

Tip of the Month – Camp Ovens

I have been asked to put something together regarding camp ovens. The following is based on my experience (i.e. mistakes and successes).

I love food cooked in camp ovens. They are very versatile. You can use them for roasts, stews, pizzas, cakes, frying etc. I have used them on a stove (when I did not have a fry pan), in the fire, in a Cobb cooker etc. Cooking in them is not difficult – it just takes a bit of practice. My first attempt was a disaster.

Buying a camp oven:

- They come in all sorts of sizes and shapes. Choose a size that will: (a) Cater for most of the cooking you will do. (b) Fit into the space where you want to pack it. (c) Is not too heavy. One with a lid that has a lip around the edge is best for retaining coals. Make sure the lid fits well.
- It is best to spend the extra money to get a good quality camp oven.
- Invest in: (a) A canvas bag to keep it in to prevent the black soot from getting everything else dirty. (b) A good “lid lifter” or wire hooks to make it easy to lift the lid (with coals on) to check how the food is going. You do not want to drop coals or ash into the food unless you like crunchy food. (c) A trivet (mesh shelf to keep food up off the hot camp oven bottom) which gives more even cooking and stops burning on the bottom. Small stones can also be used as a trivet. (d) A good straw brush (heat resistant) for brushing ashes off the lid.

Preparing the oven:

- A trick I learnt is to sand the inside of the pot for an hour or two to get it nice and smooth. This makes it nicer to cook with and much easier to clean.
- A camp oven needs to be “seasoned”. Some are pre-seasoned when you buy them. “Seasoning” means impregnating the metal with cooking oil (not sump oil!). On a stove top, fire or kitchen oven, preheat the camp oven until it is hot. Splash some cooking oil (NOT engine oil) inside the camp oven and thoroughly rub it into the metal with paper towel. Don’t burn yourself on the hot oil/metal. Reheat the camp oven and repeat the oiling. The more you do it the better the results. The more cooking you do in the oven the better the seasoning gets. Washing with hot soapy water will remove the seasoning.

Cooking with it:

- For camp fire cooking you need a good supply of hot coals and a long handled shovel. It can take an hour or more for the fire to burn down to produce enough suitable coals. Different woods produce coals of different quality and heat. Heat beads can be used instead if you do not have coals.
- Warm up the camp oven on the main fire, add some cooking oil and wipe out with paper towel to make sure it is clean.
- Preheat the camp oven on the fire until it is the desired temperature – about the same as your kitchen oven 150 – 180 °C. A couple of ways to test this are: (a) Put some saliva (preferably yours) on the end of your finger and touch the outside wall of the camp oven. If the spit sizzles then it is hot. (b) Put a bit of paper inside the oven and it should turn brown after about 5 minutes (I have not tried this one).
- Rather than plonking the oven straight on the fire where you can’t control the heat, it is best to dig a shallow hole beside the fire (make it deeper if it is windy). Put a shovel full of hot coals in the hole and place the camp oven on top.
- With the food in the preheated camp oven place a shovel or two of hot coals on the lid. It is these coals on the top that do the cooking. Don’t overload it or it will burn the food. Keep the fire going to produce more coals for a top up as you go. Every half hour or so, check the heat and that the food is cooking ok. A damper will take about 30 minutes while roasts take 30 minutes per half kg i.e. a 1 kg roast = 1 hour. Vegies take about ¾ to 1 hour depending on the size of the pieces. A meat thermometer is great for testing if roasts are cooked. A damper should sound hollow when tapped. Enjoy the aromas.
- If you are cooking roasts, vegies, damper, cakes etc, it is best to use a trivet on the bottom so that the food cooks more evenly. Damper and cakes etc can be placed in a small pot or pan before placing in the camp oven. Baking paper may also be handy on a trivet. Roasts can be put in an oven bag.

Cleaning it:

- Treat the camp oven like a BBQ plate. Don’t leave food remains in the camp oven! Scrape out as much as you can (better still, eat it!!).
- Warm the camp oven before cleaning. Add oil and wipe out with paper towel.
- You can wash it in warm soapy water but make sure you dry it thoroughly and then re-oil it while warm before packing it away. Otherwise it will rust.
- Don’t put cold water into a hot camp oven or it may crack.