

Hook, Line and Sinker

Ok. So I fell for it.

I watched Jacques Pepin make chili con carne in an electric pressure cooker. I didn't even know these things existed. I'd been contemplating purchasing a regular pressure cooker for awhile now. I added one to my Amazon shopping cart; I turned down the corner of the page in the Sur la Table catalog ... but nothing pushed me over the edge until I watched this cooking show.

He just poured the dried beans into the pot right out of the bag. He added raw hamburger, and water and canned tomatoes and tomato paste and spices. He clamped on the lid, and said that he'd have chili in an hour. (I've snipped out just the parts where he demonstrates the chili recipe ... the first video is the prep, and the second one shows him serving it. [The whole episode is here.](#))

I looked on the internet, and saw recipes for pot roast in less than an hour. Chicken stock in 40 minutes. I read that this cooker let you brown your meat in it first without making you dirty up another pan. It also has a setting that lets you simmer the contents once the pressure is off, to keep it warm. ~~Contrary to his demonstration, it really doesn't seem to be designed to let you put the ingredients in, then go off to work or the store, and have it wait, and then turn itself on 45 minutes before you get home. Instead, the timer is more a way to limit the amount of time the food cooks under pressure — the device will build up the pressure, cook for the time you've set on the timer, and then shut off. (On re-reading the manual, it'll cook for the allotted time, and then switch to "simmer" mode — so I guess you could set it up, let it cook, and then it'll keep warm all day long while you were shopping or at work.)~~



Well, of course I had to have one. I had some credit built up on Amazon, so I ordered it.

And then I re-watched the cooking show, and only then realized that the whole damn show is sponsored by Cuisinart, the people who make the electric pressure cooker. What's more, the unsweetened chocolate he puts in is made by yet another of his sponsors. I realized I'd been bamboozled. Oh, Jacques! How could you? If anyone would resist being an infomercial pitchman, it'd be you.

So, the cooker showed up this afternoon, and I was tempted to make dinner using it, but then I figured I should wait and try some of the recipes from the little cookbook that came with it, instead of just winging it. I don't have much buyer's remorse. I'm still glad I bought it, but the proof will be in the pudding.

[Cuisinart CPC-600 1000-Watt 6-Quart Electric Pressure Cooker](#), \$149

The Aerogarden



I've had an [Aerogarden](#) for about 2 years now. When my wife and I moved into an apartment building, I really missed having my own backyard garden, and I thought that this might, in some small way, act as a replacement. I've been moderately satisfied with the results, and it's fun to grow your own kitchen herbs.

As with all advertised products, the yield isn't what the box or the literature would have you believe. Since I've had my system, I've grown two different herb mixes (the one that comes with the system, and an additional european herb mix) as well as the yellow and red cherry tomato kit. Invariably, one or more of the varieties of herb will take over and dominate the available light unless you diligently trim them back. In my most recent attempt, the savory, chives, and thyme have all suffered at the hands of the overwhelming mint, basil and parsley. As for the tomatoes, the output was pretty disappointing. I think I managed to get fewer than 50 tomatoes for my effort – though the system did have its issues, because water ended up corroding the electrical contact for the internal pump and as such, the water didn't really circulate the way it was supposed to.

When I first got my system, I needed to call service right away. I had assembled the kit per the instructions, but the pump never kicked on like it was supposed to. After walking me through some obvious fixes, the tech person decided I had a faulty base unit, and shipped out a new one, along with a replacement pump, free of charge.



The set up is pretty simple, and you see the seedlings sprouting within a week or two, and you can start harvesting

fresh herbs within a month. Maintenance is easy, too. Just add water every so often, or when the red LED lights up, and toss in a couple of fertilizer tablets (which is supposedly completely organic – seaweed somesuch) every week. The seed kits all come with fertilizer, which runs out after about 6 months, though the plants still seem fairly vigorous at that point. Presumably, you could purchase some sort of liquid fertlizer and keep the system going for longer. I've restarted just for the novelty of it.

The device costs upwards of \$150, and you need to replace the bulbs once every 2 years or so (another \$25). The seed kits cost \$20, and the growing season on them is 6 months ... or at least, as I said, that's when the fertilizer packs peter out, so you'll need to buy 2 seed kits a year. Add on top of that the cost for the electricity to run it (though it uses florescent lights, so that's pretty inexpensive, really). When you calculate the costs, there's no way you're going to be saving money by using this method to grow your kitchen herbs. Still, it's a fun project, especially if you have kids, or don't have a particularly sunny windowsill, or access to a backyard plot.



[AeroGarden Pro 100 with Gourmet Herb Seed Kit](#) on Amazon.