

MAN: Imagine that your partner has asked you on a dinner date for this Friday night. The restaurant is a surprise, but you were told not to worry about dressing up. Your partner promptly picks you up at 6:00 PM, and says that the restaurant is about 45 minutes away, so you have plenty of time to catch up on the week's events. Soon, you and your partner are driving far outside the city into the countryside and you start to get a little concerned.

When your partner says you have about five minutes to go, you demand to know where you are going. It is then that your date pulls a homemade menu out of the glove box. Apparently, to your surprise, you're having exhaust eggplant Parmesan with a side of cruise control buttered carrots and a Go-Go Greek salad.

As you contemplate the fact that you are miles away from civilization, your partner pulls into the entrance of a park. Aha, you think, we're having a picnic. Imagine your surprise when your partner lifts the hood of his or her Subaru, only to reveal a series of tinfoil packets arranged on top of the fuel injector housing. That's right, friends, the meal for your romantic evening was cooked in the car as you were driving it.

Today, I would like to inform you about the fine art of car cookery, both what it is and how to do it. Although we don't know exactly when car cooking began, we do know that truckers have been heating their meals on their engines for decades. Regardless, cooking in your car makes planning picnics for road trips a blast.

Almost every moving vehicle on the road is propelled by burning fuel, and burning fuel creates heat. That means the engines get hot, allowing you to cook on them. Doing so requires patience and practice, as well as pre-testing your own car. First, I will explain the history of car cookery. Second, I will describe the general techniques of car cooking with a few sample recipes. Finally, I'll conclude with a few dos and don'ts.

Now you might be wondering where the idea of car cooking came from. Stories have circulated in popular culture about folks cooking on their cars for decades, from truckers heating cans of beans on their engine rigs to hunters using the engine block to cook venison. According to Chris Maynard and Bill Scheller in their definitive guide to car cooking titled *Manifold Destiny*, we can probably trace the practice back to the fourth and fifth centuries.

Apparently, the Huns made use of a form of combustion friction to prepare their food. When a

Hun wanted to enjoy a hunk of unsmoked brisket, reports Maynard and Scheller, he would take the meat and put it under his saddle cloth and the friction between the Hun and the horse would have a tenderizing and the warming effect. Sounds delicious, doesn't it?

Although it is not known who started the practice of car cookery or where it came from, we can thank Maynard and Scheller for writing a book-length series of guidelines to help us do it. As someone with many years of car cooking experience, first as a Boy Scout and later as a car camping enthusiast, I think we can reduce their 150 page book to three basic steps.

Get to know your engine, plan your menu, and prepare your food. First, you have to figure out the layout of your car's engine, or as engineers put it, your engine configuration, to find out where the hot spots are. In the 1950s, cars had large, relatively uncluttered engines that were ideal for cooking. Simply put, in the 1950s, cars ran hot. Today, car manufacturers design engines that are more efficient, make less heat, and look like spaceships.

Manufacturers are increasingly replacing metal parts, the ones that are great for conducting heat from the engine, with plastic. And with the advent of the hybrid electric car, a gas engine is now paired with an electric one, making it a challenge to figure out which is which. The best way to figure out how suitable your engine is for cooking is to drive it around for about a 1/2 hour, then pull over, open the hood, and carefully check for heat.

Quickly touch the metal parts of your car to see where the heat is. Plastic parts won't get hot enough so don't worry about those. Unfortunately, if you have one of those fancy futuristic cars in which the whole thing is covered in plastic, you're just going to have to borrow your friend's car to cook on. This is especially the case if your car is a hybrid, or exclusively electric, as they won't get hot enough to heat hamburger buns.

Once you have determined the hottest spots on your engine, you're ready for step two, planning your menu. As Maynard and Scheller note, planning your menu is determined by two simple questions. One, how far are you driving? And two, when do you expect to be hungry? You see, cooking on your car uses distance as well as time to determine what is possible for you to eat.

If you have 140 to 200 miles to drive, you can pull off baking some chicken wings. Anything with a bone in it will take longer to cook. These longer distance foods are ideal for things like road trips and, I might add, are much better than the drive-thru. But if you only have about 40

miles to go, you might want to stick to something like tube steak surprise.

Tube steak, of course, is another word for hot dog, and the surprise is stuffing it with cheese and wrapping it in bacon. Another short distance dish is salmon, which will poach relatively quickly on your average car engine. I should mention, you don't have to cook your meal entirely on your car. I have often pre-cooked my meal at home. This is especially advisable for something like say a whole fried chicken or Cornish hen. You can use your car as a basic food warmer as well, which is ideal for picnics close to home.

Once you have located the hotspots on your car's engine and determined your menu, you're ready for the third step, food preparation and placement. The trick to car cooking is quality tin foil, and the nonstick variety is especially helpful. Everything you cook will be wrapped in tin foil three times. Wrapping your food in three layers of foil will protect it from getting dirty and protect your car from smelling like chicken.

If your car is in good shape, meaning you have it serviced regularly and you fix anything that needs repair, you do not need to worry about your food taking on exhaust fumes. All fumes from your engine should be coming out of your muffler. If exhaust is coming from your engine, you've got trouble. Once your food is well-wrapped, the key is finding a nook or cranny in which to place it.

Although engines are much more complex and less hot than they were 20 years ago, they are also full of wires and strange contraptions that can help to hold your food in place. You just have to experiment, but do so carefully. Don't be yanking and pulling on hoses and wires, folks. Be gentle and observe three no-no's.

First, never, ever interfere with the free movement of the accelerator linkage. This is the line that runs from your gas pedal to your engine. Now today, many cars are using electronic throttle bodies which make this line obsolete. Nevertheless, if you have a line, stay clear of it. Second, never ever block the airflow from your engine's air intake. The intake refers to all parts of your engine that suck in air, including the largest tubes going to the engine, and are often connected to, or near, the vents at the front of the car, any visible filters and so on.

To combust, your engine needs air. If you respect your car engine, it will yield warm, delicious goodness on your next road trip or visit to the park. To be successful at car cookery, I've suggested that you first learn about your engine and discover its hotspots. Second, you must plan your menu based on how far you are driving and when you suspect you will want to eat.

Finally, good car cookery requires that you wrap your food not once, not twice, but three times, and place it carefully on your engine, avoiding the accelerator linkage, the air intake, and any moving parts, like belts.

As I noted earlier, I started using cars to cook as a boy scout, but I've carried the practice over to my adult life. I opened my speech today with a hypothetical discussion about a romantic dinner. I confess, this is a true story from my own dating past. My date was amused by the unique way I made our evening special and to this day, it is among the most memorable romantic experiences of my life. After I cleaned the juice from the baked squash off the top of the fuel injector assembly, we relaxed and finished our bottle of wine as the sun set over Austin.