

Cruzer Cookin'

I belong to a local car club here on beautiful Whidbey Island, WA called The Whidbey Cruzers, and since becoming a member, I've learned three things about the club... 1) Cruzers like to party, and I don't mean a stuffy, sit down dinner with a tux or a long formal dress kind of party, but a let your hair down, get funky kind of partying. 2) Cruzers like to eat, and simple cuisine (and lots of it) seems to be the order of the day. And 3) Cruzers like to cruise, and the destination doesn't seem to be as important as the actual cruising there and cruising back. So I thought, hey, why not combine the best of all three and save some time and money in the process? Why not cook some hearty meals on our engines as we cruise and have a hot meal ready when we get there?

My first experience with "highway cooking" was as a kid while traveling across country on a family vacation when my dad thought he would warm a large can of pork & beans on the Rambler's exhaust manifold between Prescott and Flagstaff, Arizona. Unfortunately, he neglected to poke a hole in the can, and we hadn't been back on the road for 20 minutes when the can exploded with enough power to blow super heated beans right up through the fresh air vents and across the windshield! You don't even want to know what it did to the engine compartment, and we ended up sniffing burnt beans all the way across country. Anyway, we've learned a lot since then and it turns out that cooking wholesome and nutritious meals using your engine's wasted heat is not really all that difficult. However, half an hour in traffic proves that any twit can drive, but your very first experience in the kitchen no doubt convinced you that it takes at least a marginally able twit to make dinner.

Lets take a look at the major components of cooking on the road, starting with the heat source. Engines are defined by the number of cylinders they have, and although some guys claim that size really does matter, all engines burn fuel, and in the process, they all get hot. There are lots of hot spots on your engine, but car-engine cooking is an extremely in-exact science and there is plenty of opportunity to balance fast cooking on a very hot surface vs. slow cooking on a not-so-hot surface. To locate the hot spots on your engine, get your engine up to operating temperature, turn off the ignition, lift the hood and touch metallic things with your fingers until you burn them. Not third-degree burns, just the kind of quick hit where you pull your hand back fast and stick your fingers in your mouth to cool them off kind of hot. These are the cooking spots. The exhaust manifold is the hottest part on most engines, but on an old V-8 (even on your one or two cylinder micro or mini car) you should also be able to find some space for less intensive cooking on top of the engine block itself, alongside the carburetor and around the air filter. Note: when exploring your possibilities, **never** put anything where it can interfere with the free movement of the accelerator linkage. Also, **never** assume you can use the air filter housing as a warming oven, no mater how much empty space there seems to be in there. Some other good advice: Indiscriminate yanking on wires, hoses and such to secure food packages is discouraged. Also, placing, checking, or removing food with the engine running is a bad idea. Being a spinning fan belt means never having to say you're sorry.

Food selection and prep work: Rule number one: keep your recipes simple. I have included a few tried-and-true gastronomical delights below, but right away you'll notice there is nothing really complicated about the recipes at all. Rule number two: forget boiling, and avoid recipes that involve a lot of liquid. You shouldn't expect to roast anything to a crispy stage of doneness – the best you can hope for is a nice browning. What you *can* do is nicely braise foods by cooking them gently in just enough liquid to transfer the heat and serve as a vehicle for seasonings.

Food wrapping: We've all wrapped our share of leftovers, and bundling up meals for engine cooking is a similar procedure, only more precise – sort of like wrapping Christmas presents. First, make sure nothing you're wrapping is going to poke through the foil. Second, everything is always wrapped in not one, not two, but three layers of aluminum foil. Tear off three pieces of foil large enough for your food and lay all three on a large flat surface. Place your ingredients in the center of the sheets and fold the sides up and over the food to make a flat, interlocking seal (like the seam on a pair of blue jeans) and then fold the ends over several times in toward the middle. Now, you're ready to place the packages on the engine with the folds up and hit the road.

Timing and Safety: Successful car-engine cooking comes down to these three questions: How far will you be driving? How long do you expect to be on the highway? And when do you expect to be hungry? The driving times and distances given for the following recipes are only approximate (remember I told you this was an extremely inexact science). Where you place your food packages on your engine and how hard you push your car can also have an effect on when and where your dinner is done. However, the general rule of thumb is if the air blowing through your vents smells like dinner is ready and you still have 30 miles to go, just pull off the road, remove your dinner from off the stove and set it in the trunk until you get there. If you get even a whiff of something burning, stop and check your meal (a Burger King or Wendy's parking lot is a good place to do this check just in case you've lead-footed it a bit too much or too long). Also remember that aluminum foil will become brittle when heated to extremely high temperatures, so be very careful when opening the hot packages. It's also be a good idea to have a little "Road Kit for the Kitchen" in the trunk that includes: eating utensils, paper plates, paper towels, a small cutting board, a couple of sharp knives, salt, pepper, assorted spices, and an oven mit or two.

The following recipes are simple and forgiving in terms of driving times and distances, but as you become more familiar with the process, you'll begin to get more creative. I once cooked a complete turkey dinner (sliced turkey breast, sage stuffing, broasted potatoes, mixed vegetables, and a small cherry cobbler) on the engine of my Datsun 2000 roadster between Knob Noster, Missouri and Lincoln, Nebraska that had everyone at the freeway rest stop drooling. As one of our past Presidents likes to say... "Live, Love, and always drive a really cool car (you can cook on)". Bon Appetit!

“Hammond’s Hobo Stew”

Per Person:

¼ pound round steak, cut in half-inch pieces
¼ cup each, potatoes, carrots, and onions, cut in half-inch pieces
1 tsp. Worcestershire Sauce
Salt and pepper to taste

Mix all ingredients and wrap in foil. Serve with biscuits and a cheap wine.

Driving distance: 85 miles.

Driving time: 1 ½ hours.

“Smitty’s Kielbasa Surprise”

Per Person:

2 - Eight or nine inch Kielbasa Sausages
1 - Slice of American or Cheddar cheese
4 - Slices of smoked bacon
Onion slices (optional)

Cut a deep slit in each sausage and stuff with fingers of cheese. Wrap on the diagonal with bacon slices and top with slices of onion. Seal individually in foil. Serve in hoagie rolls with spicy mustard and cold dark beer.

Driving distance: 40 miles

Driving time: 45 minutes

And for those of you into gourmet cooking, give this one a try...

“Fullerton’s Candy Apple Chicken”

Serves Two:

1 large chicken breast, halved
½ cup chopped onion
½ cup chopped green pepper
½ tsp. Garlic powder
½ tsp. salt
1 tsp. Oregano
1 6 oz. Can tomato sauce
4 tsp. Brown sugar
1 Tbl. Worcestershire sauce
4 Tbl. Cider vinegar

1 ½ cups baby carrots

Place the chicken breast halves on separate sheets of foil. Combine the remaining ingredients (except carrots) and ladle over the chicken. Tuck the baby carrots in around the chicken breasts and wrap. Serve with a chilled Riesling wine and a crusty French bread.

Driving distance: 85-110 miles.

Driving time: 1 ½ to 2 hours.

Firemarshal Bill