

Cooking on a Wood Cookstove

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<http://www.homestead.org/KarenZlattner/Woodstove/CookingonaWoodCookStove.htm>

Although my husband and I are not off the grid, we don't want to rely on public utilities if we don't have to. So, even though we have an all-electric kitchen we decided to add a wood cook-stove. Last year, in the process of renovating our home, we decided to approximately double our kitchen space. This allowed us the room to keep our ceramic cook-top and electric, double-wall oven with space left over to install our new Waterford Stanley wood stove.

We wanted to be as self-sufficient as possible, but we also wanted to maximize functionality and flexibility.

Now that we have the wood stove, if the electricity goes out we can still cook, plus, still being on the grid, burning wood helps lower our electric bill. We still have the electric kitchen for summer use, or if I just make coffee or tea, etc. It's not worth to make a fire in the wood stove just for that, unless you keep the fire going all night which we didn't want to do.

When we started looking for a wood stove, we first went to antique shops, auctions and shows, but we couldn't find anything that was in good shape, and didn't require a lot of work.

I'm quite sure that such treasures are out there, somewhere, but we couldn't find any. Besides that, antique stoves are not airtight.

When we started looking into new stoves, we found that most wood stove dealers were only too happy to help us get exactly the stove we wanted.

We researched different brands found in Lehman's catalog, advertised in magazines like *Mother Earth News* and *Countryside*, and on the web. That's when we decided on the Waterford Stanley, mostly because of it's small size.

If you decide to buy an old stove, be careful to inspect the condition inside and outside of the stove. Make sure the wood grate is in good shape, and that there are no cracks or spots rusting though. Also make sure that all the vents will open and close, since that is the way you control the fire, and therefore the temperature of the stove. This is extremely critical, because cast iron is not easy to repair, so a new stove may be a better choice.

Of course, if you have manufacturer's manuals with the stove, go by their guidelines, since every stove is different. There are also many good books available on the subject.

Although some people will use the cook-stove as a heat source, we don't, since we already have a wood stove for that purpose.

We made the decision for a wood cookstove for two reasons: 1. to help keep down the electric bill, and 2. so that I can cook even without power. After the stove was installed, we found another reason for a wood cook-stove: it makes you slow down.

Cooking on a wood stove takes longer than an electric or gas range. It takes a while to get the fire hot enough to cook on, especially the oven.

All stoves have the same basics, although they may be in different areas on the stove.

- The Firebox: this is usually on the left upper corner, under the cook-top.

Most, like mine, are loaded from the front, others may be loaded from the left side. To light a fire, place crumpled newspaper in the fire box with kindling over that. Fill the box tightly, but don't compact it so much that air can't circulate.

- Dampers: There are 2 dampers that you use. They are in different spots on different stoves. The one you're concerned with now, opens the chimney. Mine are on the cook-top, others are a dial or slide on the left side of the stove, and others may be a handle that's turned in the chimney itself. No matter where it is, that must be opened to let the smoke out of the stove. Then somewhere in bottom-front or the bottom- left side of the stove will be an air intake. This can be adjusted to let air into the stove. The less air in, the cooler and slower the fire. Open all the way to start your fire.

The other damper is to open the oven damper. Keep this closed while lighting your fire. Once the fire is going well, you can open this damper. For my stove, when the oven damper is opened, I can close the chimney damper. Your stove may be the same or you may need to keep both dampers open.

Once you have your kindling burning well, you can add your log(s).

Before starting a fire, be sure you know the size logs that fit inside your stove, and make sure that they are well seasoned.

- Cooking area: This is the top of the stove. Those round lids are not burners, like on a conventional stove. Those circles are lids that can be lifted off so that you have access to the inside of the stove enabling you to brush away the accumulation of ash. You cook on the entire stovetop. The hottest area is over the fire (left side) to the coolest (right side). So instead of turning a dial to "lower the heat", you move your pots and pans around.

On many stoves, like mine, you can now close or partially close the chimney damper and/or air intake, once your fire is going good. You have to play around with them to see which works best for your stove. You want a slow, steady fire.

- The Oven: My oven has a temperature gauge on it. Some models may not, so you may want to use an oven thermometer, bought from a store. Open the oven damper, and close the chimney damper (if you do that on your stove). It will more than likely take about 1 hour for the oven to heat up to proper temperature. You may also need to open the air intake, and/or add more wood or kindling. The oven is used like any other oven, although I find that baking or roasting may take a little longer.

Now you are ready to cook.

I like cast iron pans, but steel works well also. Thinner materials will work also, but if the fire is too hot, your food can scorch. Keep the pan more to the right side of the cook top. Again, knowing where to place your pans requires practice, because, obviously, there is no high, medium, or low settings. I also use a metal trivet on the right back corner so I can raise a pan off the stove completely if I want to just keep something warm.

Remember that the oven is a box (the oven) within a box (the stove). The principal is to get the smoke to circle around the inner box. To keep things working properly, take off those lids on the cook-top (WHEN NOT IN USE) and brush and scrape around the sides of the oven. Any accumulation of ash will act as insulation to the oven. Under the oven there should be a little door that you scrape and put out the loose ash.

There will also be a door or drawer under the firebox. This too, will need to be emptied periodically of ash. How often will depend on how much you use the stove, but empty it at least weekly.

It is not normal for smoke to come out of the stove. If it does smoke, then something is wrong with the draft in the chimney or a crack somewhere in the stove, or if it's around a door, the stove could be warped. You need to watch for this in buying a used stove.

Those are the basics of cooking on a wood cook-stove. I was not brought up cooking like this, so I can tell you that it just takes practice, trial and error. Cook something really simple the first time. Get that down pat before using the oven.

As I mentioned, cooking this way slows you down, and the warmth in the area draws people to the stove. We have chairs round the stove so I can be with friends and family while cooking, and I always keep a teakettle on the back of the stove.

If you're impatient and your family wants instant meals, a wood cook-stove may not be for you. To appreciate cooking with wood, you need to slow down and enjoy. Grab a chair and have some tea.