



# Byron's Dutch Oven Cooking Tips & Techniques

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## Dutch Oven Cooking Tips & Techniques

This page contains a collection of useful Dutch oven cooking tips and techniques I have picked up over the years.

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## Regulating Oven Cooking Temperature

**Regulating cooking temperature is by far the hardest thing to master when learning to cook in a Dutch oven.** Hopefully the few tips I have to offer will help you out.

**First and foremost, always use high quality briquettes.** I recommend using Kingsford charcoal. Kingsford is packed tighter than most other brands so it won't pop and spit, and it tends to burn longer than other brands. Avoid using "Match Light" charcoal as it burns hot so it doesn't last as long. Kingsford charcoal will generate good heat for about an hours time. For recipes that take more than an hour to cook, after an hour remove the remaining briquettes and ash from the oven and replenish them with new briquettes. **Note: because the Dutch oven is already hot, you will not need as many briquettes as when you started cooking.** I usually remove 2-3 briquettes from the top and bottom the first time I replenish them.

**The general rule of thumb to produce about a 350° heat is to take the size of the Dutch oven in inches, double the number, and use that many total briquettes.** So, for a 12" oven you would use 24 briquettes, for a 14" oven you would use 28 briquettes, etc.. **Remember this is just a rule of thumb and does not work for all makes of ovens!** This rule for instance does not work when cooking with MACA deep Dutch ovens because they are much deeper and they are manufactured with more metal. This will be better explained below.

Lodge Cast Iron Mfg. has recently put out a baking temperature chart for use with their ovens listing the total number of briquettes necessary to bring an oven to different temperatures. You can download a copy of the document [here](#).

Generally speaking **each briquette will produce about 10° - 15° F. worth of heat on a moderately warm day with no wind.** However, do not use these numbers to try and formulate how many briquettes you should

use to generate internal oven temperatures. Instead, use the general rule of thumb to calculate the number of briquettes to reach 350° F. and then add or subtract briquettes to reach the temperature you desire. Why shouldn't you use the heat values to determine temperature? The answer is, other factors such as the amount of metal used to manufacture the oven, the size of the oven (volume), and the amount of free airspace inside the oven affect the final internal temperature the oven will reach when using a set number of briquettes. **The more metal, volume of food, and internal air space you have to heat up, the more heat will be required to bring your oven to the desired temperature.**

Other factors such as ambient air temperature, humidity, altitude, and wind all influence how much heat is generated by burning briquettes. **Cool air temperatures, high altitudes, shade, and high humidity will decrease the amount of heat generated by briquettes. Hot air temperatures, low altitude, direct sunlight, and wind will increase the amount of heat generated by briquettes.** Also note that in windy conditions briquettes will burn faster due to the increased air flow around them, so they will not last as long.

Heat placement around the Dutch oven is crucial to yield the best cooking results. Briquettes placed under the oven should be arranged in a circular pattern no less than 1/2" from the outside edge of the oven. Briquettes placed on the lid should be spread out in a [checkerboard pattern](#). Try to avoid bunching the briquettes as this causes hot spots.

The number one question I am asked is **"How many briquettes should I put on the lid and how many should go underneath the oven?"**. The answer is **"It depends on what you are cooking"**.

**For food you wish to simmer** such as soups, stews, and chili's; place 1/3 of the total briquettes on the lid and 2/3 under the oven.

**For food you wish to bake** such as breads and rolls, biscuits, cakes, pies and cobblers (rising); place 2/3 of the total briquettes on the lid and 1/3 underneath the oven.

**For food you wish to roast** such as meats, poultry, casseroles, quiche, vegetables, and cobblers (non-rising); use an even distribution of briquettes on the lid and underneath the oven.

**The golden rule of Dutch oven cooking is "go easy with the heat"**. If the oven isn't hot enough you can always add more briquettes, but once food is burned, it's burned.

## Campfire Cooking Tips

I have received a lot of response from people asking how to use their Dutch ovens over a campfire. I have two separate campfire cooking methods I like to use, each depending on the amount of time I want to spend tending my ovens.

The first method involves using charcoal briquettes which are lit in the campfire. I prefer to use charcoal for cooking as opposed to cooking over an open fire because temperatures can be easily regulated with briquettes whereas an open fire is riddled with hot spots that can lead to burned food if your Dutch ovens are not watched carefully. I simply add a pile of charcoal to the center of the campfire to be started by the flames. Once the charcoal is lit, the briquettes are removed from the fire and arranged for cooking near the edge of the fire pit away from the campfire flames. Then cooking proceeds just like it would at home.

The second method entails burying your Dutch oven in coals and is about like cooking in a crock pot set on low heat. I usually use this method when out hunting or fishing (in a campfire safe area) and I don't want to spend a lot of time over my ovens. It starts by digging a hole 18-20 inches deep and 20-24 inches in diameter in the center of the campfire pit. Line the sides of the hole with flat stones and check to make sure the oven will fit in the hole. Next, start a campfire in the bottom of the hole to get coals going. Keep adding wood to the fire until the hole is 1/2 - 2/3 full of coals. Next kick the fire out and remove the larger pieces of remaining wood. Dig a hole in the coals that the Dutch oven containing the evening meal can be set in then cover the Dutch oven with the remaining coals (you want at least 2-3" of coals on top of the lid) followed by a 2" layer of dirt spread out over the coals. Spread 2 wet burlap bags over the dirt and cover them with rocks so they won't be blown away in the event a wind comes up. The burlap bags will help to hold the heat in. Then leave the oven to sit for the day. When you return to camp in the evening the food will be ready for eating. Simply dig the oven up and brush it off with a whisk broom prior to opening it.

## Helpful Dutch Oven Cooking Tips

Many problems can be avoided by watching your ovens while you are cooking so don't be afraid to lift your oven lids to check on your food. If you see steam escaping from around your oven lids then your ovens are too hot. Dutch ovens act as a sort of pressure cooker steaming the food from the inside out making it more tender. If you let the steam out of your Dutch oven, it doesn't help the food and more often than not the top or bottom will be burned.

To keep from generating hot spots which cause uneven browning and burned spots, rotate your Dutch ovens every 15 minutes by turning the oven 90° in one direction and the lid 90° in the opposite direction. The easiest way to manage this is to lift the lid, rotate the oven 90° clockwise, then put the lid back on so it is facing the same way it was when you lifted it. I usually look at the number cast on the lid when I do this. When rotating the oven properly **the number on the lid should stay in the same place during the whole cooking process.**





When I lift the lid to rotate my ovens I usually peek inside to see what the food is doing. This way I know if the oven temperature is right or if I need to adjust the number of briquettes.




"Stacking" your Dutch ovens is a convenient way to save space and share heat. Stacking is best done when ovens need the same amount of heat on top and bottom. (I.E. - Do not mix and match ovens that require different amounts of heat on top and bottom. Placing an oven with a cake, pie, or rolls in it, on top of an oven loaded with coals on the lid is not a very good idea.)

A Dutch oven lid can be placed over 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.




Many people have asked me how to turn an upside down cake out of an oven without getting cake everywhere. Here's the method I use: First, let the cake cool for 10 minutes or so in the oven with the lid cracked. Next run a rubber spatula around the inside edge of the oven to loosen the cake. To turn the cake out, first lay a piece of parchment paper across the top of the oven so it lays flat and replace the lid so that it holds the paper in place. Make sure you have an available lid stand resting on your table for the next step. Using gloved hands place one hand on the oven lid and your other hand under the oven and carefully flip the oven over so the cake falls onto the lid. Rest the oven upside down on the lid stand and tap the bottom and sides of the oven lightly with your hand to make sure the cake didn't stick. Then lift the oven off the lid. The cake will be resting on the parchment lined lid and can be cooled this way or slid off the lid using the parchment paper.

## Tools You Will Need

	Make sure to have some wooden utensils on hand for stirring your food. Avoid using metal utensils in your ovens as they can scratch off the protective coating. Heavy plastic utensils can also be used, but remember, they are plastic and will melt if left resting against a hot oven for any period of time. Plastic is also hard to clean off the oven once it has been baked on.
	A good pair of leather gloves will prove invaluable around a hot fire. A pair of work style gloves will do, but I recommend using either camp or welders gloves. Although these typically cost more, they offer thicker leather and an inner insulated lining. The camp gloves pictured to the left are manufactured by Lodge.
	A charcoal starter or "chimney" offers a fast way of lighting briquettes without using lighter fluid. Simply place your charcoal in the chimney, then wrinkle up 3-4 pieces of newspaper and place under the chimney. Light the paper with a match stuck through the vent holes in the side. That's it, in 10-15 minutes your charcoal is hot and ready for use. Charcoal starters can be purchased at most outdoors sporting goods stores.
	Long handled metal tongs work well for moving and placing briquettes. The long handle keeps your hands away from the flame and heat. If you are using coals from a fire, you can use a standard garden or fireplace shovel.

	Another item that will prove useful is some sort of lid lifter or hook. A large pair of pliers will also do the job. I prefer to use Mair lifters, pictured at left, because they allow you to control the lid easily and securely.
	A lid stand offers a nice place to rest your lid and keep it out of the dirt while you are stirring your ovens. They can be made easily, a #2 ½ aluminum can will work, or there are a number of them available on the market. The lid stands pictured at left are manufactured by Lodge.
	A whisk broom does a good job removing ashes from the top of your lids before serving your food. This will help keep ashes from falling into your tasty dishes.

## Other Helpful Items

	Cooking tables can eliminate back strain by getting your Dutch ovens up off the ground at a level where you can work with them easily without having to bend over. Tables come in many shapes and sizes. I advise people when purchasing a table to make sure it comes with a wind screen. The table pictured at left is manufactured by Lodge. (A flat bottomed charcoal barbecue can also be used, just remove the cooking rack and use the bottom of the barbecue like you would a cooking table. Open the vents and close the lid and you have an effective wind screen.)
	Dust covers will help keep dust off your ovens when in storage. They also protect your clothing and vehicle from picking up oil from off the oven when lifting or transporting it. The cover pictured at left is manufactured by <a href="#">Kirkham's Outdoors Products</a> and is my favorite choice. These covers are made of heavy duty canvas with brass grommets in the bottom that the oven legs pass through so they don't wear holes in the bottom of the cover.
	Volcano cook stoves allow you to cook your favorite dishes using fewer briquettes. These cook stoves are of the finest quality and are very durable. The ventilated design keeps the outside of the stove cool to the touch even when loaded with coals.

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