

# MICROWAVE MINUTES

By JOYCE BATTCHER

Did you ever wonder why you can't put food in your microwave and forget about it until it's done — like you do in conventional baking? Why do you have to be there to stir or rearrange food or rotate the dish?

Here's why. Microwave cooking is so fast and all microwave ovens don't cook the same in all spots, so in order to cook the food evenly, the food needs some help from you.

Stirring a casserole halfway through the short 10 to 15 minute cooking time helps heat the entire mixture and actually speeds total cooking time. Rearranging and turning over pieces of swiss steak or chicken once during cooking allows thicker parts to cook done and prevents thinner parts from overcooking and toughening. When a food can't be stirred or rearranged — for example with lasagna or meatloaf — rotating the dish helps insure that all sides will be cooked the same amount.

Stirring, rearranging or rotating are not difficult to do. And, once

you get into the habit of doing them, they become automatic.

Stir food from the outside edges to the center - so the cooked edges are moved to the center of dish. Stirring speeds cooking of most foods. But some foods also need stirring to thicken properly. If not stirred at the times called for in recipe, puddings, Easy Cheese Sauce (below) and other starch or egg thickened foods, form a big lump of starch in the dish bottom.

Rearrange foods so the most-cooked parts are repositioned in dish or in microwave (usually placing most-cooked parts to center). Individual foods like hamburgers, Swiss steak, or pork chops should be rearranged to avoid overcooking and toughening. Large amounts of whole or large vegetables, like broccoli spears, corn-on-the-cob and baked potatoes may be rearranged for even cooking.

With some foods rearranging isn't possible; so before cooking, food is arranged in a ring — or doughnut — shape. Or, food is

placed with the thickest parts to the outside edges of dish (or to the area in your microwave where fastest cooking occurs). Individual foods — such as cupcakes, custards or potatoes — are arranged in a circle with the center open. Cakes, quick breads and meat loaves are cooked in a ring-shaped dish.

Along with rearranging, some foods must be turned over halfway through cooking. Large meats — like ham, roasts, whole chicken and turkey — must be turned over; otherwise the top edges become hard and brown, while the bottom remains undone. Turning over also helps keep smaller meats, like round steak and pork chops, from overcooking and toughening. It speeds cooking of large vegetables, like whole squash and baked potatoes.

Rotate the cooking dish, especially if your microwave cooks unevenly. This is necessary for some delicate foods, micro-baking, and when food can't be stirred. About halfway through cooking time, rotate the dish by turning it so the side closest to back of oven is closest to front of oven.

Even though you have to be around to stir, rearrange or rotate, cooking time is so much faster and convenient that you're still ahead when microwaving.

Take today's recipe, Microwave Turkey and Broccoli Bake, for example. If you make this microwave version, you have to stay close to the kitchen to rotate the dish once during the 8 to 10 minutes of heating. But, in the conventional oven, you'd need to butter the baking dish to prevent food from sticking to it. (And, cleaning the dish would include scrubbing off dry cooked-on

food.) Baking time would be 30 to 40 minutes when you'd be free. (Except for the last 10 minutes, when you'd want to check to make sure the top doesn't burn.)

When you make Microwave Turkey and Broccoli Bake you'll get to practice rotating the cooking dish once. You'll see that both sides will be evenly cooked (bubbly or at the same temperature) at the end if you've rotated the dish. You won't need to rearrange food during cooking, but you'll start by arranging broccoli with the more tender, quick-cooking flowerettes to the dish center and the tougher, longer-cooking stems to the outside edges. You'll also be able to practice stirring when making Easy Cheese Sauce.

### Microwave Turkey and Broccoli Bake

- Easy Cheese Sauce (below)
- 1/4 - 1 pound broccoli or 1 package (10 ounces) frozen
- 1/4 cup water
- 4 large cooked slices of turkey or 8 thin slices turkey breast luncheon meat
- 1 cup herbed croutons
- Paprika

Trim fresh broccoli into 5-inch long spears. Split any 1-inch or thicker diameter stems. Arrange broccoli in microwave-safe 9-inch square or round dish, placing flowerette-ends to dish center (flowerettes may overlap) and thicker stem-ends to dish edges. Add water; cover with plastic wrap. Microwave (High) 4 to 6 minutes, rotating dish once, until almost tender. Let stand, covered, 5 minutes. If using frozen broccoli, prepare according to package directions.

Meanwhile, prepare Easy Cheese Sauce (below). Drain cooked broccoli; arrange evenly in cooking dish so flowerette-ends are to dish center. Layer turkey slices over broccoli. Pour sauce over turkey. Sprinkle with croutons; then evenly with paprika. Cover with waxed paper. Microwave (High) 3 to 5 minutes or until sauce is bubbly around edges, rotating dish once. Makes 4 servings.

Each serving: 309 calories, 25g protein, 19g fat, 13g carbohydrate, 377mg sodium, 81 mg cholesterol.

### Easy Cheese Sauce

- 2 tablespoons butter or margarine
- 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 1 cup skim, 2 percent or whole milk
- 1/4 teaspoon salt (optional)
- Dash pepper, preferably white (optional)
- 1 cup shredded Cheddar cheese

Melt butter in microwave-safe 1-quart measure by microwaving (High) 30 to 45 seconds; stir in flour. Microwave (High) 20 to 30 seconds or until mixture is bubbly. Gradually stir in milk, mixing until smooth; stir in salt and pepper. (A wire whisk works well.) Microwave (High) 3 to 4 minutes, stirring after each 1 minute, until boiling and thick. Stir in cheese until cheese melts. Makes 1 cup.

Hint: Melting butter first, stirring in flour and then microwaving the two together for about 30 seconds is an important step that cooks the flour and makes the difference between a good-tasting cheese sauce and a starchy-tasting one. Gradually add milk, stirring constantly to make a smooth sauce.

Each serving - 1/4 cup, made with 2% milk and butter; 207 calories, 9g protein, 16g fat, 6g carbohydrate, 303mg sodium, 49mg cholesterol.

For lower calories: Use skim milk and low-fat natural cheese.

### Questions for Joyce?

Do you have a question about microwave cooking? Send it to Microwave Minutes, c/o Extra Newspaper Features, P.O. Box 6118, Rochester, MN 55903. Please include a self-addressed, stamped, business-size envelope.

Recipes in this column are tested in 600- and 650-watt microwave ovens. With an oven of different wattage output, timings may need slight adjustment.

Joyce Battcher is an independent home economist microwave specialist. She is author of "Microwave Family Favorites" and editor of "A Batch of Ideas" newsletter.

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