Instead of cooking these foods on high, turn your oven down to medium (50% power, which is listed as 50 or 5 on most oven brands). Turning the power down slows the rate at which the microwaves heat the edges of your food. This gives heat time to be conducted into the center evenly,

but it takes longer to cook the food. Cooking on medium (50, 5 or 1/2 power) takes twice as long as cooking in high.

5. If you can't turn the power down, shield the edges of food with foil to keep them from burning on high power. Put small pieces or strips of aluminum foil on the edges of roasts, over turkey drumsticks, on the ends of a loaf pan for meatloaf, and on the four corners of a cake or lasagna pan. This keeps some of the microwave energy from penetrating the food in these small areas since microwaves can't penetrate foil. Foil, even though it is metal, can be used in most ovens if you follow these rules:

—Keep foil one inch or more away from the walls and oven door.

—Do not let foil touch other metal, such as an oven rack or a TV dinner tray.

—When using foil for shielding, look inside the oven for arcing (sparks) when you turn the power

on. If you see any arcing, stop the oven and remove the source so the oven is not damaged.

6. Thick foods like roasts and turkeys should be turned over during the cooking time. Turning them over ensures even cooking of both the top and the bottom.

7. One last technique that is different from range cooking is allowing standing time for the foods to finish cooking. All foods, especially those cooked on high power, will continue to cook a little after they are removed from the microwave. Allowing for this extra cooking during standing time is the biggest difference between microwave and range cooking. It causes many beginners to overcook their food.

Food that is properly cooked in a microwave is juicy, moist and tender. Hard or dry food is overcooked. Join me next week for a more thorough discussion of standing time and how to use it to your advantage!

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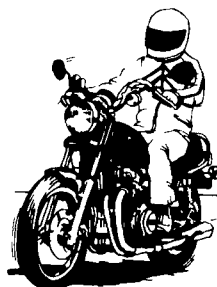
Shield small parts of food or the corners of pans with aluminum foil to prevent overcooking. See text for directions and cautions.

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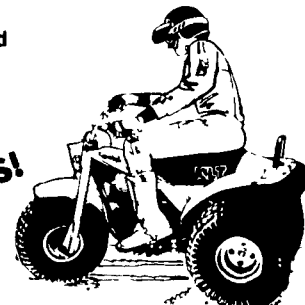


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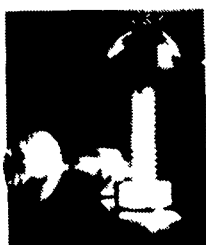
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