

Consuming Thoughts

by
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Almost every American household possesses at least one microwave oven and the popularity of microwave cooking continues to grow. Yet, concerns about the safety of cooking meat and poultry products in the microwave persist. Even the cookware and plastic wraps used in the ovens have come under question.

Plus, there are traits, unique to microwave cooking, that affect how completely food is cooked. "Cold spots" can occur because of the irregular way the microwaves enter the oven and are absorbed by the food.

Since we have traditionally relied on thorough cooking to kill bacteria that may be present in food, consumers should take sim-

ple, yet effective steps to ensure even cooking when using a microwave.

The USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline offers these tips on how to microwave safely when defrosting or cooking:

Defrosting:

When using the microwave to defrost foods, plan to finish the cooking immediately. Some areas of larger food items may begin to cook during the defrost cycle, raising the temperature to a point where bacteria can flourish.

Remove food from store wrap prior to thawing. Foam insulated trays and plastic wraps are not heat stable at high temperatures. They can melt or warp from the food's heat, possibly causing

chemicals to migrate into the food.

• Don't defrost or hold food at room temperature for more than 2 hours. It is easy to forget all about a food item thawing in the microwave oven. Set a timer to sound an alert when the thawing time is up.

Cooking Tips:

• Debone large pieces of meat. Bone can shield the meat around it from thorough cooking.

• Arrange food items uniformly in a covered dish and add a little liquid. Under the cover, steam helps kill bacteria and ensures uniform heating. Either plastic wrap or a glass cover works well. Many recipes suggest venting a small area, allowing some steam to escape. Plastic wrap shouldn't touch the food.

• Cook large pieces of meat at 50 percent power for longer periods of time. This allows the heat to reach deeper portions without overcooking outer areas. Commercial oven cooking bags can also help even out cooking and provide a tender product.

• Move the food inside the dish several times during cooking. Stir soups or stews. If you don't have a turntable, turn the entire dish during cooking. This is especially important for food like casseroles that can't be stirred.

• Do not cook whole, stuffed

poultry in the microwave. The bones and density of the bird do not allow even cooking. Microwaves may not thoroughly cook the moist stuffing deep inside the bird either.

• Never partially cook food. If planning to combine microwave cooking with conventional roasting, broiling or grilling, transfer the microwave foods to conventional heat immediately.

• Use a temperature probe or meat thermometer to verify the food has reached a safe tempera-

ture. Check the temperature in several places, avoiding fat and bone. It should reach 160°F for red meat; 180°F for poultry.

• Make allowances for oven wattage variations. Because ovens vary in power and operating efficiency, make sure food is done. Use a meat thermometer and visual signs to check doneness. Juices should run clear, and meat should not be pink.

• Observe the standing time in the recipe. It is necessary to complete the cooking process.

Prepare Paczki

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ed) with rotary beater until smooth.

Add remaining flour (not sifted). Mix until dough leaves sides of bowl. Turn out onto lightly floured board.

Knead until dough becomes smooth, elastic, and no longer sticky (5-10 minutes).

Place in lightly greased bowl. Grease top of dough. Cover with

waxed paper.

Let rise in warm place (80-85) until doubled (1 to 1½ hours). Punch down.

Divide dough into a few parts. Slightly roll each piece and cut into desired shapes with a sharp knife.

Deep fry in vegetable oil until golden brown on all sides.

Drain on paper towels, sugar as desired, and enjoy!

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