

Slow cooker cheat sheet

If you're just want a hot meal ready and waiting as soon as you get home from work at the expense of some flavour, then the slow cooker is going to deliver that for you.

However:

1. Slow cooking does tend to mitigate flavour resulting in bland or bitter notes
2. Low temperature cooking means starches and gelatine are not activated with thinner results and watery sauces or gravies
3. There is no evaporation to concentrate sauces and no caramelization to deepen and enrich flavours so finished dishes lack depth, umami and can be colourless and watery

To improve your slow cooker meals:

- Intensely browning meats and vegetables in a separate pan before adding them to the slow cooker can improve depth of flavour and the appearance to some degree.
- Finishing with bright, flavour-enhancing ingredients can inject a burst of flavour to counter the blandness.
- Savoury ingredients, like soy sauce, fish sauce, Marmite, or Worcestershire sauce, can add some of the umami depth you're missing.
- Acidic ingredients like vinegar and lemon juice can brighten up flavours that have been dulled by hours of slow steaming and simmering.
- Add arrowroot or corn flour to thicken sauces.
- For creamy soups, plan to puree a portion of the soup at the end and stir it back into the crock to thicken the entire batch.
- Firm produce like potatoes, turnips, carrots, and parsnips take longer to cook than most meats, so they should sit at the bottom of the slow cooker.
- Instead of grinding peppercorns, crush them in a mortar so they release their flavour slowly as the dish cooks. So too with seeds such as cumin, fennel, coriander.
- With rosemary and thyme, use fresh rather than dried and toss the whole stem in, along with the leaves. The stem cooks slowly, releasing flavour and keeping the dish seasoned.
- Keep the lid ON! Frequently lifting the lid will reduce the cooking temperature even further and may affect the results.

Stovetop Time: 15 – 30 mins = Crockpot: 1 – 2 hours on High, or 4 – 6 hours on Low

Stovetop Time: 30 mins – 1 hour = Crockpot: 2 – 3 hours on High, or 5 – 7 hours on Low

Stovetop Time: 1 – 2 hours, = Crockpot: 3 – 4 hours on High, or 6 – 8 hours on Low

Stovetop Time: 2 – 3 hours = Crockpot: 4 – 6 hours on High, or 8 – 12 hours on Low

Chicken – high for a shorter time – 4-5 hours

Beef – lower and slower – 8 hours

Mince use lean mince

If you want a really good fall off the bone leg of lamb or other nice quality cut of meat, use the oven rather than the slow cooker.

While the conventional oven or pressure cooker produce tastier versions quicker there's no better device for keeping things like mulled wine, stews, soups, chilies, dips, and cheese sauces hot at a buffet table, where guests are going to be dipping repeatedly over the course of several hours. There's very little reduction going on, and because of the slow, even heat dispersal of ceramic, there's virtually no chance that your sauces are going to burn or brown.

Slow cookers are also great for making large batches of caramelized onions. It takes a long time, but it's essentially a set-it-and-forget-it technique. Fill up the crock with sliced onions, add a few knobs of butter, season with salt, turn it on, and leave it alone until the onions are as dark as you like. You won't develop quite the same flavour as you'll get with onions caramelized the traditional way but you don't have to stand over it.

Dulce de Leche is really easy in the slow cooker. Remove the labels from cans of condensed milk. Fill the slow cooker with water so it covers the cans and cook on high for 5 hours. Store unopened in the pantry till needed.