

## Ironclad love

### **COOK'S FAVORITE | Prized for their longevity and versatility, cast-iron pans never fail to deliver**

February 11, 2009  
**BY MICHAEL NAGRANT**

The cookware huckster at the department store was wrong: My heavy clad nonstick cookware set hasn't outlasted me or my marriage.

Eight years later, I can still see the clerk from the kitchenware department of a particularly famous Chicago department store shaking her head disapprovingly as I fingered the dull finish of a new cast-iron skillet.

She harrumphed and whipped off her glossy red reading glasses and beelined for my wife and me while we built our wedding registry. I almost expected her to smack my wrist off the pan, but instead she pitched a tirade about how cast-iron pans are too much work, how they rust and how what we really wanted was a heavy clad nonstick collection.

She said she'd throw in a free wok if we registered for the set. If only we'd held out for a set of Ginzu knives.

Maybe it wasn't the clerk's fault. Wedding registries tend to encourage witless excess. After all, who really needs five Waterford lead crystal pieces, NASCAR china or a Baccarat dolphin sculpture?

And at that time, I thought that cooking was something my grandmother did, Outback Steakhouse was luxury food and the chrome lids on the recommended set were pretty sweet.

So for a year or so after we were married, our shiny set was a pride-inducing museum display of unused gleaming glory on our kitchen shelves.

Then I learned to cook.

Two years later, I finally got that cast-iron skillet. I coddled it, fed it precious bacon fat when it was thirsty and it returned my love as the workhorse of my kitchen.

While the nonstick coating on those wedding gifts is long gone, after six years, the non-stickiness of my fat-laden cast-iron skillet keeps on going.

By cast iron, mind you, I'm not talking about those bank account-draining, oven range-gulping yachts slathered in pretty, vibrant colored enamels. I'm talking about the \$20 pans so heavy that they can double as a handy bludgeon for would-be intruders. For value, there may be no better pan, especially in these troubled economic times.

My Lodge skillet is the only pan I use to make breakfast. It does double duty at dinner, ensuring a uniform, crispy-brown crust on steak or any protein, for those of us without 1,500-degree infrared restaurant broilers.

Even those with restaurant equipment tend to love cast iron. A few years ago at Avenues restaurant in the Peninsula Chicago hotel, I watched as chef Graham Elliot Bowles' staff, surrounded by gleaming copper sauce pans and Dutch ovens, seared meat exclusively in a cast-iron pan.

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Says Rob Levitt, chef-owner of Bucktown's Mado, who uses his to pan-fry soft-shell crabs, braise lamb belly and render pork fat: "Aluminum sauté pans just don't cut it. There's nothing greater to sear protein."

Cast-iron pans are prized not only for their function, but their durability. Even a fully rusted one dug up at a thrift store can usually be revived with a healthy coating of lard and an hour or two in a 375-degree oven.

While I've always said it would be the first thing I'd grab on way out of the door during a fire, my cast-iron pan would likely endure that, too.

In fact, Rogers Park purse-maker Cinnamon Cooper told me that when she was in fourth grade, a classmate's kitchen chimney caught on fire and the cast-iron pans were among the only things that survived.

Because of this, and also because her own mother cooked with cast iron so often during her childhood, when Cooper worked as a clerk for Williams-Sonoma, she'd often try to convince would-be purchasers of expensive cooking sets to consider cast iron instead.

"I remember one guy came in and bought this 14-piece set, came back two weeks later with a warped pan and said, 'Alright, show me the cast iron,' " Cooper, 37, says.

Because cast iron is so durable, the pans are often handed down between generations. Catherine Jahns, a 92-year-old Chicago woman, got her pan from her Aunt Margaret over 60 years ago.

"She could no longer use it on her new electric stove," Jahns says. "I will not part with it for love or money."

Carol Bernard, 74, of Chicago owns three of her grandmother's cast iron pans -- a 12-inch frying pan, 8-inch frying pan and a Dutch oven.

"These pans have to be at least 100 plus years old, probably more like 125 plus and still going strong," Bernard says.

Cast iron was originally forged in in China in 6th century B.C., though it didn't really come into wide culinary use until the early 18th century in England.

Lodge, America's largest domestic manufacturer of cast iron cookware, was established during the first presidential term of William McKinley when founder Joseph Lodge established the Blacklot foundry, named after his favorite Episcopal priest, in South Pittsburg, Tenn.

The company also manufactured stove pieces, pipes and, during the Depression, cast iron gnomes, dogs and doorstops. Today, Lodge's great grandchildren still run the business.

Mark Kelly, Lodge's market promotions manager, says cast iron pans are the most popular they have been in the last 40 years.

He credits the recent innovation of pre-seasoned skillet and Food Network celebrities like Paula Deen and Bobby Flay for raising awareness of the product, but adds that the pans are popular because they're like "the utility infielder of kitchen, one from which you get Hall of Fame play every day."

To illustrate how prized cast iron is in the South, Kelly tells the story of a burglar who broke into his friend's New Orleans house and didn't touch the widescreen televisions and high-end electronics, but instead took six seasoned cast iron Dutch ovens.

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Apart from superior cooking, one of the beautiful things about cast iron is its low maintenance. Cast iron pans don't even really need to be washed.

Because the non-stickiness of the pan and the flavor of cooked items is often dependent on years of accumulated cooking, many people try to keep soap away from the pan surface. Cleaning usually involves salt, a scrub brush and a dash of water for really tough stains.

"I've worked at French restaurants where everything goes through the dishwasher, except the cast iron," Mado's Levitt says. "The cooks always lovingly hand-scrub those."

My wife and I have had more than a few disagreements after I've caught her on the precipice of unwittingly soaping or watering down my cast iron skillet.

That said, our marriage will likely never be felled by such petty things. And I'm confident that unlike our heavy duty nonstick set, our cast iron skillet will live up to its promise and last as long as our relationship.

*Michael Nagrant is a Chicago free-lance writer.*