

Molly Gets Her Veggie Bites

By Jim Scott, October 2007

“Dad, will you fix this for me for lunch?” My daughter Molly used her most courteous shout as she left the kitchen.

“What is it?” I shouted from the computer room.

“It’s on the kitchen counter.”

I went downstairs to the kitchen and looked around. We actually had more than one kitchen counter, with multiple objects on each, but I adopted the strategy of just looking for something out of the ordinary.

I spotted a green box. It felt cold. “Keep frozen,” it said. Analysis so far: It should have been in the freezer, but it wasn’t; that qualified as unusual, although not unprecedented. This was probably it. I looked closer.

“Breaded veggie bites – broccoli cheddar.” That’s just the kind of thing Molly liked for lunch. This was definitely the “this” she had referred to. I read on.

“Cooking instructions – conventional oven (do not microwave). Preheat oven to 375°F.”

So the microwave oven was not eligible to prepare my daughter’s lunch that day. (This was a blow, but I got over it.) That left the other two ovens: the big built-in oven, and the counter-top toaster oven. Clearly, the big oven would work, but it seemed like a waste of time and electricity. It was much larger than necessary for this task, and it would take several minutes to preheat. Most of the heat would eventually be released into the air-conditioned kitchen, causing extra work for the heat pump.

I considered the toaster oven. Did it qualify as a “conventional oven”? Could it be preheated to a specific temperature? I didn’t know; I had only used it for toast. Did preheating imply the creation of a large reservoir of heated air, so that the interior of the oven would have a consistent temperature, both spatially and temporally? Could the relatively small toaster oven manage this? Or would the temperature gradient from the center to the outer margins of the cooking space be excessive, because of the smaller spatial dimensions? The suitability of the toaster oven was uncertain. On the other hand, if it would work, it would be faster and more efficient.

In short, if I chose the big oven, I would use extra time and electricity, but I would be sure of a successfully prepared lunch for my daughter. If I opted for the toaster oven, the process would be quick and efficient, but the veggie bites might turn out undercooked or unevenly cooked; in other words, they might be less than optimally appetizing. In that case, Molly, a hedonistic seventeen-year-old, would refuse to eat

them. I would have wasted, time, electricity, money, and food product, and she'd dig up something less nutritious to eat.

So far, I had been thinking with the part of my brain that eked out a B.S. in physics so many years ago. But science had not provided enough information to make the crucial choice. Then I realized the truth.

Whatever choice I made would be wrong.

If I went with the big oven, it would turn out that I could have used the toaster oven. If I used the toaster oven, the food would be spoiled.

Since my chief goal was a properly prepared food product, I went with the big oven. After nine minutes of preheating and 17 minutes of cooking, Molly enjoyed her delicious lunch of breaded broccoli cheddar veggie bites, dipping them in sauce for that extra taste sensation.

When my wife (known to the masses as "Molly's mom") got home from the office, I gave her the gist of my dilemma. (After 22 years of marriage, I had learned to get to the bottom line and omit the details about how I got there.) She said, "*Of course* you could have used the toaster oven! I use it all the time to cook veggie bites!" My destiny had been fulfilled: I had made my choice, and it had been wrong.

Suddenly I grasped the enormous power I wielded; I could shape the very laws of nature! Knowing that whatever choice I made would be wrong, I had chosen the big oven. In doing so, *I had created a universe in which toaster ovens are perfectly fine for cooking veggie bites!*

I must be careful to continue to use this power for good, not evil.