



Pressure Cookers

The current generation of pressure cookers is far safer than the those of yore—do they deserve more popularity?

This updated a [testing](#) that appeared in the July 1996 issue.

We hadn't looked at pressure cookers since 1996, so we thought it was time to become reacquainted. Pressure cookers work by forming a closed system in which the temperature of boiling water can be raised. Instead of boiling at 212 degrees, the water in a pressure cooker, usually under about 15 pounds of pressure, doesn't boil until it reaches 250 degrees. This above-average temperature causes foods to cook at above-average speeds. Cooking times can be cut by one-third or even by half. Because little moisture escapes, less liquid is required, and this results in more intense flavors.

The current generation of pressure cookers is far safer than the those of yore. Unlike the original jiggle-top pressure cookers, the newer spring-valve cookers carry no risk of exploding baked beans or splattering beef stew. Because we didn't need to worry about safety, we rated the cookers we tested by price, performance, and convenience.

In the first round of tests, we eliminated electronic pressure cookers, which don't allow the cook to modify or change a recipe procedure once the pot is sealed; we wanted more control. We also preferred stainless steel pots. Many of our recipes begin by sautéing and browning ingredients, and aluminum pots are more likely to cause uneven browning or scorching. Aluminum can also react with some acidic ingredients to create off flavors. Another important factor was pot size. We wanted a cooker that could handle up to eight servings. Because pressure cookers can be filled only up to two-thirds of their capacity, we focused on 8-quart pots. Finally, we wanted widely available models.

We narrowed our testing to six models: the Innova Stainless 8 Quart (\$89.99), the Stainless Presto 8 Quart (\$68.43), the WMF Perfect Plus 8.5 Quart (\$197.99), the Magefesa Classic 8 Quart (\$85.00), the Fagor Duo 8 Quart (\$79.99), and the Kuhn-Rikon Duromatic 7.35 quart (\$169.00). We conducted four tests. We boiled water to evaluate the time it took each cooker to reach full pressure and then release pressure, also measuring moisture loss. We sprinkled flour evenly on the bottom and used direct heat to see if the pans had cold or hot spots or scorched easily. We prepared risotto, which requires quick pressure release, and baked beans, which require natural release. We also judged the pots on ease of cleaning, but all of them cleaned easily.

Our three lowest ranked models had several issues. The Innova comes with several parts (pressure regulator, weights, and cleaning wire) that are detached after using and are easily lost. The Presto scorched a little, has short handles that get hot quickly, and has a valve that directs steam directly upward, where it can easily burn hands. The Duromatic showed no advantage over its much less expensive competitors; in fact, it has several shortcomings. There is no indication of when the handle is locked in place (when the bottom and top handles are lined up, the lid is locked but there is no audible or mechanical indication), and the instructions in the operating manual for quick pressure release (as opposed to normal and slow is release) are hard to follow, requiring that you place only the rim of the pot under running water.

The WMF cooker came the closest to our ideal. It comes with a solidly locking handle; good high- and zero-pressure indication; easy quick release, with steam directed away from the cook; and a clear instruction manual. Unfortunately, at high pressure it makes a continuous hum that many cooks found very, very annoying. It also costs almost twice as much as the other two acceptable models. As a result, we ranked it third.

We liked the Magefesa for its quick steam time (time it takes to reach full pressure), handle with a comfortable locking mechanism, consistent performance under high pressure, and reasonable price. We had two reservations. It has no pressure indicator, instead asking the cook to judge when high pressure is reached based on the emission of "gentle steady flow of steam." We also had some concern with the quick release mechanism. The valve, which is needed to turn for quick release, has a small grip which became hot. It was also difficult to turn, and, when opened, the spew of steam could hit your hands. For this reason, we only recommend it with reservations. (We should note here that the quick release method in any cooker always releases steam, so it's advisable to wear protective hand coverings, regardless of where the valve is pointing).

Our recommended model was the Fagor Duo, which had all of the qualities we were looking for--except for a clear indicator that high pressure has been reached. There is a pressure indicator, but it kicks in only when all pressure has been released. Like the Magefesa, the signal for high pressure is a "gentle steady stream of steam," and some experience with the cooker is needed before you can determine exactly what that means. However, this cooker's quick-release valve is larger than the Magefesa's, and the steam is more carefully directed away from the cook. We also liked the Fagor Duo's wide base (wider than that of most other pots), which allows for easier browning and sautéing.

Pressure Cookers: While none of the models we tested met all of our specifications, we felt we could recommend the Fagor Duo without reservations. Its only drawback, the lack of an obvious high pressure indicator, should be minimized after the user has become familiar with the cooker.

RECOMMENDED

Fagor Duo 8 Quart (#85M7):

-- \$79.99, available from www.amazon.com

-- Spanish manufacture

The Duo's attractive features include an excellent handle that locks solidly, easy-to-read markings indicating pressure and quick-release positions, a valve that indicates when the pot is under pressure, and a wide bottom with ample sautéing space. It also comes with clear instructions and a

well-written recipe book. We missed having a clear indicator that would tell us when strong pressure has been achieved; the existing "signal" relies on the cook's ability to perceive a "gentle steady stream of steam."

RECOMMENDED WITH RESERVATIONS

Magfesa Classic 8 Quart (PG 04008):

-- \$85.00, available from www.magfesausa.com

-- Spanish manufacture

We liked the Magfesa for its quick steam time (time it takes to reach a steam), good locking handle, and consistent performance under high pressure. As with the Fagor, the indication of high pressure is a "gentle steady flow steam." However, we found the quick-release switch to be too flat and jerky to turn--it also gets very hot. The instruction manual is also wholly inadequate: unclear and with translation errors, it also contains only a handful of recipes.

WMF Perfect Plus 8.5 Quart (#0793149300):

-- \$197.99, available from www.amazon.com

-- German manufacture

Given its high price, the WMF should be perfect, and it comes close. Its detachable, easy-to-clean handle locks easily, it has a well-marked valve that indicates low and high pressure, and it has an easy-to-handle quick-release valve, which directs the steam well away from the cook. Still, many of the cooks in the test kitchen so disliked the low hum the cooker emits at high pressure that they said they would never want it in their kitchen.

Kuhn-Rikon Duromatic 7.4 Quart (7 Liter) (INOX):

-- \$169.00, available from www.amazon.com

-- Swiss manufacture

We found two problems with this cooker, neither of which we'd expect given its high price. While we liked the valve that clearly indicates both high and low pressure, we were uncomfortable with the fact that the handle had no audible or manual locking mechanism -- although it is locked when the handles are correctly positioned over each other. Second, while several of the cookers suggest running a pot under water as an alternative method for quick release (as opposed to slow and normal release), in the Duromatic this is the only option the instruction manual gives, (although some models do have automatic pressure reduction functions). Further, the maker says that only the rim should be rinsed, and manipulating the hot, heavy pot in the sink is very awkward.

NOT RECOMMENDED

Presto 8 Quart Stainless (#01370):

-- \$87.49, available from www.amazon.com

-- U.S. manufacture

The best feature of the Presto is a valve that indicates when all the pressure has been released. Otherwise, its handles are too short and, although advertised as "stay cool," we found they got hot, unlike the long handles on the other models tested. The bottom also has a slight tendency to scorch. Finally, more than any other model, this one spat water in different directions.

Innova Stainless Steel 8 Quart (#42008)

-- \$89.99, available from www.amazon.com

-- Chinese Manufacture

We can't recommend the Innova for a variety of reasons. The instruction manual is so unclear that no one in the kitchen could figure out how to remove the detachable rings that control the pressure. The pot has a number of small, removable parts that must be detached with every use, including the pressure regulator, which got very hot. Under high pressure, this cooker spat steam straight up. It was also difficult to determine how much pressure was in the pot -- a "slight rocking motion" of the regulator is supposed to indicate maximum steam. Further, the only way to test whether the pressure was gone was to tilt the pressure regulator; if the pressure wasn't gone, the cooker would spew steam, which could easily burn your hand.