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Subject: "QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS." Information from the Office of Experiment Stations, United States Department of Agriculture.

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Once again, foods and cookery questions fill up the week's mailbag. The answers to these questions come from various State experiment stations.

Writes one listener: "Can you tell me why my pressure cooker has taken on an unpleasant stale odor? I even notice the same sort of flavor in the food I cook in it."

Answer: The trouble may be that you have kept your cooker closed from the air when not in use--or that you haven't cleaned it thoroughly. Your cooker needs to be washed with warm soapsuds, rinsed with boiling water, and dried after each use. When you put it away, leave the cover off--or set it on upside down so air can reach the interior. Slip a paper bag over it to keep out dust. This kind of care prevents a stale odor and taste.

Mr. Baragar who made a study of pressure cookers at the Nebraska Station says that careful cleaning is important to keep a cooker in good working order. He advises giving special attention to cleaning the rims of the cooker and cover. (A brush helps here.) If the rim is dirty or greasy, the cooker won't seal tightly. But be careful not to dent or mar the rim as you clean, since this also spoils the seal. The safety valve is another part that Mr. Baragar says needs careful cleaning. Dirt in the valve may cause it to stick and perhaps keep the steam from escaping when the pressure goes too high. (That makes it an unsafe valve.) Use silver polish to keep the valve and valve-seat clean and afterward dry them so they won't rust. Be sure the petcock is kept clean and working freely as well as the opening into the pressure gauge. The pressure gauge itself, of course, should never go in water.

By the way, listeners have complained about the same stale odor in thermos bottles and fireless cooking containers. The remedy is the same: Keep them clean and open to the air.

Second question: "My family likes home-baked beans. I've been preparing this dish for years but for some strange reason, since we moved into another part of the country, I can't cook the beans tender, even though I soak them and then boil them hours on end. Have you any idea what the trouble is?"

Answer: I have an idea that the trouble is a change of water. If you are used to cooking dried beans in soft water, you'll notice quite a difference with hard water. The mineral salts in water harden or toughen the skin of the bean and prevent it from absorbing water and cooking tender. Sometimes, too, bean skins may be naturally hard if they contain a good deal of calcium, or they may have hardened in storage.

If possible, soak and cook dried beans in soft water, softened water or even rain water. But if you must use hard water, a little soda will help. Soak the beans in warm or hot water containing baking soda--about a teaspoon and a half of soda in 5 cups of warm water. Soda helps soften the skin both in soaking and in cooking, but unfortunately, it also destroys vitamin B in the beans. Soda in the cooking water--a little too much of it--spoils both the taste and color of the beans, so you'll play safe if you use it only for soaking. After a 5 or 6-hour soak, the beans should take up their own weight in water. Then boil them gently in a covered kettle for 2 hours, or less if they are tender in a shorter time.

Most cookbooks say to bake beans in a slow oven 8 or 10 hours. But cookery experts at the Nebraska and New Mexico stations have found that long, slow baking uses up a great deal of fuel and isn't necessary. They had just as good results from baking beans a much shorter time in a hotter oven--an oven registering 400 to 450 degrees. But in a hotter oven, you need to use more water so the beans won't burn before they are done.

If you are using molasses or tomato in your baked beans, add it toward the last of the baking, for molasses contains calcium which may harden the skins, and tomatoes contain acid which may do the same thing.

Here's an inquiry from a farm housewife about aging cured ham. She says: "We have always aged our hams by storing them 2 years or more in our cold cellar. I understand that there is a new way of aging them in a much shorter time."

Yes, the Maryland Station found that hams stored in a very warm place--an attic, say, where the temperature was as high as 107--salt-cured hams stored in a warm place will take on an excellent aged flavor in as short a time as 10 weeks. After being properly cured with salt, the hams will not spoil, so they do not need to be kept in a cold cellar.

Here's a potato cookery question: "What's the best way to cook potatoes so they will be mealy?"

Answer: Baked or boiled potatoes are most likely to be mealy. Boiled potatoes are best if you drop them in rapidly boiling salted water and keep the water boiling gently until they are done. (Simmering makes them soggy, you see, while very fast boiling may break them up.) After cooking, drain the potatoes well, then return them to the stove to dry off a few minutes with only a cloth over them.

Baked potatoes are mealiest if you crush them open as soon as they are done and return them to the oven to dry off.

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Which reminds me/the last question for today: "What causes white potatoes and rice to turn yellowish or even greenish during boiling?"

Answer: Hard water containing alkali salts and perhaps some iron. Keep your potatoes and rice white by using a little cream of tartar, or even vinegar or lemon juice in the cooking water.

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