

WILL SUNBATHE FOR FOOD

BY SARAH INEZ LEVY

It's one of those perfect summer afternoons in Orinda when there's not a cloud in the sky and you can't hear the groaning motors of Highway 24 above the birdsong. I'm sitting on Wendy Helms's back porch eating lunch. She's served a lovely garden salad with avocados and homemade honey mustard dressing. The honey came from Wendy's own bees, which I can see buzzing around at the other end of the yard. There are also juicy bits of chicken and a tender cracked-wheat salad, both of which we pulled from her solar oven only minutes ago. Now, we're sunning our toes in the very rays that cooked the food on our plates.

"It's amazing!" I exclaim, through a mouthful of helio-chicken. "No," Wendy corrects me, "it's not amazing. It's actually quite simple." She's right, of course. There's nothing incredible about using the sun's energy to cook our food. What's shocking is that I've never done it before.

Let's back up an hour: Wendy is delicately placing chicken breast pieces on the bottom of a black cooking pot. She dabs each morsel with a spoonful of apricot-chili jam (a homemade gift from a friend) and covers the pot. She explains that the chicken needs no oil; unlike a conventional oven, the slow cooking of the solar



Corn muffins working on a tan.

oven locks in moisture, resulting in tender meat that never sticks. Wendy then fills a second pot with cracked wheat, sunflower seeds, and parsley and covers this with boiling water—a shortcut, she admits.

The "Sport" Solar Oven into which we're about to place our lunch was produced by the nonprofit Solar Oven Society (SOS).

It's made from the plastic of 68 recycled soda bottles and the entire thing weighs only 10 pounds. It seems somewhat out of place on Wendy's tasteful deck, looking like a cross between an amplifier and a television set. My solar chef dons a pair of new silicone oven mitts and places the two pots inside the preheated oven. She takes note of the oven's shadow to aim the oven properly toward the sun and places reflectors around the top for extra heat. Then, through the simple laws of physics, the insulated solar oven and dark enamel pots absorb energy from rays of the sun streaming down through the blue Orinda sky, heating the inside of the chamber to nearly 300 degrees. Now we need only relax and wait.

Wendy thanks a spike in environmental consciousness for better-than-ever solar oven sales this year. She volunteers as a local distributor for the SOS, spreading the word on solar cooking and demonstrating the Sport at local farmers' markets. She sees first-hand the extent to which the SOS has benefited from consumers' growing interest in leading greener lives and buying eco-products.

Photographs by Cheryl Kochler



Wendy's beehives are kept company here by a weed she referred to as "wild artichoke."

However, despite all the fun that I'm having watching the sun work its magic on my lunch, it's hard to believe that this contraption will really catch on. It's easy enough to use here, on a sunny day in California when we are happy to wait for our meal, but what about gray winter days in the Northeast when dinner needs to be on the table in 20 minutes?

Wendy seems to have read my mind and clarifies that the SOS does the greatest ecological and social good abroad, where the Sport Solar Oven eases deforestation and improves quality of life for people with limited access to cooking fuel. In many developing countries, I learn, millions of people are forced to spend excessively on fuel or travel unsafe distances to collect scarce firewood. Many of these people also suffer the negative health effects of indoor cooking fires and contaminated drinking water. Meanwhile, steady deforestation for fuel exacerbates both social and environmental problems.

The Solar Oven Society is hoping to alleviate the situation by using solar oven sales in America to subsidize the cost of placing Sport ovens in developing countries. The society organizes solar cooker demonstrations and trainings in villages from Afghanistan to Zambia, teaching local people how to use the ovens for cooking and water pasteurization and introducing them to alternative fuel-saving technologies. But, as Wendy says, you don't have to go to Africa to make a difference. She did go once on holiday, packing a Sport oven into an extra suitcase to spare SOS the shipping



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cost. But for the rest of us, buying a solar oven and showing it off to friends is no less constructive.

It's time to check on the chicken, so Wendy once again slips on her silicone mitts and lifts the lid off the oven. Then she raises the dark pot cover to reveal a dozen ivory lumps of chicken lounging in their own lightly perfumed juices. I lean in closer for a good sniff. There's something very pure about cooking like this, and even though I'm one to enjoy the satisfaction of lovingly stirring a risotto or fussing over a complex cassoulet, I appreciate how the leisurely, unhurried process of cooking in this oven has influenced my perspective on the whole afternoon. As the food emerges soft and tender, it seems as though we have received a gift from the heavens, and as I take the first bite of my Sport-cooked chicken, I feel like I'm eating a bit of sunshine. Knowing that we've used almost no fuel makes it taste even better.

Of course, people have long experimented with solar cooking, and the SOS Sport is by no means the only solar oven on the market. In fact, a quick googling reveals a surprisingly large selection of cookers, one cardboard and boxy, another made of metallic panels in the shape of a satellite dish. Many solar oven manufacturers support environmental and humanitarian efforts in developing countries, so choosing the best one for your backyard could be daunting.

Cooks Illustrated recently evaluated three solar ovens (the SOS Sport among them) on the roof of its test kitchen in the Boston

suburbs. After testing everything from potatoes to marinated pork to chocolate chip cookies, the team declared the Sport their solar favorite. It proved the least sensitive to temperature fluctuations, large enough to hold a baking sheet, easy to clean, and reasonably priced. Their recommendation came with a caveat, though: Potential buyers should be aware that while solar cooking—with any oven—can be enjoyable, it requires some trial and error and much flexibility. I'm guessing that we won't be rushing to replace our conventional ovens or barbecue grills with solar ovens for quite a while, but in the meantime, solar cooking is an entertaining way to introduce environmentally sensitive options into our fuel-sucking kitchens—or rather, outside of them.

As I savor the meal, seasoning each mouthful with breaths of fresh garden air, I'm thinking about all the places one could tote the Sport oven for a hot meal on the go. The possibilities scroll through my mind like a Dr. Seuss rhyme: Would you, could you on a boat? Could you, would you at the beach? At your campsite? Strapped to your alligator pool raft? Then I start having visions of the Kitchen of the Future: solar-powered oven and fridge, bicycle-powered mixer, zero waste . . . The environmentalist in me is painting my daydreams green.

All of a sudden, my plate is empty. (Apparently slow food doesn't always beget slow eating.) Wendy has pulled out a binder of solar oven recipes and is pointing out her favorites. As I browse through the listings for roasted vegetables, fish stews, and "quick" breads, the sun toasts the skin on my forearm and I wonder if dedicated solar cooks begin to measure their days in meals: 30 minutes spent mowing the lawn = crisp-tender asparagus; two hours at a soccer match = one pot of chili; one full work day = a pot roast. It's probably not a bad way to perceive the world.

The sun is moving steadily across the backyard, slanting the oven's shadow off to one side. Resisting the urge to re-aim the oven and fill the pot with another delicious experiment, I help Wendy bring the dirty plates into the house. I'm happy to be in a kitchen

SOLAR SIRLOIN TIPS

- 1 ½ pounds sirloin tips (or sirloin steak), cut into 1-inch pieces
- 1 pound fresh mushrooms, sliced
- 1 medium-sized onion, cut in wedges
- 1 clove garlic, minced

Place sirloin tips in bottom of solar oven pot. Do not add any oil. Sprinkle garlic over the meat and then add sliced onion and mushrooms on top of sirloin tips. Place pot in solar oven to cook. It should take about 2 hours.

SOLAR CHICKEN BREASTS

- 2 boneless, skinless chicken breasts
- 1 tablespoon capers
- 1 chopped, fresh tomato
- Several garlic chives, chopped

Place chicken breasts in bottom of solar oven pot. Spread capers, tomatoes and garlic chives over top. Place pot in solar oven. It should take about an hour and a half.

Recipes Courtesy of Solar Oven Society

again, surrounded by familiar comforts, pleasant memory associations, and—not least important—a dishwasher. But then, as my eyes slowly adjust to the indoor dimness, the once-normal kitchen begins to look terribly elaborate, full of switches and burners and buzzing appliances. I'm already feeling nostalgic for the clever simplicity of the Sport oven.

On the drive home (30 minutes = cooked zucchini), I let my newfound solar optimism muffle the harsh, dirty reality of the thousands of cars whooshing around me. I'm welcomed home by the wafting perfume of a bowl of ripe peaches, but though I'm dying to bake them into a summertime pie, I wait until sundown to preheat the oven. Maybe it doesn't make much of a difference to the grid, but for today, out of new respect for the sun, it's the least I can do. ♡

The SOS Sport Solar Oven is available for \$150 from www.solarovens.org.

Writer Sarah Inez Levy once ate a Pop-Tart outside Chez Panisse. Except for this one lapse in judgement, she has enjoyed a steady love affair with the edible treasures of the Bay Area. Sarah is a Boston native and freelance writer with a gift for spotting wild blackberries.

