



## Things to consider when selecting a microwave oven

Many people have told me that they want to buy a microwave, but don't know how to pick a good one. There are many different brands and models to choose from, and if you've never used a microwave, the features can be very confusing at first. So where do you start?

Start right at home, in your kitchen! Before you go looking, figure out where you will put the microwave. Microwave doors open to the left or pull down. Measure the space available, so you know your size limitations. Most microwaves plug into any three prong outlet, but should have their own circuits.

Try to put a microwave near your stove, where you are used to cooking, and at a comfortable working heights. If your microwave is around the corner in the pantry, or on a cart and you have to move each time you use it, you won't use it for cooking once you're done "playing" with it! There are countertop ovens, ovens with or without exhaust fans for over the range, shelves to mount countertop ovens on top of a range, ovens to hang under cabinets, and kits to build ovens into a wall... you can put one almost anywhere!

Look for a brand name microwave and a good dealer who can give you service if you need it. You might get a good buy on a microwave down at the XYZ Discount Store, but you might also have to ship the oven back to the manufacturer if it breaks down. Many stores offer free cooking classes to help you learn to use the oven's features.

Look for an oven with a sturdy door hinge system, so the door will not get misaligned easily - requiring service.

The controls should be clear and easy to use. I prefer the digital, touch-pad type controls because they are more accurate. However, dial controls and buttons are more familiar to most people. Maytag has an oven with a combination dial and digital readout that is easy to use for someone who is "afraid" of the touch-pad controls.

Check the timer carefully. What is the total length of time you can set? A 15 minute timer would be an inconvenience if you wanted to simmer a pot roast for an hour. Can

you set the timer for 30 seconds to melt some butter? What about 10 seconds to warm one roll? Does the oven have an interior light, and a signal for the end of each cycle? A rack or shelf is useful sometimes. The oven should have a start button, so the oven won't start accidentally if you shut the door with the timer set.

Should you get a turntable oven or not? A turntable is one system used to provide even cooking in microwaves today. Most microwaves, like the Litton, Sears and Tappan brands, for example, use a stirrer fan system to provide even cooking. In these, microwave energy bounces off a fan at the top of the oven, and enters the oven going all directions, giving an even power distribution. General Electric and Caloric use a two feed system, with microwave energy entering from two locations.

Sharp and Panasonic have turntable systems that rotate food under a power source. The turntables must rotate during cooking, and some pans do not fit the turntables, which might be an inconvenience. All three systems (stirrer fan, two feed and turntable) produce fairly even cooking, and no system is perfect! Personally, I don't like the turntables because my large pans and turkeys don't fit, but I do use a wind-up turntable for baking in my stirrer fan oven.

Microwaves come with many different features which may be confusing at first. There are three

features that I would look for in a basic microwave, if you want to COOK in it. (Now don't tell me that you just want a microwave for reheating and defrosting! Next August you might want to bake a bundt cake without turning on that hot range oven. Or, on one of those hectic days you might need to cook a meatloaf or a few baked potatoes in less than 15 minutes.) As I was saying, the three features to look for in a basic microwave are:

1. It should have 600-700 watts of power. Most large countertop ovens have this, and most microwave recipes in newspapers and magazines are written for this power. You will have to lengthen cooking times in an oven with less power.

2. It should have variable power, which means that you can adjust the power to cook food more slowly (like turning your range burner down). You could "make-do" with three power levels, but five or more would be better. An oven with less than three is difficult to cook in.

3. I like using a temperature probe or sensor, for roasting meats and for reheating food. Most

beginners overcook food, and a temperature probe prevents this! The probe should have a signal for the end of cooking, and one that reads out the temperature of the food during cooking is easy to use.

Another feature I find useful, but not essential, is two or more memory stages on a microwave. You can set an oven with a memory to turn the power up or down on its own. For example, you could start a pot roast on high power for 5-10 minutes, then have the oven turn the power down to simmer for an hour or so. However, many times you would have to return to the oven to stir or turn food, and could reset the next step at that time.


Ovens also come with many other "luxury" or "automatic" features. These can be very convenient to use, but you will have to read the manual and spend some time learning to use the features. Next week I will explain some of these automatic cooking features, and compact and micro/convection ovens. If you (or Santa) are shopping for a microwave, clip today's column and watch for The Micro Way next week!

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