

Microwaves can be very fussy machines

POLLY'S POINTERS



POLLY FISHER

DEAR POLLY — My microwave seems very inconsistent. Sometimes it takes 2½ minutes to boil a cup of water, and sometimes it seems to take almost three minutes. I don't feel I can rely on set cooking times, and this is making it very difficult to judge when things are done. Is this usual? Should my oven go in for repair? — HELEN

DEAR LUCY — There could be a number of reasons for these apparent inconsistencies. Are there other electrical appliances on the same circuit

as your microwave? If it's on the same circuit as a coffee maker or the refrigerator, for example, whenever those are on, the power going to the microwave could be reduced, requiring longer cooking times.

Or, perhaps when you boil water, the water does not always start out at the same temperature each time. If you draw a cup from the cold water tap, it will obviously take longer to boil than a cup of lukewarm or hot water. The same is true of food temperatures. Warming something chilled from the refrigerator will take longer than warming the identical dish that has been sitting at room temperature for a while.

Examine your habits regarding such details to see if this could answer your question. If you're convinced that the oven is still very inconsistent, a trip to the repair shop may, indeed, be in order. Perhaps there is something wrong with the device that regulates the power levels, or with the

timing mechanism. It's certainly worth checking out. — POLLY

RECIPE OF THE WEEK: Chocolatey with a hint of spice, these brownstone shortbread cookies are perfect for filling up the family cookie jar, or as the stars of a holiday cookie plate.

Cream together 1 cup softened butter, ¼ cup granulated sugar, ¼ cup light brown sugar, ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon and 1 teaspoon vanilla extract until light and fluffy. Mix together in a separate bowl ¼ cups flour, ½ cup cornstarch, ¼ cup unsweetened cocoa powder (preferably Dutch process) and ¼ teaspoon salt. Then work dry ingredient mixture into the butter-and-sugar mixture until well combined into a smooth dough.

Working with half the dough at a time, turn the dough out onto a lightly floured board and roll approximately ¼ inch thick. Cut into simple shapes with cookie cutters or a knife.

Bake on ungreased baking sheets in a preheated 350-degree oven for 12 to 15 minutes or until the cookies are set. Do not let the cookies become too brown. This recipe makes 4 to 5 dozen cookies, depending on the size of the cutters used.

DEAR POLLY — We just moved into an apartment with terribly stained, dirty-looking linoleum in the kitchen and dining room. We can't afford to replace it right now, and the landlord refuses to do so. Is there some way to improve the appearance of this floor? I've gotten down on my hands and knees and washed it, so I know it's clean, but it still looks terrible! — B.K.W.

DEAR B.K.W. — Here are two suggestions:

Try scrubbing the floor with trisodium phosphate (TSP or washing soda). Dissolve a cup of TSP in a bucket of hot water, mop it onto the floor and let it sit for 10 minutes, then

scrub. Rinse with clear water. This is quite effective for removing stains and brightening up linoleum and vinyl flooring. (It's also good for removing oil stains from your driveway!)

Even if you could afford it, putting down a new piece of vinyl flooring is a big job. You may want to cover the floor with a kitchen carpet remnant instead. I'm not a fan of carpeting in food areas, since spills are not always easy to clean up, but if you can find an inexpensive remnant on sale, it would be an easy way to improve the room's appearance. — POLLY

DEAR POLLY — Shaking my dust cloth out of the screened windows of my upper-story apartment is difficult. However, with a firm hold on the cloth, I can pull it across the nozzle of my vacuum cleaner. This does a good job of removing dust from the cloth. — R.C.

Make your own laundry soap, hand soap and heavy-duty laundry presoak — as well as general household cleaners, furniture polish and window washing fluid — with the formulas in Polly's newsletter "Homemade Soaps and Cleaners."

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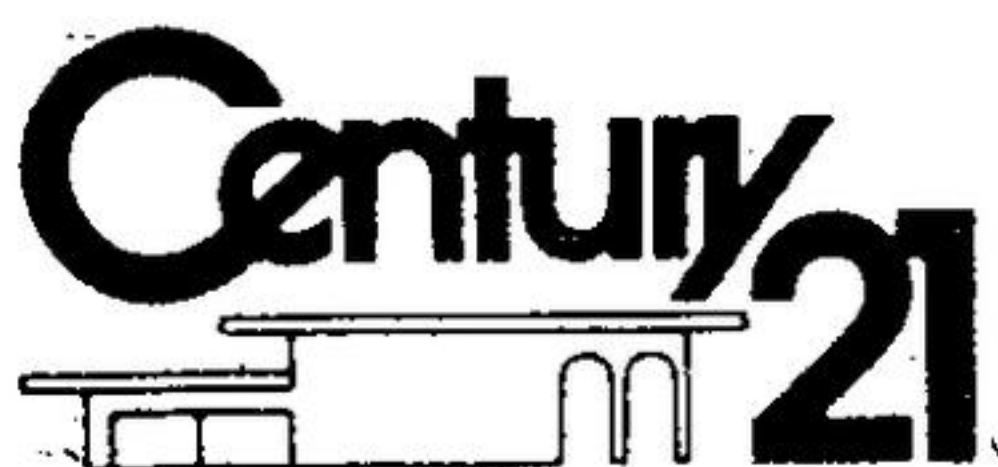


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