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PERFORMANCE REPORT



PRODUCT: CAT Enabled Gas Cooker

TESTED BY: SAM KILGOUR

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Elected Committee Member of The Guild of Food Writers

Original thinking by



THE ORIGINAL CAST IRON COOKER

This report contains test results correct up until January 2006.

Any product development affecting its performance cannot be accounted for after January 2006.

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Publications

'The Flavour Continuum', in Nurture; Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery, ed. Richard Hosking, Footwork 2004.

'The Water Tiger; the Pike in English Cookery', in Wild Food; Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery, ed. Richard Hosking, Footwork 2005.

Journalism

Articles, features and recipes for a variety of publications

About me

Recently the main focus of my work has been children's food. As a governor at two London schools I have been very involved in efforts to improve the quality of meals and increase awareness of the importance of food and healthy eating within the school communities. I also have practical and contemporary experience of how young palates develop an interest in taste, texture and flavour. In 2003 I presented a paper on the development of the palate at the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery.

At present I am researching and writing a history of the pike as well as undertaking commissioned work.

As a firm believer in locally sourced seasonal food I am strongly in favour of reducing food miles where possible and support local produce, small producers and Farmer's Markets. Over the past few years I have built up a strong working relationship with many farmers, suppliers and artisan producers. I have also attended food events and conferences, including Raymond Blanc's 'American Food Revolution' at Le Manoir, the Oxford Symposium and food fairs and festivals across England and Wales.

In addition to writing about food I also work with individuals and small groups teaching food preparation and cooking skills. Confidence is an essential ingredient in successful cooking and so I endeavour to help clients learn to trust themselves and their ingredients.

Installation

The installers were polite and helpful, however, several problems arose during the installation. The first real issue was that the flue cover would not fit onto the cooker properly. This was resolved with a few taps from a hammer but once on, the hotplates could not be lifted or lowered without catching the flue cover. The problem was sorted out by pulling the cooker forward but this means that the splashback is not completely level and nor is the cooker. The simmering plate cover does not close properly and there is a gap around the bottom where it does not meet the hotplate.

The condensation emitted by the cooker also meant that when I wiped the timer free of water the printed notes on the timer smudged. This makes the timer rather hard to decipher. The cooker did give off a lot of condensation which I expect is due to there being no positive pull from a flue to draw out the damp air. The extractor helped to clear the condensation very effectively.

The extractor fan was fitted with no problems and works extremely well. It is very powerful indeed and very quiet in operation. Even on the maximum setting it does not overpower conversation or drown out other noises.

The cooker came with two wire shelves, a roasting tin, baking tray, oven gloves and an apron. I also tested a set of ESSE Protherm stainless steel casseroles. I did wonder why ESSE did not supply a toasting rack and wire brush for the hotplates with the cooker. I happened to have a toasting rack but it must be rather frustrating for first-time range users who do not have one. These small details provide much added-value for customers.

A commissioning card was sent on by ESSE to be filled out and returned.

As the CAT-enabled ESSE does not require a flue it can be placed anywhere in the kitchen, although in my kitchen it is on an outside wall.



ESSE baking tray, roasting tray, apron and oven gloves are inclusive items when you purchase a CAT cooker.



Testing

During the testing period I checked the oven temperatures to see how closely they matched the temperatures in the ESSE instructions and also to see if they were replicated time after time. The temperatures did correspond to those suggested by ESSE and on each testing the cooker replicated the previous temperatures accurately. Although exact temperatures are not as useful when assessing cast-iron ovens due to the radiant heat, it is useful to know the temperature in the middle of the oven. It was difficult to assess how quickly the oven came up to temperature but it is somewhere in the region of 15-40 minutes from tick-over depending on the setting required. With the timer, this means that the cooker can always be ready and waiting to cook when needed.

I cooked a range of foods on the ESSE and subjected it to Thanksgiving dinner and a family Christmas in addition to normal daily cooking and testing.

The Ovens

Both ovens provided superb performance with maximum flexibility. The temperature of the ovens is dependent on the cooker setting. The ESSE is a very personal cooker and it will happily work for you and the way you cook. Unlike some range cookers where one oven is for roasting and baking and the other for simmering or warming, the ESSE can be set so that the oven temperature suits the food to be cooked.

On full temperature (7), the top oven is a very hot roasting oven with a hot baking oven below. When set at 4 or 5 the top oven is very versatile and will turn its hand to many cooking tasks whilst the bottom oven will be superb for simmering or keeping cooked food hot. On lower temperatures (1 or 2) the top oven will simmer or braise and the bottom oven can be used for warming or drying.

For Christmas dinner I cooked a 6 kilo goose in the top oven. The bottom oven held the Christmas pudding (precooked and warmed through in its basin wrapped in foil), two dishes of stuffing, a jug of gravy, a large dish of bread sauce, and the plates. Once the goose came out, roast potatoes went into the top oven and were cooked and ready within 40 minutes. In spite of an unscheduled hour-long delay to the meal, both the potatoes (covered with foil) and all the trimmings in the bottom oven, remained in perfect condition. The goose, resting under a blanket of foil and tea-towels was also beautifully cooked. When we were finally ready to eat the brussels sprouts cooked in under three minutes on the boiling plate.

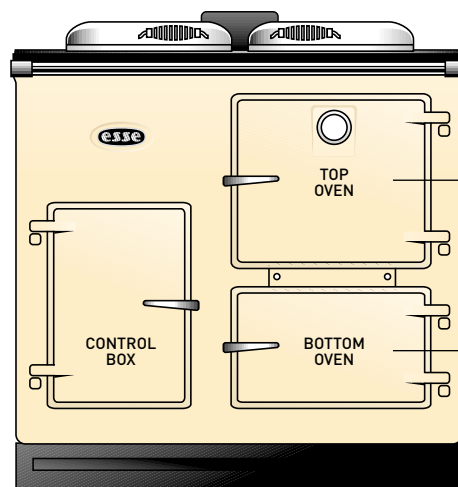
The Christmas ham was brought to the boil on the hotplate and then transferred to the top oven set at a simmering temperature for four hours. Whilst it was being peeled and scored the oven was turned back up for the final baking, reaching a hot temperature in only ten minutes. The ham baked for about 20 minutes in the top oven with excellent results.



Temperature dial

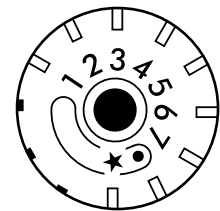
| | °F | °C | G.M. |
|----------------|---------|---------|---------|
| Very Cool | 225-250 | 110-130 | 1/4-1/2 |
| Cool | 275-300 | 140-150 | 1-2 |
| Moderate | 325-350 | 170-180 | 3-4 |
| Moderately Hot | 375-400 | 190-200 | 5-6 |
| Hot | 425-450 | 220-230 | 7-8 |
| Very Hot | 475 | 240 | 9 |

Oven cooking recommendations



7 - Roasting
4 - Versatile cooking
1/2 - Simmering & braising

7 - Baking
4 - Simmering
1/2 - Warming or drying



Gas control

| Knob Position | Approx. Top Oven °C |
|---------------|---------------------|
| 1 | 100 |
| 2 | 130 |
| 3 | 150 |
| 4 | 170 |
| 5 | 200 |
| 6 | 235 |
| 7 | 270 |

The Ovens

I had expected cooking smells to be an issue with the CAT-enabled cooker but I have been pleasantly surprised. If the oven doors are opened then the smell of food will obviously be noticeable, but whilst the doors are closed odours are kept to a minimum. On several occasions I have completely forgotten that I have put things into the oven, particularly when cooking overnight, and have inadvertently left stock or casseroles cooking for several hours longer than intended. So far, nothing has yet come to any harm and the stock which sat in the oven for 24 hours was very good. Strong smelling foods such as smoked fish or dishes containing a lot of garlic can also be cooked without the whole house being aware of them.

The cooking zones within the ovens mean that exact temperatures are less critical than in fan-assisted ovens. If the centre of the oven isn't quite hot enough, or if it's too hot, then the food to be cooked can be moved up or down to find the right level of heat. The oven floor is a useful cooking area in its own right: pastry and pizza will cook evenly and quickly on the floor of the oven and the floor can also be used in the same way as the hotplate for frying or browning foods that would normally be cooked on top of the cooker. Cooking pastry items here eliminates the need for tedious and time-consuming blind baking. A frying pan placed on the floor of the oven will ensure that eggs or sausages cook perfectly without all the splashes of fat that accompany cooking such foods on the hotplate.

There is a small hot spot in the top oven near the front, in the middle just behind the door, which I believe is caused by a steam vent. It is only an issue if baking cookies or meringues or similar items in the top oven on the top shelf. I found that only one biscuit or meringue would be affected and now simply cook these foods lower in the oven to avoid this. The bottom oven cooks evenly throughout and as it runs at approximately 2/3 of the temperature of the top oven can be used for baking and roasting in its own right.

The thermodial gives an indication of the temperature in the centre of the top oven but its reading is affected when the oven doors are opened. After a few minutes the reading will return to normal.

Warmth

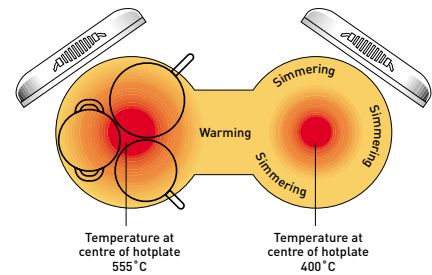
The cooker does emit quite an amount of heat into the room when on at high temperatures but when in tick-over mode or on a low setting it is not a problem. An ESSE extractor fan is very useful when cooking on the hobs or if the kitchen becomes too warm. The continual warmth of the cooker means that it can be used for ironing, warming and drying clothes as well as for cooking meringues, drying fruits and proving bread dough. I have barely used my tumble dryer since the ESSE was installed as clothes dry on an airing rack in the kitchen in no time.



Because the ovens are warm overnight when the cooker is in tick-over mode or on a low setting the ovens can be used for making porridge or stock overnight.

Hotplate

The hotplate is extremely versatile and responds quickly when the heat is turned up. The heat varies according to the cooker setting but it's quite possible to turn the cooker up to full from cold or tickover and be making toast or boiling vegetables within a few minutes. Once the toast is made or the kettle boiled the cooker can simply be turned back down unless the ovens are needed.



When the cooker is on a high setting the boiling performance of the left hand side of the plate is impressive whilst the simmering plate on the right has a range of heats available depending on the placement of the pan. The ESSE range of pans complements the hotplate by allowing offsetting of pans and by providing a totally even heat. I have had noticeably better results with the ESSE pans than with other pans that I already own.

The dogbone hotplate is particularly useful as heavy pans can be slid from boiling to simmering without having to be lifted and the centre area is large enough to be properly useful to the cook.

Roasting

The ovens are particularly suited to roasting, with the even all-round radiant heat producing exceptional results. Because the oven temperature can be varied, a temperature suitable to the meat or poultry being cooked can be set. Depending on the heat level selected the lower oven can be used as a baking or simmering oven whilst the top oven is roasting. The high temperature and relatively high humidity (compared to conventional ovens) of the top oven is perfect for baking bread. Unlike some range cookers the ESSE will not lose heat whilst it is being used so there is no need to pre-cook roast potatoes or limit use of the simmering plate during long cooking sessions.



I roasted lamb, beef, pork, ham, goose, chicken, duck and game with very good results for all. The jacket potatoes which emerged from the oven were wonderful; crisp outside and wonderfully soft and fluffy inside. Roast potatoes cook superbly on the oven floor in the roasting tin.

Steaming

The boiling plate will bring water to the boil very quickly when the cooker is on a high setting which enables easy steaming of foods such as vegetables and rice on the hotplate. Root vegetables and potatoes can also be brought to the boil in water on the hotplate and then drained and transferred to the bottom oven where they will finish steaming.

The ovens make steaming traditional puddings simple as they do not need to be watched or topped up and can be left to cook in peace. Rice, cous cous and other grains will also steam very happily in the ovens.

Baking

Both ovens are excellent for baking. Unlike some other cast-iron range cookers, the ESSE can be set to the required baking temperature which dispenses with worry over specialist cake-baking equipment or altered cooking times. Because the ovens cook evenly there is no need to turn cakes or biscuits during cooking to prevent over-browning as there is with some range cookers.



Bread is particularly suited to the cast-iron ovens and radiant heat with excellent results on all kinds of loaves, rolls and buns. I found that flat and round loaves and pizza cooked very well on the oven floor whilst tin loaves preferred the top of the oven.

All kinds of cakes, biscuits, brownies and cookies cooked happily in the ESSE. I had particularly good results with delicate flourless cakes and souffles as the oven door can be opened during cooking to check on progress without fear of the cake or souffle collapsing.

Grilling

Grilling on the ESSE can be achieved in two ways. A cast-iron ridged grill pan can be used either on the hotplate or on the floor of the top oven for perfect steaks, chops and grilled vegetables. Dishes such as shepherd's pie, gratin or lasagne can be browned by placing near the top of the roasting oven towards the end of the cooking time.

During testing I grilled bacon and sausages and fish at the top of the oven as well as cheese on toast. I also grilled chops, steaks and fish on both the hotplate and the oven floor. Toast is best made on the hotplate using a wire toasting rack.

Frying

Foods can be shallow-fried using either the boiling plate or the floor of the roasting oven. One advantage of frying foods on the floor of the roasting oven is that fat splashes are contained within the oven and carbonised which saves on mess and cleaning.

I fried a variety of foods including sausages, eggs, chicken and fishcakes and found that both oven floor and hotplate work well. Deep-frying is also possible on the hotplate especially if the oil is preheated on the right-hand side of the hotplate before being moved over to the left-hand side for cooking.

The ESSE is also well-suited to stir-frying. I obtained best results using a cast-iron wok on the boiling plate where the fierce but even heat produced good results with both meat and vegetable stir-fries.

Braising and Stewing

The ESSE ovens are perfect for long slow cooking. Tagines, casseroles, pie fillings can all be left to simmer slowly without needing attention. I had excellent results with overnight simmering in the top oven when the ESSE was in tickover mode and also with the bottom oven when the top oven was set to higher temperatures. The cast-iron ovens are particularly suited to slow cooking as the heat is gentle, even and constant.

Boiling

The hotplate has a wide range of temperatures which means that water will boil very quickly at the hot end and maintain a gentle simmer at the other with a range of heats in between. Kettles will boil very rapidly on the boiling plate as will pans for vegetables or pasta. The hotplate will maintain a rolling boil for cooking pasta without fear of boiling over. This makes boiling and poaching simple on the ESSE as the pan can simply be positioned for the correct level of heat without requiring continual adjustment.

Toasting

Toast is made on the hotplate using a wire toasting frame. I found that 4 is about the minimum setting for good toast if using the timer. Alternatively the cooker can be turned up to full heat from tickover and toast can be made within minutes. There's nothing quite like toast made on a cast-iron range cooker which is crisp yet deliciously fluffy and soft inside. The simmering plate can also be used for direct toasting of bagels, muffins and crumpets. Cheese on toast is easily made by placing the toast, topped with butter and cheese, at the top of the oven to melt and brown. Toasted sandwiches can be cooked directly on the hotplate.

Simmering

The variable heat of the simmering plate ensures that foods can be simmered without risk of overheating. On one occasion I was distracted whilst making a roux for a bechamel sauce and went upstairs for ten minutes. On my return the roux was still unharmed and continuing to cook gently. This demonstrates how effective the simmering plate and ESSE pans are when used together at providing gentle cooking temperatures where required.

The simmering plate can be used directly for pancakes, drop scones and griddle cakes but I achieved better results using a cast-iron griddle or crepe pan. The simmering plate is also the place for making delicate sauces such as hollandaise or for heating zabaglione and for poaching foods such as fish and eggs.

The Timer

Although the cooker can be set manually the 7-day timer is extremely useful. Like a central heating timer it can be programmed to come on up to three times a day. Coming down in the morning to a cooker ready and waiting to cook bacon, sausages and eggs or french toast is a pleasure. Likewise, returning home in the evening to a cooker that is ready to go is most convenient. On a low setting slow-cooked dishes can be left in the cooker all day, ready to be eaten in the evening with minimal fuss.



The ESSE can also be turned up and down manually if preferred or if electricity is not available.

The ESSE

The most important thing about the ESSE is that it is so versatile and will fit around your cooking needs. The timer enables it to be pre-set if so desired so that it will be hot to cook breakfast or dinner or alternatively it can be turned up and down manually as required. Either way, it is quick to heat up and retains the heat well. The ovens can hold an enormous amount of food and because the temperature of the ovens can be set it is a simple matter to find the right temperature. Exact temperatures are less important than in a conventional cooker as the zoning of the temperatures means that there is a spread of temperatures throughout the oven. If something is cooking more quickly than desired it can be moved to a lower position in the oven and vice versa. Food can also be moved from one oven to another to start or finish the cooking process.

Overall I found the ESSE coped well with the demands made of it whilst managing to be a very friendly cooker. Timings are less critical than with electric ovens and gas hobs which is particularly useful for busy cooks or those with children or pets under their feet. The ESSE has also transformed our kitchen and made it the most popular room in the house.

Cleaning

I have used e-cloths to clean the cooker. They are used with water only and the results have been impressive. A quick wipe at the end of each cooking session has left the cooker clean and shiny and streak-free with very little effort. The splashback and extractor hood are also easy to clean using the e-cloths.

The ovens are best cleaned by brushing out with a wire brush. When the cooker is cool a vacuum cleaner can be used to remove any carbonised bits from the floor of the oven. It is important to keep the hotplates free of crumbs or debris using a wire brush as the performance of the hotplate will be affected if it is not absolutely clean.

Conclusions

The CAT-enabled ESSE is an excellent all-round performer which adapts easily to any method of cooking. Although it can be turned up and down manually, for ease of use the timer is a great bonus enabling optimum use of the cooker.

During the testing period I cooked a wide variety of foods both on and in the cooker and was very satisfied with the outcome. The performance of the cooker was excellent and exceeded my expectations in many ways.

Those used to cooking on with a cast-iron range cooker will find the ESSE adaptable and effective whilst first-time users will be reassured by the ease of use and excellent results.