

## **CATEGORY TO STUDY: Multi-Cookers**

### **Overview**

Multi-cookers are countertop appliances that can "do it all." No more need for a separate slow, pressure, rice, or steam cooker or sauté pan--this appliance handles all these tasks. It frees up space on your countertop as well as your time. Sales of multi-cookers have skyrocketed over the past several years as families have learned about this appliance's versatility. Some models are pressure cookers, all have a slow-cook function. Additional appliance functions could include air-frying, crisping, dehydrating, and sous vide.

Additional convenience factors could include clarity of the touch controls, multi-cooker programming ease, and cooking surface durability.

### **A Brief History of Multi-Cookers**

While multi-cookers have several functions, they are well known for their pressurized cooking and slow cooking features. The first pressurized cooking pot was believed to have been made in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by Denis Papin, a French physicist. Alfred Vischer advanced pressurized cooking by introducing his Flex-Seal Speed Cooker in 1938--the first pressure cooker designed for home use on a stove. Electric rice cookers, another form of pressurized cooking, were developed in Japan in the 1950s and moved pressurized cooking from the stovetop to the countertop. Interestingly, the first electric pressure cooker patent wasn't until Chinese scientist, Yong-Guang, obtained it in 1991.

The first slow cooker was created in 1936 by Chicago-based inventor Irving Naxon. However, it wasn't until the 1950s when Naxon introduced his invention to the marketplace as the Naxon Beanery. However, this small appliance did not become popular in home kitchens until the 1970s after Rival Manufacturing bought the rights to the Nixon Beanery, updated it, and rebranded it "Crock-Pot." While it continued to be a common kitchen appliance, the slow cooker's popularity experienced a resurgence in 2005 when a new generation of cooks looked for ways to serve "from scratch" meals that didn't take time away from other family activities.

The electric multi-cooker for home use was first introduced in 2010 via Amazon as the Instant Pot<sup>®</sup>. Robert Wang was credited with inventing this hybrid of slow and pressurized cooking. Initial units were marketed as a cooking powerhouse that had functions of six appliances. The multi-cooker popularity has brought other companies into the mix, with units now being produced by companies other than Instant Pot<sup>®</sup>. Functionality has continued to advance, with some models touting ten or more different cooking functions -- with many performed in half the time it traditionally takes -- making this appliance one of the most prized appliances in today's kitchen. In fact, these multi-function wonders are now the tops of wedding registry gift lists, with a Facebook following of 1.3 million members in the Instant Pot<sup>®</sup> Community alone.

### **Selection Factors**

Due to the nature of the appliance, there are several factors to examine when deciding which multi-cooker to purchase.

#### *Cooking Methods:*

*Pressure Cooking:* High-temperature steam and pressure results in cooking times up to 50% faster while retaining nutrients. Pressure cooking also tenderizes cheaper cuts of meat. This function is typically considered the most important, with a Cook's Illustrated survey indicating that 93% of respondents reporting pressure cooking was their primary use of this appliance.

*Slow Cooking:* **Slow-cooking** involves searing meat well in oil or butter at a relatively high temperature before the **cooking process** is finished off slowly and gently in the oven at a lower temperature. Slow cooking helps to tenderize less expensive cuts of meat, which saves money.

*Rice Cooking:* Multi-cookers use pressure to cook rice in a fraction of the time it takes to cook in a covered pot on the stove.

*Sautéing:* Instead of dirtying another pan on the stove, recipes that call for browning meat or sautéing vegetables before cooking can be done directly in the multi-cooker. Some multi-cookers may use the terms searing or browning for this function. Different temperature levels such as low, medium, or high may be included, with some models indicating an exact temperature (i.e., 350F).

*Steaming:* Gentle heat prevents foods from drying out and minimizes the risk of burning or scorching food. Steam-cooked foods retain more flavor, texture, and color with less vitamin, minerals, and nutrient loss.

*Other food preparation methods:* Some multi-cookers have additional food preparation functions such as sous vide, ferment, air-fry, baking, yogurt-making, and more.

*Size:* Models are available in 3-, 6-, and 8-quart sizes. The 8-quart model provides more surface area for functions such as sautéing, but the tradeoff is a comparatively heavier, larger unit.

*Convenience:* In addition to offering multiple cooking methods, additional convenience features include a delay start timer that allows food to be put into the multi-cooker in advance and selecting a later time to start cooking the meal. Some multi-cookers have buttons for specific dishes such as meat, fish, or rice. The keep-warm function automatically kicks in after the food is cooked and keeps it warm until it is ready to be served. Some multi-cookers may also include accommodating cooking adjustments for high-altitude locations such as Colorado. Manufacturers have also introduced units with "Smart WiFi" to control the appliance from a smart device (i.e., phone or tablet).

*Alerts:* Alert systems "beep" or provide a sound to alert the user when the unit is ready to perform certain functions.

*Pots:* Pots may be non-stick or stainless steel. While non-stick is easier to clean, stainless steel provides more even cooking.

*Dishwasher Safe Insert and Lid*

*Accessories:* Could include a stainless steel steam basket, trivet, temperature probe, and/or condensation collector.

*Appliance Specifications:* Including weight (ease of picking up/moving), height, width, and depth (for countertop placement).

*Warranty:* Length of time the product is covered for product defects.

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