

VILLAGE VIEW

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This is a Thank You Letter to each Village View reader who responded to my plea for help in finding an oven to use on top of my woodburning stove. My quest has ended, and I feel as though I'd acquired the Holy Grail.

What is it and where did I find it? Once on the trail, it was remarkably easy. The first person to point me in the right direction suggested a Coleman camping oven, describing it as portable, foldable for storage, and the right size. Then started to come other suggestions, even entire catalogs featuring many types of stoves and ovens, but none pictured was exactly right.

Finally, a reader in Edgartown sent not only pamphlets and descriptive material, but the names of specific shops to contact and their telephone numbers. Among them was the Red Top in Buzzards Bay; a call there confirmed the advice was excellent.

As luck would have it, it wasn't even necessary to make a special trip up-Cape; friends from that area were coming down for a visit the very next day. Another phone call, and when they arrived, so did the oven.

It's perfect, and I'm delighted. Now the weather's getting chilly, I can put it to work and retire my electric oven except for broiling or when it's time to roast the turkey.

One of the first things I'm baking is Indian Pudding. The recipe, an old one that's come down through the family for generations, makes one of the most delicious desserts imaginable.

To a quart of milk add three teaspoons of tapioca, bring to a boil and simmer for a few minutes. Remove from heat and stir in a mixture of two heaping tablespoons of corn meal, a beaten egg, a half-cup of sugar, a half-cup of molasses and a quarter-teaspoon of salt. Pour into a buttered casserole dish, let set five minutes until thickened, add a lump of butter the size of an egg, and bake about three hours at approximately 300°. When done, it will no longer be runny.

Maintaining a steady oven temperature with a wood burning stove is not the easiest part of baking in a portable oven. It requires some watching and tending; it takes some fiddling, now and then, with stove damper and draft, but once the fire is going well and settles down to a steady burn, and with the stove dampered down to maintain itself as though for overnight, your pudding will cook perfectly.

My new little oven has a temperature gauge on the outside of its door to indicate how close I'm coming to maintaining the recommended figure. For Indian pudding, it's not necessary to be precise. Stoves, in the days when this recipe was a standby, were fired with either wood or coal and, often as not, had no temperature indicators. Mother judged the oven's heat by opening the door and testing the interior with her hand. For many old-fashioned recipes a variation of 50° either way does no harm.

Potatoes will bake at 300° in about an hour-and-a-half; at 400° in about 45 minutes. A macaroni-ham-and-cheese casserole can be brought to proper doneness in 20 minutes if the oven maintains 400°; at 300° allow 40 minutes to an hour.

When using a stove-top oven, it doesn't cost anything to cook dishes that require long hours of baking. You're not burning gas or electricity; you're using heat the stove generates anyhow to warm the house.

Once a pudding is done and potatoes are baked, of course, you can remove the oven from the stove and put on a pan of frozen vegetables to cook. The casserole will stay hot while the vegetables grow tender. Finish the meal with the still-warm pudding topped with a few tablespoons of cream or ice cream, and you'll send your family from the table well-satisfied.

While I'm thanking Village View readers for helping me find an oven, I want to thank the many who've shared other things with me, over the years. Some have written to say they especially enjoyed a particular article. Some, to pass along information I can use in another column. Many pause at the post office or supermarket to tell me the column gives them pleasure. And sometimes, when I'm mistaken, that's brought to my attention, too.

Comments, suggestions, corrections, criticisms, and additional information are all welcome. This column has appeared weekly for a dozen years, now, and it's nice to know it's read occasionally. Its purpose is primarily to entertain; sometimes, to inform. Often readers say, "I don't always agree with you, but I like to know your point of view."

It would be astonishing if everyone agreed with me all

the time, or even if anyone did. I don't expect it. In spite of positive, sometimes downright dogmatic positions I may take on controversial subjects, I'm well aware I don't know everything and can't always be right. Nevertheless, having an opinion, even a wrong one, is better than having no opinion at all.

As long as people take time to read this column now and then, and as long as they enjoy it, whether they agree with me or not is unimportant. If it makes them laugh sometimes, if it makes them think sometimes, if it makes them sad or glad sometimes, it's achieved its goal.

And when I receive responses from readers, I'm rewarded, for without those, I could feel as though I were writing to creatures in outer space. Letters like the one from Edgartown telling me where to find the oven truly warm my heart. The writer may not read Village View every week; I doubt anyone does that. But he, along with many others, did read the one asking for help, and he and the others took the time to answer. His was the information I needed.

He also took time to tell me he looks forward to Village View, and I'll share that comment with the rest of you because his words encourage me to continue writing.

"You don't know how much your Village View means to me. It comes each week like a dry no'easter from across the Sound... and often confirms my sometimes muddled thinking." Now what's more welcome than a dry no'easter? About the only thing I can think of is a few kind words, like his.

Think, then, as the days grow shorter and colder this winter, of me at my typewriter, the woodstove cozily near, and the Coleman oven baking Indian pudding and sending throughout the house a tantalizing aroma. As I tap away at this machine, I think of you readers: some young, some elderly; some busy and active in the community, some housebound, depressed and lonely; some well-off, some scrimping along. But all friends, even if we've not yet met.

Whatever our station or condition, we all, taken together, form a composite, yet each of you, as I write, is an individual. Perhaps that's why, at times, I seem to contradict myself, for it depends upon which one of you I'm thinking about as these articles take shape and form.

Again, my thanks to all who helped steer me on the right course to finding my oven. I'm as pleased as a cat with two tails!