

AGA COOKING TIPS

10 frequently asked questions answered by Richard Maggs, our resident cookery doctor.



1.) On a scale of 1 to 10, how hard is it to adapt to cooking on an Aga?

It is not only the best cooker in the world, it is also the easiest cooker to use. With an Aga remember just two main rules of thumb and you will find it very easy indeed:

1. You don't set the heat with an Aga. You find it. Select the correct position in or on the cooker and the food will cook to perfection, the cooker temperatures being automatically adjusted by the thermostat.
2. Remember the Aga 80:20 Rule: on a conventional cooker you typically cook 80% of your food on the top of the cooker, and turn on the oven to cook 20% of your food, e.g. baking a cake, roasting meat etc. With the Aga, the hot ovens full of stored heat are always available for instant use --- no pre-heating is required --- so cook 80% of your food in the ovens, and only 20% of your food on the hotplates. This conserves the heat, keep you and the kitchen cool, and ensures that food actually requires less supervision than you are used to on conventional cookers.



I personally rate the Aga 1/10 in level of difficulty to adapt. Designed by a blind man, there are no knobs or switches to turn or forget, no burners to light, no low gas settings to blow out, the two main temperatures you need on a hob ---

extremely hot for rapid cooking and bringing things to the boil, and gentle, temperate heat for slow boiling, heating milk and making delicate sauces --- are available all the time for 6 - 8 pans, with every temperature in between. Simply adjust the amount the pan is on a hotplate for infinitely variable boiling. You don't have to relearn how to cook, or abandon your favourite recipes and cookbooks, just understand that there are some Aga cooking techniques open to you for you to enjoy, that save time and work, make washing up easier and give consistently stunning results. The Aga will transform your cooking and lifestyle. Here are just a few of these time-saving techniques:

Vapour-lock the flavour and nutrients in potatoes and root vegetables when you steam them in the Simmering Oven.

Baking blind is a thing of the past using the Aga "bottom heat" technique.

The Aga grilling method in the top of the Roasting Oven cuts down turning and supervision by 70%.

Steamed puddings sweet and savoury may be cooked with no topping up.

The Simmering Oven is a built in slow-cooker for off-peak and overnight cookery.

2.) Does the AGA heat the kitchen?

The Aga is a heat storage cooker, and is well insulated so that a relatively small but economical and efficient heat source is able to store heat in the cast iron castings to maintain the different parts of the stove at their correct temperatures.



Cast iron has fantastic heat absorbing and retaining properties and requires little to keep it up to temperature. The heat source is automatically thermostatically controlled so that no fuel is wasted. The design is such

that a constant small amount of heat is released into the kitchen to keep it warm and inviting, and ensure a comfortable working environment. This means that your tea towels etc. on the hand rail are always kept dry and the gentle warmth given off is useful for lots of cooking and household tasks. These include warming flour for breadmaking, melting chocolate, softening butter, drying awkward graters and metalware such as garlic presses fresh from the dishwasher etc. Laundry can also air safely and a pile of folded pillow slips, for example, can be left damp but folded neatly and placed on top of the Simmering Plate lid to gently dry and "iron" in your absence.

To give you some idea of the amount of heat given off, it is approx. 3,000 B.T.U.s per hour, the equivalent of 10 x 100W light bulbs, or the heat given off from 12 people standing in a room, or one conventional gas burner left running. Most people run their Agas all year, but some owners turn them down a little during the hottest weeks of the year, cooking times will take a little longer than normal.

To the question, "is it on all the time?" the answer is yes, but it is more a case of, "it is always available for service." All temperatures are available simultaneously, with no pre-heating required. You can boil a kettle at the drop of a hat --- with a good ground based kettle, the Aga will boil water faster than an electric kettle or one on a gas burner. It is no extravagance in an Aga household, to just cook one baked potato for yourself if you happen to want one for lunch. A conventional oven would be expensive to heat up for just one potato, and a proper potato oven-baked is light years away from ones cooked in a microwave. If cooking a dozen or more at the same time, the Aga is actually faster than a microwave.

3.) What are the pan sizes you can use in an Aga?

The dimensions of all of the ovens on a heat storage (main) Aga are approx. 13 3/4 inch wide, 19 1/2 inches deep and 10 inches high. Because the ovens are indirectly heated (there are no flames or elements within the ovens) every square inch of the ovens can be used. They can all be really packed with a large amount of food. Conventional ovens require room to be left for hot air to circulate. It is for this reason that each of the ovens can accommodate a 28 lb (13 Kg) turkey, the Roasting Oven being able to fast roast one of this size to absolute perfection in as little as 4 hours.

The ovens are deceptive, they appear to be quite small as the doors are smaller than on conventional stoves, but the depth ensures that several roasting tins can be placed in one oven at a time. For example, in the Roasting Oven you could simultaneously cook a tray of roast potatoes, a 4 lb roast chicken, start off a 2 pint rice pudding, bake an apple pie, cook 8 baked potatoes and bake 8 vol-au-vent cases. In the Baking Oven at the same time you could cook a further different collection of foods. The sheer capacity and power of the Aga ovens has to be seen to be believed. And the Roasting and Baking Ovens are humidity controlled: they vent into the flue so cooking smells are drawn away, and there is no confusion of flavours between sweet and savoury dishes. Cook an angel cake next to a kippered herring if you want to. Agas have also featured genuinely self-cleaning ovens since 1929.

The companion ovens are conventional (one regular, one fan) and as with any other conventional oven, space needs to be left to allow heat to circulate.

With an Aga you have the luxury of ovens that are constantly available. Their immediate readiness means that you can cook a lot of food, fast and slow, in the ovens that you wouldn't perhaps have thought to cook there. Foods that are inclined to splash and make a mess, or that are strong smelling, can be cooked in the hot ovens and the smells are ducted away, so that the oven venting system is a type of integral cooker hood. As therefore the hotplates are not used as much as on a conventional cooker, and the hotplates are mainly kept down to contain the heat, less heat is let into the kitchen from the hotplates and ovens. Noisy extraction canopies are not recommended as they are largely redundant when cooking on an Aga, but in some cases they can be fitted, providing a suitable air inlet to the kitchen is provided to allow the extracted air to be replaced.

4.) What can you do to make the AGA cooking have more of a broiling effect? (ie -nice and toasty brown on top-for instance a hamburger)?

For broiling (grilling) burgers, bacon and sausages etc., place on the grill rack set in the high position in a full or half size Aga meat tin and place on the very highest set of runners of the Roasting Oven, so the food is almost touching the roof of the oven. If cooking a breakfast grill, sliced tomatoes and mushrooms can be cooked underneath, and all the delicious juices will drip down to baste them as they cook to perfection at the same time.

A conventional broiler (grill) browns first, and cooks, i.e. lets heat penetrate, secondly: food therefore needs constant watching and turning to prevent over-browning and to ensure that the centre of thicker foods such as sausages



are thoroughly cooked. Aga broiling (grilling) takes the same time as a conventional broiler (grill), but works the other way around: infra red heat penetrates the food first, and as it cooks through it then starts to brown, as a secondary process,

requiring less supervision until the final few minutes than with a conventional broiler (grill).

Chops and steaks should be contact broiled (grilled) on a ridged pan on the Aga Boiling Plate. The round cast iron Aga one is my favourite and I use it a lot. Heat it clean and dry on the Boiling Plate for four minutes to absorb the full amount of heat ready for cooking. Brush the ridges with a little fat from the side of the meat and then place the meat on the ridges. Grill for just a few minutes each side as the process is very quick. Apart from steaks, chops and cutlets, meaty type fish such as fresh swordfish, tuna, salmon and marlin also work well using this technique: brush the fish very lightly with oil before cooking. Flat fish are generally best grilled using the oven method above, brushed with butter on both sides.

Once you have mastered the Boiling Plate ridged grill pan technique you might like to go on to transfer the pan to the floor of the Roasting Oven to finish cooking once you have added the meat or meaty fish. This keeps the top plate nice and free from splashes.

5.) We would like to know if it is possible to cook an overnight breakfast in our Aga? We have three starving children all going to high school and cooking at 06.30 holds little appeal.

The Aga makes fantastic overnight porridge, try the following recipe:

- 3 oz (75g) medium (pinhead) oatmeal*
- pinch of salt

-1 pt (550ml) water

*Oatmeal (as opposed to rolled oats) is easily available from health food shops if you can't find it in your super-market. My personal favourite is a mix of fine and medium oatmeals, half and half

Bring the water to the boil in a saucepan on the Boiling Plate, transfer to the Simmering Plate and sprinkle in the oats, and simmer for 3-5 minutes, stirring well. Cover with a tight-fitting lid and transfer to the floor of the Warming Oven overnight in a four-oven Aga, or onto a grid shelf or Aga toaster on the floor of the Simmering Oven in a two-oven Aga. On a two-oven Aga only, if the porridge seems to need a gentler heat, try leaving the Simmering Oven door just against the catch so that the oven is made slightly cooler overnight. Close as normal in the morning once the porridge is taken out.

Another overnight star turn is mixed dried fruit compote. This cooks well in water, apple juice or weak tea in the Simmering Oven. I like to cook this overnight, then in the morning cool and chill in the refrigerator for eating cold the following morning as a welcome change from the usual fruit juices, and grapefruit segments and prunes.

If you really want a cooked breakfast in the morning, I suggest you use the "ahead-of-time breakfast" method, which I routinely use when I have a crowd of friends staying over. Using Aga roasting tins and grill racks, and tray up the night before the following ingredients:

In the base of the tins place mushrooms and roughly diced cooked potatoes, the later with a mere trickle of oil over them. With the grill rack placed over these, set in the high position, place halved tomatoes and bacon. Cover with cling film and refrigerate. Lay table and put out frying pan for eggs, and place pile of plates in warming oven ready for serving.

In the morning, place the meat tin on the highest set of runners in the Roasting Oven to grill your breakfast. These four foods will be perfectly cooked in the same time: 10-15 minutes. Sausages take a good bit longer, but if wanted I think work best fried in a little fat in a roasting tin on the floor of the Roasting Oven, just start them earlier. To fry the eggs quickly at the last minute I prefer either to fry to perfection in a pan (cast iron frying pan is my personal favourite) on the Simmering Plate or in a roasting tin or cast iron container on the floor of the Roasting Oven. Fried eggs are one of the few breakfast components that I personally do like to cook on the Simmering Plate as I am quite fussy about having a perfectly set white, with no "frizzy" bits underneath and at the same time a really nice runny yolk. Lots of people use the oven - see which you prefer. Other options include fried bread (if you must!), using dripping or oil cooked in a roasting tin on the floor of the Roasting Oven. If you are cooking for a large number, just invest in some more Aga roasting tins and baking

trays, and use the middle of the Roasting Oven and even more food in the Baking Oven, the same method holds for these foods there, but as it is more moderate it will take a little longer. Try starting trays off in the Roasting Oven, then when turning food transfer to finish off in the Baking Oven. The Simmering Oven will safely hot-hold cooked food for quite some time if you all want to sit down together at the same time.

6.) I am waiting for my first `Aga` to be installed in the next few weeks. I already have a set of good quality heavy based stainless steel saucepans but am not sure what ovenware I will need? Could you advise me on a few basics?

The "standard kit" should include one grid shelf and one solid cold plain shelf, which is an important piece of equipment on a two oven Aga as it is used in certain situations to provide a moderate baking temperature in the roasting oven, for foods such as Victoria Sponges and biscuits. I think a second one is a good move. If you want to cook large cakes which take more than 45 minutes to cook, such as fruit cake, Madeira cake, cherry cake, etc., with a two oven Aga you should invest in an Aga Cakebaker. As well as coming with 6", 7" and 8" round tins it is an excellent universal saucepan. The internal carrier makes it ideal for steaming savoury and sweet puddings, and as a 9 pint saucepan with flat lid it is great as a small preserving pan, boiling hams and fowls and making stock and larger batches of bolognese types sauces.



From what you have said I would also suggest you buy at least a second half size roasting tin, possibly a large one as well. The small one as well as being used for meats is great as a "carrier" for other dishes, such as when making a rice pudding - any milk boiled over is contained and keeps cleaning up nice and simple. The full size baking tin is also great for extra roast potatoes and makes fabulous 5 egg roulades, both the normal type and of the meringue variety. Your roasting tins may well not come complete with the grill racks that were introduced as "standard issue" with all new Agas in the last ten years. They are reversible and essential for oven grilling at the top of the roasting oven and are useful in the low position to roast meat and poultry on. The round cast iron grill pan is good

value and fantastic for chops and steaks.

I take your point about your pans but would strongly suggest you treat yourself to a couple of Aga pans as their bases are machine ground perfectly flat and they really do boil more quickly, making perfect contact with the Aga hot-plates - very useful at the end of a cooking session when you want, say, a green vegetable to come rapidly back to the boil and cook as quickly as possible. With their recessed knobs the Aga pans can also be stacked in the simmering oven which is another great plus.

I take it you have already planned to buy a good Aga kettle. The aluminium and hard anodised ones are the quickest to boil. All Aga cookware is made to a very high standard and really is worth the investment. You have bought the world's finest cooker - cook with the finest cookware from day one and you really won't regret it.

7.) I have just inherited an Aga as a result of moving. I always had problems cooking meat as it was always tough. That was until I purchased a slow cooker, which produced perfect results every time. Can I cook meat in the simmering oven and achieve the same tender results? Also, how long would it take?

Yes, the Aga simmering oven is perfect for slow cooking. For casseroles, bring the food to simmering point elsewhere in the cooker, in the roasting oven or on the hot-plate and then transfer it - covered -to the simmering oven for the long, slow cooking. The results will be meltingly tender. Depending on the cut of meat, it will normally take from 2-6 hours (see The Aga Book for some delicious recipes) or use your favourite recipe, but follow the Aga book technique. It's really easy and you will get consistent results.



Joints may be slow-roasted by calculating the total cooking time using the conventional formula - 25 minutes per lb, plus 25 - varying it depending on which meat you are cooking. Start the joint for 30 mins in the roasting oven and then transfer to the simmering oven, covered with foil, for DOUBLE the remaining cooking time.

Mutton is fabulous cooked for 3-5 hours in the simmering oven.

For premium cuts of beef, I would still recommend the normal fast method and the roasting oven does this as a star turn.

8.) I'm a novice and have just moved into a house with an Aga in the kitchen (two oven). Can I please have the idiot's guide to cooking a chicken in an Aga.

The Aga roasts meat and poultry brilliantly. There is no need to resort to covered roasters, roasting bags etc. Just good, old fashioned radiant heat from the Roasting Oven castings and you will end up with a beautifully golden, succulent bird, deliciously moist. Here are the simple instructions from The Aga Book, by Mary Berry:

Lightly smear chicken with soft butter or sunflower oil. Season. Put onion, whole lemon cut in halves or herbs in the cavity. Stuff the breast end, if liked. Stand on a grill rack set in the low position in a small Aga roasting tin. Cover breast with foil, remove to brown.

2, 3 and 4 oven Aga Cookers

Roasting Oven: slide the tin onto the lowest set of runners. 2 lb (900g) small chicken about 45 minutes; 3 lb (1.5 Kg) medium chicken about 1 hour; 4 lb (1.75 Kg) large chicken about 1½ hours. To see if cooked, pierce the thickest part of the thigh with a small sharp knife and if the juices that run out are clear then the chicken is done, if still pink cook for a little longer.

For perfect roast potatoes to accompany them, parboil in salted water for 5-8 minutes, until just softening. Drain well and shake in the colander or pan to roughen the edges up



slightly. Cook in your chosen fat in an Aga roasting tin on the floor of the Roasting Oven for 45 mins to 1¼ hours. Cooking on the floor of the Roasting Oven gives fantastic results. Cooking them high up in the oven, as with a conventional cooker, means you would be in reality (broiling) grilling them, with disappointing results.

9.) You've helped before! I need a quick and easy cake for a school cake sale....any ideas?

Tray bakes are your answer as they are made by the quick and easy all-in-one method. Mary Berry these days recommends using `Flora original` straight from the `fridge for good results. They need just 30 seconds in a mixer or food processor, or three minutes beating like hell by hand.

The recipes are for half or full size Aga roasting tins, and if you line them with foil you can allow the cake to cool in the tin, pour over the icing which stays nicely contained in the tin and when set lift the whole thing out and either cut into

squares or diamonds or store in two large pieces in tins and use daily as an excellent "cut and come again" cake ideal for lunchboxes.

The recipe for the basic light fruit traybake from The Aga Book by Mary Berry I give below. The Aga Book has several delicious variations, and there are lots more to try from Mary's "Book of Cakes", "Entertaining at Home" and "Fast Cakes" and "More Fast Cakes".

For one large Aga roasting tin:

4 large eggs
9 oz (250g) soft margarine, see above
9 oz (250g) caster sugar
12 oz (350g) SR flour
4 tablespoons milk
12 oz (350g) mixed dried fruit
a little demerara sugar

Measure all the ingredients, except the demerara sugar into a bowl and beat well for about 2 minutes by hand. Line the tin as suggested above. Spread the mixture evenly in the tin.

Two-oven Aga: Roasting Oven - hang the tin on the lowest set of runners and put the cold plain shelf on the second set of runners down from the top. Bake for about 30 minutes, turning once during cooking.

Four-oven Aga: Baking Oven - hang the tin on the lowest set of runners and bake for about 30 minutes, turning once during cooking.

The sides of the cake should be shrinking away from the sides of the tin, and the top of the cake spring back when lightly pressed with a finger. Leave in the tin to cool. Lift out when cool, cut into squares and before serving sprinkle with the sugar.

10.) I am considering getting an Aga but have one question: can you cook a turkey in it? The oven seems rather small.?

You are quite right, at first sight the oven doors do look rather small. That's one of the secrets of the Aga, the small doors help keep in the huge amounts of stored heat. The ovens are in fact quite cavernous, they go back very deep, ask to hold an Aga full size roasting tin next time you are at your Aga specialist to see.

The outstanding characteristics of cast iron ovens are heat from all directions - both sides, the top, the bottom and the back - a constant temperature perfect for all over cooking. It roasts superbly, sealing in the natural juices and flavour, and reducing shrinkage. Joints emerge juicy, succulent and evenly cooked on the inside, brown and slightly crisp on the outside. The Roasting Oven is large enough to

take a 28 lb turkey, a 22 lb roast of beef, four legs of lamb, or 4 large chickens. In fact, you can roast a 28 lb turkey in each of the three cooking ovens, so you could (and I did on one occasion!) simultaneously fast roast one in the Roasting Oven, have another in the Baking Oven roasting at a lower temperature for a longer time, and a third one cooked to an unbelievable moist conclusion in the legendary Aga Simmering Oven. That's 84 lb of turkey cooked, all with the minimum of attention and basting.

For normal fast roasting, the standard cooking times you are used to "25 mins a lb plus 25 mins etc." for different meats work in the Aga, when the roasting tin is placed on the lowest set of runners in the Roasting Oven for the required length of time, so you can see you don't have to relearn how to cook when you have an Aga, just understand where to place food in the cooker. It is really easy. All the ovens are the same size, and the Baking Oven which is at a moderate temperature can also be used to roast at a lower temperature with perfect results if the hotter oven is needed for other foods. Slow roasts are also possible in the Simmering Oven, generally these have an initial period in a hotter oven and then cook for double the remaining calculated time. Apart from the very best beef cuts, I tend to slow roast a lot these days as it coaxes out all the flavour and makes for deliciously tender results with incredible gravy. Stored heat which is transmitted to the Roasting Oven from every angle, giving an all round even temperature, is the reason it provides such succulent roasts with the minimum of attention. The Aga oven is also correctly ventilated, which together with the all-embracing heat, means that your food's precious moisture and juices are sealed in from the start, reducing shrinkage and retaining the flavour. And because excess moisture and cooking smells are drawn into the flue your kitchen remains fresher. The meat and poultry also tends to shrink less, as there is not so much moisture lost by evaporation.

As well as roasting, bread, cakes and pastry which require a hot oven can be cooked in the Roasting Oven. It's the nearest thing to a baker's brick oven, emanating an all round heat that produces perfect baking. Many Aga owners bake all their own bread - there is nothing more delicious. The very smell of it turns a house into a home. And pizzas, home-made or bought ready-to-cook are fantastic. These cook directly on the floor of the Roasting Oven which produces authentic crisp bases, evenly browned cheese and moist toppings. Also, remember literally every cubic inch of the ovens can be used, so when making scones, cookies or biscuits you can space them all out right across the solid baking sheet and every one will be perfectly and evenly cooked. No burned undersides which can happen when such foods are near the gas jets or electric elements found in conventional ovens.

Food can even be cooked in cast iron utensils on the floor of the oven, such as for oven frying, so a quick meal of sausages for children will look after itself, with hardly any attention while you get on with something else. Broiling

takes place at the very top of the oven, and the integral oven venting system draws fresh air in from the kitchen and ducts smells and fumes away to the outside, keeping the kitchen and you free from messy clean up. Because there's no direct flame or heat source within the oven you can fit a number of different dishes in at any one time - up to six half size roasting tins with different foods will fit in just one oven simultaneously.

I have many times cooked something along the following lines at a demonstration:

Roasting Oven:

1. Half size roasting tin with roast potatoes and parsnips on the floor of the oven.
2. Behind that on the lowest set of runners a 4 lb chicken or a garlic and rosemary stuffed leg of English lamb.
3. A traditional creamy rice pudding in a dish sat in another half size roasting tin to heat through ready to transfer to finish in a cooler oven.
4. Behind that another half size roasting tin with 6 baked apples in it, with mincemeat and a maple syrup and apple juice jus.
5. A shelf above with 8 vol-au-vent cases baking to melt-in-your-mouth perfection.
6. Behind the pastry cases 8 large baked potatoes that really taste like baked potatoes ought to.

The capacity of the Simmering Oven also means that you can fit in up to seven Aga pans at one time, for example cooking the following:

Simmering Oven:

1. Boston Baked Beans.
2. French Onion Soup.
3. Chocolate Sponge Pudding.
4. Béchamel Sauce.
5. Sticky Toffee Sauce.
6. Steamed New Potatoes.
7. Steamed Carrots.

Double ovens, ovens that help to clean themselves, slow cookers. Glance through a magazine, and you could be forgiven for thinking that they're the very latest developments in cooking. The truth is, they're all features enjoyed by Aga owners for over seventy years. But typically, the Aga cooker adopted all three principles and many more in its own inimitable but very practical fashion.

I hope that I've wetted your appetite with the tremendous capacity of the Aga cooker. And we haven't even talked about the powerful hotplates which can each accommodate at least three large saucepans. Ask to attend an Aga demonstration and see for yourself, taste the delicious food produced and ask existing owners why they wouldn't for choice cook on anything else.

More of Richard Maggs cooking tips can be found at www.aga-ranges.com. If you have your own question, you can post it on-line.

