

## Chapter 1

# Cooking with Pressure 101

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Cooking under pressure in the 21st century
  - ▶ Discovering how pressure cooking works
  - ▶ Checking out the various pressure-cooker options
  - ▶ Whipping up great food in a fraction of the time
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**A**lthough much maligned, in reality the pressure cooker is the harried cook's most valuable friend in the kitchen. Besides the fact that it cooks up to 70 percent faster, it can also save you money and cut down on kitchen cleanup because you do all your cooking in a totally closed and sealed pot. In this chapter, I present you with some very convincing arguments for why everyone needs to be cooking under pressure — more so today than ever before.

## *Not Your Parents' Pressure Cooker*

I'm sure you've heard the story of a friend of a friend who experienced an exploding pressure cooker and wound up cleaning split-pea soup off the ceiling for a month. But come on, that was back in the 1940s! The modern pressure cooker is a far cry from what your parents and grandparents used in the past. Sleek and sophisticated, from stovetop to electric models, more pressure cookers are available for today's cook to choose from than ever before.

Better yet, all of these options are also safer. Manufacturers are always striving to make improvements on just about everything. The pressure cooker is no exception. As I mention in Chapter 2, there's no denying that earlier models weren't always as safe as they should have been and didn't have all the safety features that today's pots do. Since then, however, some of the best housewares engineers in the world, working in ultra-modern, state-of-the-art factories, have designed and added many features to traditional stovetop pressure cookers as well as the newer digital electric models. The result is pressure cookers that are nearly impossible to tamper with and super-easy to use (as you discover in Chapter 4).

## *What Makes a Pot a Pressure Cooker?*

For a pot to work as a pressure cooker, it must create an airtight seal so that when hot cooking liquid comes to a boil, the steam it creates becomes trapped, ultimately creating pressure. When that pressure is applied to the food in the sealed pot, the food winds up cooking up to 70 percent faster than via conventional cooking.

All pressure cookers are made up of the same three basic parts: a metal cooker vessel or pot, a metal lid, and a rubber gasket within the lid that creates an airtight seal when the lid is locked in place. The pots and lids are made of aluminum or stainless steel, or, in the case of electric pressure cookers, nonstick-coated aluminum.

To make them safe, all pressure cookers have at least three safety valves in the lid as well as a valve that controls and releases pressure during and after cooking. A valve may be as simple as a small rectangular cutout in the lid to release excess pressure or as sophisticated as a spring-regulated valve that controls the amount of pressure needed to cook specific types of foods.

## *Surveying What's Out There*

Go online any day of the week and you'll see that at least 75 different pressure-cooker models are available at retail, starting as low as \$30 for a traditional jiggle-valve model and going up as high as \$275 for a Swiss-made, stainless-steel version. Although they all have the same function of cooking under pressure, the aluminum, jiggle-valve pressure cooker is the most basic and therefore the least expensive. Size and country of origin are also determining factors when it comes to the price of stainless-steel models. The decision is yours as far as what to purchase and cook with.

If you're in the market for a new pressure cooker, you need to know about the different options available to you. Check out the following list for the basic details and turn to Chapter 3 for even more information:

- ✔ **Jiggle-valve pressure cooker:** If you like simplicity, this may be the pressure cooker for you. Aside from being the least-sophisticated option, this tried-and-true model is noisy, yet practical. It's also the least-expensive type of pressure cooker.
- ✔ **Developed-weight pressure cooker:** Consider this model a more updated version of its cousin, the jiggle-valve pressure cooker. But this model has no moving parts and requires no guesswork as to whether the level of pressure you want has been reached.

- ✔ **Spring-valve pressure cooker:** With the turn of a dial, this very modern pressure cooker eliminates most of the guesswork. It's the easiest to use of the stovetop models, a characteristic that comes at a price because the spring-valve pressure cooker is more expensive than the other stovetop units.
- ✔ **Electric pressure cooker:** Rapidly growing in popularity, the very-simple-to-use, multifunctional electric pressure cooker almost cooks by itself. Just choose high or low pressure, set the timer, and press Start. At the end of the cooking cycle, the pot will buzz to tell you it's done. You can either let the pressure cooker release the pressure naturally, or you can opt for a manual quick-release. And if that weren't enough, some models even have slow cooker, rice maker, and traditional cooking programs to choose from as well.



My advice for purchasing a pressure cooker is to go somewhere in the middle of the road pricewise, unless you can splurge — then, most definitely, go Swiss.

## My electric love affair

Recently, for a variety of reasons, I've become a big fan of the electric pressure cooker, also known as a multicooker. First and foremost: I like not having to use my stove. Let me explain. I'm a clean freak and I hate a dirty stove as much as I hate having to clean one. I don't care how neat you are; cooking, browning, and sautéing are messy and leave the entire cooktop dirty, even when you use only one burner. Now, when you cook in an electric pressure cooker on your counter, everything stays in the removable, nonstick cooking pot. No mess, no muss. It's all self-contained.

Another reason why I'm such a big fan of this appliance, besides the obvious one of convenience, is the additional features it offers. While I haven't used every electric pressure cooker or multicooker on the market, I've cooked with some of the best, and they all do other cooking tasks besides pressure cooking. Following are two of my favorite appliances that some electric pressure cookers can double as:

- ✔ **Slow cooker:** Besides obviously cooking fast under pressure, my favorite electric multicookers also have a slow-cooker program that lets you cook as you would in your crock pot. With this in mind, I strongly suggest you try my delicious slow-cooker recipes found in Chapter 3, as well as those found in one of my other *For Dummies* cookbooks, *Slow Cookers For Dummies*, coauthored by Glenna Vance and published by Wiley.
- ✔ **Rice cooker:** I've been making fluffy, perfectly cooked rice in rice cookers for years. They make, by far, the world's best rice. Some multicookers have a rice-cooker program that (believe it or not) also makes fabulous fluffy rice under pressure.

Three great appliance functions in one neat package with digital controls and a timer make this slightly higher-priced gadget worth it!

## Get Cookin'!

After you have your pressure cooker, the cooking fun can begin. You can prepare recipes specifically designed for the pressure cooker, like those found in Part III, or you can adapt conventional recipes you know and love so you can prepare them in less than half the time it normally takes.

Regardless of your recipe choices, cooking under pressure requires some know-how as far as how much liquid to use and how long to cook a particular type of food. Naturally, that's why you're reading this book. Understanding the particulars of cooking in a pressure cooker also makes sense. To that end, the following sections give you a quick overview of the basic steps for using your pressure cooker and adapting your favorite recipes.

### *Presenting six steps to cooking in your pressure cooker*

I provide more detailed information on using your pressure cooker in Chapter 5, but if all you need are the basics, here's a six-step breakdown of the entire process:

#### **1. Choose the right recipe.**

Whether you make a pressure-cooker-specific recipe or you adapt a conventional recipe, make sure the recipe contains at least 2 cups of water or cooking liquid. (The exception is when you're preparing a dish that cooks or steams in 10 minutes or less. Then you can use as little as 1 cup of liquid.)

Never fill your pressure cooker more than two-thirds full, even when you're making soup.

#### **2. Do any browning or sautéing necessary.**

For stovetop pressure cookers, you can brown and sauté in the pot over medium-high heat.

For electric pressure cookers, simply use the Brown setting.

Deglaze either pot as necessary with liquid.

#### **3. Set the pressure specified in your recipe.**

With stovetop cookers, you need to start cooking over high heat to reach pressure. Once you do, you have to lower the burner enough to





maintain, but not exceed, pressure. Over the course of cooking, you may need to raise the burner heat a bit to maintain pressure as needed.

With electric cookers, all you have to do is hit the high or low pressure settings; the appliance makes all the necessary adjustments.

4. **When the stovetop pressure cooker reaches the right pressure level, set a timer for the length of time your recipe requires. Your electric pressure cooker does this for you automatically.**



Get to know your stovetop cooker's pressure-regulator valve and find out how to determine when it reaches the level of pressure called for in your recipe.

5. **At the end of the specified cooking time, carefully release the pressure inside the pot using the release method specified in the recipe.**

I cover different release methods in Chapter 4.

6. **Check to see whether your food is done.**

Undercooking food is preferable to overcooking it; you can always cook food a bit more, but you can't unburn it! If the food tastes tough or hard when you test it, re-cover the pressure cooker, bring it back up to pressure, and cook for 3- to 5-minute intervals or until the food is cooked to your satisfaction.



When going from one function to another in your electric pressure cooker, always push Stop, choose another function, and then push Start.

## *Adapting your favorite recipes*

Because, as a novice pressure-cooker user, you should always walk before you run, I strongly suggest that you start off following and cooking the pressure-cooker-specific recipes found in this book. After you get a better feel for pressure cooking, you can start experimenting and begin adapting your own recipes.

The first thing you should do when adapting a recipe is to consult the recommended cooking times that I provide in Appendix A. Compare the traditional cooking times with the shortened pressure-cooker times you find there. The next step is to rewrite the recipe. I discuss how to do this in Chapter 6. There you'll find four example recipes, with two parallel versions of each: the traditional version and the pressure-cooker one. Using the recommended cooking times in Appendix A and the recipe conversion information in Chapter 6, rewrite your recipes like I did and then try them out.



One thing to remember when cooking in a pressure cooker, and specifically when adapting recipes, is that not all foods cook at the same speed. For example, when making beef stew with vegetables, the meat naturally needs to cook longer. To avoid having mushy veggies, you can use the stop-and-go cooking method I describe in Chapter 5. Here's how it works in a nutshell: You start off by browning the meat in the pot as you normally would and then begin cooking the meat with some cooking liquid under pressure. You then stop the cooking process, open the lid, add some of the harder and longer-cooking veggies, like the potatoes and carrots, and partially cook them under pressure. You finish up by adding the faster-cooking ingredients, like mushrooms and perhaps fresh herbs. Simple enough, right?

So what are you waiting for? Join millions of others worldwide and get cooking under pressure!