Cooking in Cast Iron

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Selecting Your Cast Iron Cookware

If you have not been fortunate enough to inherit cast iron cookware seasoned by generations of love, you will have the daunting task of purchasing your soon to be favorite cookware on your own. The versatility of cast iron cookware is amazing and there are many options in today's marketplace. Here are some things to consider:

- **What do you want to make?** Do you want to make skillet meals, sandwiches, or soups? You can purchase cast iron cookware in many forms: skillets, deep skillets, Dutch ovens, camp pots, grill plates, griddle pans, woks, etc.
- **What is your heat source?** Cast iron cookware can be used on electric, gas, and glass top stoves, in the oven, on a grill, or over a campfire. Note: cast iron cookware should never be used in a microwave.
- **How many are you cooking for?** One or an entire family? Cast iron cookware comes in a range of sizes varying from as small as 3.5 inches to as large as 17 inches.
- **Do you prefer "bare" cast iron, pre-seasoned, or enameled cast iron?**
    - **Traditional "bare" cast iron** requires seasoning and some extra care up front, but is a lasting investment with easy care once the cookware is well-seasoned.
    - An increasing number of manufacturers now offer **"pre-seasoned" cast iron** which can be purchased and is ready to use after an initial cleaning in soapy water. While this cookware may be somewhat rough due to the commercial pre-seasoning process, this will diminish over time and it is not necessary to season "pre-seasoned" cookware.
    - **Enameled cast iron** has a vitreous (or porcelain) enamel glaze applied to the surface. The fusion of the glaze with the cast iron prevents rusting, eliminates the need to season the metal and allows more thorough cleaning. Modern glazes are safe without risk of lead leaching into food products.

In short: If you are just getting started, a traditional 10" to 12" skillet is ideal for a wide variety of uses and heat sources.

Seasoning Cast Iron:

"Seasoning" refers to the layer of lubricated residue on the surface of the skillet that flavors food while creating a non-stick surface. Every time you cook in your cast iron pans, you are making them better by seasoning them. The more you use the pans, the smoother the surface of the pans becomes.

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Some pans come pre-seasoned, and it should say this on the label if purchasing new. If purchasing a pan at a garage sale or thrift store, it's best to assume you'll need to season it yourself especially if the surface is rusty and bumpy.

There are many ways to season cast iron pans. The following method is recommended by Lodge Manufacturing: Rinse and dry completely. Apply a very thin, even coating of MELTED solid vegetable shortening (or cooking oil of your choice) to the cookware inside and out. Too much oil will result in a sticky finish. Place aluminum foil on the bottom rack of the oven (not directly on bottom) to catch any drips. Set oven temperature to 350 – 400 degrees F. Place cookware upside down on the top rack of the oven to prevent pooling. Bake the cookware for at least one hour. After the hour, turn the oven off and let the cookware cool in the oven.

If food sticks to the surface, or you notice a dull, gray color or if rust appears, you may need to repeat the steps for seasoning, above. If the cookware is rusty, wash it with hot, soapy water and a stiff brush. While you would not typically use soap, this is okay because you are preparing to re-season the cookware.

Care of Your Cast Iron Cookware

Wash cast iron by hand with a nylon bristle scrub brush. If needed, use a nylon pan scraper for stuck on bits. For extra sticky situations, simmer a little water for 1 minute, then use the scraper after cooled. Dry promptly and thoroughly with a lint-free cloth or paper towel. Rub with a very light layer of cooking oil, preferably while the cookware is still warm. Hang or store cookware in a dry place.

Occasionally, you may notice some dark residue on your paper towel or cloth when cleaning. This is perfectly safe -- it's just the seasoning (the baked-on cooking oil) reacting to foods that may be slightly acidic or alkaline. It will disappear with regular use and care.

Soap isn't necessary, but if you like, a little mild detergent is fine. Promise. Stay away from dishwashers and metal scouring pads, which can harm the seasoning.

Tips and Tricks

- All cooking oils and fats can be used for cast iron cooking, but based on availability, affordability, effectiveness and having a high smoke point, vegetable oil, melted shortening, or canola oil are generally recommended.
- Originally lard was used in cast iron cooking, particularly seasoning, and while that is still okay, it is not recommend it unless you frequently use your cookware. If the cookware is stored for too long, lard and other animal-based fats can go rancid.
- It is very important to maintain the seasoning of your cast iron and seasoned steel cookware by applying a very thin layer of oil after each cleaning. This will help keep you cooking for decades.
- If the seasoning on your pan is sticky, this is a sign of excess oil building up and not fully converting to seasoning. To remedy this, place the cookware in the oven, upside down on the top rack and bake at 400 degrees for 1 hour. Allow to cool and repeat if necessary.

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