

Consuming Thoughts

by

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Wouldn't it be nice to open the front door on a cold winter evening and be greeted by the inviting smells of beef stroganoff or turkey Creole. These smells can be a diner's dream come true if you learn to use your slow cooker properly.

Winter is not the only time a slow cooker is useful. In the summer, using this small appliance can avoid introducing heat from a hot oven. At any time of year, a slow cooker can make life a little more convenient because by planning ahead, you save time later. And it takes less electricity to use a slow cooker rather than an oven.

Many consumers ask if slow cookers are safe? Yes, the USDA has stated that the direct heat from the pot, the length of cooking time, and the steam created by a tightly covered container increases the temperature quickly and makes slow cooking a safe process. The low heat helps less expensive, leaner cuts of meat become tender and shrink less.

It's important to begin with a clean cooker, clean utensils and a clean work area. Wash hands before and during food preparation.

Keep perishable foods refrigerated until preparation time. If you cut up meat and vegetables in advance, store them separately in the refrigerator. The slow cooker may take several hours to reach a safe, bacteria-killing temperature. Constant refrigeration assures that bacteria, which multiply rapidly at room temperature, won't get a "head start" during the first few hours of cooking.

Always defrost meat or poultry before putting it into a slow

cooker. Choose to make foods with a high moisture content such as chili, soup, stew, or spaghetti sauce.

Cut food into chunks or small pieces to ensure thorough cooking. Do not use the slow cooker for large pieces like a roast or whole chicken because the food will cook so slowly it could remain in the bacterial "danger zone" too long.

Fill the cooker no less than half full and no more than two-thirds full. Vegetables cook slower than meat and poultry in a slow cooker so if using them, put vegetables in first, at the bottom and around sides of the utensil. Then add meat and cover the food with liquid such as broth, water or barbecue sauce. Keep the lid in place, removing only to stir the food or check for doneness.

Most cookers have two or more settings. Foods take different times to cook depending upon the setting used. Certainly, foods will cook faster on high than on low. However, for all-day cooking or for less-tender cuts, you may want to use the low setting. If possible, turn the cooker on the highest setting for the first hour of cooking time and then to low or the setting called for in your recipe. However, it's safe to cook foods on low the entire time—if you're leaving for work, for example, and, preparation time is limited.

While food is cooking and once it's done, food will stay safe as long as the cooker is operating.

If you are not at home during the entire slow-cooking process and the power goes out, throw

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3) The herd must have an excellent dry cow program. "Don't just let the cows out on pasture and forget about them," said Snyder. "Make sure you keep them clean and are giving them the nutrition they need."

4) The feeding program for the entire herd should be well monitored and "up to snuff."

5) Milking system should be checked out every six months. Inflation should be changed according to the manufacturer's recommendations.

The Snyders also give their cows MuSe (selenium) shots and J5 vaccinations when they dry off and when they freshen.

"The J5 vaccination works like a flu shot," said Snyder. "It may not prevent the cow from getting mastitis, but it keeps her from getting it really bad."

The J5 shot is given right when the cow begins leaking milk and showing signs of freshening. "We want to make sure she has it when she's at her highest level of stress," said Snyder.

"A low somatic cell count is

something you really have to work hard to maintain," said Snyder. "It takes good management and some extra time in the barn. But it's worth it."

The Snyders also have a Johnes-free herd. "We tested free for Johnes the last two years and are testing again in March," said Snyder. "If that test comes back Johnes free, that we will be a certified Johnes-free herd."

With a cull rate that stays around 10 to 12 percent, the Snyders have sold some of their heifers as dairy replacements for other herds. "Once we were certified Johnes-free, we hope to sell even more replacements," said Snyder.

Snyder attributes the low cull rate to corrective breeding. "We try to maintain a higher standard of type and good udders on our cows so they stay in the herd longer."

Although Snyder farms as a way of life, not just to make a living, he is concerned about the current milk prices. While visiting area farms as an ABS technician, Snyder has heard a lot of farmers talking about the cur-

away the food even if it looks done.

If you are at home, finish cooking the ingredients immediately by some other means: a gas stove, the outdoor grill, or at a house where the power is on. When you are at home, and if the food was completely cooked before the power went out, the food should remain safe up to two hours in the cooker with the power off.

Store leftovers in shallow covered containers and refrigerate within two hours after cooking is finished. Reheating leftovers in

a slow cooker is not recommended. However, cooked foods can be brought to steaming (165°F) on the stove top or in a microwave oven and then put into a pre-heated slow cooker to keep hot for serving.

For additional food safety information about meat, poultry or eggs, call the toll-free USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-800-535-4555. It is staffed by home economists from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. year round. An extensive selection of food safety recordings can be heard 24 hours a day using a touch-tone phone.

rent low milk prices. He has even seen farmers protesting at area milk plants.

"When I took over my father's farm in 1978, I never expected milk prices to be as low now as they were then," said Snyder.

According to Snyder, the current overproduction driving the lower milk price is partially generated by improved genetics and a better way of managing cows.

One of the fundamental components of improved management should be lower somatic cell counts. A lower somatic cell count can actually improve a farmer's bottom line through quality premiums and higher milk production per cow.

"Consumers deserve a quality product, and lower somatic cell creates a better product," said Snyder.

Annette handles the financial end of managing the dairy operation. Joseph keeps track of the herd, including monitoring the breeding records, keeping the calf books up to date, registering new animals, and monitoring overall herd health and production.

They work together closely on the farm and feel fortunate to have their children involved in the farm. While Joseph likes to spend what little spare time he has fishing and hunting, Annette enjoys sewing and reading. But they both treasure the time they can spend with their two grandchildren.

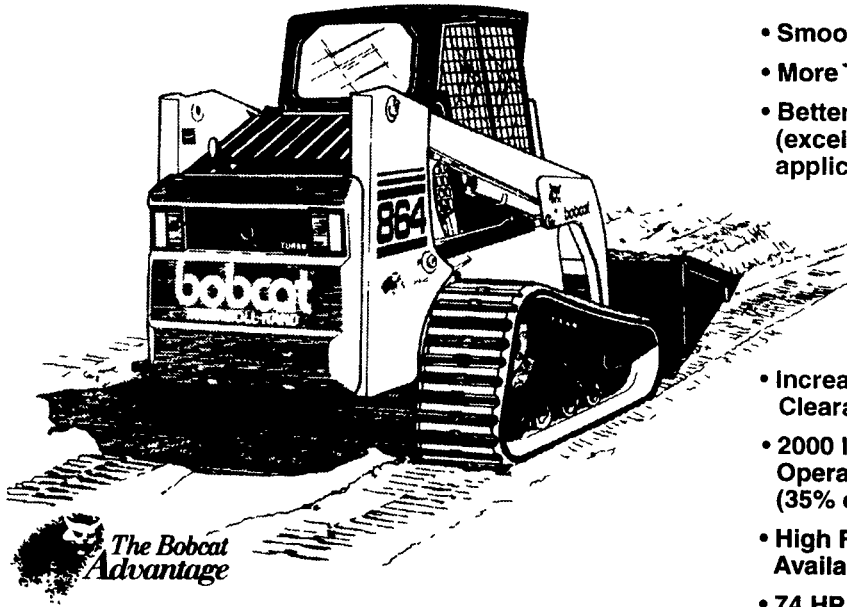
Snyder says his energy and enthusiasm for farming comes from his desire to keep the farm that his father worked so hard for all his life. "When you want something really bad, you would do anything to keep it going," said Snyder.

Through maintaining good production, ideal herd health, and excellent somatic cell counts, the Snyders hope their dairy will continue to succeed for many years to come.

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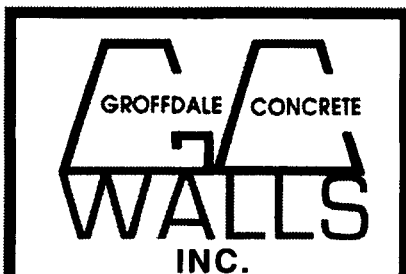


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