

Microwave Lover

In the beginning, I hadn't really wanted one. I believed all the scientific reports about microwaves rearranging molecules in foods and causing sterility. Finally, I decided to get one; after all, I was past the childbearing age and since all my friends had microwaves, if they died, I didn't want to be the only one left behind to tend their pets and house plants.

After a visit to the local library where I read Consumer Reports' evaluations about this popular kitchen appliance, I went shopping and found the perfect one, for \$140, and brought it home.

I carefully read the instruction book that came with it. "Great for cooking rice" (a staple in my house) the guide says. I'm hopeful. If it cooks rice, it'll be a boon to my pot washing requirements since I usually forget to turn down the flame before it burns the bottom layer of rice.

I soon learned that rice takes just as long to cook in the microwave and doesn't taste as good. Or, is it that I miss the ritual of preparing rice the old fashion way? Anyway, I scrap that idea. I do find the microwave great for heating up leftovers. Hmmm. Maybe a microwave cook-book will broaden my microwaving horizon.

At the bookstore, I find a whole shelf of microwave cookbooks. Richard Deacon's Microwave Cookery has a chart for every vegetable I eat (and some I'll never eat) so I purchase a copy. Within a few weeks, I grow to love my microwave and regret not having purchased one years ago. Soon, I progress from heating up leftovers to cooking vegetables, potatoes, bacon, sausage. I pre-cook everything I broil or bake. I also freeze everything, assured that my microwave can thaw anything in less than 15 minutes. I take pride in my ability to make gourmet meals in 30 minutes. I use my microwave daily: boil water for my tea, take the chill out of cold fruit, warm plates before serving. . . bring my nightly brownie treat to perfect consistency with 15 seconds in the zapper. (I quickly discover that too many minutes in the microwave will reduce my brownie to an soupy, brown blob.)

Three years pass and I buy my second supply of microwave-safe casserole dishes. Then, it happens. Amidst a raging snowstorm, my microwave stops working! I had gone grocery shopping the day before, in anticipation of the weatherman's dire predictions, and frozen everything I bought. Roads are impassible, but I'm willing to go out to buy a new microwave -- at any price. I call my favorite appliance store. It's closed, as are all others I call. I'm distraught.

"Let's just have leftovers and go buy one tomorrow," my husband says, trying to console me. I open the refrigerator and peer inside. Leftovers? What leftovers? Enough broccoli for one person. . . one wrinkled potato. . . I muster my inner resources. Hey, I still know how to rattle those pots and pans and the freezer is well stocked.

From the freezer, I remove the swordfish steak I'd anticipated having for dinner, and a lemon. Both are rock hard. Thank God I separated the fish into two parts before I froze it. I light my gas oven -- is 375 degrees too high? -- put the rock inside and close the door. Should I put the mustard and lemon juice on while it's still frozen or wait until it starts to thaw? I lay the frozen lemon on the shelf alongside the swordfish, then put rice to cook on top of the stove. That familiar act calms me.

"Come read the comics while things cook," my husband calls out. Before I go into the living room, I punch a few combinations on the microwave's control pad, press start and wait. Nothing happens. Its digital clock runs just fine, however. It is six o'clock.

Twenty minutes later, the rice is almost done, but the swordfish is still hard in the middle. I pry its center open and squeeze lemon juice onto its surface.

"How long until we eat?" my husband asks.

I walk into the living room and glare at him. "I'm not rushing you," he says defensively, "I just want to know how soon I should set the table."

"Seven?" he repeats after me. "That long?"

"Thought you weren't rushing me?" I say and return to the kitchen where I stare at my microwave, longing for its familiar hum. My stomach growls. I'm hungry too. I'd forgotten how long it takes to cook things the conventional way -- especially frozen things. I dunk a package of frozen green beans in a pot and cover it with an inch of water and a lid. I dump the broccoli in a similar pot and turn a low flame under it.

"What's that smell?" my husband asks a short while later. I run into the kitchen and snatch the smoking pot of broccoli from the stove. Its charred remains give the house an unpleasant odor. The swordfish is done but the string beans are still hard.

"I didn't put enough water in the pot when I warmed up the broccoli," I say to my husband who now stands at the kitchen door.

"Oh," is all he says and begins to remove dinner dishes from the cabinet.

"You haven't lost your touch. Everything's delicious," my husband says later, as he wolfs down the meal. "I was starved."

"Three times as long to cook it, and you eat it in one-third the time," I say. He shrugs. Later, I eat my evening brownie frozen. It's not bad, just chewy. Sleet blows against the windowpanes. I wonder if stores will open, and the roads will be passable the next day. I settle in to read the Times and search for microwave ads. I find none.

Next morning, things are just as bad. The ground outside is snow covered and the local radio station reports school closings everywhere. We are stranded at home. I head into the kitchen hoping that by some miracle my nightmare is over. It continues: my microwave is truly dead. I begin making breakfast. I pull a stainless-steel pot from the cabinet, fill it with water, and adjust a flame under it.

A year ago when I broke my stove-top carafe, I didn't replace it since it was easier to boil a cup of water directly in the microwave. Today, I'm sorry I didn't. I take a bagel for my husband and my preservative-free morning muffin from zip lock bags in the freezer. A serrated edge knife slices them both and I place the parts on the shelf of the toaster. Think ahead, I warn myself, and take two chicken breasts from the freezer. They'll thaw in plenty of time for dinner.

Throughout the day, every time I pass the microwave, I punch another combination of buttons, hoping that it will, miraculously, bring the machine to life again. Though the buttons make noisy contact, the machine doesn't respond further. I ignore my husband's laughter in the distance.

My stepdaughter calls and when I relate my predicament, she offers to give me her microwave, which she doesn't use. However, she can't bring it over until the next day. How will I survive that long? I wonder.

The next morning, roads are passable, and I consider going out to buy a microwave, but I don't want to snub my stepdaughter's offer. In anticipation of her arrival, I do not remove anything from the freezer. Near dinner time, I grow anxious. She finally arrives and presents me with my replacement microwave. I thank her, though I am disappointed: her microwave is smaller than my old one and has a rotating carousel that is too small to accommodate the new microwave-safe dishes I just bought. I sigh and put them on a top shelf in the kitchen cabinet. Maybe I'll use them for conventional cooking in the oven. Hey, who am I kidding? I'll never cook "conventionally" again. I plunk a slab of salmon filet on a plate, douse it with lemon juice and ginger, then place the plate on the turntable. When I press the start button, an electric hum fills my kitchen. I smile as I peer through the glass window and watch the plate rotate. The turntable is an unexpected boon. A nice improvement. One I would never have considered. Maybe this mechanical failure has a bright side to it.

"Dinner will be ready in a half hour," I announce, as I wrap three potatoes in waxed paper, ready for their turn in the microwave while the salmon gets a final browning under the broiler. Ah, the joy of modern inventions. Maybe I'll buy a spare microwave and store it in the garage so I'll never be microwave-less again.