

MONDAY, DECEMBER 23, 1996

## TASTE

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## HOME SENSE



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## Microwave not just for reheating food

At the end of a long, hard day, you come home tired and hungry and the last thing you want to do is spend time cooking over a hot stove. You want a hot, satisfying meal ... fast! What do you do? Microwave. The microwave is an asset to people with a hurried lifestyle, as it is convenient and time efficient.

Some microwaves are more powerful than others. The same brand of microwave popcorn may take three minutes in one microwave and four-and-one-half minutes in others. Check the recommended cooking times in your owner's manual, on the food packages and in microwave cookbooks to avoid overcooking, and always start with the shortest suggested time. You will become familiar with your microwave's power level the more you cook with it. Microwave cooking times vary because of the power, the amount of food, starting temperature of food, shape of the food and composition of the food.

Unlike conventional ovens, as you add food items to your microwave, you must increase cooking time. For example, a baked potato takes about seven minutes in a microwave and 60 minutes in a conventional oven.

If you are cooking 10 potatoes in a conventional oven, it will still take 60 minutes. If you cook 10 potatoes in a microwave, cooking may take up to 70 minutes.

The doughnut shape wins the award for the best shape for microwaves, no corners and no center. For one item, place in middle; two items, side by side with an inch between; three items, in a triangle; four items, in a square or always in a circle with nothing in the middle.

Take extra care when using microwave packages that heat and crisp foods such as pizza. These packages contain heat sensors that become very hot during the cooking time.

The microwave oven may cook foods unevenly, which can result in hot or cold spots. Some foods, such as sugar-filled pastries and meat pocket sandwiches, can be scalding hot on the inside and cold on the outside. Be sure to carefully break open these foods before biting into them. To prevent uneven cooking, stop the microwave and turn and/or stir the food halfway through the process.

## Microwave advantages

- Most foods can be cooked in less than 50 to 75 percent of the time it would take to cook the same foods in a conventional oven.

- Foods cooked in a microwave retain more color, flavor and nutritional value than conventionally cooked foods because they are cooked with little or no water to leech out vitamins, and are cooked quickly.

- Microwave cooking may be more healthful because often it is not necessary to add fat and butter when sauteing meats or vegetables or scrambling eggs.

- Microwave ovens allow you to quickly reheat and defrost foods.

- Microwave cooking helps shorten clean-up time because food usually doesn't stick to the dishes.

- Using the microwave doesn't add heat to your house. Unlike the conventional oven, you can open the microwave to check progress without letting hot air escape into the house.

## Microwave cautions

- No metal, no foil, no twist ties.
- Use only microwave-safe dishes, avoid using margarine tubs, whipped topping bowls and cottage cheese containers. High heat could cause chemicals to transfer into the food.
- Watch out for steam when removing a cover.
- Use potholders as a precaution, dishes and food are extremely hot.

- Stir foods and beverages after heating to avoid scalding, cold or hot spots can occur.

- Do not reuse trays or containers provided with microwave convenience products, they have been designed for one time use with that specific food only.

- Always allow resting or standing time after the cooking is completed.

- Never partially cook a food ahead of time to make microwaving faster later. Bacteria can grow in partially cooked foods.

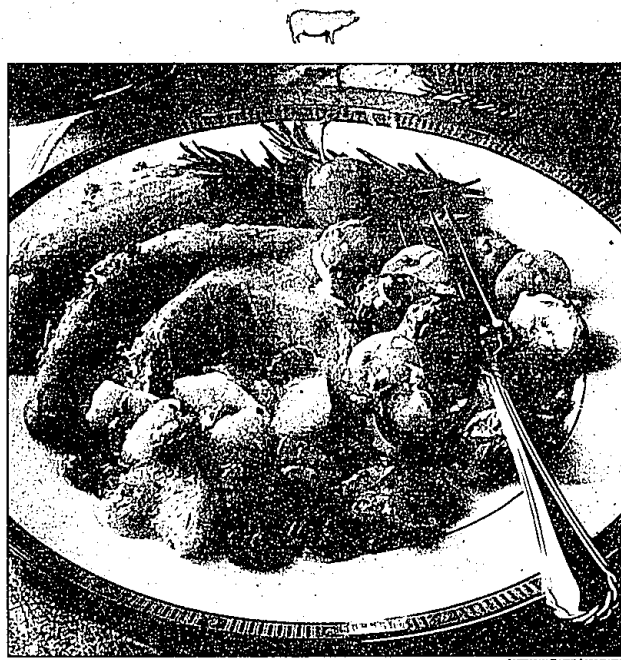
- Do not use brown grocery bags, they contain recycled materials and metals and could start a fire.

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## LOOKING AHEAD

What to watch for in *Taste* next week:

■ This year, Sandra Dalke-Przybyl does not have to make a resolution to get fit and trim. Since 1994 she's lost 140 pounds.



Holiday fare: Dress up a fully smoked ham with winter fruit chutney for a fuss-free, yet festive holiday meal.

HOLIDAY HAM  
READY IN NO TIME AT ALL

More time — is the one size that fits all gift that most of us would like to receive this holiday season. When family and friends gather, give yourself the gift of time by preparing a festive meal that's easy and quick to prepare.

Holiday Baked Ham with Winter Fruit Chutney, a recipe prepared by Beatrice Ojakangas, master baker and author of "Beatrice Ojakangas' Great Holiday Baking Book," is sure to please. The flavorful chutney, which can be made ahead of time, accompanies fully cooked smoked ham glazed with a mixture of apricot preserves, butter and Dijon mustard.

"The holidays are for spending time with family and friends," Ojakangas says. "So eliminate last minute worries by doing whatever you can in

advance and utilize short-cuts and time-saving techniques. That's how the professional chefs do it.

And there are plenty of ways to save time on holiday meal preparation, according to the United Dairy Industry's Real Butter Team. Try to plan your menu so that most of the dishes can be partially prepared before your holiday extravaganza begins. Ann Cooper, executive chef at the Putney Inn in Vermont, suggests measuring, slicing and chopping ingredients at least a day before you settle in to do the serious cooking.

"The French have a phrase that describes this preparatory process," said Cooper. "They call it *mise en place*." In English this translates into "getting your ducks in a row."

For instance, check out Cooper's strategy for making Winter Fruit Chutney. On the day before the meal she measures all the ingredients, does

all of the chopping and places everything in plastic containers or reusable plastic bags. The apples and pears are the only ingredients that Cooper waits to slice to avoid browning.

"It's always a treat to cook when everything is already measured, sliced and at your fingertips," Cooper says.

"Spare time during the holidays is something to be treasured," said Don Atkinson, senior vice president at Franklin Quest, a company that specializes in counseling busy executives on the finer points of advance planning. "Using time-saving techniques, short-cuts and good planning are the most effective ways to free yourself from the suffocating constraints of time. A little planning goes a long way in being able to relax and enjoy the holidays."

According to the National Pork Producers Council, most hams today are labeled "fully

cooked" and are ready to eat. Ham can be served cold or heated to an internal temperature of 140° F. for serving hot. Follow the directions on the label, and heat in a moderate (325° F. to 350° F.) oven.

If you purchase a ham labeled "cook before eating," it should be roasted to an internal temperature of 160° F. — use a meat thermometer to judge doneness and plan on cooking an uncooked ham for 30 minutes per pound.

Your holiday ham should be refrigerated within two hours of serving. Tightly wrap and refrigerate leftovers, and enjoy for up to seven days. Ham does not retain its high quality for long in the freezer because changes in flavor and texture occur. If you must freeze leftover ham, wrap it tightly in plastic and foil and freeze for no longer than two months.

See recipes inside.

## Make Santa's snack extra-special

In many families, after the stockings have been hung, it's time to fix Santa a snack. Cookies top the jolly man's list of favorite treats, so why not really wow him this Christmas Eve with an extra-special cookie that's been baked just for him? Although we don't know exactly when the custom of leaving cookies for Santa began, we do know that similar customs have European origins. In fact, Dutch boys and girls still fill their wooden shoes with hay for St. Nicholas' horse, and Scandinavian children leave porridge for the Yule men, the Scandinavian equivalent of Santa's elves.

While giving Santa cookies and milk is uniquely American, it most likely evolved from these and other European traditions, perhaps as a gentle reminder about giving to others.

Kids love to bake, and creating a really special cookie to give to Santa can provide hours of family fun as well as a holiday

memory that can be passed on from one generation to the next. This year, the elves in the Quaker Oatmeal Kitchens have come up with two oatmeal cookies your kids, or grandkids, will love to bake and nibble.

Standing a full ten inches high and chock-full of wholesome whole grain oats, a "Snowman Oatmeal Cookie" will keep Santa energized for the long night ahead. The classic oatmeal cookie dough is quick and easy to mix, and little hands can easily pat the dough into snowman shapes right on the cookie sheet. After cooling, the real fun begins as the kids use icing and candy to give the snowman a smile and then dress him warmly with a hat, scarf and mittens. There's even room to write Santa's name.

"Santa Sandwich Cookies" stacked on a plate and accompanied by nutmeg-sprinkled eggnog will please Santa, too. In between two buttery, tender-

crisp oatmeal cookies is a layer of creamy frosting. The dough uses on-hand ingredients and, since the quick and old-fashioned oats are interchangeable in baking, you can use whichever happens to be on the shelf. Save time on baking day by making the dough a day or two ahead and refrigerate it tightly wrapped. The filling is ready-to-spread vanilla frosting available in the baking aisle of the supermarket. Kids of all ages will have a great time rolling the edges of the frosting-filled cookies in colorful candy sprinkles.

The extra sandwich cookies and snowman make delicious gifts for teachers, friends and grandparents. Wrap the snowman in clear plastic wrap, tie with a red ribbon and attach a gift tag. The sandwich cookies pack easily in small cellophane gift bags available at party, stationery and discount stores.

See recipes inside.



Santa's snack: Surprise Santa with Snowman Oatmeal Cookies and Santa Sandwich Cookies.