

How to Use Your Kitchen Thermometer

To take much of the guesswork out of cooking, use your instant-read thermometer often—and use it right! BY DAWN YANAGIHARA

For the most part, cooking is pretty low-tech stuff. But sometimes modern gadgetry is actually useful. Nothing takes the guesswork out of cooking, for example, like an instant-read thermometer. That's why—both in the *Cook's* test kitchen and in my home kitchen—the thermometer is the second most reached-for item after a pair of tongs. In our story on testing instant-read thermometers a few years back (see “Digitals Top Instant-Read Thermometer Testing,” July/August 1997), we explained that there are two basic types: digital and dial-face. Our favorite remains the digital because of its quick response time, easy-to-read display, and wide temperature range.

Within the digital category, there are basic instant-read thermometers and there are cooking thermometer/

timers. The latter have digital-display base units to which long, wire-connected metal probes are attached. Though not really meant to be used as instant-read thermometers because of their slow response times, they can be useful in their own right. You insert the probe in a roast just going into the oven, run the wire out the oven door, plug it into the base unit, and set the alarm to sound when the desired temperature is reached. As long as you keep the wire out of flame's way, this thermometer is also handy at the stovetop, where you can use it to check the progress of custards and other such delicate mixtures. The probe can be left to lean against the pot, the display easily readable, leaving your hands free to steady the pan and stir its contents simultaneously.

The less expensive dial-face ther-

момeters, also known as dial-reads, should meet most cooks' needs, though they tend to register temperatures more slowly and their fine type can be hard to read. What's most important when using a dial-face thermometer is to remember that its probe must be inserted at least 1 to 1½ inches into the food to activate the temperature sensor. The sensors in digital thermometers, on the other hand, are located at the tip, making it easy to measure the temperature of shallow liquids.

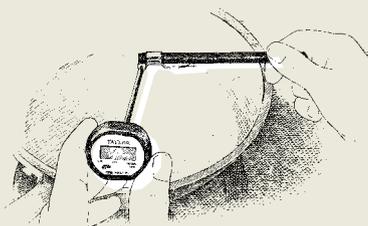
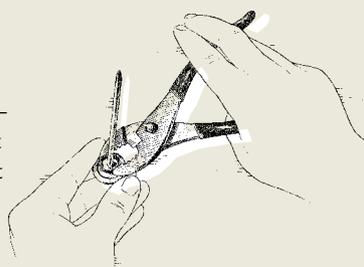
If you've got a brand new instant-read thermometer—dial-face or digital—you may want to check its accuracy before putting it to use. To do so, insert the probe into boiling water; it should register 212 degrees Fahrenheit (but keep in mind that the boiling point of water drops about 1 degree

with every 500-foot increase in altitude). An alternative method is to make a water and ice slush, in which the thermometer should register 32 degrees Fahrenheit. Because digital thermometers cannot be recalibrated, you'll need to take any degree discrepancy you find into account whenever you use the thermometer. Most dial-face versions can be recalibrated by adjusting the nut beneath the base of the head with a wrench or a pair of pliers. Make sure to recheck the accuracy of a dial-face thermometer if it is ever dropped or falls victim to any sudden, jarring motion.

Instant-read thermometers have many uses that are not so obvious. To ensure that you get good use and the most accurate readings out of yours, we've assembled a few tips based on our own experience in the test kitchen.

THERMOMETER BASICS

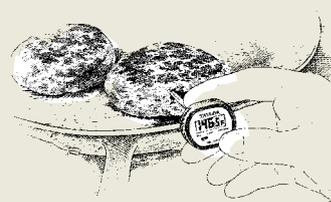
➤ To recalibrate a dial-face thermometer, insert the probe into boiling water—it should register 212 degrees Fahrenheit at sea level (see explanation, above). If it doesn't, adjust the nut just beneath the head with a wrench or a pair of pliers.



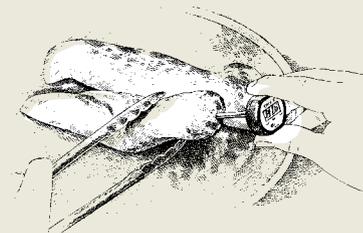
➤ Most instant-read thermometers are sold with a protective plastic sleeve with a metal clip (for clipping onto aprons) that forms a loop at the very top. To distance your hands from the heat of the food, slide the probe of the thermometer into the loop at the tip of the clip, and hold it upright using the sleeve.

MEAT

Whether cooking a burger or roasting a beef tenderloin, you should always take the temperature of the area of the meat that will be the last to finish cooking. This, naturally, is the thickest part of the meat or, if it is of uniform thickness, the center. Bones conduct heat, so if the meat you are cooking contains bone, make sure that the thermometer is not hitting it.



➤ Because it's easy to insert the thermometer too far or not far enough, the relative thinness of steaks, chops, and burgers can lead to erroneous readings when the thermometer is inserted straight down into the meat. Instead, insert the thermometer sideways into the center, taking care not to hit any bones.



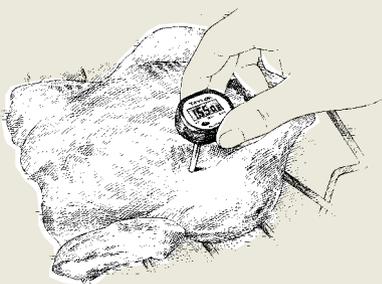
➤ For narrow, cylindrical cuts of meat, such as a pork tenderloin or rack of lamb, lift the meat with a pair of tongs and insert the thermometer into the end, parallel to the meat itself.

Illustration: John Burgoyne

POULTRY

Poultry, when roasted whole, poses a unique problem because the breast is done at a lower temperature than the thigh.

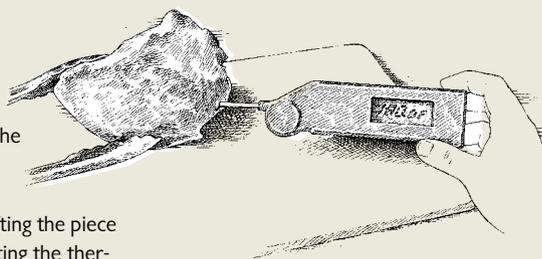
➤ To take the temperature in the thickest part of the thigh, insert the thermometer at an angle into the area between the drumstick and the breast, taking care not to hit the bone.



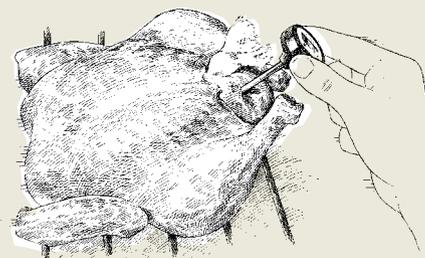
➤ To take the temperature in the thickest part of the breast, insert the thermometer from the neck end, holding the thermometer parallel to the bird.



➤ When cooking chicken pieces, use the same technique described for the breast, below left, lifting the piece with tongs and inserting the thermometer sideways into the thickest part of the meat, again taking care to avoid bone.



➤ If roasting a stuffed bird, the stuffing may lag behind the meat. Check its temperature by inserting the thermometer into the center of the cavity. (Stuffing is fully cooked at 165 degrees.)



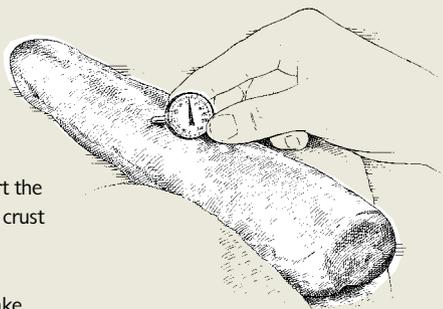
BREAD

A thermometer is a useful tool to have at the beginning and final stages of baking bread.

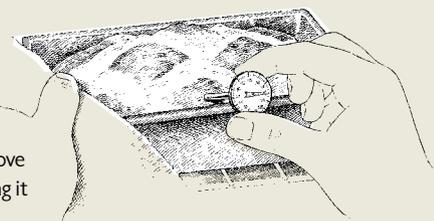
➤ Use the thermometer to gauge the temperature of the liquid to which the yeast will be added. It should be between 105 and 115 degrees, warm enough to help dissolve and activate the yeast, but not so hot as to kill it.



➤ Recipes sometimes suggest taking the internal temperature of a loaf of bread to gauge when it's done. For bread that is baked free-form, tip the loaf up with a hand shielded by an oven mitt or potholder and insert the probe through the bottom crust into the center of the loaf.



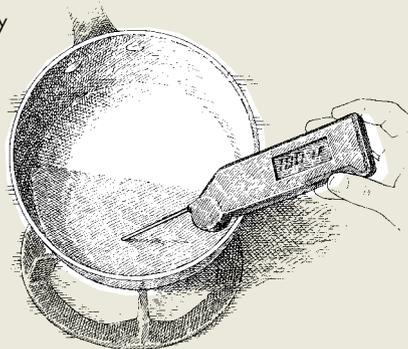
➤ The simplest way to take the temperature of bread baked in a loaf pan is to pierce the thermometer through the top crust into the center. But it's not the best way, since it leaves behind a conspicuous hole. Instead, insert the thermometer from the side, just above the edge of the loaf pan, directing it at a downward angle toward the center of the loaf.



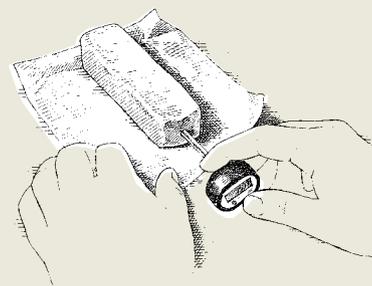
... AND MORE

An instant-read thermometer has other useful applications.

➤ Recipes for custards, curds, pastry creams, and other delicate or heat-sensitive mixtures on the stovetop often indicate at what temperature to take them off the heat. If you are cooking a small quantity and are having difficulty obtaining an accurate reading (this can be especially true with dial-face thermometers), tilt the pan or bowl so that the mixture collects to one side, creating enough depth to get an accurate reading.



➤ Butter is at the optimal temperature for creaming at 67 degrees, or cool room temperature. While it may seem persnickety, using an instant-read thermometer to determine the temperature of the butter can sometimes be helpful, especially, say, if it was just removed from the freezer. To do so, insert the probe into the length of the stick of butter.



➤ An instant-read thermometer can also be used with cold foods. For example, before being churned, ice cream bases should be chilled to about 40 degrees. Cover the bowl containing the base tightly with plastic wrap, puncture the plastic with the thermometer probe, and then let the thermometer sit in the mixture, supported by the plastic.

