

TOOLS

BY TODD DUPLÉCHAN

CAST IRON MANIFESTO

My love affair with cast iron didn't start in my mother's kitchen. Like most families in the '80s, we cooked with stainless steel or aluminum. We still had Grandma's old pan tucked away, but quite frankly, the thing scared me—it was heavy and black and greasy, always covered in dust and fuzz, and I couldn't get close to the thing without sticking to it.



Through the years, as I became more drawn to cooking, I still didn't think one way or another about cast iron pans. It wasn't until I moved to New York City to further my career as a professional cook that they revealed themselves to be quality cookware.

I remember walking into the kitchens in New York and wondering where the grill was. Where were the open burners with the stack of aluminum pans burning away, ready to turn out the food? How were we supposed to turn out 250 covers in one night with just those four black pans?

But there they sat atop the French-top stove, each no bigger than a home skillet. With these four pans burning constantly over a medium heat, cooking transformed from a sprint-to-the-finish-line-at-any-cost to a respectful communion of plant, animal and metal.

As you cook with cast iron you start to understand the importance of heat retention. Unlike aluminum, and even steel, iron heats evenly, and, since it's so dense, it will hold that heat when you put something into the pan. Maintaining this heat is the difference between searing a steak and steaming one. As for our discerning clientele, well, they didn't know how we did it, but they loved that we did. And for clean up, we just poured out the excess grease and wiped out the hot pan with an old side towel, perfectly seasoning the pans over and over again.

That was when I became a disciple of the dark side.

I was hooked on cast iron, and apparently so were many others in the center of the universe (New York City). Cast iron had been rehabilitated, to the point where I could spend my few off hours lusting over expensive Spring or Le Creuset pans at J.B. Prince, a Manhattan kitchen store for the professional cook/connoisseur. I knew I couldn't design my perfect kitchen without them.

When I met my future wife's grandparents, I discovered they'd been avid cast iron collectors, with more than a dozen perfectly cared-for pieces, throughout their 50-year marriage. They were happy to share their knowledge of the use and history of the pieces they owned.

I learned that between the 1860s and 1960s, the Griswold and Wagner companies produced some of the highest quality cookware in the United States—much of it so indestructible that there is quite a bit still around. The originals were polished to an almost mirror finish on the inside, which produced a nicely seasonable pan, more resistant to sticking than Teflon and with better, more

even heat retention than copper.

These pans evoke a different time, when equipment was valued for simplicity and usefulness. The cast iron skillet was the quintessential multitasker. It roasted, fried, baked, sautéed and, in a pinch, could be used in self-defense.

Sadly, Griswold closed its doors in the late '50s and Wagner passed through several ownerships. With stainless steel and metal alloys becoming cheaper and more accessible for production, both companies suffered from a new consumer interest in more modern, space-age and mainly lighter kitchen equipment. By the early '60s, production had dwindled to a near standstill, camping-quality iron and cheap replicas being the only new products on the market.

But these days, with a resurgence of interest in good food, great products and mindful cooking, cast iron pots are making a comeback. Wagner is starting to produce a line of pans for home cooks, some under the Griswold name, which they now own.

While people are still willing to pay upward of \$500 for a mint-condition collector's pan, I think the greater joy of these vessels is in their use. There's something wholly satisfying in cooking an entire meal out of one pan, crafted with a perfect season and shine in which you can see your reflection. Because my wife and I own just the few pieces her grandparents have given us over the years, I'm left to scour thrift stores for little gems. The pots are easily overlooked and usually caked in carbon and grease so badly that you can't read the logo. I carry a Swiss Army Knife to scrape away at the bottoms looking for the "holy cross" of the Griswold logo. I search for the rare #0 or #7 Griswold, lighter, more polished pans designed for a bit more finesse cookery, and I hope to complete my own collection of all odd numbered Griswolds one day.

So don't be tempted to forgo Grandma's old clunker for the latest composite, ionized, self-cleaning crapware.

Food is our connection to the past and in the American culinary tradition, cast iron is our heritage.