

Cooking With A Clay Pot

Notes and Suggestions by Lee and Sarah Steele, collected by Paul Elliott

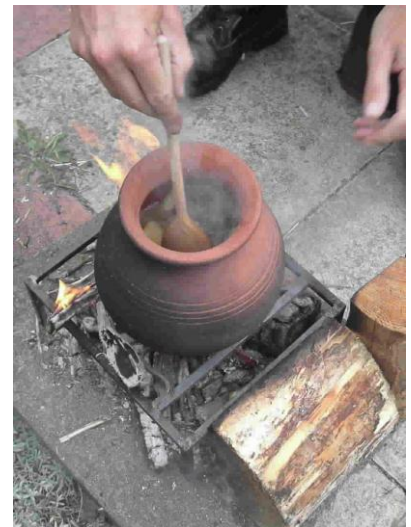
We have a few years worth of 'experimental' cookery experience and I think the following points will make for good, well cooked edible food using a clay fired cook pot...

- The pottery pot needs to be heated up slowly and cooled down slowly. Too fast and you'll end up with a fire full of ceramic playing pieces!! We have found the best way to heat a pot up is to put a small amount of cold water in to it, place it by the side of the fire and turn it regularly. As the water slowly heats up so will the pot. If you need more water add it slowly and gradually. It will take forever to heat up a cold pot full of cold water.
- Don't over cook your food. Too often re-enactment pottage turns into "gray mush". A simple veggi pottage which we have used as a base is as follows - heat up your pot either with water which you then pour into another container or with a little oil - heat slowly. If you have heated the pot using water, once emptied out, add the oil then add chopped onions. Fry, then add your other veg - carrots, leeks, turnip, mushrooms etc. Continue to fry these off. Then slowly add a bit more water, a bit at a time so it has a chance to heat up. Don't over do the water if you want a thick pottage, you can always add more but it's difficult to take it out....! Then just simmer until all the veg are cooked. You can add lentils, pearl barley, herbs, seasoning, flour to thicken if required, beer!!!!

We also do a good meat stew - use braising steak. Heat up the pot - slowly - either fry some onions and seal the meat or heat up a little water and add the meat to it. Simmer until done - this can be 3 hours, add veg towards the end of cooking, carrots are good. If we are eating when all the public has gone, then we also add some little Italian potatoe dumplings - these take about 20 mins to do and really bulk the meal out.

We have also cooked a brisket of beef in this way and a bacon joint which all look impressive in the pot and prove you can cook a substantial meal in one pot over a fire.

All the cooking will take longer than in a cooker at home, but food doesn't have to be over cooked. Your cooking will need a bit of tending and keeping the fire going, turning the pot, checking etc, but I don't see why decent food can't be produced. After all its only relatively recently we've all moved to gas and electric...!



- Bread making is good and a very effective living history display. Lee has made a copy of a NorthAfrican bread oven - evidence from Hadrians Wall. This is basically a charcoal oven with a dish on the top. There is a good recipe for Roman Army bread on the back of the Dove Farm Spelt flour packets (available from supermarkets). The modern version includes yeast but we have made it without and it makes ok bread - like a pitta bread, but a bit thicker. Good for dipping in the pottage!! The dough is baked on the heated dish, either on the bread oven or heated up by the fire. Put another dish over the top to protect it from ash. It will usually burn on the bottom, but its a good reason to explain that in later centuries how we get the saying 'upper crust'.

Wood or charcoal is good - we usually use a mixture - charcoal tends to be hotter and as you provide it yourself, dryer!! Wood is good when dry and if it burns with out too much smoke then so much the better.

Hope this has been of some help.