

Happiness is cast iron

Sometimes low-tech is best

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The low-tech skillet can produce some high-end meals. During the early years of my marriage, as my husband and I adapted to cooking and living together, we learned to share a tight kitchen and limited pieces of equipment. The one item he never touched, though, was my beloved cast-iron frying pan, purchased at a hardware store in my days as a poor student.

"You have a relationship with that pan, and I don't want to come between you," he said. Since then, I've added many pots and pans — some of them fairly expensive — to my *bat-ter-rie de cuisine*. Yet all of them remain mere equipment, without the emotional aura of that beat-up, homely black skillet.

These days, every retail outlet from Williams Sonoma to QVC touts upscale brands like All-Clad, Calphalon and Le Creuset. But

I'd like to put in a word for the kind of humble cookware that's still made in much the same way it was in the 19th century.

Plain cast iron is unsurpassed for even heat retention and cooking without hot spots. When properly seasoned, it develops a nonstick surface rivaling Teflon. But, unlike Teflon, it can get hot enough for proper browning. It heats up slowly, but evenly and at a temperature high enough for searing or frying. So you can sear a steak without burning it or cook crispy corn bread right in the skillet.

Cast iron isn't good for sauces or for acidic foods like tomatoes. It can rust if not cared for properly, and it is not for the fastidious cook: Over-scrubbing can damage the nonstick properties of the surface. It's best if you can relax enough to overlook a bit of oil or grease left in the pan, which will keep it from rusting and preserve the silky surface you worked hard to achieve. To clean it out, stick to a swab with pure hot water and a soft nylon brush. No SOS pads or detergent, please!

FIND A PAN ...

Those who weren't fortunate enough to inherit seasoned cast iron can still find a skillet to call their own through the Lodge Manufacturing company, which has been making cookware in Tennessee since 1896. Their info is below, along with some other great sources.

Lodge Manufacturing
www.lodgecmfg.com

Chef's Catalog
www.chefscatalog.com

Brown's Hardware
100 West Broad Street
Falls Church
703-532-1168

Williams Sonoma
Various locations
www.williams-sonoma.com
Cherrydale Hardware
3805 Lee Highway
Arlington
703-527-2100

Sur La Table
5211 Wisconsin Ave. NW
Washington
202-237-0375
www.surlatable.com

Cooks used to guard their cast iron jealously, for the best seasoning could take many repeated uses to achieve. One of my aunts tells a story of how her teenage son asked to help with the washing up, and diligently scoured her iron griddle clean of 20 years of seasoning.

Thankfully, cooks no longer have to invest years to achieve good results. Now

you can buy cast-iron cookware pre-seasoned at the factory, and instantly enjoy the wonderful properties that used to take months or even years to fully develop. Try it, and you too might find yourself developing a sneaking affection for a homely (but oh so effective) skillet.

Greg Whitesell/Examiner