

# Introduction to Dutch Ovens

What can they do? Actually, what can they NOT do? Dutch Ovens can be used for roasting, baking, simmering, stewing, frying, boiling, steaming, and many other cooking techniques that I cannot think of right now. All recipes use one of two Dutch oven techniques, cooking with your Dutch oven or cooking in it. The first is when the food is placed directly in the bottom of the Dutch oven, this is the most popular. In the second method, food is placed in a second dish and this dish is then placed onto a trivet in the bottom of the Dutch oven, this is to elevate the food above the bottom of the oven to prevent burning. Almost every recipe out there can be cooked in a Dutch oven.

Don't have a Dutch oven? Want one? What to know before you go. There are tons of Dutch ovens out there for purchase. What sets them apart? Lots of things. I will not tell you what brand, type, price to pay or where to purchase your Dutch oven. That is totally up to you. It is the way you take care of your Dutch oven that matters in how long it will last. Here are some features that I think should be on every Dutch oven.

- Heavy Bail handle

- Molded in handle tangs

- Handles that lay only one way

- Open holed lid handle connected on both sides

- Ridge around top of lid

- Tight fitting lid

- Beefy legs that are about an inch long

- Made of Cast Iron

- No special coating

Speaking of what it is made out of, cast iron is the most popular, but there are aluminum ones as well. Aluminum pots do have some advantages, they are lighter weight, easier to clean, easier to maintain, and heat up faster. Sometimes this is bad, because aluminum pans do not have the retention that cast iron does, which means they cool down faster too.

Then there is the size of your Dutch oven. There are ovens from 4" to 24" or bigger if you look hard enough. The most common size is 12". This will hold enough food to feed 6-10 people. Most of the recipes you will find use a 12" Dutch oven. If you have a bigger oven and want to cook more food at once, some simple math on the recipe will usually work out just fine. Just remember that the number of coals will change for bigger ovens.

What else do you need to use a Dutch Oven over a fire or coals? Now that you have the oven you want, you are going to need some other things to go along with it. Here is a short list that is recommended to have

Heavy Welding Gloves

Lid Lifter

A shovel

Charcoal chimney starter

Something to put ashes in

All of these items will be very useful at some point in your outdoor cooking with a Dutch oven.

Now that you have a Dutch oven and all of the stuff, what do you do? You have to season your Dutch oven. Most ovens come pre-seasoned and that is fine, but I don't think it is enough. I like to season them when I get them home. Here are some simple steps to seasoning a Dutch oven and they should be followed after every time it is used and cleaned.

Clean the oven with a scraper or plastic soon to get the big chunks off.

If this is really difficult, try heating some water up in the oven with the lid on securely and steam the gunk out.

Clean the oven with a scratchy pad. No food left in the oven.

This is how I do it. I wet the oven with hot water, wet the scratchy pad, put a dab of soap on the scratchy pad and lightly scrub the Dutch oven to remove ALL of the food.

Rinse well and dry over a fire or in the oven.

Not too hot or it will crack.

Pour some vegetable oil in the oven and use a paper towel to coat the ENTIRE oven inside and out, don't forget the lid.

Put back on fire or in oven to bake on the oil coating for about an hour.

Lay upside down to let excess oil run out, and try not to get coals on it when doing this.

Let cool for about 2 hours and put away.

If your oven is brand new, do this a couple times.

Make sure this is done after EVERY use.

Here are some Do Not Do things for cast iron cookware

Never, and I repeat, NEVER allow cast iron to sit in water or allow water to stand in or on it. It will rust despite a good coating.

Do not place an empty cast iron pan or oven over a hot fire. Aluminum and many other metals can tolerate it better but cast iron will crack or warp, ruining it.

Do not get in a hurry to heat cast iron, you will end up with burnt food or a damaged oven or pan.

Never put cold liquid into a very hot cast iron pan or oven. They will crack.

And finally some pointers on how to use your Dutch oven.

**ROASTING:** The heat source should come from the top and bottom equally. Coals should be placed under the oven and on the lid at a 1 to 1 ratio.

**BAKING:** Usually done with more heat from the top than from the bottom. Coals should be placed under the oven and on the lid at a 1 to 3 ratio, having more on the lid.

**FRYING, BOILING ETC:** All of the heat should come from the bottom. Coals will be placed under the oven only.

**STEWING, SIMMERING:** Almost all heat will be from the bottom. Place the coals under and on the oven at a 4 to 1 ratio with more underneath than on the lid.

**THE LID:** The lid can be placed on the fire or stove upside down and used as a skillet or griddle. Using the lid in this fashion, you can make virtually error free pancakes and eggs that don't run all over. This is because most lids are shaped like a very shallow bowl so things naturally stay in the center, even if the lid is not level.