

Letting off steam

Steaming is a healthy way to cook food but you might find electric steamers frustrating, as they are bulky, tricky to clean and take ages to cook anything

Steaming keeps far more of the goodness in food than other cooking methods such as boiling, where nutrients leach away into the water. So if you enjoy using a stovetop pan steamer, you might be thinking about upgrading to an electric model. Our advice is to think twice. There are plenty of cheap models around but many have serious drawbacks.

First, they're incredibly slow. Cooking times will horrify you if you're used to steaming over a pan. Water in an electric steamer generates far less steam than in a

pan. This makes cooking slower. Cooking thinly sliced carrots, for example, can take up to 23 minutes in an electric steamer, compared with around seven minutes in a pan steamer with the lid on.

Gazing through transparent plastic at stacks of nutritious-looking vegetables may make you feel virtuous, but an electric steamer isn't actually the healthiest way of cooking. Microwave steaming retains nutrients better. It's also quicker and uses lower temperatures and less water.

Microwave steaming retains nutrients better. It's also quicker

Cleaning most electric steamers isn't easy. Perforations and holes in the cooking baskets' bases are dirt traps. Some baskets have removable, slot-in bases which make cleaning easier but it's still hard work. Base units get messy, too. Food juices and overflowing water from condensation drip trays leave a yucky residue which is tough to clean. After testing 11 popular models, we'd say don't bother with an electric steamer.

If, however, you do want to buy one, see our Best Buys, opposite.

What you should look for

RICE BOWLS

Most steamers come with a rice bowl – a smaller dish which sits in one of the steaming baskets. The Best Buys and the Kenwood were the only models to produce soft, fluffy, well-cooked rice. Average cooking times for all those tested ranged from 31 to 43 minutes. Rice boiled in a pan would take 20 minutes

STORAGE

Steamers are bulky. Baskets and base units are 26x35cm on average. Height of models tested range from 30 to 51cm

BASKETS

On some steamers, baskets will stack securely only in one order. Some have the baskets labelled to make this easier. Look for models with indicators showing how much water to add

CONTROLS

These are simple – you just set the time you want to cook for. Few models turn off automatically, though



Contacts

Bush
0800 525089; www.albapl.com
Hinari
0870 873 0077; www.hinari.co.uk
Kenwood
0239 239 2333
www.kenwoodworld.com
Magimix
01483 427411
www.magimix.fr.com

Prestige
0151 482 8282
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Rosemary Conley
0870 050 7727
www.rosemary-conley.co.uk
Russell Hobbs
0161 947 3000; www.saltoneurope.com
Tefal
0845 602 1454; www.tefal.co.uk

Facts & scores

Our tests produce some food for thought

Ultimate cooking

This Prestige steamer's detachable power supply means it can be semi-immersed, making cleaning easier.

Poor visibility

The Magimix and Prestige have metal baskets. These look classy but you can't see what's going on inside.

MODEL

- 1 **TEFAL** 3-Tier Ultra Compact Steamer
- 2 **ROSEMARY CONLEY** Smart System Steamer CTST3
- 3 **TEFAL** Steam Cuisine Easy Store 616119
- 4 **HINARI** ST100CH
- 5 **KENWOOD** FS560
- 6 **BUSH** ST005
- 7 **PRESTIGE** 47433
- 8 **TEFAL** Vitamin+ VC400715
- 9 **RUSSELL HOBBS** 10969
- 10 **MAGIMIX** 11240
- 11 **TEFAL** Aqua Timer 615814



68% Tefal Ultra Compact Steamer £30

This cooks better-tasting food than most other models tested, though we weren't wowed by the quality from any. It was one of the few to produce good, fluffy rice, though this took 39 minutes for 100g.

Tefal makes seven of the top ten steamers sold and this is the best of the four we tested. Its labelled baskets make it easy to set up and they stack together, making storage easier. Lots of food remained stuck to basket bases when cleaned by hand. The bases are removable, though, and a dishwasher might work better. It is available from Argos.

WE LIKE It turns off automatically.

Cheapest store Argos **Size** 42x33x25cm **Timer** Manual dial **Recipe book** No **Water-level indicator** No **Cable storage** No

WHICH?
BEST
BUY

The Rosemary Conley beeps to warn you if it's in danger of boiling dry



66% Rosemary Conley CTST3 £40

Press a button marked with a symbol for the food you want to cook, and you get an automatic cooking time. This is just one of the CTST3's clever tricks. It will also beep to warn you if it's in danger of boiling dry.

The three baskets (plus rice bowl) stack together, making storage easy. Baskets are dishwasher-compatible. It cooks rice well, though this took 42 minutes for just 100g.

WORTH KNOWING Available only from Rosemary Conley's online store at www.rosemary-conley.co.uk (0870 050 7727).

Available Online **Size** 45x32x24cm **Timer** Electronic buttons **Recipe book** Yes – in instructions book **Water-level indicator** Yes **Cable storage** Yes

WHICH?
BEST
BUY

How we test

Taste, speed and ease of use were the key ingredients to success for our steamers

This spring we carried out our own version of a supermarket sweep. We cleared shelves of 20kg of carrots, 12kg of broccoli and 14.4kg of new potatoes. We then stripped their fridges of 60 salmon fillets and 48 chicken breasts.

With taste buds, sharp knives and stopwatches at the ready, we got to work. We cooked broccoli, carrots, rice and salmon separately, and also made complete meals by layering chicken breasts with potatoes and carrots. We timed how long each steamer took to cook the food properly, then checked for texture and even cooking. We compared the results with a fan steamer, boiling and microwave steaming.

After cooking, we measured how well the steamers retained vitamin C in food compared with the other cooking methods. We also assessed how easy the models were to use and clean.

SPECIFICATION					WHICH? TEST PERFORMANCE						SCORE %
PRICE (£)	BASKETS	RICE BOWL	DISHWASHER-PROOF BASKETS	MAXIMUM HEIGHT (cm)	INDIVIDUAL FOODS	TIERED COOKING	EASE OF COOKING	STORING	SETTING UP	CLEANING	
30	3	✓	✓	42	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	68
40	3	✓	✓	45	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★	66
30	3	✓	✓	42	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	64
18	3	✓	✓	43	★★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★	62
46	3	✓		44	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★	62
27	3	✓		51	★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★	60
50	2		✓	32	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	55
50	3	✓	✓	44	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★	★★	53
20	3	✓		40	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★	★★	50
100	2	✓	✓	30	★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★★★★	★★	46
50	3		✓	41	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★	★★★★★	45

USING THE TABLE

We tested popular electric steamers from market leaders. The more stars the better.

Specification

Price For Best Buys we give the cheapest widely available high-street price. Other prices are a guide. Online prices are in *italics*. **Maximum height** When fully assembled.

Test performance

Individual foods Quality of food cooked separately. **Tiered cooking** Quality of a whole meal.

Score

This ignores price and is based on:
Ease of use **70%**
Cooking performance **30%**