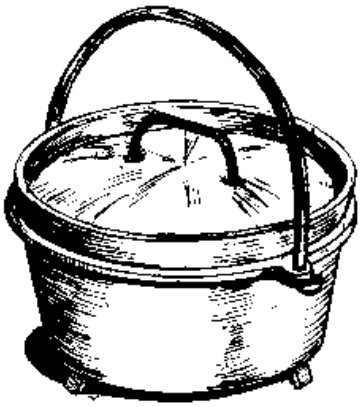
Dutch Oven Cooking

By George Denise



Dutch ovens were the cooking ovens of our pioneer forefathers. They hung them over the fireplaces in their Eastern colonials and wilderness log cabins. They carried them in their covered wagons and push carts as they headed west across the Great Plains. They cooked with them on their wood and buffalo chip stoves in their sod huts and dug outs on the prairies. They carried them in their chuck wagons on the great cattle drives. And they used them in their ranch houses and adobe homesteads when they got where they were going.

Once the basic cooking utensil of every kitchen, Dutch ovens were almost forgotten, except for a few diehard cowboys. But over the past couple of decades, Dutch ovens have been rediscovered by a cadre of weekend pioneers and a growing number of enthusiastic Scout leaders, too.

Why this growing interest in this throwback to the iron age in the age of the internet? Because it is fun, simple, entertaining, and if you do it right, the results often taste better than the product of their modern electronic counterparts. And it probably stirs some ancient memory in our own collective consciousness.

So How Do You Start?



Well, you are going to need to buy a Dutch oven. Quite a few possibilities here, but if you are going to cook over charcoal or briquettes, then you need one with three legs on the bottom, a bale or wire handle sturdy enough to allow you to lift the oven on and off the fire when it is full of beans or stew, and a handle in the middle of the lid for…, you guessed it, lifting the lid on and off the oven! Dutch ovens come in cast iron and cast aluminum. You won't see too many aluminum models around, however. They are lighter, but its not like we were going to take it backpacking anyway. And they don't have to be cured (but that's part of the fun.) But the food tastes a little different. And they just don't look right or seem right. So buy the cast iron.

You can find them at REI, Mel Cotton's, Stevens Creek Surplus, or you can buy one from the Scout Shop with a Boy Scouts of America fleur-de-lis cast in the lid – very cool! Lodge is probably the best known manufacturer of Dutch ovens, and makes a pretty good product consistently. Dutch ovens come in a variety of sizes, but a number 12 (12 inches across) is probably the best all around.



You are going to want to get some accessories to go with it. A charcoal starter, basically

a large can with a handle on it to contain the heat while you are lighting the charcoal. Or you can make one with an empty coffee can. Just punch holes in the sides all around the bottom using a can opener (the kind that make a small "V"-shaped hole in the can, like we used to open soda cans with before they invented pull tabs.) Use pliers to handle it. Using a charcoal starter just about halves the amount of time it takes to get the charcoal to the point where it is all light gray on the outside and ready to cook with.

You are also going to want a handle to lift the oven on and off of the coals, to lift the lid off of the oven, and a rack to set the lid on so it doesn't get dirty.



A set of tongs for moving the coals and placing them on the lid and removing them is also pretty handy (you can attempt to grab them and move them with your hands if you are really fast, but I don't recommend it).



Finally, a pair of leather gloves and an apron are recommended. Lodge makes a nice matching set of leather apron and gloves (in red, no less), but a pair of leather work gloves you pick up at the store and any apron will work just as well. You may want to buy welder's gloves, as they come up the arms further, offering a little more protection. Helps prevent that nasty smell of arm hair burning, too.



Finally, a small fireplace shovel to aid in moving charcoal around and a wisk broom for sweeping ashes off of the lid before you open it. (Though some actually like the taste of a few of the ashes in their meal.)

Curing Your Oven

Once you have your new oven, you will need to cure it. Often (but not always) it will come with a waxy finish which you will want to clean it with hot, soapy water. Now dry the oven thoroughly and warm it in the oven (not too hot or you won't be able to handle it easily. Then take it out, pour three or four tablespoons of cooking oil into it, and rub it all around with a piece of paper towel. Make sure you coat it entirely inside, and then outside too. If you have to add another tablespoon or two to get it completely coated. Now that it is coated, put it in the oven and heat it to 350 degrees F for about an hour. It will smoke and the kitchen will smell for a few hours afterward (opening the windows helps with this).

Curing turns the oil into a varnish, filling all of the pores and creating a smooth, relatively stick-free surface. Good cast iron skillets are maintained the same way. After several curings and/or cookings with the Dutch oven, it's color will change from flat gray, to shiny dark brown, to eventually shiny black.

Cleaning the Dutch Oven

Once your Dutch oven is cured, you want to avoid doing anything to damage or remove the cured surface. Scratching or scraping the inside of the Dutch oven with metal will remove the cured surface. Washing with hot, soapy water is controversial. I grew up with a grandmother that never washed her iron skillets with soap, only hot water. On the other hand, some Dutch oven gurus say it is OK. Personally, I agree with Gram. No soap! If you over cook and do stick food to the bottom, you can soak it in hot water, or even boil water in the oven. Some also turn the oven over and lay it on the fire and burn the food out. Some do – not me. I've found a little warm water and a wooden spatula or a scrubby sponge developed for Teflon pans works just fine. If you do loose your cured surface, simply cure it again. It's that easy.

Let's Cook

Ok, now we are ready to cook! As with everything else, the experts disagree on the right number of charcoal coals or briquettes to use. Generally, use two briquettes for every inch of diameter. For a number 12 oven, use 24 briquettes. This should give you a cooking temperature of about 350 degrees, by the way.



The next question is, how many briquettes do you put under the oven, and how many on top?

For foods you wish to simmer, such as soups, stews, and chili; place 1/3 of the total briquettes on the lid and 2/3 under the oven.

For baking, such as breads, rolls, biscuits, cakes, pies and cobblers (rising); place 2/3 of the total briquettes on the lid and 1/3 underneath the oven.

For foods you wish to roast, such as meats, poultry, casseroles, quiche, vegetables, and cobblers (non-rising); use an even distribution of briquettes on the lid and underneath the oven.

Underneath the pot, place the charcoal in a ring about one inch in from the outside edge, evenly space all the way around. This will keep from forming a hot spot in the middle of the oven. On the lid, space the briquettes evenly all over the lid.

Most recipes will tell you how long to cook it. I always start checking the food fifteen minutes before it is to be ready, and about every five minutes thereafter until it is ready. For baked foods, sticking a straw or toothpick sized stick into it is a good test. When it comes out clean and dry, the recipe is ready.

Recipes

Lazy Cobbler, Peach

Ingredients:

2 large cans sliced peaches
1 package white or yellow cake mix
½ cube of margarine
small can of cinnamon

Fill starter can with charcoal briquettes, coat briquettes with charcoal lighter fluid, or place kindling in with charcoal, light, and let burn until 2/3rds of charcoal is light gray (about 15 minutes).

Place 8 charcoal briquettes in tight circle, place Dutch oven on top of briquettes, centered over them. Pour about three tablespoons of cooking oil in the oven and spread all around with a paper towel.

When oven is pre-heated, pour whole cans of peaches with juice into oven. Sprinkle dry cake mix evenly over the top of the peaches. Place slices of margarine evenly spaced on top of cake mix. Sprinkle cinnamon over entire mixture.

Cover the oven with the lid, and place 16 briquettes, evenly spaced, on top of the lid.

Bake for about 45 minutes. When done, peach juices will have bubbled up into cake mix, and cake mix will be browned on top (but not burnt). Allow to cool for about 15 minutes. Goes great with homemade vanilla ice cream.

Pineapple Upside Down Cake

Ingredients:

¼ cup margarine
½ cup brown sugar
1 can sliced pineapple
1 yellow cake mix
1 egg
1 jar maraschino cherries

Fill starter can with charcoal briquettes, coat briquettes with charcoal lighter fluid, or place kindling in with charcoal, light, and let burn until 2/3rds of charcoal is light gray (about 15 minutes).

Place 8 charcoal briquettes in tight circle, place Dutch oven on top of briquettes, centered over them. Pour about three tablespoons of cooking oil in the oven and spread all around with a paper towel.

Place butter and brown sugar in the oven and stir until well melted and mixed. Place as many of the pineapple slices as you can in the butter and sugar mixture in the bottom of the oven, forming a single layer of pineapple slices with none overlapping.

Place one maraschino cherry in the hole of each pineapple slice, and in the spaces formed between the pineapple slices.

In a separate bowl, mix the cake mix with the egg, as directed on the package. Pour the batter evenly over the pineapples.

Cover the oven with the lid, and place 16 briquettes, evenly spaced, on top of the lid.

Bake for about 30 to 40 minutes. Check cake for doneness by inserting a straw and pulling it out. If it is dry when it comes out, the cake is done.

Allow cake to cool for about 15 minutes. Cut away from the side all the way around the inside. Then, hold a cookie sheet or piece of strong cardboard on top of the oven, quickly turn the oven over and bang it down so the cake falls evenly onto the board.

Baked Chicken

Ingredients:

4 medium-size chicken quarters
salt & pepper
½ stick margarine
Optional:
¾ cup ketchup
one can Coke

Fill starter can with charcoal briquettes, coat briquettes with charcoal lighter fluid, or place kindling in with charcoal, light, and let burn until 2/3rds of charcoal is light gray (about 15 minutes).

Place 8 charcoal briquettes in tight circle, place Dutch oven on top of briquettes, centered over them. Pour about three tablespoons of cooking oil in the oven and spread all around with a paper towel.

When oven is pre-heated (about 15 minutes), place chicken quarters in Dutch oven. Add salt and pepper. Cut up ½ margarine stick and place slices throughout oven.

Cover the oven with the lid, place 16 briquettes spaced evenly on lid. Cook slowly for about 35 to 40 minutes. Chicken is done when meat is white all the way to the bone.

For barbeque chicken, mix ¾ cup ketchup with one can of Coke and pour over chicken at start of cooking.

Breakfast Burritos

Ingredients:

1 lb. pork sausage links or patties

1 box frozen hash browns
12 eggs
½ lb. shredded cheddar cheese
salt and pepper

Fill starter can with charcoal briquettes, coat briquettes with charcoal lighter fluid, or place kindling in with charcoal, light, and let burn until 2/3rds of charcoal is light gray (about 15 minutes).

Place 8 charcoal briquettes in tight circle, place Dutch oven on top of briquettes, centered over them. Pour about three tablespoons of cooking oil in the oven and spread all around with a paper towel.

When oven is pre-heated (about 15 minutes), cut or tear sausage into little pieces and dump into oven.

Stir until sausage is cooked (or heated if using precooked sausage)

Add hash browns; stir and fry until hash browns are browned.

Remove from coals.

Mix eggs and pour over top of potato/sausage base.

Season with salt and pepper.

Cover the oven with the lid, place 16 briquettes spaced evenly on lid to cook slowly from above for about ten to fifteen minutes.

When eggs are cooked, sprinkle cheese, cover and cook for five more minutes to melt the cheese.

Serve on cold or heated tortillas to make breakfast burritos.

Cowboy Stew

Ingredients:
2 lbs. ground beef
1 tablespoon margarine
2 15 oz. Cans of Dennison's chili beans

Fill starter can with charcoal briquettes, coat briquettes with charcoal lighter fluid, or place kindling in with charcoal, light, and let burn until 2/3rds of charcoal is light gray (about 15 minutes).

Place 10 charcoal briquettes in tight circle, place Dutch oven on top of briquettes, centered over them. Pour about three tablespoons of cooking oil in the oven and spread all around with a paper towel.

When oven is pre-heated, brown beef in margarine in uncovered oven. Add beans.

Cover the oven with the lid, and cook slowly for about 15 to 20 minutes (do not place briquettes on top of lid).

Trailside beans

1/2 pound bacon, sliced in small pieces
1/2 pound ground beef
1/2 diced onion1 diced red bell pepper
1 diced green bell pepper
Two 33-oz. cans of pork and beans
1/2 cup brown sugar
1/4 cup of Worcestershire sauce
2 Tablespoons of white vinegar

Cook bacon and ground beef well in a 12-inch Dutch oven. Use 24 coals all on the bottom to start, then separate and place the coals as noted earlier during the baking stage. Before removing excess oil, sauté diced onion, diced red bell pepper, and diced green bell pepper with the meats until the onions and peppers are soft. Drain off excess oil. Add pork and beans, brown sugar, Worcestershire sauce, and white vinegar. Stir well, place lid on oven, and cook with repositioned coals for 90 to 120 minutes.

Check for moisture content every 15 to 20 minutes. (Some ovens allow too much moisture to escape.) If there is not a soupy layer of liquid covering the beans, add water, a little at a time, and stir to maintain the moisture content.

Eat this with hot biscuits and jam, and you'll understand why cowboys always looked so happy on those long, hard, dusty cattle drives.

Dutch Oven Pot Roast

Ingredients:
2 Tbs. bacon grease or olive oil
2 tsp. dry rosemary; rubbed
2 med. Yellow onions
5 cloves garlic; sliced
3 – 4 lb. beef chuck roast
salt and pepper to taste
3 Tbs. brown sugar
1 Tbs. soy sauce
1 bay leaf
1 stp. Black pepper
lbs. ground beef
1 tablespoon margarine
2 15 oz. Cans of Dennison's chili beans
¼ cup honey barbecue sauce
2 Tbs. red wine vinegar
1 Tbs. balsamic vinegar
1-2 lbs. baby carrots
6-8 medium red potatoes; skins on, cut into chunks
1 tsp. thyme
1 Tbs. parsley flakes

Fill starter can with charcoal briquettes, coat briquettes with charcoal lighter fluid, or place kindling in with charcoal, light, and let burn until 2/3rds of charcoal is light gray (about 15 minutes).

Place 20 charcoal briquettes in tight circle, place Dutch oven on top of briquettes, centered over them.

When oven is hot, add bacon grease or olive oil, rosemary, and onions; cook 2-3 minutes until you start to see a little color on the onions then add the garlic. Cook for 1 minute longer.

In a large measuring cup combine the beef stock, barbecue sauce, red wine vinegar, balsamic vinegar, brown sugar, soy sauce, bay leaf, and black pepper; stir to mix then pour juice slowly into the oven.

Season the roast with salt and pepper then add roast to oven and cover with as many of the onions as you can.

Replace the lid then reduce the number of coals on bottom to 10 and place 14-16 coals on the lid. Cook for 30 minutes rotating oven every 15 minutes.

After 30 minutes add carrots and potatoes. Season with salt, pepper, thyme, and parsley flakes.

Replace the lid and continue baking for 45-60 minutes until vegetables are fork tender.

Sourdough White Bread

Ingredients:

1 1/2 to 2 cups sourdough culture
1 tsp salt
1 cup water
2 cups flour

Mix ingredients and knead for at least 10 minutes.

Shape the loaf into a rounded disk and set in a greased 12" Dutch oven. Put the lid on and set the Dutch oven in a warm, but not hot location. Move into the sun if it is too cool. Keep an eye on it and move it back to the shade if it is getting too hot.

After about 2 hours of rising, it is ready to cook.

Use about 7-8 briquettes on the bottom (for a 12" oven) and 14-16 on the top.

Cook the bread for about 1 hour.

Open the oven often during the cooking process to check on the progress.

Beware that the top may look great while the bottom is burning charcoal black! Better to have too little heat on the bottom than too much!

Making Sourdough Culture

Starter - This is a mix of flour and water with yeast spores living in it.

Sponge - This is the starter mixed with more flour and water, used when making your dough.

The starter is a living entity; it eats and grows. The yeast spores eat the flour and their waste products are carbon dioxide and alcohol.

A well-tended starter will continue to live and grow for a long time. There are many documented cases of a starter being kept alive well over one hundred years. As long as the starter is fed and not frozen or heated over 100 degrees, it will thrive.

Making your starter

Unless you live in a completely sterile house, there are yeast spores floating around in the air in your home. We are going to capture a few to make our sourdough starter. You will need:

2 cups unbleached all-purpose flour

2 cups of warm water

If your water has a lot of chlorine in it, use bottled spring water. Mix the flour and water into a batter resembling pancake batter. Put it in a plastic, glass or glazed crockery container with a wide mouth. Never put sourdough starter in a metal container or stir it with a metal tool.

Set the sourdough container in a warm place, uncovered. In four or five days it should start to bubble up and smell sour. When it does, you have successfully made starter.

Feeding your starter

The starter is a living thing, and it must be fed regularly. When your starter has reached the bubbly stage described above, add one cup of flour and one cup of warm water. Mix the flour and water well before you add it to prevent lumps. You can now put a loose fitting cover on your starter container. If you seal it tight, the expanding gases might explode the container or pop the top off.

Your starter should bubble up and nearly double in size in an hour or so depending on the room temperature and the strength of your starter. Allow for expansion when you choose your container. About a quart size should

be okay. When the starter has bubbled up and "grown", if you are not going to use it right away, you can store it in the icebox being careful not to let it freeze. After a week or so, you need to take the starter out of the icebox and feed it again. Let it come to room temperature and then mix in the cup of flour and cup of warm water. If the liquid starts to separate from the starter, just stir it in. It's part of the process.

Making the sponge

The night before baking day, take your starter and pour it in a large bowl. Wash the starter container and set it aside to dry. In another bowl, mix two cups of flour and two cups of warm water. When this is well mixed, add it to the starter in the big bowl. Again, mix the flour and water well before adding it to the starter. If you try mixing it directly into the starter you will have a lumpy mess.

Cover the bowl with a towel to keep it clean. The surrounding temperature should be about 75 degrees. Overnight it will have doubled in size and is ready to use.

Measure out the amount of sponge called for in the recipe and return the rest to the clean storage container, feed it and then you can return it to the icebox.