

LOYAL COMPANIONS COOKS REMINISCE ABOUT THEIR BEST FRIENDS IN THE KITCHEN

[CHICAGOLAND FINAL Edition]

Chicago Tribune - Chicago, Ill.

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Date: May 5, 1999
Start Page: 4
Section: GOOD EATING
Document Types: Feature
Text Word Count: 1866

Document Text

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In the world of cookware, all burners are lighted. The period leading to Mother's Day is frenetic, busier than any other time of year except immediately before Christmas, say local retailers.

What to buy Mom? Choices range from pots and pans to gadgets, all seeking the attention of countless husbands and children who may be exploring unfamiliar territory.

To provide some suggestions we asked experts (chefs, a caterer, a cooking teacher, a cookware store manager and an expert home cook) to tell us the favorite or most-used item in their home kitchens. Price was not a factor. The prices listed here are suggested retail and may vary from store to store.

KITCHENMAID MIXER

John Rudy

director of catering, Food for Thought

"I like the flexibility of my KitchenAid mixer (\$240). I use the paddle attachment for preparing cake batters and making cookie dough with my twin daughters, the whip for cream and meringues. I'm a big baker. I also use the grinder attachment a lot. I grind meat for meat loaf, make sausages and also grind vegetables for stock. I also grind onions, scallions and chilies for jerk marinade. I like unified texture. It doesn't beat up ingredients like a food processor."

SAUTE PAN

Rick Cooper a Chicago-based music promotion executive who frequently cooks for guests at home

"I rely on my big (14-inch diameter) Calphalon saute pan (about \$140). I am in love with this pan. It's heavy, it has heft. I like the way it conducts heat. It's big enough to make pasta sauces for 12 or more. I use it to sear sesame-crusted tuna, to saute my melt-in-the-mouth cabbage, leeks and lima beans. Also, I'm fascinated by flames and this pan will take high heat. I had a non-stick pan and it didn't last."

DUTCH OVEN

Odessa Piper

chef/owner, L'Etoile restaurant, Madison

"I consider my old Dutch oven a good luck charm. I use it to sear meat and poultry, deglaze the pan and build a sauce, or just put the lid on and let the ingredients bubble over a low flame. Sunday, when the restaurant is closed, is the high holy meal of the week at home, and the main-course fixture is chicken cooked in the Dutch oven. My husband and I stretch out the preparation as long as we can because we love the ritual and I know the Dutch oven will deliver. The food always comes out fine." (Simple cast-iron Dutch ovens are easier to find in hardware stores about \$38 for a 5-quart oven and antique shops than in cookware stores. Allow \$190 for a 5-quart cast-iron Dutch oven with an enamel coating.)

FINE-MESH SKIMMER AND STRAINER

Jill Prescott owner, L'Ecole de Cuisine cooking school and cookware shop, Kohler, Wis.

"My most valuable tools are a fine-mesh skimmer (\$8) and strainer (\$12.50). I make a lot of sauces and soups and use the skimmer to take off impurities and scum, if meat is an ingredient. Do this and you also remove a lot of bitterness. I strain all my sauces to remove crunchy bits and ugly particles. It always makes food look prettier.

"They are stainless steel and Italian-made. I bought them 25 years ago when I took my first cooking classes in Chicago. The skimmer is a 4.5-inch round with an 11-inch handle. The mesh is so fine it picks up particles of fat from the surface of stews and braises. The bowl of the strainer is 6 1/2 inches in diameter and the handle is about 6 1/2 inches. It also has an extremely fine mesh. I use it for everything, including raspberries. I puree the berries in a food processor, then push them through the strainer with a flat spatula. The puree is a perfect texture and none of the seeds get through."

WOODEN SPOON, PLASTIC SPATULA AND METAL TONGS

Jackie Shen chef, Lawry's The Prime Rib

"My favorite tools are a wooden spoon (\$4), a plastic spatula (\$6) and a pair of 9-inch metal tongs (\$7). I wore out the originals or bent them out of shape long ago. So I bought replacements and use them constantly with my non-stick skillets. The wooden spoon is great for stirring eggs without scratching the non-stick surface. The same is true of the plastic spatula. I use it to flip fish or omelets. The spatula doesn't cut into the fish, the fish doesn't stick to the non-stick pan. The tongs are handy when I grill meat in the oven. It's easy to turn the meat, but I don't burn my hand. I often cook meals in people's homes to raise money for charity, and I always take these tools with me."

CAST-IRON FRYING PAN

Leo Waldmeier

executive chef, Drake Hotel

"I cannot make a meal without using my cast-iron frying pans. I have two. One is an 8-inch (hardware store price, \$7); I make hash brown potatoes, small fillets and other small items in it. The other is a 12-inch (\$15) and I cook just about everything in there, from paella to mushroom stew. My wife hates these pans because they are so heavy, but I believe cast iron is the best cooking material you can find. It is even better than a wok because it is thicker and retains heat longer.

"I've had these pans since I came to the United States in 1981. They are treated like a little baby. Every time I use one, I clean the pan with running warm water, put it back on the heat to dry completely, then use a paper towel to wipe the surface with a couple of drops of salad oil. Will I replace them? Absolutely not. I fully expect to pass them on to a son-in-law. (The chef has two daughters in their early teens.)

NON-STICK ROUND GRIDDLE PAN

Yoshi Katsumura

chef/owner, Yoshi's Cafe, 3257 N. Halsted St.

"My kids (ages 13 and 10) like me to make Western breakfasts for them on the weekends. So I pull out my non-stick round griddle pan (Farberware, 10-inch diameter, with two handles, about \$50) and make French toast or pancakes and sometimes omelets. The pan is completely flat and goes over a burner. I call it my 'Western wok' and use it almost daily to cook . . . you name it: some veggies, a fillet of fish or meat, a lot of pot stickers. It's a neat way to cook, very handy. The food cooks quickly and the cleanup is very easy, just like a wok. But because it is flat it is easy to store."

SERRATED UTILITY KNIFE

Cynthia Moreman

store manager, Williams-Sonoma, Oak Brook

"The tool I use the most is my serrated utility knife (\$45). It's a small one, discreet and harmless-looking, with a 5-inch blade. I use it to do a lot of slicing: tomatoes, soft-skinned fruits, small loaves of bread. I've had it for years. In fact, I stole it from my parents' kitchen when I moved away from home. When I joined Williams-Sonoma, my mother immediately made me replace it. So she has the new knife and I have the antique."

Moreman also likes garlic presses (\$13) and a spray tool called Quick Mist (\$19). "I use it to spray olive oil on salads or in pans before I sear meat. It has cut the amount of olive oil I use by half."

HAND-HELD BLENDER

Emeril Lagasse

New Orleans chef and restaurant owner, Food Network personality

"In addition to my knives, there are two tools I can't do without. One is my hand-held blender. I don't use it for chef stuff like coulis. I'm a soup freak. My kids are, too, and there's always a soup in our refrigerator. So I can save time and be a lot less messy if I use the hand-held submersion blender (\$60) to puree pea soup or to break down some of the beans and give bean soup a creamy texture. My other essential is the fine-mesh strainer I bought at Williams-Sonoma (18-centimeter diameter, \$26). It is perfect for straining pasta or blanched vegetables or washing berries."

JUST DREAMING

Asked for a fantasy gift, a tool or machine they would love to find waiting in the home kitchen, our experts responded with a lineup that included a restaurant model stove with six burners and two ovens (\$10,000), a set of stainless-steel and copper pots (\$800 to \$1,400), a top-of-the-line juicer (\$330), a "classic" Weber kettle grill (\$180) and a salamander (a professional infrared broiler, \$140.)

- Williams-Sonoma's Cynthia Moreman has her eye on the new French mandolin (\$160), a stainless-steel tool for slicing and cutting vegetables into julienne strips. It is more user-friendly than the old model, she says, with rubber feet at the base to keep it from sliding. She likes to use a mandolin "because it does not crush or overprocess vegetables for stir-fry or noodle dishes."

- Odessa Piper dreams of something that cannot be purchased at a cookware store: "I really, really, really want to have an open shelf put in near the work area to hold oils, vinegars and spices. I love the visual stimulation of being close to my condiments and I have so many different vinegars and oils in a cupboard, it would please me to be able to see them."

- Emeril Lagasse plans to share the fruits of his fantasy with his children. "We would rather have sorbet or ice cream with seasonal fruit than any other dessert, so I'd like a kicked-up ice cream machine (\$400). You can do it by hand; I did. You pay \$19 and spend 19 hours cranking. I want something for people who are really serious about ice cream."

- Rick Cooper is thinking convenience: "I'd be thrilled if someone would hire a maid to clean up after I cook."

WHERE TO FIND KITCHEN TOOLS

Cookware sources in the Chicago area include:

- Chef's Catalog, 3009 N. Clark St., 773-327-5210, and Crossroads Shopping Center in Highland Park, 847-831-1100.

- The Chopping Block, 1324 W. Webster Ave., 773-472-6700.

- Crate & Barrel, 646 N. Michigan Ave., 312-787-5900, and other locations in Chicago and suburbs.

- Edward Don Outlet, 2525 N. Elston Ave., 773-489-7739.

- Great Ace, 2639 N. Elston Ave., 773-342-0300.

- Lechters Housewares, 23 E. Madison St., 312-629-2611, and other locations in Chicago and suburbs.

- Williams-Sonoma: 700 N. Michigan Ave., 312-787-8991, and suburban locations, including Oakbrook Center, Old Orchard Center in Skokie and Woodfield Shopping Center in Schaumburg.

- In addition, department and other stores such as Bed, Bath & Beyond, Bloomingdale's, Carson Pirie Scott, Kohl's, Linens 'N Things, Marshall Field's and Service Merchandise have large cookware sections.

[Illustration]

PHOTOS 17; Caption: PHOTO: KITCHENAID MIXER. PHOTO: SAUTE PAN. PHOTO: DUTCH OVEN. PHOTO (color): (Odessa Piper.) PHOTO: FINE-MESH SKIMMER AND STRAINER. PHOTO: WOODEN SPOON, PLASTIC SPATULA AND METAL TONGS. PHOTO (color): (Jackie Shen.) PHOTO: (NON-STICK ROUND GRIDDLE PAN. Yoshi Katsumura and his two children.) PHOTO: SERRATED UTILITY KNIFE. PHOTO: HAND-HELD BLENDER. Photo illustrations by Bob Fila. PHOTO (color): (Emeril Lagasse.) PHOTO: (On the cover.) FINE-MESH SKIMMER. PHOTO: (On the cover.) WOODEN SPOON, METAL TONGS AND SPATULA. PHOTO: (On the cover.) HAND-HELD BLENDER. PHOTO: (On the cover.) SAUTE PAN. PHOTO: (On the cover.) KITCHENAID MIXER.

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