

Teach the world to ping: How to get the best out of your microwave

Why confine your microwave to reheating coffee when it could be roasting a joint or making a tasty stew in just 10 minutes?

By Richard Ehrlich

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I will probably murder the next person who tells me that microwave cooking "isn't really cooking". The statement often comes from people who have never used one, or use it only to reheat coffee or "cook" a ready-meal. If they don't want to use a microwave oven, fine. Just don't tell me that it isn't real cooking: it's as real as frying, roasting or grilling. It simply uses a different kind of energy to create heat in food.

And that energy makes the microwave an invaluable cooking appliance. It saves time and energy. It cooks many foods beautifully. And because the cooking vessel often doubles as serving dish, it saves on washing-up water (and the energy needed to heat it).

The technical details: microwave ovens use a magnetron (something like a radio transmitter) to generate very short radio waves which penetrate food to a depth of around 2.5cm. They cause certain molecules (mainly water) to oscillate around 2.5 billion times per second. That rapid movement heats the surrounding molecules, and as they heat up, they transfer heat to the interior of the food by conduction – the same thing that happens in a conventional oven. But that deeper penetration of energy makes microwave ovens cook food much faster than an ordinary oven, in which the energy is mostly concentrated at the surface of whatever's being cooked.

Ignoramuses complain that microwave cooking is mechanical and automatic, and allows no control over the cooking process. They couldn't be more wrong. You are not relinquishing control just because you set a timer. The timer controls the machine, but you control the timer – and the key to successful microwaving is to set it for short bursts, a minute or two, so you can look, sniff and stir to follow the food's progress. Just as you do with braising or roasting.

Another variable is the power setting. Modern ovens have settings from full power down to low (or sometimes simmer or defrost). Full power cooks fastest, but medium is often the setting to use, especially for anything large or liquid. Experience will teach you which settings are best for a particular type of dish. In almost every dish, however, it's good to give the food some resting time so heat can equalise throughout.

Once you've mastered the basics, microwaving is deeply satisfying. It requires as much skill and attention as any other cooking method. Microwaves have a tremendous advantage over hob-based cooking which is admirably summed up by my wife: "The great thing about the microwave is that you put it on for two minutes and then it stops. You don't have to worry about answering the phone and forgetting that a pot is on the hob, boiling away."

Microwave marvels

Vegetables

Chop into bite-size pieces and cook it with a little liquid in a container with a good seal. You can toss the veg with oil if you wish but it usually isn't necessary. The vegetables can be served as soon as they're cooked, or at room temperature; they can also be reheated briefly if that suits your schedule.

Fish

Fish in steaks or fillets – whole fish are trickier, though doable – is one of the real microwave stars. Place the pieces on a plate. Cover with clingfilm or with another plate, and cook in one-minute bursts (medium or full power) till just done, then leave to rest for a minute or two.

Anything soupy or stewy

Curries, soups, simple stews and braises – these work a wonder in the microwave. They need regular stirring, as the stuff at the centre of the oven is getting less energy than the stuff at the outside. Cooking times will depend on how much food you are cooking, but most dishes feeding four people will cook in around 10 minutes. Except for soups, which will need 5-10 minutes longer if you want chunks of veg to go perfectly soft.

Small joints

These can take as little as 8-10 minutes on full power. If you don't have a combination oven (see box), you can then brown them in a frying pan. Use a boned and rolled joint, no more than around 10cm at its thickest, and turn it several times during cooking. If you cook at medium power, the job will take longer, but it's also possible to cook thicker joints. If you cook at medium power, the job will take longer, but it's also possible to cook somewhat thicker joints. Figure on 20 minutes or so for a joint that's no more than around 15cm at its thickest point.

Microwave strategies

I use the microwave for at least one dish every time I cook dinner. I always use it for vegetables that, once, I would cook in a steamer. Sometimes, the main dish is the one getting microwaved. It depends on what's for dinner.

But you can also cook a whole meal using microwaves. When The Independent's photographer came to my house, I did exactly that, and it took around 20 minutes – which included ample time to pause for a gab. I cooked a bundle of asparagus first, the spears cut into 5cm lengths and cooked, with around 30ml of water in a covered dish, at medium power for around three minutes. Then I did a bowl of cherry tomatoes, halved, with some extra virgin olive oil and assorted flavourings. Cooking time: two minutes.

These tomatoes are a prime example of what I call Little Incidentals, quick accompaniments which are too substantial to be called garnishes but too small to be called side dishes.

The main dish was steamed squid with yellow peppers and fresh chilli. I sliced the peppers and chillies and cooked them for a couple of minutes while preparing the squid, then added the squid and cooked for another three minutes. Some parsley and lemon went on at the end. A light, summery meal. Prawns or chunks of firm-fleshed fish could easily be used instead of squid.

Have I persuaded you to look at the neglected box in your kitchen with more respect? I hope so. If you're using it only for reheating coffee, you're wasting the money you spent on it. And wasting time and energy. Your choice. Just don't tell me microwave cooking is not real cooking. I'm not a homicidal kind of guy, but my patience can wear thin.

About your equipment

Cooking vessels

There are many cooking vessels designed specifically for the microwave, but I am a fan of just one – which is always available on eBay. Although described as pressure cookers, they're something like a cross between a steamer and a pressure cooker. The deep plastic dish has a clamp-on lid with a vent, which can be adjusted depending on how much steam you want to escape, and they're great. But ordinary glass or ceramic bowls can usually be used. You can also use metal bowls as long as they don't arc (spark) when you turn on the power. If the dish needs to be covered during cooking, use clingfilm or a close-fitting plate.

Combination ovens

Combination ovens contain a grill and a convection oven as well as the microwave's magnetron. You can cook with either microwaves or convection alone, but their greatest benefits come from using the two energy types together. The microwaves speed up cooking while convection does the job of browning. Cooking times for big items such as a chicken or a joint of meat are cut by up to 75 per cent. I don't have a combi oven, but I wish I did.

Quick fish curry

Even though I generally like fish simply cooked in the microwave, certain stewy preparations are also very well suited to the magic box. Every bit of cooking can be done in a glass bowl, so there's only one dish to wash up. And the whole thing takes just minutes. Use any sustainable but firm-fleshed white fish, such as pollock, gurnard or huss. These quantities will serve four with a side dish of plain boiled rice. And note: if you have a favourite fish curry recipe you can adapt it for the microwave using this basic method.

Ingredients: Serves 4-6

1 medium onion, coarsely chopped
 2-3 garlic cloves, finely chopped
 A knob of fresh ginger peeled and finely chopped
 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
 1 cardamom pod
 1-2 tablespoons curry powder, home-made or commercial
 Around 1.2kg fish, cut into chunks or strips around 2.5cm thick
 Around 200ml Greek or bio yoghurt
 A small handful of fresh coriander leaves, chopped

Method:

Put the onion, garlic, ginger and oil in a large bowl and stir well to mix. Microwave on full power in 1-minute bursts until the mixture is lightly coloured and extremely fragrant, around 2 minutes. Now add the cardamom pod and curry powder, and microwave again for another minute. Add the fish, with 100ml water, and stir well to coat every piece with the onion spice mixture.

Microwave for 6-7 minutes more, stirring thoroughly every minute or two, until the fish is just cooked. Mix in enough yoghurt to make the dish wet but not too watery, and cook again on a low to medium power just to heat it through thoroughly. Add the coriander and serve immediately.

Chicken in a pot with saffron cream

This is an indulgent but simple one-pot dinner. The ideal herb is tarragon, but parsley will do just fine. Serve with a plainly cooked vegetable such as green beans or broccoli.

Ingredients: Serves 4

100ml double cream
 A large pinch of saffron
 1 large garlic clove, crushed or finely chopped
 500g maincrop potatoes, peeled and cut into chunks
 150ml chicken stock, or a 50-50 mix of stock and dry white wine
 Salt and freshly ground black pepper
 4-8 chicken thighs (depending on their size), skinned if you wish
 1 large onion, cut into chunks
 6-8 sprigs of tarragon or a small handful of parsley leaves, coarsely chopped

Method:

Put the cream, saffron and garlic in a small jug and heat on full power in 1-minute bursts until the cream is hot. Take care not to let it boil, or it will froth over the sides of the jug. Leave to infuse while you do the rest of the cooking.

Put the potatoes and liquid in a large bowl and toss well with salt and pepper. Cover the bowl and cook on full power for around 4 minutes, just until the liquid is starting to show signs of boiling. Now add the chicken and onion, toss well, and continue cooking for another 10-12 minutes, until the chicken is barely cooked and the potatoes are fully softened. Add the infused cream and cook for another 1-2 minutes, until the liquid is bubbling lightly. Stir in the herbs, check the seasoning and serve.

Richard Ehrlich's 'The Green Kitchen' has a chapter on microwave cooking. His most recent books are '80 Recipes for Your Pressure Cooker' and '80 Recipes for Your Halogen Oven'