

Turning the stove top into a grill

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TRIBUNE REPORTER

Not everybody has a backyard, a balcony...or a grill. And even when you do have any or all of that, snow and rain can put the kibosh on outdoor cooking. In these cases, a stove-top grill pan can come to the rescue. These sturdy pans have ridged interiors that approximate outdoor grilling for the indoor cook.

There are dozens of pans out there, many crafted from different materials. Our test focused on three: preseasoned cast-iron, enamel-coated cast-iron and stainless-steel.

We heated the pans on medium-high heat for 10 minutes before placing two lightly oiled chicken breasts on each. All three pans got the job done, grilling the meat in no more than 15 minutes. But there were differences.

The stainless-steel pan heated so fast we had to lower the heat to medium a few minutes into cooking. (Which may explain why the chicken took the longest—15 minutes—to cook on that pan.) The chicken finished first on the non-stick enamel (12 minutes), followed by the cast-iron pan (13 minutes).

Here are the pans we tested, with a few pros and cons. We found these particular models online at amazon.com, and the prices listed are from the site. Kitchenware and department stores also stock a wide array of these and similar grill pans.

1 Lodge Logic preseasoned square grill pan: \$18. Comments: Least expensive pan. 10 1/2-inch-square cooking surface. It's heavy (about 8 pounds), and that's a bonus or detriment, depending on the cook's arm strength. (A helper-handle eases lifting.) It's hand-wash only but grilling meat will almost always require some preliminary scrubbing to remove the charred bits—and this was the easiest pan to clean.

2 Cuisinart Chef's Classic enamel cast-iron square grill pan: \$40. Comments: Very pretty pan that comes in a cheerful red or green exterior. (One tester said she'd buy it on looks alone.) 12-inch grilling surface, with shallow ridges that limit searing. Relatively easy to scrub by hand and it's dishwasher-safe; it emerged from the dishwasher looking great.

3 KitchenAid five-ply stainless-steel clad 12-inch round grill pan. \$80. Comments: Its light weight (2 pounds) didn't diminish its sturdiness, so this may appeal to smaller cooks. It had a large cooking surface (20.7 inches in diameter). Dishwasher-safe, but it was the hardest to scrub by hand. It is dishwasher-safe and came out clean, but it may need polishing to look as great as it looked out of the box.

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RESULTS AT A GLANCE

In terms of flavor and visual appeal, we cast our vote for the **preseasoned cast-iron**—and not just because it was the least expensive pan. It produced chicken with a deep sear and crispy exterior. The shallower ridges of the **enamel-coated cast-iron** produced the palest sear, but the flavor was fine. The chicken seared too much on the **stainless-steel**, resulting in a charred flavor on the exterior. Inside, though, the meat was tender and juicy.