



A beginner's guide to Dutch oven cooking

Welcome to the world of Dutch oven cooking. Whether you've cooked with one for years or just want to try it for the first time, we've designed this guide with you in mind. You'll need a Dutch oven and an appreciation for good food.

We call lots of pots Dutch ovens. They're the ones with three legs on the bottom, designed to sit above some coals, and have a lid with a rim around the outside edge to keep the coals on top from falling off. They're made with two kinds of material: aluminum or cast iron.

Purists prefer cast-iron ovens. They're heavy and rust if not properly cared for. But they conduct heat more evenly, and, if well seasoned, develop a nonstick surface that rivals Teflon.

Other folks swear by aluminum. They're lighter, don't rust and require fewer coals. But they can develop hot spots and lose heat faster. And food tends to stick.

Which Oven Is Right?

The key to choosing a Dutch oven isn't the brand or style. It's whether the lid fits properly. Don't use one that wobbles or is warped. Check the sides of the oven to make sure they're the same thickness all around; uneven walls will result in uneven cooking. Note the surface inside. Is it rough or pock marked? If so, find one that's smooth.

Dutch ovens come in a variety of sizes. Look on the lid for a number that indicates its diameter in inches. A 12-inch oven represents a standard size.

These days, most ovens come "pre-seasoned," meaning the manufacturer has baked onto it a "patina" or nonstick surface. You'll recognize the patina as that rich, black color that

reminds you of Grandma's skillet. But if you find an "unseasoned" oven, or one that's rusty, don't fret. Here's a seasoning method that works well:

How to Season Your Dutch Oven

1. Wash the pot and lid in warm, soapy water — this is the only time you'll use soap in your oven.
2. Rinse well and dry with a paper towel.
3. Thoroughly rub the pot and lid with a thin layer of shortening, lard, olive oil or cast-iron conditioner. Do not use butter or margarine.
4. Set your outdoor-barbecue grill to medium/high heat (about 400 degrees) and separately place the oven and lid upside down on the wire rack. Close the cover and let the oven bake for an hour. Turn off the grill and allow it and the oven to cool down. You may repeat this entire process if you want a darker patina.

Note: If you're careful, you also can use your kitchen oven for the seasoning process. But you might set off your fire alarm. Place aluminum foil or a cookie sheet on the bottom rack to catch any drips. Bake the Dutch oven at 400 degrees for one hour. Turn off the heat and allow the Dutch oven to cool down as your kitchen oven cools.

The Essentials:

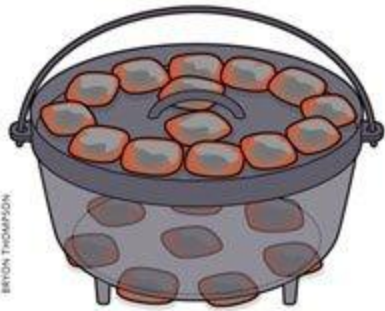
- Dutch oven
- Charcoal briquettes
- Lid lifter
- Charcoal chimney (a metal tube with a handle). Fill chimney with charcoal briquettes. Place a wad of newspaper in the bottom of the chimney and light it, which starts the coals. You can also place the chimney on an outdoor gas stove for faster results.
- Matches or barbecue lighter
- Long tongs for handling hot briquettes
- Heavy leather gloves; welding gloves work great
- Cooking supplies and eating utensils
- Paper towels, scrapers and nylon scrub pads for cleaning
- Recipes and ingredients

Cooking Made Easy

You can cook anything in a Dutch oven that you can cook in your kitchen oven at home. To avoid serving “burnt offerings,” though, follow the simple “Rule of Three.”

HERE'S HOW TO TURN UP THE HEAT

This simple formula will bring your Dutch oven to the correct temperature for baking without fail. It all depends on the number of charcoal briquettes you set on top of the lid and below the oven. Tear out this handy guide for future reference.



Take the diameter of the oven (12 inches, for example) and subtract three ($12 - 3 = 9$) for the number of coals to place below the oven and add three ($12 + 3 = 15$) for the number of coals to place on the lid. This creates a temperature of about 325 degrees.

To increase the temperature by 25 degrees, place one coal on top of the oven and one below it (see the accompanying chart). But weather will have an effect. If it's hot, the oven will cook faster; if it's cold, it will cook slower. Wind also dramatically affects the results of Dutch oven cooking.

Also influencing the result: the way you position the charcoal briquettes.

12-INCH DUTCH OVEN		
TEMP. °F	TOP	BOTTOM
300°	14	8
325°	15	9
350°	16	10
375°	17	11
400°	18	12
425°	19	13
450°	20	14
500°	21	15

Make a ring of coals about the diameter of the oven's bottom, placing one coal in the center. Set the oven on top of the coals and evenly place coals around the outside edge of the lid, with two coals in the center and one on each side of the handle. Some Dutch oven cooks disagree about placing coals in the center. I prefer it. Experiment and see what works best for you.

Hint: If you can smell your food cooking, you'd better check it regardless of the time suggested by the recipe. It's probably done.

Watch out when you lift the lid to check your food. I've seen many a dish spiced with “camp pepper” (ash) when folks try to lift the lid with a claw hammer, pliers, or some kind of fancy lever. The best lid lifter ever invented is the Mair Dutch Oven Lifter. It gives you control of the lid like it was your bare hand.

Dutch Oven Meal Make Cleanup a Snap

Wipe out the oven with a paper towel. For stubborn foods, use hot water and a nylon “scrubbie” or similar scrub pad (not steel wool) to remove all food from the pot. Or try boiling a few cups of water in the pot with the lid on.

When all food has been cleaned from the oven, wipe it dry and place on a gas stove or other heat source to thoroughly dry out the pores. I wipe a thin layer of cast-iron conditioner, olive oil etc., on my ovens after I dry them. Some other cooks do not. Just remember: If you keep the oven dry, it won't rust.

Colleen Sloan, one sage of Dutch oven cooking, likes to fill a spray bottle with one part vinegar to four parts water to clean her ovens. She sprays the dirty oven while it's still warm, puts the lid on for a few minutes, and then wipes the oven clean with a paper towel (repeat a few times for really stuck-on foods). I like to use this vinegar/water mix because it neutralizes any odors and disinfects the oven as well.

Some folks line their ovens with aluminum foil or purchase ready-made aluminum inserts to make cleanup easier. Will the aluminum hurt your oven? No. However, it will affect cooking time and evenness of heat, as well as alter the taste. Remember, keep your cast-iron pot well seasoned and cleanup will be a snap.

Store your ovens with the lid off or with a folded paper towel half-in/half-out of the oven with the lid on.

By H. Kent Rapple

Photographs by W. Garth Dowling

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FIND MORE DUTCH OVEN RECIPES AT SCOUTINGMAGAZINE.ORG/DUTCHOVEN