

Exploring and Experimenting with Solar Cooking as a School-based Activity

by. Mary Landau

A solar oven is an amazing invention! It not only cooks your food with the power of the sun, it makes almost everything taste better! How do I know? Well, when someone tells me something that challenges the way I have done things all my life I find that I must try it out to see if it is true! Experience and experimentation! That's how I learned solar cooking is truly wonderful!

I had wanted to learn about solar cooking from the time I was a Jr. Girl Scout. Someone told me that they could cook with the power of the sun. I was skeptical. Years later, as a Extended Learning Teacher for Glendale Unified School District, I finally got my chance to try it out. Tor Allen, solar teacher extraordinaire, came to Glendale through educational funding from Glendale Water and Power, to teach teachers about solar energy. Tor said that one could boil water with a solar oven. That was interesting! When he told me that one could cook vegetables without using water, I knew I had to try it for myself.

My mom taught me that to cook potatoes and carrots at home, one had to start out by boiling some water. How then could one cook carrots in a solar oven without any water? I decided to try it for myself. With the solar oven that our school got from Tor and G.W. P., I took several bags of baby cut carrots, put them in the cooking pot (no water added) and set the pot in the solar oven, facing the sun. As it was autumn, the carrots had to cook for about **1 Vi** hours. When they were done I served some up to the students in my program for a taste test. They loved them! We tried it again and found that 95% of those who tried them liked them better than raw carrots. That was because the solar oven had brought out the sugar that is naturally found in carrots. They were almost as sweet as candy.

The most delicious beet that I have ever had was one that we grew in our school garden. We picked it, washed it, and put it into the cooking pot and sun oven. About an hour later we cut it into small pieces and tried them. It also tasted as sweet as candy!

We decided to cook potatoes. We washed and scrubbed the potatoes as we were going to serve them with the skins still on (so much of a potato's nutrition is in and just under that skin). After cutting them into cubes, we placed the potatoes in the pot and solar oven. They cooked for more than an hour. One could smell the delicious aroma of potatoes near the oven! They were soon done and ready to be taken out of the oven. I put a small amount of butter and some chopped chives from our garden on the potatoes. They were so delicious, and quickly eaten.



Mary Landau prepares a creation for the Solar Oven.

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There is something wondrous about serving warm snacks after school! I'd compare it to going to your grandmother's house for warm cookies, freshly made with her TLC. Not only do you get great tasting food, you get that extra "hug" that comes from eating food made with love, just for you! That is truly how we felt.

If vegetables tasted like candy, how would solar cooked fruit taste? First we tried cooking whole pears. They were washed and put in the pan with a generous sprinkling of cinnamon, no sugar added. When they were ready to be tasted some of the students gathered around. They smelled lovely! They tasted fabulous! I asked the kids what we should call these tasty treats. Something this good needs a name! Without hesitating, one of the girls said, "These pears taste like they came from Heaven! We should call them Pears from Heaven". And so we did!

We tried a mixture of cut up sweet plums, pears, cinnamon and some apples. It was wonderful! We continued to experiment. We even tried some "aged grapes" that looked a bit abused. Delicious! I felt comfortable cooking them because I knew that the heat would kill any of the germs that might be on them. They had only been in the refrigerator a day too long and only needed to be washed, and then cooked.

Did you know that you can make perfect brown rice in a solar oven? We did (of course you do need water to cook rice). We even made rice pudding. One of the boys said that our rice pudding was better than his grandmother's, and that she made the best ever. (Yes we did have his grandmother try it and she agreed!)

I wanted to try to make some "cake" out of crackers that the children would not eat for snack. We crushed the crackers into powder and mixed them with yogurt, fruit cocktail and cinnamon and cooked the mixture in the solar oven. Sometimes it would be more like a cooked pudding than a cake, so we called it Pudding Cake. The students decided that it tasted pretty good and wanted to try other experiments.

In working with students and the solar oven I found that many children were inspired to try new ideas, and taste more foods. We only used nutritious foods so I knew the food we made was good for them. Students remembered and asked for carrots again and again. My daughter came to lead the students in a drum circle one day. I told her that before we could make music we had to have our snack. She was surprised to find we were serving cooked carrots. I announced "Carrot Time" and about thirty five students came to line up to get their warm snack! They waited in line while we served the sweet treats. She tried them too. Quickly the carrots disappeared and the students were very happy. My daughter said, "I can't believe what I just saw! I never would have thought that kids would love cooked carrots!" I told her that that was the power of the solar oven.

