

A Guide to Recommended Bakeware

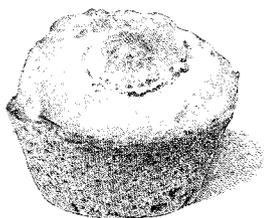
Price doesn't always equal performance. The design details that prevent stuck muffins and burnt cookies may be the ones you least expected. BY SEAN LAWLER

MATERIAL WORLD: The Light, the Dark, and the See-Through

Though its manufacturers are loath to admit it, choosing quality bakeware is pretty simple. All the usual jargon about clad aluminum cores and anodized coatings remains in full force, but a dozen years of testing have left us even more skeptical than usual about bells and whistles when it comes to shopping for cake pans and cookie sheets. Here's what to look for—and what to avoid.

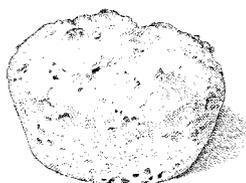
TEMPERED, OVENPROOF GLASS: Better known by the brand name Pyrex, thick tempered glass retains plenty of heat, so pans made from it ensure deep and even browning. They also make it easy to monitor the browning as it develops. Because Pyrex is scratch-resistant, you can cut and serve right from the pan with sharp knives and metal spatulas. What's not to like? Just the occasional explosion, a manageable risk as long as you take precautions (see "When Pyrex Explodes," page 17).

DARK-COLORED FINISHES: When it comes to metal pans, neither the type of metal nor its thickness matters much. What does matter is the color of the pan. Dark-colored nonstick pans allow metal to absorb more heat inside the oven than reflective, lighter-colored materials. The result: darker browning of baked goods, which is almost always a good thing. Combine that with the



TALL, DARK, AND HANDSOME

Dark-colored pans absorb heat well, yielding tall, nicely browned baked goods.



SQUAT AND PALE

Light-colored pans absorb less heat, inhibiting browning and rise.

clean release and easy cleanup of nonstick, and pans in this category are often the ones to beat.

LIGHT-COLORED FINISHES: A well-browned crust releases more easily from a pan than a pale crust. Because light-colored reflective pans brown more slowly than dark-colored pans, and because they also lack a nonstick coating, we're generally reluctant to recommend them. In a few situations, however, this controlled browning can be an advantage, such as when baking cookies. (Because it's only the bottom of a cookie that's in contact with the metal, it can easily burn before the rest of the cookie bakes through.)

INSULATED: To protect against overbrowning (not usually a problem for us), insulated pans incorporate a layer of air sandwiched between two sheets of metal. Unfortunately, this "insulation" works all too well: The pans produce pale, underdeveloped crusts. The interior chamber also becomes waterlogged if submerged in water during cleanup. What a pain.

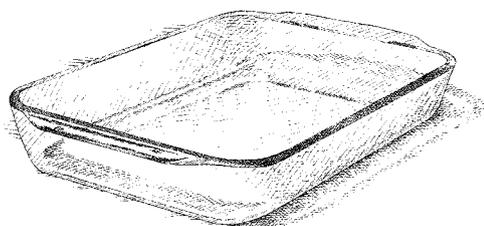
SILICONE: These flexible, rubbery pans are the most useless things to appear in the kitchen since salad shooters. These "pans" don't brown well, and getting them into the oven when loaded down with batter is awkward.

BAKING PAN

Testing Notes: We stock plenty of these pans in the test kitchen, where they handle everything from lasagna to sticky buns. Sturdy Pyrex is our first choice here: dishwasher-safe, handy handles, and scratch-resistant. The 13 by 9-inch pan is the best all-around option, but the 17 by 11-inch model turns out super-sized casseroles, while the 8-inch- and 9-inch-square pans are good for smaller batches of cornbread or brownies.

What to Avoid:

- Aluminum pans, which can react with the acids in tomato-based recipes



★ TEST KITCHEN FAVORITE ★

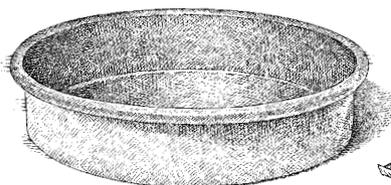
PYREX Bakeware 13 by 9-Inch Baking Dish, \$8.95

CAKE PAN

Testing Notes: We're still searching for the ultimate cake pan: one with high, straight sides; a dark, nonstick finish; and handles, which most manufacturers consider unnecessary. Until then, both our test kitchen winner and "best buy" option (below) score two out of three. Nine-inch cake pans are the standard size, and you'll need two for most recipes. (If you want to bake in a square pan instead, drop down to the 8-inch size—the surface area is comparable to a 9-inch round pan.)

What to Avoid:

- Light-colored tinned or stainless steel pans, which brown and release poorly
- Sloped sides, which produce flared cakes that are impossible to split evenly



★ TEST KITCHEN FAVORITE ★

CHICAGO METALLIC Professional Nonstick, \$14.95

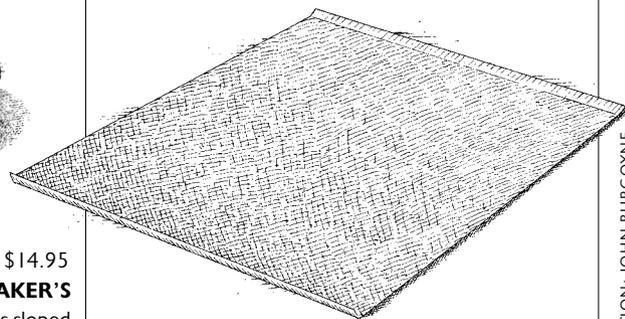
➤ **BEST BUY:** The supermarket standard **BAKER'S SECRET** cake pan (\$3.99) is a bit short and has sloped sides, but it browns and releases easily, has helpful handles, and boasts a winning price tag.

COOKIE SHEET

Testing Notes: When it comes to light- versus dark-colored metal bakeware, the cookie sheet is the exception. All of the dark-colored, nonstick cookie sheets we tested consistently overbrowned the bottoms of cookies. Light-colored sheets, on the other hand, were prone to sticking, but because we always bake cookies on parchment paper, we chose the (much) lesser of two evils.

What to Avoid:

- Dark finishes
- Lightweight sheets, which are prone to warping
- Sheets with only one handle (difficult to rotate during baking) or four sides (difficult to transfer cookie-loaded parchment paper from sheet to cooling rack)



★ TEST KITCHEN FAVORITE ★

VOLLRATH Cookie Sheet, \$19.95



Go to www.cooksillustrated.com

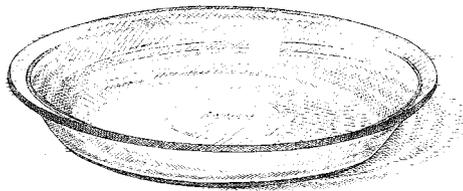
- Key in code 3067 for Mail-Order Sources for Recommended Bakeware.
- This information is available until September 1, 2006.

PIE PLATE

Testing Notes: Pie making is hard work—we understand why lots of cooks want to show off the finished product in a handsome, heavy piece of French ceramic pottery. (We're less certain why so many others trust their creations to flimsy EZ Foil disposable aluminum pans.) But neither option turns out evenly browned crusts as reliably as the trusty, inexpensive Pyrex. The Pyrex pie plate is scratch-resistant, its wide lip makes it easy to shape decorative fluted crusts, and its see-through glass is the best choice for monitoring a crust's browning progress.

What to Avoid:

- Ceramic pie plates
- Flimsy, disposable aluminum pie plates
- Opaque plates



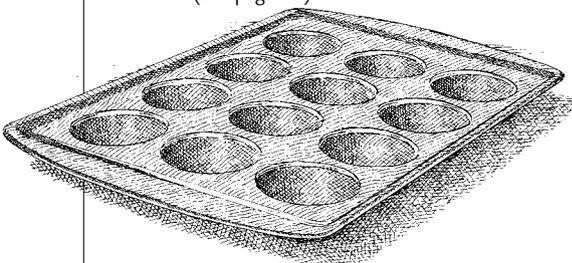
★ **TEST KITCHEN FAVORITE** ★
PYREX (9-Inch) Pie Plate, \$5.00

MUFFIN TIN

Testing Notes: Thanks to excellent heat absorption, dark-colored metal pans produce muffins and cupcakes that not only brown better but also rise higher and sport more nicely domed tops when compared with those baked in shiny, reflective tins. Choose a moderately priced muffin tin with reasonable heft (no more than 2 pounds).

What to Avoid:

- Flimsy pans that buckle when filled with heavy batter
- Heavy pans (some of our contenders weighed in at well over 2 pounds), which provide an unwelcome one-arm workout
- Silicone (see page 16)



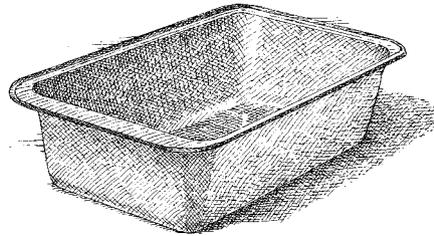
★ **TEST KITCHEN FAVORITE** ★
WILTON Ultra-Bake, \$9.99

LOAF PAN

Testing Notes: The refusal of much of the bakeware industry to embrace the good common sense of handles has always left us puzzled. Loaf pans are a good example. All of the dark, nonstick pans we tested browned nicely and released cleanly, so we gave the nod to those that are easy to carry as well. Though often referred to as “9 by 5-inch loaf pans,” few meet those exact dimensions. We prefer pans with a width of just under 5 inches, which produce loaves with taller, rounder tops. Many recipes yield two loaves, so you might as well buy two pans.

What to Avoid:

- Pans without handles
- Light-colored pans, which deter browning



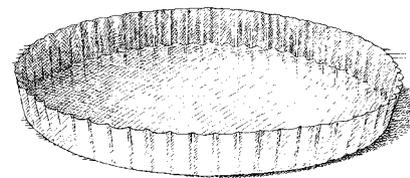
★ **TEST KITCHEN FAVORITE** ★
BAKER'S SECRET Non-Stick Loaf Pan
(8½ by 4½ inches), \$3.99

FLUTED TART PAN

Testing Notes: We love these clever pans—the fluted edges and false bottom allow even a novice baker to turn out elegant-looking desserts with not much effort. But we can't condone splurging on pricey nonstick models when the generic tinned steel pans, sold in most stores for around \$8, work just as well. (There's so much fat in buttery tart dough that it wouldn't stick to flypaper, much less a pan.) Our tart recipes are generally developed to fit a 9-inch pan, but 11-inch pans are also common.

What to Avoid:

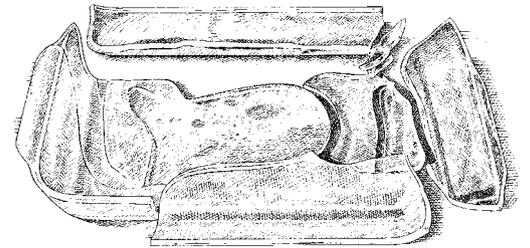
- Nonremovable bottoms
- Expensive nonstick pans



★ **TEST KITCHEN FAVORITE** ★
Tinned Steel Fluted Tart Pan with
Removable Bottom, about \$8

When Pyrex Explodes

Pyrex pie plates and baking dishes are standard issue in the test kitchen, but over the years we've learned that they are prone to shattering when exposed to sudden and extreme temperature changes. Naturally, this prohibits their use under a broiler or over direct stovetop heat, but the tempered glass bakeware is also vulnerable to sudden drops in temperature, known in the industry as downshock. Downshock would result from adding cold liquid to a hot Pyrex dish or from placing a hot dish directly on a cold or wet surface. It is considered safe, however, to transfer a Pyrex dish directly from the refrigerator or freezer to a hot oven, provided it has been properly preheated—some ovens use the broiler element to heat up to the desired temperature.



SHOCKING RESULTS

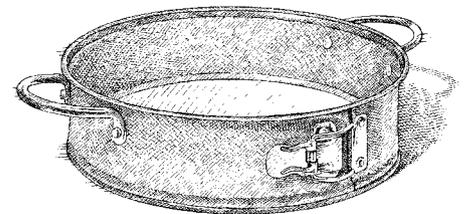
This pan went from hot to cold too quickly.

SPRINGFORM PAN

Testing Notes: The disappointing truth: All springform pans leak. This means that using them in a water bath can be problematic (we recommend double-wrapping the pan with aluminum foil to make it leakproof). We picked out the least leaky contenders, then chose the only model with helpful handles and a clear glass bottom to boot. Nine-inch pans are the standard size.

What to Avoid:

- Rimmed bottoms, which make it difficult to slide a spatula under the cake to remove it



★ **TEST KITCHEN FAVORITE** ★
FRIELING Handle-It (9-Inch) Glass Bottom
Springform, \$31.95

KITCHEN WORKHORSE: Jellyroll Pan

In the test kitchen, we keep stacks of rimmed aluminum baking sheets (known as jellyroll pans—half-sheet pans, in restaurant lingo) and use them for a wide assortment of everyday tasks: roasting vegetables, catching drips in the oven, and, yes, baking the occasional jellyroll or sheet cake. Fitted with the right-sized wire cooling rack, this versatile pan can stand in for a roasting pan; it also makes an acceptable cookie sheet, though the rimmed design prevents a quick sliding of cookies to the cooling rack. Though similar pans are available in cookware shops in a variety of materials, sizes, and finishes, we purchase ours at a restaurant supply store in the industry standard size of 16 by 12 inches and recommend that you do the same. If you do buy retail, however, a good alternative is the WearEver Commercial Jellyroll Pan (\$10.99).

