

**THE MICRO WAY
LANI BLOOMER**



A Remedial Microwave Class!
How did you do on the microwave test last week? For those of you who flunked that test (or anyone whose rolls could challenge the toughest tire, whose microwaved meat is fit for hiking boots, whose hot dogs are bullets, whose sweet rolls are frizbees, or whose buns are soggy), help is here! Read on...
Today I want to look at three common problems and their remedies: dried out food, soggy food, and oven power. These are the problems I am asked about most often.
Almost all the "disasters"

people ask me about are related to overcooking the food. Any food that is hard, dry, tough, rubbery, stringy, or has hard spots in parts of it, is overcooked. (Now, read that last sentence again, outloud!)
Overcooking is caused in two ways. First, you cooked it too long! When you are given a time range in a recipe, always start with the shortest time given. Or, if you have smaller quantities than a recipe, use less time. You can microwave food a little longer if it's not hot or done. But you can't uncook it if it's overdone!
Remember, food cooks a little more after you take it out of the

oven (during standing time). Undercook things just a little bit. Don't add any more cooking time until after the standing time has been allowed.
Most food that's cooked too long will turn hard, dry, etc. during the standing time. So, cook it less and let it stand!
The second kind of overcooking occurs when you try to cook food too fast. Usually this happens when you're in a hurry and use high power! When food is microwaved at too high a power level, the outside edges of the food will be overcooked, but the inside isn't cooked enough.
If your meat gets dried out or tough on the outside, but is still too pink in the middle to suit you, the power level was too high. If food you reheated in a microwave cools down too fast at the table, it wasn't hot enough in the middle, even if it was bubbling around the edges.
Microwaves cook food from the outside in to the center, so edges get done first. Also, microwaves aren't strong enough to reach the middle of large, dense food, such as a roast or big casserole. Therefore, the middle of large items (whether you are cooking or

just reheating them) will get done by heat being conducted in slowly from the edges.
So what does all this mean? Turn the power level down on your microwave! If you don't know how to do this, find out! Read your manual, attend a microwave class, or if necessary, ask where you bought your oven. (If your oven has only one power — ON — then consider a new oven! For \$200 to \$300 you can get a really good oven with several power levels.)
When you use the lower power levels, the edges of the food are heated at a slower rate. There is time for heat to be conducted to the center of the food before the edges get burned.
But when you turn the power down, it takes longer to cook or heat food. How much longer? That depends on the power level. Medium power (50 percent, or 50, or 5 on some ovens) is about one-half power, so it takes twice as long as cooking on high power. Medium low power (30 percent, or 30, or 3, or defrost on some ovens) is about one-third power, and takes three times as long as cooking on high.
Never reheat or cook meat

(other than hamburger or bacon) at any power higher than 50 percent. For very well done meat, use 30 percent power. The cooking time is still shorter than range time, but it isn't as fast as using high power.
If you don't have time to cook your meat on a lower power level, fix some sandwiches or eat out! Cooking meat on high power gives you shoe leather — unless you are very, very careful, very experienced, and like your meat rare!
A different kind of problem makes your buns soggy! Bread products get soggy from steam being trapped between the bread and a plate. The bread absorbs this extra moisture and becomes soggy.
To avoid this, warm all bread products on paper towels, napkins, or on a rack (oven rack, meat rack, bacon cooker, etc.). A paper napkin or towel will absorb the extra moisture. On a rack, there are air spaces under the bread to help the moisture escape.
Did you miss question #21 on the quiz last week, asking about the wattage of your microwave? It is important to know this if you use recipes from this column or from any source other than the cookbook that came with your oven. Microwaves with less power (smaller wattage) will take longer to heat or cook food.
If you don't know your oven's power, take 5 minutes, (RIGHT NOW!) to do this simple test. You will know it's approximate power right away!
Estimating The Wattage of a Microwave
1. Measure 8 ounces (1 cup) of tap water into a glass measuring cup. Put it in your microwave.
2. Set your microwave to cook on high (full power, 100 percent, cook, etc.) for 5 minutes.
3. Watch the water continuously after two minutes until it boils. When the water boils, stop the oven. Now, figure out how long it took for the water to boil.
— If it took 2½-3½ minutes to boil, your oven has 600-700 watts.
— If it took 3½-4½ minutes to boil, your oven has 500-600 watts.
— If it took 4½-5½ minutes to boil, your oven has 400-500 watts of power.
Remember, though, that variations in the container and water temperature make this only a rough estimate of your oven's power.
If you're still confused about microwave cooking, join me next week for a quick review of the basic microwave cooking techniques. Then we'll get on with some great summer recipes!
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