Chapter 1

Slow Cooking in the Fast Lane

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- Comparing slow food to fast food
- Defining who uses slow cookers
- Discussing slow cooking benefits

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- Quick and Easy Turkey Vegetable Soup

It's 5:55 p.m. and there you are — sitting in stalled traffic for the third night in a row. Work was a bear and your boss was beyond belief. The kids must have called you at least a half-dozen times since they got home from school, bellyaching that there was nothing good in the house to eat and asking you when you're going to be home. And just as you realize that the inspection sticker on your car expired last week, that nice police officer driving alongside of you asks that you pull over at the next intersection. So you're having a bad day.

But at least you did one thing right. You had the foresight to set up your slow cooker with a fantastic leg of lamb with roasted potatoes 20 minutes before heading out for work this morning. After the type of day you had, the last thing you want to worry about is what to make for dinner. Although slow cookers may not solve all your problems, they can at least make things a little more bearable!

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The Hare and the Tortoise: Fast Food versus Slow Food

What we eat helps define us as a people, and sometimes how food is cooked defines us as a society and culture. Based on many Americans' preference for meals from drive-through windows, fast food establishments appear to have become surrogate mothers, at least when mealtime rolls around. Approximately 47 cents of every dollar spent on food in this country is spent on restaurant meals, with fast food restaurants outperforming full-service establishments. The reasons are simple to understand. For the most part, fast food tastes good.

Fast food is usually consistently prepared and provides good value for the dollar when all other issues are cast aside. Great for providing instant gratification for our tummies, fast food restaurants usually are nonthreatening, clean, and air-conditioned and have become the sanctums of our inner cities and the refuge of travelers the world over. Nowhere else can you be served a meal in two minutes or less at such an affordable price. Fast foods appeal to both young families and the retired, and many a baby's first solid food has been the humble French fry!

Nevertheless, we all know that reliance on a fast food diet leads to health concerns such as obesity and heart disease. Most people are aware that sitting down to a home-cooked, well-balanced meal is preferable to wolfing down a high-fat meal of little nutritional value and fiber, along with a sugary, carbonated drink, while driving to an appointment or working at our desks. Eating on the run, we lose track of how much we've eaten and tend to fall prey to impulse eating. Recent studies reveal that over 50 percent of the American population is overweight, with fast food and lack of exercise the main culprits. When it comes to fast food, moderation is the key word.

But because of these health concerns and a desire to maintain the traditions of old, 83 percent of all households still make an effort to get dinner on the table at least five nights a week, even though since 1969 we have on average 22 fewer hours a week to spend with our family because of professional and personal commitments. How we prepare dinner at home has undoubtedly changed, with such conveniences as salad in a bag, frozen heat-and-serve pizzas, and supermarket rotisserie chicken now available. Nevertheless, when given the opportunity, what we're doing can still be defined as preparing and cooking dinner.

Since its introduction in 1971, the slow cooker has been a way for Americans to get a home-cooked meal on the table. It is in the act of preparing dinner that the slow cooker excels. You can prepare the foods at your convenience — even the night before — and layer them in the slow cooker, refrigerate the food overnight, set the slow cooker on low the next morning, and leave for work, trusting in complete faith that you will have a tasty, home-prepared meal, cooked to perfection, waiting for you when you return. All that's left for you to do is set the table, get a salad together if you want (using the aforementioned salad in a bag), and pour the drinks.

Slow cooked meals are convenient and nutritious — in that they use fresh, wholesome ingredients — and taste good. In many cases, you can easily adapt your favorite traditional-cooked dishes so you can make them in the slow cooker. In Chapter 5, we discuss various techniques you can use in making these adaptations. We also provide you with some of our favorite "before" and "after" (read "traditional" transformed to "slow cooker") recipes to help you see how it's done.

Snail crossing: The international slow food movement

While we are, perhaps, too familiar with fast food, a relatively new phenomena is *slow food,* a new twist on an old lifestyle: You eat what is produced locally and is part of the local fabric. In fact, in 1986 an organization dedicated to slow food was founded in Italy. With 60,000 members in 35 countries, the International Slow Food Movement (www.slowfood.com) seeks to preserve and promote local food traditions, while at the same time limiting the globalization and standardization of food and drink.

The symbol of the movement is appropriately the snail, a traditional emblem of slowness. Although not denying the need for advancement, "slow foodees" want to savor the taste of each morsel as it was intended to look and taste. For example, we all know that with the right formula, your favorite brand of cola can be made almost anywhere in the world and taste the same no matter where you drink it. On the other hand, factory-made Parmesan cheese, sold in the cardboard shaker containers, tastes nothing like artisan-made Parmesan cheese from Italy — made from the milk of grass-grazing cows and aged following century-long traditions.

Here's Who's Slow Cooking

People never cease to envy people in the cooking profession. It's not that they're rich or better looking, or live in fancy houses and drive expensive cars. It's because they know how to cook *and* enjoy it. Because professional cooks work with food, most people naturally assume that their pantries and fridges are stocked with endless goodies and wonderful things to eat. We, the authors of this book, want to set the record straight on that score!

Usually we, as members of the culinary profession, *do* have plenty around to eat, but sometimes we too fall short — especially when life is getting the best of us and the last thing we want or have time to do is plan and prepare a delectable meal. Many a day, dinnertime rolls around, and regrettably, we haven't even thought about feeding our families. That's when we shake our heads and wish we had been better organized and had thought to put a meal in the slow cooker earlier in the day. Planning ahead is so much easier than racking your brain and wringing your hands when time is short and bellies are empty.

Many culinary professionals besides us also use slow cookers, as attested to by Julia Child in her recent cookbook, *Julia and Jacques Cooking at Home* (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1999). In the section on cooking beans, Julia claims that her favorite way to cook beans is overnight in a slow cooker with water and seasonings until the beans are done the next morning. That has become our favorite method, too.

The U.S. love affair with the slow cooker

Estimates claim that over 40 million slow cookers are being used in the United States at least three times a week. With new sales estimated at 6 million a year, we have to believe that people in the United States find slow cookers to be a value and useful kitchen appliance. But who exactly is using them? You may be surprised.

- 73 percent of *Good Housekeeping* readers polled own slow cookers (1997).
- Largest age group is 34 to 54 years old and married with children under age 18.
- Most are college educated and work at least part-time.
- 82 percent of *Better Homes and Gardens* readers own slow cookers; 18 percent use them more now than two years ago (1998).

Slow cooking is for *everyone* on a tight schedule who has to eat but who doesn't want to rely on prepared convenience foods and take-out, except on occasion. Slow cookers are for working families, married couples, single individuals, students, the retired, those on fixed incomes, and even for those with live-in help who get a day off once in a while. They are for all of us who want to eat real food, made in the comfort and convenience of our home but without spending hours tending a simmering pot or a hot oven.

The Benefits of Owning a Slow Cooker

Slow cookers are convenient and portable — that's why they show up at potlucks and church suppers! Moreover, in the heat of summer, when you don't want to add to the heat or stress your air conditioner by cooking on the stove or turning on the oven, slow cookers provide a welcome alternative. On Thanksgiving, when your oven is full, there's always the slow cooker, ready and waiting. These are just a few of the benefits of owning a slow cooker. And there are more, as you find out in this section!

Slow cooked versus grilled

When food is seared and then grilled over very high heat, the natural juices caramelize, altering the taste. But food cooked with low heat produces tender, flavorful results. For generations, women in small towns throughout Europe have known this and have been using the town bread baker's cooling ovens to slow cook their family's meals. In fact, when Tom was living in Spain, he remembers going to the bakery in his wife's hometown midmorning with his mother-in-law to use the cooling ovens. For a small price, the baker

rented oven space to anyone who wanted to slow cook a joint of meat or fish. The food was left in the oven unattended and picked up in the early afternoon for dinner. Although the practice of slow cooking food in a wood-burning oven was also common practice in the United States during the 1800s, it died out with the introduction of cast-iron stoves, with the concept revitalized in the 1970s with the electric slow cooker.

Slow cookers (see Figure 1-1) cook food at a low temperature for an extended period of time, with minimum evaporation. By doing so, tough cuts of meat tenderize in their own juices, the same as they would in a heavy, cast-iron Dutch oven set over low heat. What an electric slow cooker provides, however, is the convenience of being able to walk away and come back later in the day to a fully cooked meal that requires virtually no intervention. The introduction of the slow cooker in the United States in the early 1970s benefited a generation of women and their families.

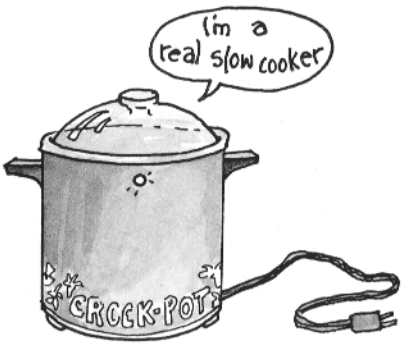

Figure 1-1: A slow cooker.

The introduction and evolution of the Crock-Pot

Without a doubt, the transition from the 1960s to the 1970s was a time of radical social and lifestyle change. Fast food was on its way to becoming an American icon as Mom, to her family's dismay (especially at dinnertime!), went back to work, redefining the workplace, as well as the American family.

In 1971 a revolutionary new appliance was introduced to millions of people in the United States, allowing moms nationwide to transform raw ingredients into a home-cooked meal while they were away at work or play. The appliance was the Rival Crock-Pot. And guess what colors it came in? Those good old 1970s colors of copper, harvest gold, and avocado.

Although the slow cooker remains faithful to the original premise of cooking a one-pot meal from start to finish without mortal intervention, today's slow cooker is no longer harvest gold — unless you have one of the original ones. It has evolved over the past three decades to fit in with today's kitchen decor in colors, sizes, and shapes.

Slow cooker convenience and healthy cooking in the 21st century

The 1970s are not exactly remembered as a period of culinary growth. In fact, it was more like a wasteland, best known for fast food and convenience. In looking over some of the early slow cooker recipes, we're not surprised to see such a large dependence on canned and dehydrated soup mixes. Once again, during a period of economic crisis, people in the United States had turned to their old reliable choices to get dinner on the table quickly and inexpensively. This time, though, they were also relying upon a brand-new gadget, the slow cooker.

In some culinary circles, slow cooker cooking is frowned on for a variety of reasons: The food is overcooked, high in sodium and fat, bland, and too wet. But despite these criticisms, slow cooking has overcome the negatives, and 6 million are sold on average each year. In reality, the problem doesn't lie with the slow cooker, but with the recipes, which reflect how people want to eat.

Over the past 30 years since the first slow cooker was made, our knowledge of nutrition and our culinary horizons have boomed. We have a better understanding of what to include in our diet, as well as what food items to consume in moderation or even avoid altogether. In developing the recipes for this cookbook, we decided to rethink how to use the slow cooker. We knew that we had to follow certain basic parameters, such as cooking with sufficient liquid and filling the slow cooker up at least half full but no more than two-thirds. But we also wanted the food to reflect how most people are eating today.

We use as few prepared ingredients as possible, making concessions for the sake of convenience only rarely. Our recipes call for fresh vegetables and herbs as often as possible for flavor and color. To bring out the true flavors of the food, we cut back as much as possible on fat and instead use olive oil, a monosaturate, whenever appropriate. At times, you may be called upon to brown certain ingredients on the stovetop for added flavor, as well as for appearance. By incorporating these changes with traditional slow cooker cooking methods, we are impressed with the end results. But the best approval will come from you as you prepare and sample the recipes.

Our recipes

Once we knew what we could achieve in the slow cooker, we set out to assemble a well-balanced list of recipes. We wanted to include traditional slower cooker recipes like pot roast, chili, and soup as well as some all-time perennial classics like sweet 'n' sour meatballs and nacho cheese sauce.

We wanted to give our updated versions of some of the more popular casserole dishes, such as the vegetable casserole with French-fried onions, without having to rely upon sodium- and fat-rich canned soup. And we wanted to provide some "exotic" ethnic and regional dishes that have become mainstream over the years, such as jambalaya and Moroccan vegetable stew with couscous. These recipes, as well as the others, turned out to be perfect for the slow cooker.

The slow cooking method using just the right amount of liquid accentuates and draws out the flavors of the different ingredients. The time-saving convenience of being able to spend no more than 20 minutes in the kitchen reassures us that we can still make and eat real food that's good for us at home without having to spend hours slaving over a hot stove.

As with any recipe, let it be your guide. If you lack cooking confidence, follow the recipe to a tee; if not, adjust and modify the ingredients as you desire. In some instances, we provide variations within a given recipe. If we don't offer variations, let your taste buds and whatever you have on hand be your guide.

Here's and example of one of our rcipes. It may not be the most exotic or sophisticated of dishes, but it is comfort food with a capital C. Our Quick and Easy Turkey Vegetable Soup that follows is most definitely a good recipe to get you started cooking in the slow cooker. Its name says it all: It's quick, it's easy, and it sure does taste good. And best of all, it cooks up all by itself in the slow cooker.

Quick and Easy Turkey Vegetable Soup

For a well-balanced meal, serve this soup with a tossed green salad and fresh fruit.

Preparation time: *10 minutes*

Cooking time: *Low 6 to 7 hours*

Yield: *4 servings*

2 turkey drumsticks, skin and excess fat removed and discarded

2 large leeks, washed well to remove dirt and grit, white and light green parts only, sliced thin

3 carrots, peeled and cut into ¼-inch rounds

3 celery stalks, cut into ¼-inch slices

1 package (10 ounces) frozen corn kernels, thawed

1 package (10 ounces) frozen cut green beans, thawed

½ cup uncooked pearl barley

1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley or dill weed

2 chicken bouillon cubes, dissolved in 4 cups hot tap water

Salt

Freshly ground black pepper

1 Combine all the ingredients in the slow cooker.

2 Cover and cook on low for 6 to 7 hours, or until the turkey and vegetables are tender.

3 Before serving, remove the turkey meat from the bones. Shred into small pieces and return to the soup. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

Vary It: *You can also make this hearty soup by using the roasted turkey carcass from Thanksgiving dinner or from the Master Roast Turkey Breast recipe in Chapter 13. Remove any visible fat or gristle. Rinse the carcass under cold water and crush by applying pressure to the rib cage with the heel of your hand. Add with the rest of the ingredients to the slow cooker.*

Per serving: *Calories 346 (From Fat 46); Fat 5g; (Saturated 1.5g); Cholesterol 40mg; Sodium 885mg; Carbohydrate 52g (Dietary Fiber 10g); Protein 18g.*