

## Cast in memory

*Be it ever so humble, there's nothing that cooks up Southern like an old black skillet*

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By Jim Auchmutey

It's as old-fashioned as an anvil, and almost as heavy. Properly used over the years, it becomes fire-blackened like an ironsmith's tool. And like those tools, it can, in the right hands, be used to create works of art.

Cast iron is to Southern cooking what an accent is to Southern talking. It's hard to imagine one without the other. Without cast-iron pots and skillets, there would be no properly pan-fried chicken, no crispy-crust corn bread, no slow-simmering gumbo or burbling Brunswick stew.

No wonder so many Southern marriages have started with a white dress and a black skillet. "The first gift a bride used to get was her granny's skillet," remembers food writer Eugene Walter, who grew up during the Depression in Mobile, Ala.

But as nonstick cookware conquered the market after World War II, cast iron lost its appeal for millions of homemakers. In the age of Teflon, something so heavy and primitive came to be seen as (shudder) inconvenient.

"About the only place you could find cast iron in the '70s was in a hardware store," says Hugh Rushing of the Cookware Manufacturers Association, a trade group in Birmingham. "It was usually in the back with the rat traps, covered in dust."

The good news is that cast iron has staged something of a comeback in sales and interest. The trend started in the mid-'80s with the popularity of Cajun blackened foods, and it hasn't let up.

The reason is simple, says Paul Prudhomme, the New Orleans chef, who wouldn't dream of blackening a redfish in anything but a black skillet.

"Things just taste better in cast iron. It's seems to pick up some of the flavor of what you cooked before, which is good for gumbos. When you cook with cast iron, you're cooking with memory."

Accompanying article inside section:

### Iron has left its mark on the South's cuisine and culture

South Pittsburg, Tenn. -- A few years ago, the nation's largest maker of cast-iron cookware, the Lodge Manufacturing Co., made a simple request of its neighbors. Lodge needed some vintage skillets to display at a trade show, so the head of the foundry, Bob Kellerman, went on local radio to announce that he was willing to swap four shiny new pans for a single well-aged black one.

Fair deal? People in this town west of Chattanooga didn't think so. Kellerman got no takers and had to sweet-talk an aunt into lending him the pieces. "No one wants to get rid of those babies," he says. "That's the problem with this business: There's no planned obsolescence."

### A link to our past

Like whiskey and tall tales, cast-iron cookware is one of those rare things that improve with age. Ever since Colonial times, when George Washington's mother

specified in her will what would happen to her "cast-iron kitchen furniture," those old black pots and pans have been passed from generation to generation like homely heirlooms. It's not unheard of for someone to be cooking with skillets that a forebear used a century ago.

"My mother gave them to me, and her mother gave them to her, and her mother gave them to her," says Andrea Bailey, an Atlanta lawyer who traces her skillets to her great-grandmother, a school dietitian in Birmingham. "I love that slight taste of bacon drippings I get from all those meals they cooked."

At first glance, it's hard to see why a modern cook would hold such affection for cast iron. It comes in one color, Model T black. It's far heavier than aluminum or stainless steel. And if you don't know how to use it, food can stick or taste metallic, broths can turn black and you can smoke up the kitchen.

Yet cooks - particularly in the South - swear by cast iron. They talk about its durability, its even heating, the flavor it imparts to dishes. But the deepest appeal may be the flavor of nostalgia: Cast iron is a cultural link, a reminder of a time when people put their backs into their kitchen craft, a tasty throwback to the days when old-time cooking was new.

### **Nostalgia boosting sales**

Remembrance of pans past - listen:

--- Paul Prudhomme, the celebrated Cajun chef, owns eight cast-iron pieces, but the one he pines for is the skillet his mother used to roast coffee beans on their Louisiana farm. "I'd be in the field working when the wind shifted. It was just wonderful."

--- Eugene Walter, the Alabama food writer, remembers moving back home after years in Europe and digging his grandparents' cast iron out of the attic. "It was like a family reunion."

--- Dori Sanders, the South Carolina novelist and peach farmer, recalls the night of Hurricane Hugo, when her elderly friend Miss Hattie cooked for her powerless neighbors on a wood stove with long-handled cast iron. "I've had my eye on her collection ever since. Every now and then, she'll say, 'Maybe I ought to give you one of these old pots,' but she never does. I'm afraid she's going to give them to someone else."

In an era of fancy kitchenware sporting designer colors, cast iron stands out like an Amish couple at a BMW dealership. But there was a time when its plain black simplicity was the norm.

In a sense, America grew up on cast iron. Well into the 1800s, most cooking was done at the hearth in iron pots, skillets and Dutch ovens that were hung over the fire or covered with coals. When Lewis and Clark returned from their continent-blazing expedition in 1806, the only manufactured items they managed to bring back were their rifles and kettles - iron cookware was that important.

This century, lighter utensils with nonstick surfaces have gradually relegated cast iron to the flea market in much of the country. The exceptions: the South (especially Louisiana, with its gumbos and pan-blackened dishes) and the Rocky Mountain states (where cast-iron Dutch ovens figure prominently in camp cooking).

Decades ago, almost every stoveworks in America made iron cookware. Today, only two U.S. companies still manufacture it: General Housewares of Sidney, Ohio, which makes the Wagner brand, and Lodge, of South Pittsburg, Tenn., which is celebrating its centennial this month.

It was 100 years ago that Joseph Lodge moved south from Pennsylvania and opened his foundry on the banks of the Tennessee River. The process has changed little since then. Workers still take iron (much of it now recycled), melt it at 2,800 degrees and pour it into sand molds. The rough pieces are then bombarded with BBs, smoothed by river stones and dipped in a protective wax. The biggest thing that's changed is the product line: Lodge now makes 140 items, including woks, broilers, hibachis and "sizzleware," as the company calls fajita pans.

"We have to keep expanding," Kellerman says, "because we're competing against grandma's skillet."

The strategy seems to be working. Sales of cast-iron cookware have risen in 10 years from \$ 20 million to \$ 34 million. While that represents only 5 percent of the U.S. cookware market (which aluminum and stainless steel dominate), it does indicate that a lot of cooks are trying to master the intricacies of iron.

### **'Things just taste better'**

That's where Billie Hill comes in. As Lodge's longtime consumer affairs director, the woman with the double-take name fields calls and answers letters from puzzled members of the Teflon generation. Their education starts with seasoning, the proper way to give a new piece a carbonized grease buildup that makes the surface smooth and nonstick. Don't use too much grease, she cautions; too much grease can turn a kitchen into a smelter.

One woman called and said, "Oh dear, my kitchen is full of smoke," and Hill said, "Well, open the windows and turn on the exhaust."

Cast iron's other drawback, of course, is weight. Kellerman likes to tell young homemakers that his pots and pans make great bust developers, but for cooks accustomed to lighter ware, lifting an 5-pound piece is no joke.

Like a Monica Seles backhand, a 10-inch skillet requires a two-handed grip. Some skillets require more than that. Son's Place, a soul food restaurant in Candler Park, has an ancient 30-incher that takes two people to operate. "We call it the Big One. Or sometimes we just call, 'Help!' " says proprietor Lenn Storey.

(Storey, you may recall, is the man who claimed to be the illegitimate son of the late, great chicken fryer Deacon Burton. Storey lost his legal claim to Burton's Grill last year and opened his own place. What happened to the tools of the Deacon's art, his skillets? Storey is silent. "I can't answer that question," he finally says. "Let's just say I've got the best cast iron in Atlanta.")

To experienced cooks, cast iron's virtues easily outweigh its disadvantages. It's cheap. Its slow, reliable heat is perfect for stews and gumbos. Correctly seasoned, its porous surface breathes a hint of flavor into dishes. Some studies even suggest it adds a healthy dose of iron to the diet.

"Things just taste better in cast iron," says Mary Louise Lever, the Rome cook-off queen who has won more than three dozen competitions. "I take my old skillet to these contests, and people with all this Teflon equipment laugh about it. But I like that skillet better than any of the expensive cookware I've won."

Lever loves her iron, but for pure devotion to heavy metal, it'd be hard to top Jack Jenney of Otto, N.C. The retired funeral director owns so many cast-iron pieces - 1,500 in all, 260 waffle irons alone - that he built an addition onto his house to showcase them.

Jenney's collection is the source of some amusement around Otto. A Wisconsin native, he doesn't care much for Southern corn bread ("it catches in my throat"). And he doesn't eat pan-fried chicken because of the cholesterol. It's just as well. With antique pieces like an 1865 skillet valued at \$3,000, Jenney has more than a culinary interest in iron.

As he puts it, "I can't afford to cook in this stuff."