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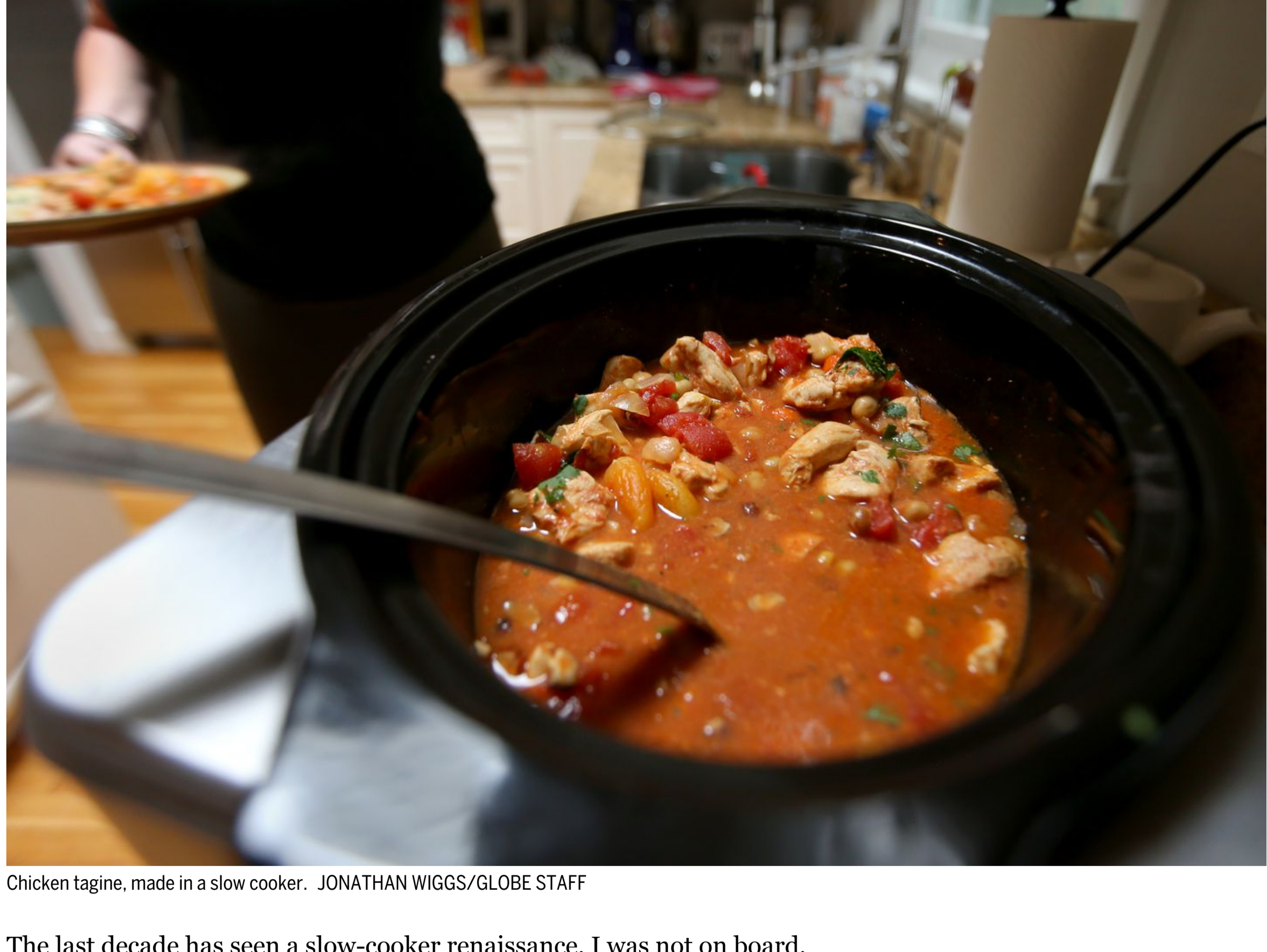
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How I learned to stop worrying and love the slow cooker

By **Alexandra Hall** Globe Correspondent, September 6, 2016, 11:50 a.m.



Chicken tagine, made in a slow cooker. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

The last decade has seen a slow-cooker renaissance. I was not on board.

To me, the device stood for mushy, perfunctory cooking. It was first patented in the 1940s, inspired by the stews of a Jewish Lithuanian grandmother; the Crock-Pot brand popularized it in the early '70s. By the time that decade was done, it looked as though the slow-cooker fad was, too. Sales of crock pots plummeted. Goodbye, chicken fricassee. It was time to move on.

Then, about eight years ago, the crock pot resurfaced. To be fair, the recipes, like the crock pot itself, had evolved. Instead of gloppy casseroles cooked in mustard-hued vessels painted with wheat patterns, we now had lamb shanks with white beans and seafood stews, prepared in gleaming, high-tech stainless-steel machines.

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It made no difference to me. Crock pots, I believed, were best left in the annals of American kitsch, along with bell-bottoms, shag carpet, and other bad ideas of the '70s. I didn't subscribe to the notion that throwing everything from the fridge into a pot and letting it cook all day would yield something delicious. After attending Le Cordon Bleu cooking school in Paris, the alma mater of Julia Child, I emerged wedded to the ideal of true gastronomy, to meticulousness above all else, and to the belief that there are no shortcuts in making excellent food. In other words, I was a food snob. I'd be sticking to fastidious "real" cooking, thanks very much.

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And yet. Friends sang the slow cooker's praises — especially friends with kids to feed. They told tales of magical dinners ready and waiting when everyone came home from work and school. Then, two years ago, something happened. Fall happened, to be exact. I had fallen in love with a man who, like me, had two children. And so my family expanded. And with September came an increasingly complex schedule, with more after-school activities, and weekends packed with sports practices and music lessons, and double the number of doctor appointments and play dates and God knows what else. It was a blessing, and it was exhausting. And it certainly wasn't conducive to cooking.

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Gone were the weekend mornings spent shopping at the farmers' market. No more experimenting with gazpacho recipes, or futzing with funky new homemade ice cream flavors. More often than not, dinner had become a thrown-together pasta dish at best, takeout or a frozen pizza at worst.

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- [Recipe for slow-cooker cassoulet](#)
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So why not just give the slow cooker a chance already? After all, it was really just simmering and braising, right? And plenty of classic dishes are the product of a good, patient simmer. There was no reason I had to use all those gloppy recipes from the '70s, or any of the plain old boring ones that proliferate online today. With a little T.L.C., a few creative tweaks, and good ingredients, maybe I could even make something pretty darn delicious.

The first device I tried was a 20-plus-year-old Rival Crock-Pot 3100/2 — a relic from my fiancé's basement. I unknotted its cord, cleaned it, and prepared to make an old standby that seemed a foolproof entry into slow cooking: split pea soup with ham and sage. The device was avocado green, covered with illustrations of various foods, just in case I forgot what the thing's intended use was. The ceramic pot inside wasn't removable. There was no "warm" setting, just "high" and "low," and no timer. The soup turned out fine, but it was time to trade up.

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And thus the Cuisinart Programmable Slow Cooker PSC-650 entered our lives, after hours spent reading consumer reviews, reports, and blogs and comparing prices. "Does it talk?" my 9-year-old daughter, Cleo, asked when I plunked the shiny steel cuboid on the counter. "It reminds me of C-3PO."

Actually, it looked more like a sideways fridge; holding 6½ quarts, it took up solid real estate on the counter. But oh, the bells and whistles: a snazzy digital timer, an automatic warm setting, a removable ceramic insert and glass lid (the latter is key to keeping an eye on your food without disturbing it) that are both dishwasher-safe. This wasn't C-3PO; this was the Starship Enterprise.

We put it to the test the next day — a school day — with a tagine of chicken, chickpeas, and apricots. It finished cooking at 4 p.m. and automatically reset to "warm," so the meat was fall-off-the-bone tender without being even a smidge overcooked. Everyone went back for seconds. And we had time to really talk to one another. I was a convert.

Since that fateful fall two years ago, I've logged countless hours experimenting with ingredients, temperatures, and methods (see below). To be sure, the slow cooker is a godsend for family dinners during the school year, but I've also had unequivocal success using it for weekend dinner parties with adults. One big hit: a cassoulet with an addictively fragrant broth and garlicky toasts for dunking. It was inspired by the cassoulet served at my old haunt in Paris, the enchanting bistro Au Trou Gascon.

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Take that, food snob.

Some slow cooker recipes to try:

- [Recipe for slow-cooker mulled cider](#)
- [Recipe for slow-cooker chicken tagine](#)
- [Recipe for slow-cooker cassoulet](#)

Tips and tricks for the slow cooker

There are several myths about slow cookers that will lead you down the path to terrible dinners. No, you can't just throw everything in at once and hope for the best. And no, you don't just turn it on in the morning and expect to come home to anything remotely edible. The slow cooker is easy and convenient, but that doesn't mean you don't have to do *anything*. Here are a few guidelines to help get your slow-cooker game into high gear.

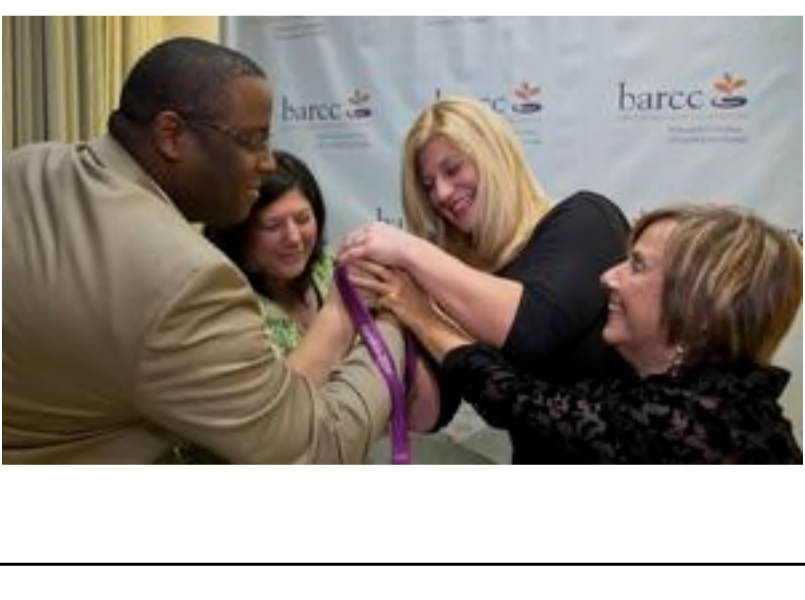
- 1. Timing:** No matter what you hear, foods can be overcooked in a slow cooker. So rather than leaving something cooking all day (i.e., 10 hours or more at a time), play it safe by doing all the prep work and setting it to cook the night before, while you sleep. In the morning, remove the inner pot from the heating element to cool, refrigerate it before leaving the house, then when you get home that night take it out and cook for one more hour. Some meats (such as beef ribs and round) can only cook for so long before they lose flavor and tenderness; save those for weekend cooking when you're around to intermittently check their progress. And if you're not eating the dish that night, you can refrigerate it and cook it an additional 20 minutes later in the week, just before serving.
- 2. Searing:** Opinions vary on whether searing meat before slow-cooking makes any difference. I find it ultimately yields a much deeper flavor. I use a pan to quickly brown the meat on all sides, add it to the cooker, deglaze the pan with about ¼ cup of beef stock, then add that, along with all the extra flavor it contains, to the cooker. Most modern slow-cooker models have a dishwasher-safe insert you can use to brown and sauté ingredients that get messy on the stovetop, such as bacon or ground meat. But larger pieces of meat still require a separate pan.
- 3. Trimming and skimming:** A certain amount of fat enhances the flavor of a stew or roast, but too much can turn your sauce into an oil slick. Trimming meats (poultry included) of any fat visibly lining the edges helps enormously in controlling this. And just as key: skimming any fat that rises to the top about a half-hour before the cooking is finished.
- 4. Prepping:** In the slow cooker, as with any method, even cooking depends on even cutting. So do your best to chop vegetables and meat into pieces that are roughly the same size — that way some won't be fork tender while others evoke shoe leather.
- 5. Garnishing:** As with almost any dish that is cooked this long, the rich and melded flavors can benefit from a jolt of bright, contrasting, uncooked flavor added just before serving. Lemon wedges (fresh or preserved) are a great addition to tagine; fresh chopped basil or cilantro sharpens up a roast beef; with cassoulet, fresh thyme (or, better yet, daubs of thyme, olive oil, and garlic run quickly through a blender) lends new dimension and complexity to your finished masterpiece.

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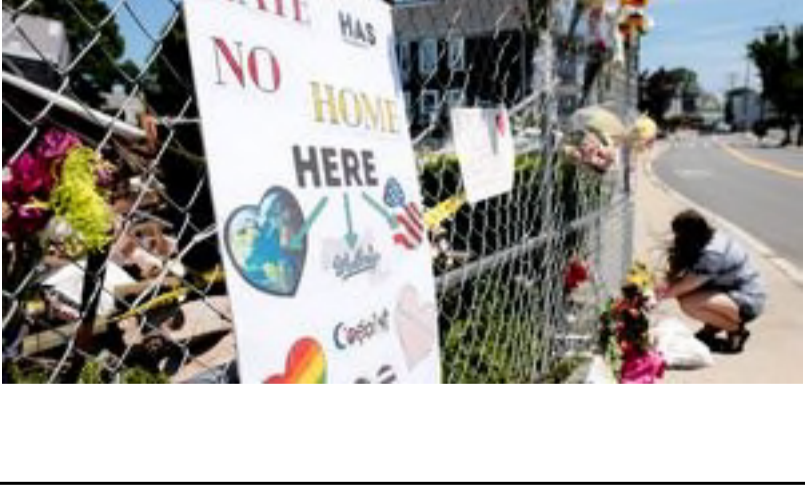
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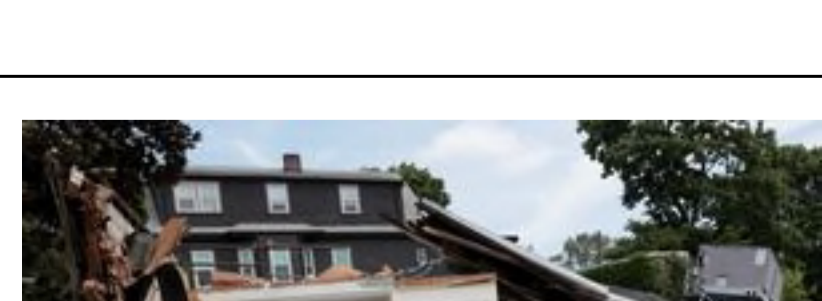
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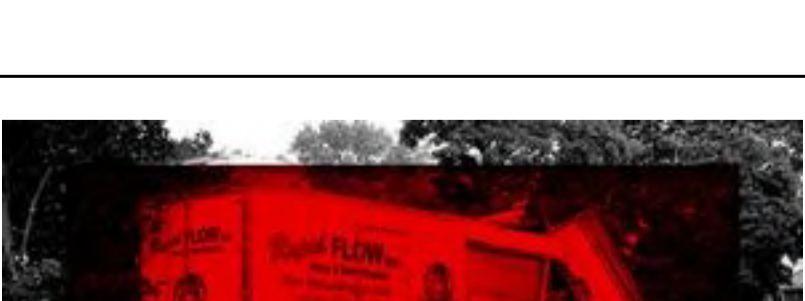
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