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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Monday, December 28, 1931.

(NOT FOR PUBLICATION)

Subject: "Cooking by the Thermometer." Information from the Bureau of Home Economics, U.S.D.A.

Bulletin available: "Cooking Beef According to the Cut", "Lamb as You Like It", "Pork In Preferred Ways", and "Cooking Cured Pork."

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Old Mrs. Padgett, whom I often used to visit when I was a child, had a favorite remark that she always made when we discussed the subject of cooking. She used to say, "Good cooks, dearie, get on by good luck and good guessing."

Mrs. Padgett was considered one of the best cooks in the town. She rarely had a failure of any sort. Yet once in a while the cake fell or the icing came out soft and sticky or the roast was too rare. Then she would exclaim, "Oh, mercy me. This must be an unlucky day." Or else she would say, "I guessed wrong about that oven. It wasn't hot enough."

From long experience, however, Mrs. Padgett generally knew when the oven was the right temperature by putting her hand in, and as she said, "getting the feel of it." And she could tell from years of practice when the syrup for the frosting threaded just right and when the roast was done.

"How do you know when things are done?" I used to ask, sitting on her high stool and watching as she tried the cake with a straw or dropped silver threads of syrup from her spoon.

"It takes a long time to learn to guess right, little lady," she would say. "And while you're learning you have to make mistakes. That's just part of the game. Even now, when I've been cooking these fifty years or more, I have bad luck every now and then."

That was Mrs. Padgett's way of explaining that the housekeeper of former days learned to cook by the trial and error method--learning through mistakes. She had to learn to cook that way because no easier way had been discovered. But a lot of good food was wasted along the line, and so were time and energy. The modern housekeeper is more fortunate. With her standard measuring cups, her accurate modern recipes, her efficient utensils and regulated ovens, she doesn't have to make a guessing game of preparing food. Even the beginner these days can be reasonably sure of success because she has good, sensible and scientific methods to guide her.

R-H.C. 12/28/31

In an old cookbook that I was looking at the other day I read these directions: "Bake in an afternoon oven until done."

An afternoon oven

"Gracious," I said to myself, "No wonder old Mrs. Padgett said cooking was a matter of luck and guesswork. How would any housewife know how hot an afternoon oven was? It's even difficult, especially for a beginner, to know just how hot a 'moderate' oven should feel or what the cookbook means exactly when it says, 'Bake in a quick oven.'"

Thermometers are one of the modern methods of taking the guesswork out of cooking. The reason is that with a thermometer you can tell the exact temperature. In baking, roasting, deep-fat frying and in making candy and cake icings, the right temperature spells success. If the heat is a little above or a little below the right point, failure may result.

The old methods of telling temperature were many and varied. You tested the oven with your hand or with a piece of paper, the kettle of fat by browning a piece of bread, the icing by the way it formed a thread and so forth. These as I said were the best methods housekeepers in the past had, and they are still widely used. But they did require a good deal of guesswork and housekeepers had to learn to judge by experience.

Today, however, experts in cookery have given up inexact methods. They are using thermometers and can be sure of their temperature. With a thermometer in the oven, it is no longer necessary to wonder just how hot a "moderate" or a "slow" or a "quick" oven should feel. Modern cookbooks also give accurate temperatures when they give directions. For example, the directions for cooking a tender roast will read: "Sear in a very hot oven, 500 degrees Fahrenheit, until a golden brown crust is formed over the roast. Then reduce the temperature of the oven 300 degrees Fahrenheit for slow roasting." That tells the whole story, you see. Both the figures and the description are given. Even a beginner at cooking could scarcely go astray, if she relied on a thermometer and has directions like that.

Many ovens in our modern stoves are provided with heat indicators. If yours hasn't one, you can use one of those accurate, compact thermometers on a little standard that can be set in on the oven rack.

Some women prefer to buy three separate thermometers, each made for a special type of cooking. For baking, there is the oven thermometer on a standard. For sugar cooking and deep-fat frying, there is a thermometer made with a strong protecting metal case that hooks on the side of the kettle. For roasting, there is a short tube thermometer to insert inside the roast of meat and tell exactly the degree of doneness in the center.

Over at the Bureau of Home Economics all the roasting of the meat is done with a thermometer. Shall I tell you how the specialists there recommend roasting beef at home? You may want to follow the same method next time you have a Sunday roast, or for your New Years' dinner.

First thing, of course, you should wipe off the roast with a damp cloth and then sprinkle the meat with salt, pepper and flour. Then place it in a shallow roasting pan without water. No water and no cover over the pan. Oh, just a minute. Let me stop here long enough to describe the roast before we go further. To cook nicely, a rib roast should be at least two ribs wide. Have the butcher leave the rib bones whole, not even cracking the rib ends. This is you see, to be a real standing rib cut. The tip of the ribs rests on the pan at one end and the backbone at the other. The layer of fat over the lean meat is like a self-baster. No need to open the oven and baste the meat every now and then. The layer of fat will do it for you automatically. A short tube thermometer is thrust into the center of the lean part of the beef--sometimes called the eye of the beef. This thermometer is going to decide when the meat is done.

Well, here's the roast all ready for the oven. The oven that it goes into is very hot--500 degrees Fahrenheit, to be exact. It stays in that hot oven for about 25 minutes, during which time a crust is formed over the meat that will hold in the juices. After that the oven heat is reduced quickly by turning down the gas flame and leaving the oven door open a few minutes. The roasting will now continue slowly with the oven temperature down to 300 degrees.

When the thermometer in the meat registers 160 degrees, the cooking will be finished. That is, if you like beef medium rather than rare or very well done. If you have a meat thermometer, you can tell exactly when your roast is done to the stage you prefer it, but, with or without a thermometer time is always a useful guide. It usually takes about 22 minutes to the pound for a medium done rib roast when the bones are left in and these oven temperatures are used. And if you use a moderate temperature for most of the roasting, and an open pan with no water, your meat will be juicy, too. If there is water and a closed pan, the steam formed washes lots of the juices into the gravy.

Well, there's the story of a roast of meat. If you have a roast for New Years' day, this story may suggest ways of making it especially delicious. If you want more information on the same subject, remember those nice little meat leaflets that are all ready to help you. Just send a postcard asking for the lamb leaflet or the beef leaflet or the leaflets on pork--fresh and cured or--But there. I've said that lots of times before and I'll probably say it lots of times in the future and it's getting nearly time for me to stop.

So let me tell you about tomorrow before it's too late. I'm not giving you a menu today, because I have a very special one all ready for tomorrow. And on Wednesday I'll have suggestions for New Years' dinner.

Tomorrow I have for you a menu for a progressive supper. Ever give one? This is a pleasant way to while away the hours waiting for the new year and seeing the old year out. Something different, too, if you're tired of the same old kind of party, yet don't know how to make it novel. Please bring pencils tomorrow. And again on Wednesday.

