



Time Saving Kitchen Tools for Healthy Eating Part 2—The Crock Pot (Slow Cooker)

Bill Bradley, Registered Dietitian and Cookbook Author

I love talking to the owners or chefs at small ethnic restaurants. They always have tidbits of knowledge that helps me in my cooking. Recently, I ate at a middle eastern restaurant. I spoke to the owner about how they cook where he is from (Iran). He said that food is not considered done unless it has been stewing for at least 4 hours. Many of the most delicious foods from all over the world are the ones that have been cooking for a long time.

Most recipes that have been simmering on the stove for 4 hours or more do come out amazing. Meat is tender, beans are soft, flavors are blended and the aroma is fantastic. But who has time for such endeavors? There was an era when spending half the day in the kitchen was the norm, but almost no one does that anymore. So, how do we get the flavors and tastes of long simmered recipes without spending the time that we don't have? The answer is the Crockpot (slow cooker).

I love coming home to the smells of a home cooked meal that took me only 10 minutes to prepare in the morning. Beef stew, chicken thighs with greens and olives, veggie filled chili and chicken noodle soup are just a few of the amazing dishes you can put together in the time it would take you to go through a take-out menu to order. Wake up in the morning, throw everything in the slow cooker, turn it on, come back 6-8 hours later and you've got yourself a meal!

The crockpot was invented in the 1940's, became a sensation in the 70's and recently has seen a resurgence of popularity (sales have doubled in the last 15 years). The slow cooker blends well with our lack of time and our obsession with tasty food. You can purchase a crock pot for as little as \$20 (I have bought them at tag sales for \$1) and you can get a really top of the line, programmable one for under \$100.

As a dietitian my favorite part of the crock pot is that you can create amazingly delicious foods that are also good for you by following a simple formula:

- 1) Add Protein** – meat, chicken, and/or beans. You can sear the chicken or meat in a skillet ahead of time to help keep the juices in, but I usually don't. I usually use canned beans in my crockpot creations, but you can cook them from dried, soaked beans as well. [Here is a guide](#) for cooking dried beans in the crockpot.
- 2) Add Vegetables** – almost every vegetable cooks well in the crockpot from greens to potatoes.
- 3) Cover everything with liquid** – tomato sauce, chicken broth, water, beef broth, wine, vinegar, olive oil and lemon juice. You only need to slightly cover with liquid especially if you use a lot of vegetables as they will create a lot of liquid as well.
- 4) Add herbs, spices and condiments.** Salt, pepper, oregano, thyme, Dijon mustard, smoked paprika, and parsley are just a few of the possibilities that creates the final burst of flavor.

Another great aspect of the crockpot is that it is fairly forgiving. In all the years of making crockpot meals, I can only think of one that went horribly wrong (a story for another day). The one big tip is not to over spice your dish. You can always add more spice later.

If you don't want to try making your own crockpot creation, here are a few links to some of our favorite online recipes:

[Slow Cooker Spanish Beef Stew](#)

[Persian Pulled Chicken](#)

[Vegetarian Black Bean Chili](#)

[Detox Crockpot Lentil Soup](#)

[Slow Cooker Shrimp Scampi Recipe](#)

I hope you enjoy these recipes (and maybe make up some of your own!). Share your crockpot success stories and recipes with me at bbradley@mma.org

May you celebrate every meal!