



## Camp Oven Cooking

*Harry Cramer*

Camp oven cooking is part of Australian outback history. Over the ages the camp oven has been used by drovers, shearers, and Bushmen on the move and by miners during the days of the gold rush. This type of cooking has definite advantages.

With the advent of the four wheel drive vehicle becoming so popular, more and more people are becoming aware that their vehicle is able to travel on more than a sealed road, and they are taking advantage of this to get off the beaten track.

With this chance to explore, a new adventure comes, the getting to places that up until a few years back, few people were seen in some of these areas of the Australian outback.

The desert areas are now a destination that is not impossible to traverse for these new explorers.

All people have to eat, and part of the enjoyment of these trips, is to sit around a campfire at night, and cook up a nourishing meal, and what is better than to do it in a camp oven. The one that most people think of is the cast iron camp oven. These have been around for ever and used by the early settlers, and also the droving camps in a bygone era. Cast iron camp oven had to and still require to be handled with careful for if the cast iron oven is accidently dropped there is always the chance that it could crack

Someone came up with the idea of making a spun metal camp oven. Being from spun metal, the big advantage is that they will not break if dropped not like the cast iron ovens. This became the famous **Bedourie camp oven** named after the town Bedourie out in the Diamantina area in out back of Queensland.

The town started in the 1880's as a major watering hole and rest stop for drovers and cattle because of the artesian bore.

This type of oven has gained in popularity and now there are a number of spun metal camp ovens on the market. The disadvantage with the spun metal oven is it does not distribute the heat like cast iron, as well as they are prone to rust if not looked after.

I have included a video from Derrick on our web site [www.allcamping.com.au/](http://www.allcamping.com.au/) in the **Bush Cooking Section** to go through the different camp oven and also some of the cooking equipment so that you can see the difference and gain some knowledge for camp cooking.

## Preparing your new Camp Oven

A camp oven must be seasoned before it is used. Whether of cast iron or of spun metal these materials are porous to an extent, and the inside of the oven has to be treated so as to seal the surface especially the cast iron ones.

We will deal with the cast iron camp oven first.

Before you first cook in the camp oven remove any stickers, and then it needs to be given a thorough wash with warm water and detergent.

This is the only time that you should use detergent on the oven.

This is to remove any coating that has been applied in the manufacturing process to stop it from rusting. After washing the oven it then needs to be dried thoroughly.

It is not a bad idea to warm the camp oven after washing it and this will make sure that it is completely dry.

Once dry, rub cooking oil (I recommend the use of olive oil) inside and out with a cloth or paper towel.

Repeat this 3 or 4 times over the next 2 days. This is to get the oil to penetrate into the metal as cast iron is very porous. Don't use the 'spray on oil' as it does not work as well.

After this process has been completed, then place the camp oven in a hot oven at home, upside down and bake it for at least an hour at 300-350degrees, putting some aluminium foil under it to catch the drips. Don't forget to give the lid the same treatment.

When you are doing this it is not a bad idea to remove the smoke detector near the kitchen as this process will generate a lot of white smoke and set the alarm off.

If you have a BBQ with a hood you can do it in that, as this will achieve the same result and you won't set off the smoke alarm. This is how I do mine.

This oiling and heat treatment might have to be repeated a couple of times, until you get the desired results of a uniform black patina or glaze, as this will provide the non-stick surface that you are trying to achieve and this process that also protects your oven from rusting.

Before storing after use always give the camp oven a wash but don't use detergent or a scourer on it otherwise you will have to re-seal it. Just use a soft brush and if the oven has been done properly it will clean up easily.

Give the oven a good oiling as this will stop any rust forming whilst not in use.

If this oiling process is not done before you first use it, food particles penetrate into the cast iron and go rancid while it is not used.

The spun metal type camp oven is a lot easier to season. It is a case of washing the preservative coating off it and oiling the unit

I have included a video on how it is done on our web site [www.allcamping.com.au](http://www.allcamping.com.au) in the **Bush Cooking Section**. It is basically the same as a cast iron camp oven but you only have to give the oven a wash and dry then apply the oil and cook. I oil mine inside and out and then use the BBQ and find this is the best method, although any method you find that works and get the oil to glaze is what you want as an end result.

## The Camp Fire

When using a camp oven there are a number of ways of using it depending what you are cooking. To be able to get the best results there are some guide lines to follow. There is nothing that will beat experience of having done it, and been successful as this is something that can't be replaced.

One of the big mistakes made is too much heat especially if the oven is put over a flame, as this will cause over heating of the camp oven and will usually cause the contents to be burnt.

I have included in this article camp oven temperature guide using paper and how it will change colour in accordance to the heat as a guide. As well as this I have also included a guide using heat beads and how many are required for the amount of heat.

When cooking damper, scones, cakes or a roast, ideally the cooking should be done with a bed of coals but not too many because all you want to do is just to heat the bottom of the oven – Too much heat on the bottom and the contents could finish up being burnt.

With the bottom now warmed place coals on the lid of the oven so that the oven is heated from the top. These coals will have to be topped up from time to time depending how long the cooking process will take.

What you are trying to achieve is if you were using the oven in your kitchen at home. Too much heat could cause evaporation of liquids inside the camp oven and cause the food to burn.

When using the camp oven to do a roast or cakes, it is advisable to use a cake rack or trivet in the bottom to stop the food being burnt. Just remember with cake or damper a bit of foil or pie dish is a good way of supporting the mix.

Another method to use the camp oven is to dig a hole deep enough to put the camp oven in it with some room around it so you can add coals. This should be near to your fire. Place some coals in the bottom of the hole but not too many, you only want to warm the bottom of the oven. Once this is done place more coals around the sides and on the lid.

This method gives a very constant heat and the bottom does not get burnt.

If you are using the camp oven to do a casserole or stew then the above method can be used or by placing the oven over coals. Again too much heat and you will burn the food.

A bad experience will be a lesson and realise that you need time and plenty of it with this type of cooking.

## Camp Oven Temperature

I came across these tables on the Mitsubishi 4WD Owners Club of Qld and have included it for information for those wanting to know how to test the oven for temperature and also when using heat beads instead of coals

### *Testing camp oven heats by the paper test*

Here's a way to determine the heat of an oven when using coals from a fire  
Pre-heat the oven on a bed of coals.

Place a piece of paper inside the oven to find out what heat the oven is at.

The paper will change colour according to the heat of the oven within a few moments.

### Paper Heat Test Chart

Heat	Degrees C	Paper Test
Very Hot oven	260	Dark brown
Hot oven	190-200	Light Brown
Moderate oven	160-190	Yellow
Slow oven	120-160	Crust
Too hot oven		Black & on fire

### Heat Control in the Camp Oven

Heat control is the hardest thing to master when learning to cook with a cast iron camp oven. Here are a few tips to help you on your way!

Good quality heat beads rather than camp fire coals are recommended because they provide a long lasting, even heat source and are easier to use.

It is important to remember that these tips are a guide to help you get started. You will need to adjust the heat beads according to your recipe and keep in mind that the weather, temperature and soft ground can affect cooking temperature and times.

#### Things to look out for when cooking

- A strong wind or breeze will raise the temperature
- High humidity will lower the temperature
- Direct sunlight will increase the temperature.
- Shade will lower the temperature.
- Higher air temperature will increase the temperature.
- High altitude will lower the temperature.

#### Various recipes and dishes require that you have the correct placement

- Stews, soups, chilli and other liquid dishes require more heat on the bottom than the top.
- Meat, poultry, potatoes, vegetables, require even distribution of heat on top and Bottom.
- Bread, damper, cakes etc. require most of the heat on the top and little heat on the bottom.

## TEMPERATURE CONTROL USING HEAT BEADS

(These numbers are approximate)

- Each heat bead adds about 20 degrees.
- Place the required number of heat beads under the oven bottom in a circular pattern so they are at least 1/2" inside the oven's edge.
- Arrange heat beads on top in a checkerboard pattern.
- Do not bunch heat beads as they can cause hot spots
- To prevent hot spots during cooking, lift and rotate the oven a 1/4 turn every 10-15 minutes and then rotate the lid a 1/4 turn in the opposite direction

Temperature Degrees C	10 inch		12 inch	
	Top	Bottom	Top	Bottom
150	12	5	14	7
175	14	6	16	8
200	16	7	19	10
230	18	8	21	10

I hope these hints will assist you to having more enjoyable times

### Heat beads Tip

When using heat beads you will find ones that have been open for a period do not burn as well as fresh ones. When you open a new pack put the unused ones in an air tight container and they will stay fresh like new.

### Cooking Equipment

There are some things that are required to make the task of cooking in camp ovens easier and also safer as with any cooking there is heat and fire. Care must be taken at all times as it is so easy to be the recipient of a burn or scald.

- Camp Oven
- Camp oven lid lifter
- A pair of multigrips
- Long Handle tongs
- Trivet or cake rack - for the bottom of the camp oven
- Pie tray , alfoil , disposable alfoil trays
- Gloves or mitts- to handle hot items
- Small brush – not nylon to clean top of oven
- Paper towels
- Olive Oil
- Heat Beads, Matches
- Fire lighters – great for getting the heat beads going
- Self raising & Plain Flower, Baking soda
- Salt & Pepper
- Herbs & Spices, Cinnamon, chilli, Ginger, Garlic,
- Coconut milk
- also think about tubes of herbs now available
- Sugar-Brown & white, Icing Sugar
- Soy sauce, Balsamic vinegar
- Honey, Golden Syrup
- Anything else you can think of