Greetings,

This is the first in a series of postings dealing with recipes for diabetics using slow cookers. The origin of the series comes from a 'conversation' between forum user 'forge' and myself in forge's thread "Fun - Getting the most out of life".

The more I thought about it the more I felt that a short series of postings in which I gave recipes of varying types would be far more useful than one posting giving just a few recipes. I also took on board forge's comment that his household normally consists of two people but at present consists of three. One of my complaints about cookery books and recipe sites is that they mostly cater for four people but there are a lot of people who need recipes that cater for one person or for two. The need for recipes that cater for one person or two people can arise for a variety of reasons such as:

- You're single.
- You live with just your spouse or partner.
- You're the lone diabetic in a household of non-diabetics.
- You're the lone vegetarian/vegan or person with a food allergy in a household of omnivores. (I'm not a vegetarian but I eat a lot of vegetarian food).

If you come under any of those headings this series is particularly aimed at you. There are millions of recipes aimed at the "standard household" of four people and precious few aimed at people like us. Particularly for slow cookers it's very easy indeed to multiply a recipe for one of two people up. All you do is add extra amounts of the ingredients. However *it can be very difficult indeed to divide a recipe for four or more people down.* The result of this is that singles or couples either wind up throwing out food or they wind up eating the same thing to the point of boredom. For that reason the overwhelming majority of my recipes in this posting will serve one or portions.

As there are quite a few people who don't know what a slow cooker is I'm starting the series with this very long posting explaining what they are and how they work. The next posting will deal with slow cooker types and some basic rules of food hygiene and safety. Once we have those out of the way I'll post some recipes.

Mark.

Slow Cooker:

A slow cooker, which you will also see referred to as a 'Crock-pot' is an electrical cooking appliance that sits on work surface and cooks food by keeping it at a relatively low temperature for a relatively long period of time.

How they work:

The concept of slow cooking is simple and has been around for a very long time: You put your food into some sort of container or contained area and let it cook slowly. Slow cookers use the same underlying principles found in barbecue pits, pig roasts, and casseroles but they differ from other cooking technologies in that you can not only use them for stews, soups, and casseroles, but you can also use them for roasting, braising,

and yes baking. They're far more versatile than even people who've been using them for a long time realise because of they use moisture:

A slow cooker remains sealed during the cooking process and uses the moisture contained within your food a baster this makes them ideal for braising and slow roasting.

So much for moist foods – stews soups and casseroles, what about dry roasting or baking, can you use it for that?

Surprisingly for something that uses no more electricity than a powerful light bulb the answer to that question is "yes". I routinely make roast chicken in a slow cooker, I routinely roast vegetables in a slow cooker, and yes I bake in it too.

History:

The slow cooking method has been around for ages but the electrical slow is a device that originated in the USA in the 1970s. Their ancestor is a 1960s device called the "Electrical Bean Pot" made by a company called West Bend whose function was to steep and cook dry beans. Various corporations jumped on the band wagon and 1971 the Rival corporation released the first proper slow cooker. These slow cookers or "Crock pots" to use the name by which they became known in the USA were manufactured specifically to appeal to people who wanted home cooked food but who also wanted to save time and money. They're wildly popular – the last time I looked which admittedly was two years ago something like 85% of all American households have at least one slow cooker.

Components and principles:

A typical slow cooker has three main components:

1. An outer casing containing low-wattage heating coils:

   The outer casing is metal and completely encapsulates the low-wattage heating coils which are what actually cooks the food.

2. A removable inner container:

   The inner container ("crock") is usually made of glazed ceramic although I have seen ones made of borosilicate glass. (For practical domestic purposes glazed ceramic and borosilicate glass are pretty well thermally identical). For the overwhelming majority of slow cookers it's removable to make both serving at the table and cleaning easier.

3. A heavy – usually made of borosilicate glass.

   The lid sits on top of the crock. Its weight is what ensures the seal and prevents too much moisture from escaping. As your food cooks, it releases moisture in the form of steam. This condenses against the lid creating both a seal between the lid and the rim of the crock, *and* adds moisture to the food while helping the

cooking process by basting it. In short the lid is both integral to the cooking process and essential to it.

The classic mistake made by novice slow cooker cooks is to take the lid off so they can peek at the food. DON'T every time you do this you drop the temperature of the food and increase the length of time it needs to cook.

When you put your food into the crock, put the crock into the outer casing, stick the lid on and turn the thing on the three components listed above work together to cook your food. Essentially what you're doing is combining power (electrical wattage) and time as follows:

- When you turn your slow cooker on, the electrical coils heat up and transfer heat to the space between the outer casing and the crock.
- The heat is then transferred to the crock to somewhere which heats to somewhere between 82 to 149 degrees centigrade the crock in turn transfers heat to the food.

  This indirect heat transfer warms the food to a low boil/gentle simmer. Generally at a temperature equal to or greater than 80-85˚C. You leave it to do this for several hours until the food is cooked.

  Many slow cookers have a setting that once the desired temperature is reached it automatically switches to a slightly less intense heat to prevent the food from overcooking/boiling dry. If you have a slow cooker whose settings include one marked "auto" that's what that setting is for.

Slow Cooker Benefits

Convenience: I find that using a slow cooker saves me a lot of while still allowing me to eat home-cooked and very tasty food. For some recipes I either quickly assemble the dish in the morning or I assemble it the evening before. I switch it on before leaving the house and come home to be greeted at the door by mouth-watering smells.

I only have one cooking dish to clean.

Economy:

Compared to traditional cooking using saucepans on a ring or burner or in an oven a slow cooker uses very little energy so lower fuel bills. A side-benefit is that apart from saving energy costs it also won't heat up an entire kitchen the way an oven does.

Another economy comes from the fact that you can use cheaper cuts of meat. The combination of low heat over a fairly long period of time coupled with the fact that condensation acts as a self-baster means that tougher cuts of meat become tender in a slow cooker. All those fatty and connective tissues become very tender and incidentally release lots of flavour. They'll also absorb flavours from stocks or spices leading to some very well flavoured dishes.

What Can Be Cooked in a Slow Cooker?

Meat and vegetable stews/casseroles of course but also a surprising number of other dishes.

For this type of dish you can cook meat that has been frozen but you **MUST** thaw it first. This is because meat needs to reach a *minimum* of 60˚C rising to 75˚C quickly to kill harmful bacteria.

You can also cook frozen vegetables but again for food safety reasons particularly if you're making a dish that includes meat you should let the frozen vegetables thaw first. I routinely use frozen vegetables not least because they've been chopped into uniform sizes for me. Vegetables often take longer to cook than meat so I layer them on the bottom of the pot.

Soups and Stews:

Slow cookers are designed to simmer on the low setting for long periods of time. Make sure to cover your ingredients with water, and if you need to add more liquid during cooking, boil it first, so it doesn't lower the soup's cooking temperature and lengthen your cooking time.

Dips and Spreads:

Slow cookers are great for dips and spreads are another category. The low heat cooks a cheese-based dip and keeps it warm without burning the ingredients. I often make some dips, hack up some veg to hold the stuff and enjoy it as a main meal. Dips and spreads are also good for party's and pretty easy to make.

Grains:

Grains are surprisingly good in a slow cooker. If you can eat porridge the slow cooker is your friend. Bread and bread-based dishes like stuffing be baked in a slow cooker – the low heat setting helps bread dough rise thus eliminating the need for sugar so the problem is the starch contained in flour. I've successfully baked ordinary bread in a slow cooker and am experimenting with low-carb baking results are encouraging. I wouldn't describe them as low carb I'd describe them as lower carb – so if you're a strict low carber anything I post in that category is not for you. I'll keep you posted.

Desserts:

I'm experimenting with stewed fruits/compotes using stevia instead of sugar so far very happy with the results. I'll put up a few recipes over the next few weeks but there are so many recipes for low carb desserts out there that anyone who can type into Google can find them so don't expect too many dessert recipes.

Herbs and Spices:

Some recipes call for herbs and or spices. However because of the nature of the process WHEN you add herbs and spices is quite as important as WHAT you add. Because

many spices and herbs become concentrated during cooking I often add them towards the end of the cooking process.