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## Ever So Humble, Cast Iron Outshines the Fancy Pans

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AS cookware becomes more expensive and the kinds available become more varied, it's increasingly clear to me that most "new" pots and pans are about marketing. For most tasks, old-style cookware is best. So these days when I'm asked for a recommendation, I reply with an old-fashioned answer: cast iron.



Andrew Scrivani for The New York Times

Fish fried with cayenne and paprika.



Andrew Scrivani for The New York Times

Indeed Cooked in a cast-iron pan, brussels sprouts get brown and tender.

My personal return to cast iron began less than a year ago when I began to heed the warnings against preheating chemically treated pans and putting them in hot ovens, which could create potentially harmful fumes.

As most experienced cooks know, you can't brown food unless you preheat your skillet, and I frequently transfer food from stove top to oven.

So cast iron is a logical choice, especially in skillets, unless you require gorgeous stainless to make a style point or you can afford copper - which is ideal for sautéing because its heat distribution is incomparable - and the time to care for it. The only disadvantages are that cast iron is heavy (look for skillets with handles on both sides) and it requires a bit of care to keep it seasoned and looking nice.

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But cast iron has so many benefits. Well seasoned, it is nearly as nonstick as any manufactured nonstick surface and far more so than stainless, aluminum or even copper pans.

Cast iron is practically free compared with other high-quality pots and pans (\$20, say, for a skillet). In addition, it lasts nearly forever: the huge skillet I bought around 1970 for \$10 is still going strong.

Furthermore, it is an even distributor of heat, which you will instantly appreciate if switching from stainless steel or aluminum. And you can move it from stove top to oven without a thought.

Cast-iron pans are created by pouring molten iron into sand molds. After the metal solidifies, the sand crust is blasted off, and any rough edges are removed. This is pretty much the way cast iron has been made for centuries.

A couple of variables might influence your buying decision: the purity of the cast iron and the issue of seasoning it.

Lodge, the only domestic maker of cast-iron cookware, uses only "pig-iron ingot and scrap steel converted back into iron" to make its cookware, according to the company's chief executive, Bob Kellermann. Anonymously made imported cast-iron cookware, though often less expensive, offers no such guarantees. In my experience the cheapest cast-iron pans have far more "hot spots."

But the biggest fear most people have about cast iron is the seasoning process. The metal is porous and rough, and until it gains a patina from use it is the opposite of nonstick. Lodge, in an attempt to make this a non-issue, has introduced a line of preseasoned cookware, which now makes up something like 80 percent of its sales.

But I'd rather control the process: seasoning is simple, and maintaining it is even simpler. To season a new pan wash it well and dry it. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees while you warm the pan gently over low heat on top of the stove. Using a brush or a paper towel, spread a tablespoon or so of a fresh neutral oil like corn or grape seed in the pan; the surface should be evenly covered, with no excess. Put the pan in the oven, bake it for about an hour and let it cool in the oven.

That's it.

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It's helpful if the first few uses of the pan involve oil, like sautéing or deep-frying. If you care for the pan properly, it will darken with use and become increasingly smooth, beautiful and easy to cook in.

Once the pan is seasoned, routine washing can almost always be done with a scouring pad, not steel wool or anything else that will damage the seasoning (although the worst that can happen is that the pan will have to be re-seasoned).

Despite many recommendations to the contrary, a little mild soap won't tear off the seasoning.

Cast iron can rust of course, but never if you dry it after washing and keep it out of rain and floods. If rust does appear, scour it off with steel wool or sandpaper, and re-season.

Cast iron really struts its stuff when you want to get a pan good and hot and keep it that way. For "grilling" a steak indoors, it can't be beat. Ridged cast-iron "grill pans" are good for two reasons: They raise the meat slightly above the surface, which promotes browning by preventing escaping liquids from contacting the meat, and they leave grill marks, which are attractive if nothing else.

Cast iron is as good at browning as any other cookware, and its mass lets it hold a steady temperature so well that it is perfect for deep- or shallow-frying.

But braising in cast iron, especially with acidic ingredients like tomato or wine, may degrade the seasoning slightly. In extreme cases, you may have to re-season the pan; more likely, you'll just have to treat it to a light coating of oil and a few minutes of warming.

In any case, this isn't a bad routine. Every so often I wash my cast-iron skillet and put it over low heat. When the water begins to evaporate I wipe it dry and spread a little oil over its surface with a paper towel. I leave the skillet over the heat a few more minutes and wipe it out again.

Yes, this is maintenance, and most cookware is maintenance-free. But it seems a small price to pay for inexpensive, high-performing, safe, nonstick pans. When it comes to cookware, new is not necessarily better

## Recipe: Roasted Brussels Sprouts With Garlic

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Time: 45 Minutes

1 pint brussels sprouts (about a pound)  
4 to 6 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil, to coat bottom of pan  
5 cloves garlic  
Salt and pepper to taste  
1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar.

1. Heat oven to 450 degrees. Trim bottom of brussels sprouts, and slice each in half top to bottom. Heat oil in cast-iron pan over medium-high heat until it shimmers; put sprouts cut side down in one layer in pan. Put in garlic, and sprinkle with salt and pepper.

2. Cook, undisturbed, until sprouts begin to brown on bottom, and transfer to oven. Cook, shaking pan occasionally, until sprouts are quite brown and tender, about ½ hour.

3. Taste, and add more salt and pepper if necessary. Stir in balsamic vinegar, and serve hot or warm.

*Yield: 4 servings.*

## Recipe: Seared Steak

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Time: 20 minutes' cooking, 25 minutes' resting

2 steaks (sirloin strip, rib-eye or other), 8 to 10 ounces each and about 1 inch thick  
Course salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste.

1. If time allows remove steaks from packaging, dry with paper towels, put on a plate and refrigerate a day or two. If not, wrap in paper towels and set on counter about 30 minutes. (If you're really in a hurry, just proceed.)

2. Heat oven to 500 degrees (550 if possible), and set a rack in the lowest position, unless skillet can be placed directly on oven floor. Place a cast-iron skillet large enough to hold steaks without crowding over high heat, and heat until smoking. Sprinkle surface of pan with coarse salt, and put steaks in. Smoke will billow up; wearing a thick oven mitt, immediately transfer skillet to oven.

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3. Roast steaks, turning once, about 4 minutes a side for medium rare, or until browned and cooked to preferred doneness. Sprinkle with salt and pepper, and let rest 3 to 5 minutes. Slice steaks or cut each into two pieces, and serve.

*Yield: 4 servings.*

## **Recipe: Red-Fried Fish**

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Time: 40 minutes

Corn, grape seed or other neutral oil for deep-frying

1 teaspoon ground ginger

½ teaspoon cayenne, or to taste

1 teaspoon mild paprika

Salt and pepper to taste

½ cup flour

1 egg

2 tablespoons lime juice

1 pound thin fillets of a white fish like flounder or fluke, in 4-inch strips about 1 inch wide (almost like fish fingers)

1 lime, cut into wedges.

1. Put at least ½ inch oil in cast-iron skillet. Over medium-high heat, bring oil to 350 degrees. (A drop of batter will sizzle energetically but not violently at this temperature.)

2. Meanwhile combine ginger, cayenne, paprika, salt, pepper and flour in a bowl. Beat egg with lime juice and about ¼ cup cold water; stir into mixture, and stir in as much water as necessary to achieve consistency of pancake batter. Stir in fish.

3. When oil is heated, gently slide a few pieces of fish into it; do not crowd. Fry, turning once, until fish is crisp and golden brown all over, about 5 minutes. Repeat with rest of fish as necessary. Drain on paper towels, and serve immediately with lime wedges.

*Yield: 4 servings.*

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