

Toaster Ovens

We have all had days where we just want one little piece of toast browned to perfection—but we don't want to have to turn on an entire oven and heat up the whole kitchen in the process. Or there are times when you have a houseful of guests coming over, and it seems as if you need just more oven racks to bake the rolls on or to keep a dish warm while the meat finishes cooking. Or perhaps it is a summer evening and a pizza sounds amazing—except the kitchen is still blazing hot from a record-setting heat wave blasting through, and the last thing you want to do is generate more heat in your home.

The list of examples could go on and on as to why a toaster oven is an extremely helpful—if not essential—kitchen appliance to own along with your conventional oven. Its small size, versatile uses, and money-saving qualities make a toaster oven worth looking into.

A toaster oven either fits right on your countertop or can be hung from an attachment underneath your cabinets, depending on the amount of space you have. They usually range in size from under a foot to two feet. When looking at sizes, be sure to double-check if the measurements refer to the actual size of the oven or the interior size. This can affect what you can fit inside. Obviously, the size you choose dictates what items you can cook inside. The larger the toaster

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oven, the larger the price tag. However, considering you can use your toaster oven in much the same way you can use a conventional oven, investing in a larger toaster oven quickly pays off.

Toaster ovens have various cooking elements depending on what you are looking for. Many toaster ovens are convectional. This means generated heat is continuously circulated throughout the oven by means of a fan. The movement creates an even cooking environment, ensuring that the top and bottom of the food are cooked evenly. That means heat spots are eliminated, and one area of a pan of cookies does not cook more than another. Convection ovens also cut cooking time down by almost a third, saving you not only time but also electricity.

Other toaster ovens cook traditionally using coiled heating elements. Some are on the top, others are on the bottom, and some are on both. This is how your conventional oven usually heats. These elements can be made from different materials, but the best material is quartz on both the top and bottom, so food will be evenly cooked. If you get a traditional toaster oven, it is best to get the tallest one so the coils are not right on top of the food you are cooking.

A newer type of heating element is becoming popular in toaster ovens. Infrared heating sends rays into the food to cook it, similar to a microwave. This

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allows for a faster cooking time. However, you can only use metal pans, and the risk of fires inside your oven is higher.

All toaster ovens come with at least one rack that you cook your food on.

Depending on the size, some come with two racks, which allow you to cook more than one item at a time and to vary the height of the food away from or toward the heating elements. It is helpful to have racks that are removable or at least hinged to make for easier cleaning. Adjustable racks are perfect for making more room in your toaster oven.

Also included with toaster ovens are drip trays that catch any crumbs or spills. This helps keep your oven clean, as well as prevent fires. Removable, nonstick drip trays are the best as they are easy to take out and clean. If they are not removable, you either have to try to clean them out in a smaller area, or pick the whole oven up and hold it over the trash can to empty the crumbs out.

One of the great advantages of toaster ovens is there are many options available. Not all toaster ovens are created equal. Some come with the very basics: a dial to set the temperature and a rack inside to hold the food. Others are more elaborate and come with touchscreens and rotisserie hooks. Whatever level of oven you choose, though, the majority come with a perfectly sized pan to fit inside the oven. That way you can place most of your cooking items on it rather

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than directly on the rack. Pizza pans and cookie sheets are made to fit inside different-sized toaster ovens. Others have stones you can set inside that your pizza can sit on top of, creating a better taste. Brick inserts can make the food taste as if it has come from a brick oven.

Many toaster ovens have temperature settings that go below 200 °F and as high up as 500 °F, along with broiling options. The wide temperature range is sometimes more than is available in a conventional oven. This is particularly helpful if you want to avoid using a microwave, but you obviously cannot set your plate inside a conventional oven.

An additional advantage with some toaster ovens is a warming element on top of the toaster oven. Simply set your plate or dish you need to keep warm on the warming section while another cooks. Then your food will be kept at toast temperature—without further cooking. Perfect for those times you cannot get all your dishes ready at the same time.

Because a toaster oven is smaller than a traditional oven, you can save energy and money. Not only are you helping the environment, but you are also helping your wallet. Plus, because of the small size, the heat is contained and can consequently cook your food faster. By having to heat up a smaller space for a

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shorter amount of time, you can keep your kitchen cooler, which will stop you from getting sweaty and encourage your kitchen help to stay put.

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A toaster oven can also help you cut back on expenses by encouraging you to cook at home more. Knowing your cooking time will be faster and you will not be facing a hot kitchen can motivate you to start making more homemade meals instead of relying on the closest fast-food restaurant. Eating out pushes expenses up—and negatively affects your family’s health. By cooking at home, you can put together meals where you know what ingredients you are using and where you can incorporate fresh, nutritious options. Not only are you cutting back on unhealthy substances, you are also getting a good start on managing your weight and setting a good example for your kids.

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