

# A Guide to Essential Cookware

To outfit your kitchen without breaking the bank, invest in cookware that is durable and versatile. Here's our master list of what to buy and why. BY SEAN LAWLER

In any cluttered kitchen (ours included), there are pots and pans that gather dust and others that rarely get put away. After a decade of careful testing, we've identified the true multitaskers, the "must-have" pots and pans that we reach for time and again. We think every cook should own these eight pieces of cookware.

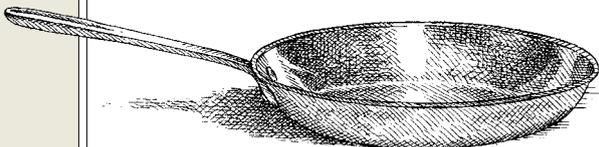
## THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS:

### Constructing "Clad" Cookware

Few pans on the market today are made from a single material. Manufacturers are constantly inventing new ways to bond materials together to take advantage of their different properties. "Clad" cookware comes in two varieties. "Fully clad" pieces have a complete core of conductive material (aluminum or copper) that extends up the sides of the pan. In a "disk-bottom" pan, the core is a conductive disk of aluminum added to the bottom exterior of the pan. Our tests have shown that disk-bottom pans often perform just as well as fully clad pans: With some exceptions, the thickness of the core is more important than whether or not it covers the sides of the pan.

## TRADITIONAL SKILLET

**ALTERNATE NAMES:** Frypan, Omelet Pan



**What We Use It For:** This is the pan we reach for when pan-searing steaks, chops, and cutlets and when pan-roasting chicken parts. The traditional (that is, nonstick) finish develops *fond*—the crusty, brown bits that collect on the pan bottom and are deglazed to make pan sauces.

**Why We Like It:** The flared, shallow sides encourage the rapid evaporation of moisture, so pan sauces reduce quickly and foods sear rather than steam.

### TEST KITCHEN TIPS:

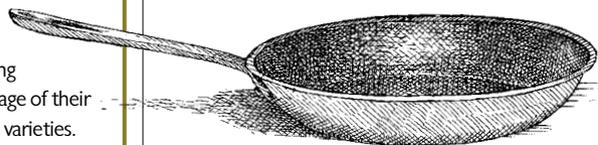
- Consider weight carefully. The pan should be heavy enough to retain heat, but it also needs to be easily maneuverable (even when loaded with 3 pounds of chicken parts).
- Look for a comfortable handle that can safely go under the broiler.
- A 12-inch diameter (measured across the top) is the best choice to accommodate four large chops or a whole, cut-up chicken.

### And the Winner Is . . .

- ★ **ALL-CLAD** Stainless 12-Inch Frypan, \$125
- ★ **BEST BUY: WOLFGANG PUCK** Bistro 12-Inch Open Omelet Pan, \$30

## NONSTICK SKILLET

**ALTERNATE NAMES:** Frypan, Omelet Pan



**What We Use It For:** This is our favorite pan for searing delicate items that have a tendency to stick or break apart, such as fish fillets. We also favor it for stir-fries, pancakes, omelets, and other egg dishes.

**Why We Like It:** The nonstick finish means no *fond* for pan sauces, but the foods themselves still get nicely browned provided the pan is large enough to avoid overcrowding. The flared sides allow for the quick redistribution of food by jerking and sliding the pan over the burner. Easy cleanup, of course.

### TEST KITCHEN TIPS:

- Nonstick bonding technology has improved by leaps and bounds, meaning that it's worth investing in a nonstick skillet with a thick base that distributes heat evenly.
- A 12-inch nonstick skillet can handle a batch of fish fillets or a stir-fry serving four. Smaller nonstick skillets (8 or 10 inches) are a good choice for omelets and snacks like quesadillas or grilled-cheese sandwiches.

### And the Winner Is . . .

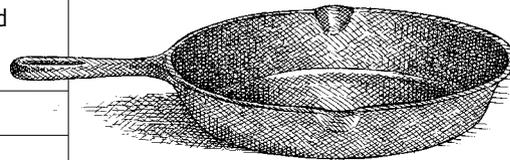
- ★ **ALL-CLAD** Stainless Nonstick 12-Inch Frypan, \$125
- ★ **BEST BUY: WOLFGANG PUCK** Bistro 12-Inch Nonstick Omelet Pan, \$35

## Traditional versus Nonstick

There are advantages to both traditional and nonstick pans. The latter are easy to clean and require very little cooking fat, while traditional surfaces excel at developing *fond*, those crusty, stuck-on bits of food that add deep flavor and color to pan sauces. In the test kitchen, we reach for a nonstick pan when cooking delicate foods that are prone to sticking, such as eggs, seafood, and stir-fries. For searing steaks, chops, or chicken or making any other recipe that favors browning over frequent stirring, we prefer a traditional pan, preferably one with a light-colored interior finish that makes it easy to watch for signs of burnt drippings.

## CAST-IRON SKILLET

**ALTERNATE NAME:** Frypan



**What We Use It For:** Cast iron is just the thing for searing or blackening food quickly over very high heat. When we're after a really dark, even crust on steaks, chops, or even cornbread, there's nothing better.

**Why We Like It:** In our lineup of winning pans, this is the placekicker. We may not use it every day, but it's almost essential to have on hand when the right recipe comes along. Why? For the simple reason that no other metal in the cookware arena retains heat as well as cast iron. With its slow response time and tremendous heft, this pan is the wrong choice for delicate sauté work, but it's dirt cheap and will outlast any other pan.

### TEST KITCHEN TIPS:

- This pan's tiny, scorching-hot handle tells you something: It's not designed to be moved around while in use. So heavier is better, within reason.
- Look for a pouring lip for easier disposal of used oil.
- A 12-inch skillet is the best all-purpose size.

### And the Winner Is . . .

- ★ **LODGE** 12-Inch Skillet, \$20

## SAUTÉ PAN

**ALTERNATE NAME:** None



**What We Use It For:** A good choice for pan-frying. Also good for dishes in which you want to brown meat and vegetables and then add liquid, such as smothered chops, fricassees, and meaty pasta sauces.

**Why We Like It:** With its high, straight sides, this pan has a greater capacity for liquid than a skillet and a slightly wider cooking surface. Does well in the oven, too.

### TEST KITCHEN TIPS:

- Handles should be long, comfortable, and oven-safe, and they should stay cool on the stovetop—some phenolic (heat-resistant plastic) handles are oven-worthy only to about 350 degrees.
- A 3-quart pan, 10 to 11 inches in diameter, is best.

### And the Winner Is . . .

- ★ **ALL-CLAD** Stainless 3-Quart Covered Sauté Pan, \$195

## SAUCEPAN

**ALTERNATE NAME:** None



**What We Use It For:** Rice, sauces, vegetables, gravy, pastry cream, and poached fruit, to list just a few.

**Why We Like It:** Just the right size and shape for a thousand and one common kitchen tasks. A true workhorse: It's easy to maneuver and stays out of your way on a crowded cooktop.

### TEST KITCHEN TIPS:

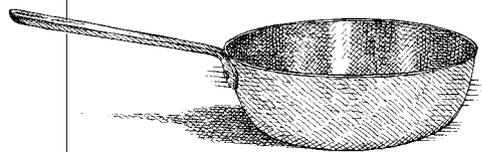
- A comfortable, stay-cool handle is a must, and the handle should also be long enough for two-handed carrying when the pan is full.
- Larger saucepans should be able to handle some sauté work, so good heat conduction is a must.
- Every kitchen should be equipped with a large saucepan with a capacity of 3 to 4 quarts.
- Consider a nonstick finish when choosing smaller saucepans, which are useful for cooking oatmeal and reheating leftovers.

### And the Winner Is . . .

- ★ **ALL-CLAD** 3-Quart Stainless Saucepan, \$150
- ★ **BEST BUY:** **SITRAM** Profiserie 3.3-Quart Sauce Pan, \$50

## SAUCIER

**ALTERNATE NAMES:** Chef's Pan, Reduction Saucepan



**What We Use It For:** Does anything a saucepan can do—and does a few things better. A good choice for sauces, risotto, pastry cream, or anything else that requires constant attention and frequent stirring.

**Why We Like It:** A saucier's wide mouth and rounded, flared sides easily accommodate whisks and spatulas and eliminate tight corners where food can stick and burn.

### TEST KITCHEN TIPS:

- We like the wider, shallower pans in this category for easy access and visibility. A saucier should be weighty enough to distribute heat evenly yet still be maneuverable. Its bottom should be wide enough to cover the burner and prevent excess heat from wafting up the sides.
- Also look for a stay-cool handle that's long enough to keep hands clear of heat during constant stirring.
- Avoid "disk-bottom" sauciers, which are prone to burning.

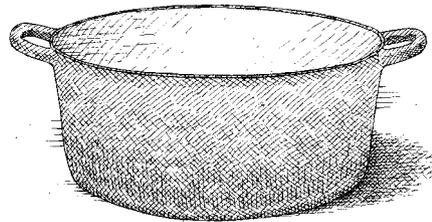
### And the Winner Is . . .

- ★ **ALL-CLAD** Stainless 3-Quart Saucier, \$145

## What about a Stockpot?

Just about the only thing we don't use our Dutch oven for is boiling water for pasta, corn on the cob, or the occasional lobster. Our favorite enameled cast-iron pot is a bit slow in bringing water to a boil and simply too heavy to carry over to the sink and drain. For these tasks, we employ an inexpensive stockpot, the sort you can find at your local hardware store for about \$30. When it comes to actually making stock, which often involves browning meat and sweating vegetables, we reach for the Dutch oven instead.

## DUTCH OVEN



**ALTERNATE NAMES:** French Oven, Casserole

**What We Use It For:** Our choice for soups and stocks, a Dutch oven is also ideal for frying, stewing, and braising.

**Why We Like It:** Built for both oven and stovetop use, a Dutch oven is generally wider and shallower than a conventional stockpot. This makes it accessible (that is, easy to reach and see into) and provides a wider surface area for browning (at least a 2:1 ratio of diameter to height is ideal). Its tremendous heft translates into plenty of heat retention, which is perfect for keeping frying oil hot or maintaining a very low simmer.

### TEST KITCHEN TIPS:

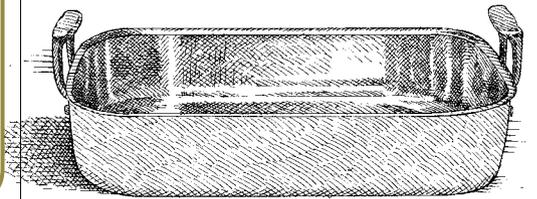
- Looping handles should be extremely sturdy and wide enough to grab with thick oven mitts.
- Lids should be tight fitting and heavy enough not to clatter when the pot contents are simmering below.
- We find the most useful sizes to be 6 to 8 quarts.

### And the Winner Is . . .

- ★ **LE CREUSET** 7¼-Quart Round French Oven, \$215

## ROASTING PAN

**ALTERNATE NAME:** Roaster



**What We Use It For:** As its name suggests, this pan is for roasting, especially poultry and other large cuts of meat. It can also be used to deglaze drippings for gravies and sauces on the stovetop.

**Why We Like It:** This pan's low sides and open design provide roasts with maximum exposure to the oven's hot air for even browning. (High-sided covered roasters cook faster and hotter but cause meat to steam and inhibit browning.) Deglazing is the key to great sauces and gravies, so if it's not flameproof, forget it.

### TEST KITCHEN TIPS:

- A roaster should be heavy enough to handle large birds and roasts without buckling but not so heavy as to be backbreaking.
- Look for handles that are sturdy, upright (not perpendicular to the sides), and large enough to accommodate thick oven mitts.
- A light-colored interior finish makes it easier to spot burning drippings.
- Oval-shaped models may not accommodate roasting racks.
- Measure your oven before shopping for a roasting pan; it should fit with about 2 inches of clearance on all sides. Most of the large roasters we tested were between 16 and 18 inches long and would hold a turkey weighing up to 25 pounds.

### And the Winner Is . . .

- ★ **CALPHALON** Contemporary Stainless Steel Roasting Pan, \$100

## METAL SHOP: The Big Four

**COPPER** conducts heat extremely well, but it is also expensive and heavy, tarnishes easily, and is reactive, leaching into many foods to produce off colors and flavors. For this reason, it is almost always lined with tin or stainless steel. **Not worth the expense.**

**ALUMINUM** is second to copper in conductivity among the metals used for cookware, but it is also light and inexpensive and retains heat well, provided it is of sufficient thickness. But aluminum is also reactive, and the soft metal dents and scratches easily. To compensate for these drawbacks, manufacturers have developed anodized aluminum cookware, in which the pans undergo electrolytic processing that makes the outer surface both harder and less reactive. The dark color of anodized aluminum can make it tricky to monitor the development of *fond* for pan sauces. **Unless anodized, best used in combination with other metals.**

**CAST IRON** heats up slowly but retains heat very well. Cast iron is inexpensive and lasts a lifetime (or several!), but it is very heavy, is mildly reactive, and must be seasoned before use. Enameled cast iron is nonreactive and need not be seasoned, but the exterior can chip and scratch. **Useful in limited applications.**

**STAINLESS STEEL** is a poor heat conductor. Inexpensive cookware made entirely of thin-gauge stainless steel is prone to hot spots and warping over high heat. Stainless steel is, however, nonreactive, durable, and attractive, making it an excellent choice for coating, or "cladding," aluminum or copper. **Great with other metals.**