

bold BEGINNINGS

1 First, become familiar with your slow cooker! Just as ovens cook differently, so do slow cookers. Some slow cookers may have hotter heating units, and those with auto-shift cook faster. Some slow cookers come with removable crocks; others do not. For best results, be sure the slow cooker is between one-half and three-fourths full of food.

2 Cleaning up can often be a time-consuming part of cooking. Before adding food to the slow cooker, spray the inside of it with cooking spray so the cooked food will release easily. A slow cooker with a nonstick interior is now available.

3 Food placed on the bottom of the slow cooker will often be moister (from being in the cooking liquid), and meat, such as ribs, roasts and chicken, will fall off the bones sooner. To help meats cook evenly, rotate large meats halfway through cooking.

4 Root vegetables, such as carrots and potatoes, take longer to cook, so cut them into smaller pieces and place in the bottom of the slow cooker for best results.

5 For food-safety reasons, always cook and drain ground meats before adding them to the slow cooker. Browning large cuts of meat (roasts, chops) and poultry, although not necessary, can enhance the flavor and appearance of the finished dish.

6 Thaw frozen vegetables or rinse with warm water before placing them in the slow cooker.

TIMING is everything

1 When your schedule doesn't fit with dinnertime, simply shorten the cook time by turning the slow cooker to high for 1 hour, which counts as 2 hours on low.

2 Slow cookers offer flexibility. Cooked food can be held up to an hour on the low setting without overcooking.

3 For food-safety reasons, slow cooker recipes containing raw poultry or beef should cook a minimum of 3 hours. Do not cook whole chickens in the slow cooker because the temperature of the chicken cannot reach the desired level quickly enough for food safety.

4 Smaller is not always faster. Baby carrots, for example, take longer than some other veggies. Be sure to test for doneness.

5 Tender vegetables, such as fresh tomatoes, mushrooms and zucchini, should be added the last 30 minutes to prevent overcooking.

be DISCREET

You can check on the food while it cooks, but do so discreetly! Try spinning the slow cooker lid until vapors fall off so you can see inside rather than removing the lid. When you do have the impulse to stir, lift the lid slightly just so you can get the spoon in. Removing the lid can delay the cooking time by 15 to 20 minutes.

