



## Cutting Costs by Cooking Clever

### using your kitchen appliances to advantage

Anyone with money sense is always searching for ways to economise, especially when income fails to keep up with inflation. In the last Money Matters we looked at the rising cost of gifts as being an increasing drain on the budget. Other issues have dealt with a variety of savings possibilities, most focussing on how to trim back on the cash outflow. In many respects, this article will be no different, except that it will centre on the place which tends to be the hub of the home – the kitchen. Not only is this where a good portion of the weekly wage is swallowed up by the purchase of foodstuff, but the job of preparing and cooking it has a considerable impact on finances, not to mention stress levels. Whoever earns the money to pay the bills may question why the housekeeping costs keep going up when the quality and variety of meals seem to be declining. That won't go down too well with a cook who is struggling to compensate for rising prices while maintaining expected standards. Fair enough, it might be cheaper, healthier even, to have more home-cooked food than take-out or packaged heat-and-serve dishes; but such a suggestion by the resident penny-pincher is likely to start a blazing row. There's never enough time to serve cordon bleu every night; and even if there was, that certain someone who shall remain nameless would start carrying on about power bills going through the roof again. Unless everyone is happy to eat salads seven days a week, nothing can be done to improve the situation.

Maybe so, maybe no. Far be it from me to tell Grandma how to suck eggs, but there are ways to save time and money that might have been overlooked. Much depends on the setup, for instance the type of oven and hob, in particular the fuel source it operates by. Gas would seem to be cheaper because it is closer to instant than electricity. There's no waiting for a hotplate to reach the desired temperature to fry some steaks, and if they are cooking too quickly, the heat can be reduced in a matter of seconds rather than having to remove the pan from the heat while the burner takes a minute or more to cool. As for the oven, whether it is gas or electric, it will take time before it is ready for the pie or whatever else is to be cooked; but once the thermostat light goes out, if the food isn't put in almost straight away, the heating element will continue to burn money just to keep an empty cabinet hot.

Obviously it is impractical to replace a stove just because it isn't super-efficient; however, many homes also have a variety of other cooking appliances. Most of these are energy-efficient compared to an oven, are easy to use and no problem to clean. An electric frypan sitting on the work surface frees off the stove-top for other pots. It is cheap to run, simple to regulate, will cook most things either individually or in a combination; and having a decent cover with a vent that can be opened or closed, it can fry or steam without spitting fat over the surrounding area. An electric slow-cooker is great for any dish that takes a matter of hours to cook, whether on the hob or in the oven. Stews, curries, hot-pots and frijoles can be left for ages until needed and only require stirring occasionally. Even roasts can be cooked from just right for carving, to pull-apart – that's when the meat is so tender that it can be taken off the joint in slivers with a fork. Aside from the convenience, slow cookers use very little power.

The traditional roast was always done in the oven, left to sizzle away for a couple of hours or more surrounded by potatoes and requiring basting every so often. Even though getting the roast spuds right was a bit hit and miss, it was enjoyed by all except for the unfortunate drone responsible for cleaning up the splattered mess in the oven afterwards. Enter the electric roaster, another bench-top device. Cheaper to run, with a touch-timer which can be adjusted up or down while cooking, plus a handy drip-tray for the fat and juices – great for making a really rich gravy. To check how it's cooking, just lift the lid and stick a fork in – no risk of getting burnt; and clean-up's a breeze, seeing as the interior is non-stick coated. As for the potatoes, do them to perfection under the grill as per

Recipe 34 – Goulash and Rumbled Roasties. In the meantime, the oven can be better employed for a batch of Yorkshire puddings.

Other appliances often under-used include the electric bench-top griller. We've got a "George Forman" designed to drain off the fat. It's brilliant, especially for mouth-watering pork steaks that are so tender you'd think they'd been braised; and they only take a matter of minutes. Because we like toasted-sandwiches we bought – you guessed it – a sandwich-maker, the one with the flat plate not the partitioned kind. To save on cleaning, we tried a piece of baking paper big enough to sit the sandwiches on and fold over the top. That kept any overflow of cheese or whatever on the paper. Then we figured it ought to be capable of cooking other stuff – like bacon and fish. It did. Same as before, there was no mess, no clean-up apart from a wipe with a damp cloth when it had cooled down. Who likes cleaning anyway? And, hey – it did the job a lot quicker and cheaper than the griller in the stove!

There are plenty more – coffee machines, pie-makers, bread-makers, pancake-makers, etc. I'll leave you to ponder the advantages of these while I talk about the eighth wonder of the world, the microwave. I dread to think where I'd be without mine. From what I've heard, some don't have one, and many who do just use them for the odd cup of cocoa and re-heating TV dinners. I do use the nuke for that – not shop-bought meals, but my own pre-cooked and frozen dishes; and scrambled eggs are so easy. I beat four eggs, some milk and a knob of butter in an ice cream container, then microwave it on 5 for a minute at a time, stirring with a fork in between until the eggs just start to solidify. Then I leave it to prepare the rest – maybe toast, bacon, tomatoes, mushrooms, or whatever. As soon as these are ready I begin serving them up on warmed plates, having re-started the nuke to finish off the scrambled eggs, moist or dry as preferred. And afterwards, the easiest thing to clean is the ice cream container.

This particular breakfast is always on the table with everything hot, including the eggs. No fuss, no bother, and all thanks to the nuke. Where it truly comes into its own, for me anyway, is with the cooking of your average dinner. I try to have five different vegetables with each meal, so boiling them separately on our stove top isn't an option, not with only four burners. So I consign them to microwave-safe containers, sometimes on their own, or in the company of others, adding a little water – carrots and runner beans on the bottom; cauliflower and broccoli sitting on top. Peas go in their own container. I nuke the carrots, beans and cauli first for 3 minutes on 8 (this is for a 3-serve quantity). Once they "ping off", I pop in the broccoli, snap on the lid and leave that lot to sit while I do the potatoes. These go in a deeper container, cubed and barely covered with water. 6-7 minutes on number 8 is usually good enough to cook and soften a reasonably large potato. A stab with a fork tells whether it needs another spin. That done, I leave them about a minute – they'll carry on cooking for that time, even without the power – then I drain and mash them. As with the other vegies, they can wait until I'm ready to re-heat them. The sauce? I did that while I was juggling the vegies. Once the main ingredient is almost cooked, I give the rest a final spin – broccoli et al for 4 minutes on 8, peas for 3 minutes on the same setting. The mash will go in for 2 minutes on number 4 while I'm serving everything else onto the plates. With a bit of time-management and a trusty microwave, my life is far less stressful.

So far, I've probably told you nothing you don't already know, at least those of you who are accomplished nuke users. As for our regular Money-Matters visitors, you will be wondering what any of this has to do with you. Think about it – around 20 minutes microwave time to cook all of the vegetables: how much of a saving is that compared to what the stove top would cost? For the main part of the meal, some thoughtful pre-planning can help avoid unnecessary expense. Whenever possible, preparing all the ingredients before starting to cook means everything is ready to go. Even a one-pan dish like a stir-fry is made easier when all the additions including sauces and spices are to hand. Meals that require the various parts cooked separately need a little extra consideration, but it can be done. It is mainly about timing, figuring out which takes the longest to cook and in what order they are to go on the plate. Ensuring everything is just right - not overdone or underdone - takes a bit of practice, but once this is achieved, cooking and serving is less of a hassle. At least, that's what I've found, and I manage this minor miracle by using a combination of the appliances at my disposal.

Using appropriate cooking devices can save both time and money; but let's not ignore the major one. A fan-forced oven operates on a lower heat setting and usually cooks quicker than the conventional kind - a couple of bonus savings - but the ones I've used also retained their temperatures for a few minutes after they'd been turned off, reducing costs even further. The same applies to warming plates and dishes – once the correct temperature has been reached, switch off the power and leave them in the oven until needed. My best advice for cooks is: get to know your equipment better and use it for your own benefit to save time, money and stress. Your diners will appreciate it, and the resident miser won't have too much to whinge about!

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