

'HANDS-OFF'

meals with haybox cooking

If there was a way of **cooking that uses virtually no fuel** you'd think everyone would be using it, but that's not the case.

Seren Evans-Charrington resurrects the **'haybox' cooking** method

At the beginning of the 20th century there was a fashion for something called fuel-less cookery. Indeed, there were even a few early examples of fuel-less cookers manufactured at the time, including one called 'Queen's Fuel-less Cooker', circa 1930, which was basically an insulated small oil drum; however, most people simply made their own home-made versions called 'hayboxes'.

Haybox cooking is not just a great way to conserve resources; it's also a fantastic way to prepare a meal without having to slave over a hot stove – ideal when you are busy on the allotment, or, of course, when you are going out for the day, or simply have a million and one jobs to get through.

Haybox cooking is certainly fantastic for 'busy bees', but I've also used the technique when I've gone on picnics but fancied something rather more substantial than just a sandwich. Indeed, as I leaf through old cookery books I can find lots of recipes and ideas for preparing a meal to eat while actually on a journey or out for the day. I find this sort of cooking particularly suitable for stews and casseroles, although it can be used to cook soups, rice, curries and

porridge. Less water is needed than for other forms of cooking, as there is less evaporation, and, of course, there is no need to worry about burning the meal.

USING A HAYBOX

There is really nothing simpler than haybox cooking: all you actually need is a box and some hay. The idea is really explained in the name. Food is simply heated up to boiling point, transferred to a pot, then immediately placed in a box surrounded by hay as insulation. Over the years I have used different sorts of boxes, from wooden ones with fitted lids, to old drawers which I've topped with a pillow for insulation, and I've even used a thick cardboard box.

The idea is to take a box with a tight-fitting lid and fill it with insulating material like hay, although you can use straw, shredded paper, wood shavings, and even popcorn. A casserole dish with a lid is then rested on some of the insulation material, and more is packed around it to create a nest effect.

The casserole dish really needs to have a tight-fitting lid, too; I have used cast-iron cooking pots and crock pots, both with good results. Once the pot is

nestled into its insulation, you need to pack hay over the top of it, and the lid of the box will need securing tightly. If you are using an old drawer, you will need to pack hay over the top of the cooking pot, then use a feather-filled pillow as a lid for the box – this will act as a good layer of insulation.

The food for your cooking pot needs to be heated thoroughly to start with, which is where the idea of boiling it for 10 minutes first comes from. Once it is hot, the sealed dish is then put into the box and left alone until it cooks. This leads to quite a considerable saving in the amount of fuel used, and it also means that, as with a standard slow cooker, it is possible to start the cooking process for a meal a few hours before it is needed and then to get on with other things as it is cooking, which is useful at any time of year.

STORING A HAYBOX

A haybox left unattended for a while can look like a ready-made home to a mouse, so be careful where you keep it – mouse stew is probably not what you are hoping to achieve!



Filling the box with hay.



Positioning the crock pot.



Covering the crock pot with hay.



Top Tips

It can typically take four times longer to cook food in a haybox than in an oven, so you need to get on the go well in advance, and at first it can take a bit of trial and error to get the times right when you first get into haybox cooking. How long you leave it will depend very much on the sort of food you are cooking, but if you allow plenty of cooking time you really can't go wrong.

Whatever type of box is used, don't keep checking the food too often, as this will only lead to the food cooling down so that it will take longer or just not cook properly. However, this is really just common sense and no different from any oven, as opening the door extends cooking times and uses more fuel, as any cold air has to be heated up again. Most foods that can be cooked this way will certainly benefit from a long, slow cook, and will take on an improved flavour and texture as a result of it.

Foods will also cook better if the dish is nearly full. However, it is important not to get the insulating material wet from either the steam (hence the tight-fitting lid) or from spilling the food, so don't overfill the dish. A clean tea towel wrapped around the dish can be particularly helpful in absorbing any leakage. If hay and any other insulating materials do get wet, they will not hold in the heat quite so well, and hay does not last well if it gets damp, so always check the condition of the hay after every usage.

Whether using a wooden box, cardboard box, or even an old metal chest, the trick is to create lots of little air pockets. The insulating material can be used again and again, although you may need to add a little more hay as time passes. It is also essential to dry out any damp insulation so that the box works well next time, and doesn't form any mould.

SEREN'S SLOW-COOK CASSEROLE

This recipe is adapted for use in the haybox, and takes about 4 hours to cook.

INGREDIENTS

500g pork, cut into cubes
 500g venison, cut into cubes
 1 tbsp freshly ground pepper
 3 tbsp vegetable oil
 3 medium onions, chopped
 2 × 400g tins of chopped tomatoes
 ¼ bottle of red wine (Merlot works well)
 3 sticks celery, coarsely chopped
 4 large carrots, coarsely chopped
 150g butternut squash, cut into cubes
 150g sweet potatoes, peeled and cubed
 225g mushrooms, cut into slices
 Ground sea salt (to taste)

METHOD

- 1 Dust the meat with the ground pepper.
- 2 Heat the oil in a frying pan over a medium heat and add the meat. Brown the meat in batches, and once browned, put it in a crock pot.
- 3 Add the onions to the frying pan and cook until soft, then add to the crock pot.
- 4 Add the tomatoes, red wine, celery and carrots to the meat and onions, then bring to the boil.
- 5 Add the butternut squash, sweet potato and mushrooms, then stir well and bring back to the boil.
- 6 Cook on the stove for 5 minutes in a covered pan.
- 7 Transfer the vegetables and stock to the crock pot with the meat and slow-cook in the haybox for 4 hours.



Try to keep the box sealed once the cooking process begins.

- 8 Check the seasoning and adjust if necessary, then serve with crusty bread or new potatoes.

GOOD OLD-FASHIONED LIVER AND ONIONS – WITH A TWIST

Liver is not enjoyed by everyone, but I believe it has gained a bad reputation due to bad cooking techniques. It is one of those dishes that benefits from a long, slow cook, and it is really good for you, as it is rich in iron and vitamin A.



It takes no time at all to prepare this dish, and you can use any type of liver, but I find ox liver is particularly good.

INGREDIENTS

350g ox liver, cut into strips
 3 tbsp plain flour
 2 tbsp salted butter
 1 tbsp vegetable oil
 1 onion, chopped roughly
 100g white mushrooms, sliced
 1 × 400g tin haricot beans, drained
 1 × 400g tin chopped tomatoes
 150ml beef stock
 2 tbsp tomato purée
 1 tsp dried mixed herbs
 Salt and freshly ground pepper (for seasoning)

METHOD

- 1 Dust the liver with seasoned flour.
- 2 Melt the butter and oil in a large pan.
- 3 Brown the liver, onion and mushrooms, then add the remaining ingredients and bring to the boil.
- 4 Turn down the heat, cover, then simmer for 5 minutes.
- 5 Place the liver mixture into a crock pot and pack into the haybox to cook for 2 hours, then serve with hot buttered toast.

IN CONCLUSION...

Any stews, curries, rice puddings, and even nut roasts, do really well in a haybox, and once you start cooking this way you'll find that the dual benefits of fuel reduction and increased taste make this method a real winner. For me, the hands-off cooking approach is fantastic at busy times, and sitting down with the chores done, aching legs, and a delicious hot meal is the perfect end to the day.

DON'T FORGET YOUR FLASK!

For cooking small amounts (say a single portion of pasta or a casserole), a quality Thermos flask can be used in a similar way to a haybox, and it's great for taking on picnics and long car journeys. The principle is exactly the same as a haybox, but the technique is slightly different.

METHOD

- 1 Preheat the flask with boiling water and seal.
- 2 Bring the soup, pasta or casserole to the boil in a saucepan.
- 3 Empty the flask, carefully pour the contents of the saucepan into it, then reseal and leave to cook.

Don't forget that rice and pasta will expand as they cook, so never fill the flask to the brim, and exercise caution when opening it in case the flask has become pressurised.

