

# Dutch Ovens

By Tailgunner

When the early pioneers traveled across the plains to the west they used a number of things such as lumbering prairie schooners, teams of oxen, wooden water barrels and kegs to store things like flour and powder. Most of these have since changed over the years. However, there is one very popular indispensable cooking tool which thousands of people are still using in everyday activities especially in the outdoors or while camping. Dutch ovens look the same as they did a hundred and fifty years ago, they are still made basically the same way and the food cooked in them is wonderful. Explorers like Lewis & Clark, Jim Bridger and many others used both the kettle versions and the standard three-legged, flat top with a rim version. They will make breads, tasty fruit cobblers and delicious stews among other things. In fact you can cook just about any dish you would cook at home "in the woods".

Pioneer trains gearing up near Independence, Missouri were given a list of essentials with the Dutch oven at the top of the list. They can be used over coals from a campfire or in a fireplace or by using charcoal briquettes outdoors. They are very simple to use tools. And if taken care of, will last for many generations. My family used a Dutch oven without legs in the kitchen and it was the only way to make stews. Scouts use the ones with legs at summer camp and love the flavor of food cooked outdoors in a Dutch oven (course the scouts I know would eat and like anything as long as you told them it was food).

If you are thinking of getting one a few hints are in order: First you need to first determine what size you would want to use. The 8" is just about too small even for a couple but can be useful to cook small deserts. The 10" Dutch oven with legs is great for a family of three or four and is very versatile. The 12" is the most versatile and is good for larger groups like 6-8 people, where-as the big 14" is really for even larger groups of 10-15 people. The most useful to me are the 10" and 12" models. They come in cast iron and cast aluminum, I recommend the cast iron, unless weight is an big issue in which case the aluminum may be an acceptable choice (however, aluminum doesn't heat evenly quite as well as the cast iron, nor does it retain heat very long). I had an aluminum one for a few years and it just didn't taste the same and was a bit more finicky to cook with. I got rid of it and bought a cast iron one. I recommend the Lodge brand but there are many really great ones out there. You can find them sometimes at garage sales (rarely), hardware stores or at outdoor supply stores. Dutch ovens have a flat bottom sitting on three short legs protruding about an inch and a half. They usually have a heavy gauge strong wire bail and the lid is made of the same heavy cast iron material with a small loop handle in the center. The rim of the lid is usually flanged so that hot coals will stay on the lid while cooking. Look for one with a strong wire bail handle that moves easily and a lid that has a lip around the top edge (this helps to keep any coals from rolling off during cooking or when you lift the lid). Some brands have lids that do not have the ridge and have dimples on the underside of the lid to help condense steam and drip back down on your food, but these can't be used as a frying pan and the ridge or flange is important.

Tools that you will find useful include: A pair of thick leather gloves for moving the hot oven from the cooking area to the picnic table or elsewhere; a pair of heavy pliers (the boy scouts have

an aluminum pair with angled jaws that are most useful with Dutch ovens), used to lift the hot lid and set it aside on stones (to keep the bottom of the lid clean) or bricks next to the fire, it also has a hook on the end of one handle that makes carrying the oven to the table much easier; you can get larger lid lifters that cost more and are bigger but they don't work a lot better; a small shovel or trowel is helpful in moving around the coals from either your fire or charcoal briquettes, you could use a set of barbeque tongs as well for this. If you get a Dutch Oven that does not have legs you might get some larger metal tent stakes and put three of them in a triangle pattern to support the oven over coals. If you do this take a second set of three and put the oven on the first set then pound in the second set just outside of the oven as blockers to keep the oven from sliding off of the first set.

After you determine which oven you want, and get it, you will need to season it. To do so first wash the oven with warm water and just a little mild soap to remove the waxy film put on the oven when it is packaged. Then rinse it in clean water and carefully dry it inside and out. Put a small amount of good vegetable oil or Crisco in the oven and wipe it over all of the surfaces, inside and out, the lid too. Place the oiled oven in your kitchen oven at 400 degrees for an hour, then turn off the heat and let cool in the oven. After letting it cool but while it is still warm coat it with oil or Crisco again and repeat the process. 400 degrees for an hour then turn the heat off and let it cool inside the oven. Be sure to have an open window near-by cause it will smoke up the place. When cool enough to touch wipe it down once more with oil on a paper towel and store with the lid propped open with a crumbled chunk of aluminum foil. The oven will have a brownish color to it. After many uses it will be black (this is good, it means it is well seasoned).

After each use of your Dutch oven, clean it. There are stories saying you just scrape it out and turn it upside down in the fire. That is how the early pioneers and mountain men supposedly cleaned their ovens. A Dutch oven can be cleaned like that, but it burns out all of the seasoning. Scrape the oven out with a plastic or wood spatula or spoon to remove most all of the stuck-on food, and boil an inch or two of water in the oven to steam it out (don't use soap or you will ruin it and have to clean it off and re-season it). This also gives you time to eat with everyone else. After the oven has steamed a while, scrub it with a green scrubby pad or a wood bristle kitchen brush, just to remove any remaining food particles, pour out the water and rinse with clean warm water. Then wipe it dry and coat it lightly with a good vegetable oil while the oven is still warm. Lastly place a wadded up piece of aluminum foil inside the oven so it hangs out a little. Then place the lid on the oven and put it away. The foil helps keep the lid slightly ajar for air movement.

Controlling the heat in a Dutch oven can be done in several ways, the one main and easiest way to test the temperature is to lift the lid. If the food is not cooking fast enough add some heat. If it's cooking too fast take off some heat. Remember, it's much easier to raise the temperature of cast iron than to lower it. Another good way to test the temperature is called the 2-3 briquette rule. Using this rule, you take the size of the oven and place that amount of briquettes on the lid and place that amount under the oven. Then take 2-3 briquettes from the bottom and move them to the top. This technique will maintain a temperature of 325E to 350E degrees. Refer to the table below for common oven sizes. For every 2 briquettes added or subtracted to/from this the net change is about 25E degrees.

Use this chart as a starting point and adjust from there!

Oven size	Briquettes on top	Briquettes on bottom
8"	10	6
10"	12	8
12"	14	10
14"	16	12

Remember that this would give the oven a cooking temperature of about 325E-350E. For every 2 coals added or subtracted to this amount, the temperature will be affected by about 25 degrees.

A couple general guidelines to use when experimenting with the Dutch oven include:

1. Soups or stews need more heat on the bottom than on the lid. Place 2/3 of the coals below and 1/3 of the coals on top.
2. For meat, poultry, potatoes, vegetables and cobblers use the chart above.
3. Cakes, bread, biscuits and cookies require most of the heat to be on top of the oven. Place 1/3 of the coals below and 2/3 of the coals on top.

You can even stack a couple of the ovens that have legs to conserve your briquettes. Remember to keep them shielded somewhat from wind or your heat will not be uniform (especially with the aluminum ovens).

There are a couple of other things to remember about temperature control. The first is that you can rotate your oven a third of a turn every ten minutes (may be necessary if you have a windy day, or you can just block the wind with something). And then rotate the lid a third of a turn the other direction (this is important if you use an aluminum oven, remember they don't radiate the heat as evenly). Next if you are baking bread, rolls, or cake remove the bottom heat after two thirds of the cooking time. It will finish cooking from the top heat (if you have an iron oven). This will keep it from burning on the bottom.

One last thing, when you are cooking something with a lot of sugar that might make a sticky mess of your oven you can line the inside of the oven with aluminum foil. Then when you are finished you can lift out the foil and throw it away.

Whatever you do, consider cooking with a Dutch oven. It could become as essential to you as it was to Lewis and Clark.

I have included a couple recipes that I have tried. You can cook just about anything in a Dutch Oven, finding and trying out recipes is half of the fun of owning a Dutch Oven.

### **Red Beans And Rice With Smoked Sausage**

1 lb Dried red beans (or Pink beans)

1 Garlic clove chopped

1 1/2 lb Smoked sausage cut into chunks

1 tsp Dried thyme

1 tsp Ground pepper

8 oz Smoked ham

1/2 tsp Sage

1 Large onion chopped

1 pinch Cayenne pepper

Salt

Freshly cooked rice

Place beans in Dutch oven and cover generously with water. Let soak 30 minutes. Add remaining ingredients to beans except salt and rice. Bring to boil over medium high heat.

Reduce heat to medium low, cover and simmer until beans are tender, adding more water if necessary (about 2 1/2 hours). Add salt to taste.

Remove about 3 tablespoons of beans from mixture and mash to paste; return to Dutch oven and stir. Simmer 15 more minutes.

Serve over hot rice.

### **Pinto Beans**

4 c Water

2 c Pinto Or Black Beans; 1 lb

1/2 c Onion; Chopped, 1 Med

1/4 c Vegetable Oil

1 tsp Salt

2 ea Cloves Garlic; Crushed

1 slice Bacon

Mix the water, beans, and onion in a 4-quart Dutch oven. Cover and heat to boiling. Boil 2 minutes and remove from the heat; let stand for 1 hour. Add just enough water to the beans to cover. Stir in the remaining ingredients and heat to boiling. Cover and reduce the heat. Boil gently, stirring occasionally, until the beans are very tender, about 2 hours, (add water during the cooking time if necessary); drain the beans. Beans can be covered and refrigerated up to 10 days.

### **Chicken Cacciatore**

1 Chicken, cut up

1 clove Garlic, peeled

1/4 c Flour

2 tsp Salt

1/8 tsp Pepper

1/4 c Oil

28 oz can Tomatoes

8 Small onions, peeled

6 oz Tomato paste

2 tsp Sugar

1 Bay leaf

Rub chicken with garlic. Mince garlic and save. Combine flour, 1 tsp salt, and pepper in large paper bag; shake chicken pieces until coated. Heat oil in Dutch oven. Brown chicken a few pieces at a time on all sides; drain on absorbent paper. Pour off any oil remaining in pan. Return chicken to Dutch oven. Add garlic, tomatoes, tomato paste, onions, sugar, 1 tsp salt, and bay leaf. Cover. Basting occasionally with sauce in the pan, simmer 1 hour or until chicken is tender.

Serves 4

## **Beefy Chili Mac**

1 lb Beef cubed steaks

1 tbs Vegetable oil

1 med Onion; coarsely chopped

28 oz Canned diced tomatoes (chili-seasoned), undrained

1 1/2 c Uncooked spiral pasta (or macaroni)

1/2 c Water

1/2 c Shredded Cheddar cheese

Cut beef steaks lengthwise into 1" wide strips and then crosswise into 1" pieces. Heat oil in Dutch oven over medium-high heat until hot. Add beef and onion; cook and stir 3 minutes.

Stir tomatoes, pasta and water into beef. Bring to a boil; reduce heat to low. Cover tightly and simmer 20 minutes or until pasta is tender. Sprinkle with cheese before serving.

## **Old Fashioned Pot Roast**

3 lb Beef roast

6 tbs Flour, divided

6 tbs Butter, divided

3 c Hot water

2 tsp Beef bouillon granules

1 med Onion, quartered

1 Rib celery, cut into pieces

1 tsp Salt

1/2 tsp Pepper

4 potatoes, cut into 1" pieces

4 Carrots, cut into 1" pieces

Sprinkle the roast with 1 Tbsp. flour. In a Dutch oven, brown the roast on all sides in half of the butter. Add the water, bouillon, onion, celery, salt and pepper; bring to a boil. Reduce heat; cover and simmer for 1 hour. Add carrots and potatoes; cover and simmer 45-60 minutes longer or until meat is tender. Remove meat, potatoes and carrots to a plate and keep warm. Strain out the juices into a bowl, save the stuff that is strained out on the plate too. In the same Dutch oven, melt remaining butter. Stir in remaining flour; cook and stir until bubbly. Add 2 cups of the cooking juices and blend until smooth. Cook and stir until thickened; add additional cooking juices until gravy has desired consistency. Return meat, potatoes and carrots to the gravy and serve.

## **Dutch Oven Biscuits**

2 c Flour

1/2 tsp Salt

3 tsp Baking powder

4 tbs Solid shortning

1 c Milk (diluted canned ok)

Blend flour, salt, baking powder and mash in shortning with a fork until crumbly. Add milk and stir until the dough sags down into trough left by

spoon as it moves around the bowl.

Turn dough out on a floured surface, knead for 30 seconds, pat out gently until it is 1/2 inch thick. Cut with a round cutter or pinch off pieces of

dough and form by hand.

Put biscuits into a greased Dutch Oven, cover, and bury in bright coals for 5 or 10 minutes or until golden brown.

## **Dump Cobbler**

12 inch oven

1 package yellow cake mix

2 30 oz cans apples (or peaches, or just about any canned fruit)

1/2 C chopped nuts (optional)

1/2 stick margarine or butter

1/4 tsp cinnamon

I line the bottom of my Dutch oven with aluminum foil to help in cleanup for this one.

Warm up the oven with 10 briquettes on the bottom and 15 on top. When warm dump fruit with juice in bottom of Dutch oven. Sprinkle nuts over fruit. Sprinkle dry cake mix evenly over fruit and nuts. Dribble melted margarine over mixture. You really don't need to stir it up, it will do so on its own believe it or not. Sprinkle cinnamon on top.

Cook until cake mix is golden brown around edges (20-30 minutes).

For variety, try any other canned fruit, or mix them.

### **Blackberry Dumplings**

1 qt Fresh or frozen (loose-pack) blackberries

1 c Plus 1 tablespoon sugar, divided

3/4 teaspoon salt, divided

1/2 tsp Lemon extract

1 1/2 c All-purpose flour

2 tsp Baking powder

1/4 tsp Ground nutmeg

2/3 c Milk Cream or whipped cream, optional

In a Dutch oven, combine the blackberries, 1 cup sugar, 1/4 teaspoon salt and lemon extract. Bring to a boil; reduce heat and simmer for 5 minutes. Meanwhile, in a mixing bowl, combine flour, baking powder, nutmeg and remaining sugar and salt. Add milk; stir just until mixed. (Dough will be very thick.) Drop by tablespoonfuls into six mounds onto hot blackberry mixture cover tightly and simmer for 15 minutes or until a toothpick inserted in a dumpling comes out clean. Spoon in-to serving dishes. Serve with cream or whipped cream if desired.

Enjoy!