

FROM THE COVER

CAST IRON | Durable pans are handed down in families

"I remember one guy came in and bought this 14-piece set, came back two weeks later with a warped pan and said, 'All right, show me the cast iron,'" says the 37-year-old Cooper.

Because cast iron is so durable, the pans are often handed down between generations. Catherine Jahns, a 92-year-old Chicago woman, got her pan from her Aunt Margaret more than 60 years ago.

"She could no longer use it on her new electric stove," Jahns says. "I will not part with it for love or money."

Carol Bernard, 74, of Chicago owns three of her grandmother's cast-iron pans — a 12-inch frying pan, 8-inch frying pan and a Dutch oven.

"These pans have to be at least 100 plus years old, probably more like 125 plus and still going strong," Bernard says.

Cast iron was originally forged in China in 6th century B.C., though it didn't really come into wide culinary use until the early 18th century in England.

Lodge, America's largest domestic manufacturer of cast-iron cookware, was established during the first term of President William McKinley when founder Joseph Lodge established the Blacklot foundry, named after his favorite Episcopal priest, in South Pittsburg, Tenn.

The company also manufactured stove pieces, pipes and, during the Depression, cast-iron gnomes, dogs and doorstops. Today, Lodge's great-grandchildren still run the business.

Mark Kelly, Lodge's market promotions manager, says cast-iron pans are the most popular they have been in the last 40 years.

He credits the recent innovation of pre-seasoned skillets and Food Network celebrities such as Paula Deen and Bobby Flay for raising awareness of the product, but adds that the pans are popular because they're like "the utility infielder of the kitchen, one from which you get Hall of Fame play every day."

To illustrate how prized cast iron is in the South, Kelly tells the story of a burglar who broke into his friend's New Orleans house and didn't touch the wide-screen televisions and high-end electronics, but instead took six seasoned cast-iron Dutch ovens.

Apart from superior cooking, one of the beautiful things about cast iron is its low maintenance. Cast-iron pans don't even really need to be washed.

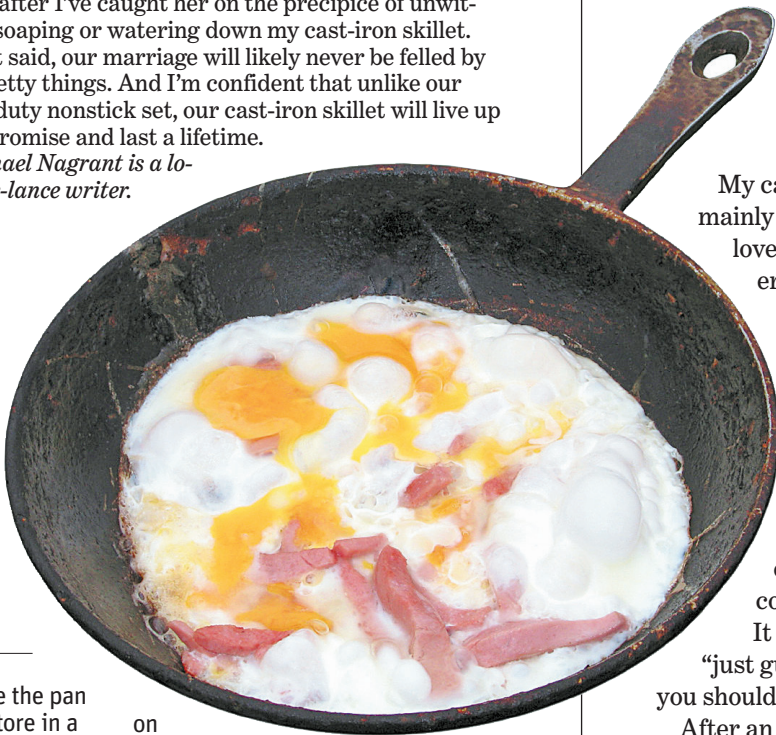
Because the non-stickiness of the pan and the flavor of cooked items is often dependent on years of accumulated cooking, many people try to keep soap away from the pan surface. Cleaning usually involves salt, a scrub brush and a dash of water for really tough stains.

"I've worked at French restaurants where everything goes through the dishwasher except the cast iron," Mado's Levitt says. "The cooks always lovingly hand-scrub those."

My wife and I have had more than a few disagreements after I've caught her on the precipice of unwittingly soaping or watering down my cast-iron skillet.

That said, our marriage will likely never be felled by such petty things. And I'm confident that unlike our heavy duty nonstick set, our cast-iron skillet will live up to its promise and last a lifetime.

Michael Nagrant is a local free-lance writer.



LETTERS | 'It was handled by a minimum of four generations ...'

The cast-iron pan came to Illinois when our mother and father left Louisiana. We grew up with delicious fried chicken, cornbread, sauteed ingredients for gumbo. The pan did it all. We always hurried home hoping the pan was working its miracles.

In July, I'll be married 59 years and still keep the pan working its miracles.

Marion L. Frazier, Calumet City

In 1979 I moved to Chicago, had my first real job out of college and was setting up my first real apartment on my own. I had nothing for the kitchen. So I went to the Woolworth's on North Broadway, in what was then known as New Town, to buy some kitchen and dining needs.

On display were brand-new cast-iron skillets.

Some were priced at \$4.99 and some had no price at all, but one was priced at \$2.99. So that is the one I selected and purchased. I have had it ever since.

Terry J. Baublis, Chicago

My cast-iron Dutch oven is at least 100 years old. ... I mainly cook my mixed greens and my various beans in it. I love it because it was handled by a minimum of four generations and it is a part of my history.

Shirley E. Griffin, Chicago

My 13-inch, deep-walled, cast-iron skillet was bought at a garage sale about 33 years ago in Blue Island. I was just out of the Marine Corps, going to night school, newly married, and we had no money. So we used to go camping just to be able to go away somewhere. The \$3 skillet looked like a good, durable cooking item that could be a very versatile cooking tool.

It later morphed into a pan I would take along for the "just guys" fishing trips, and I learned the hard way what you should not cook in it ... like eggs, for instance.

After an attempt at a large egg casserole, the pan spent a night in the wavy surf of Lake Michigan, Mich., as a start to the next morning's scouring. But lo and behold, I reeled it in just before dawn, and not a speck was left on the pan. It was washed up and put back in duty.

It was just after that that I learned about seasoning the pan. Rust is not a good thing for cast iron. I figured out the oiling process around 1980 or so.

From that point forward, no water — or very little — would ever touch that pan again. And since I loved to fish and had a family that loved to eat fish, especially fresh perch, the skillet reinvented itself as the Perch Pan.

Incredible what butter, butter, garlic, olive oil, salt, butter and corn flakes — did I mention butter? — can produce in a cast-iron skillet.

Jack Althoff, Geneva

CARING FOR CAST IRON

Seasoning a new pan or restoring an old one

If you're buying your first cast-iron pan from a housewares store, you're in luck. Most come pre-seasoned so you don't have to do any hard work.

Still, the pre-coating performs better with an extra coat of fat.

So for new pans or pans that have lost their seasoning:

Pre-heat oven to 375 degrees. Melt vegetable shortening (or pork lard, if you happen to have some on hand) and wipe a thin layer of the melted fat over the inside and outside of the pan.

Place the oiled pan in the oven. Place a sheet tray or foil on the bottom rack

to catch any drippings. Bake the pan for an hour, let it cool and store in a dry place.

For secondhand pans:

Run steel wool or an abrasive cleaning pad across the surface of the pan until the rust disappears. Wash it with hot, soapy water (the only time you should let soap near this pan) and then follow the instructions above to season.

Cleaning a pan

Some folks (read: me) try to keep water away from their pans at all costs, and often wipe them down with just a dish towel or a paper towel after cooking.

If there is particularly tough buildup

on the pan, sprinkle it with salt and use a stiff plastic-bristled brush to scrub clean.

If you're not as obsessive as me, there's no reason you can't swirl a little hot water in your pan before scrubbing (with or without salt). But avoid using soap or abrasive cleaners, as this will remove the seasoning.

Do not soak in water, let water sit inside the pan or run it in the dishwasher. Rust will develop.

And never air dry before storing your pan. Always towel dry.

Michael Nagrant

Making hapless cooks happy

WEB WATCH | New site aims to fix kitchen flops

BY JANET RAUSA FULLER

Food Editor/jfuller@suntimes.com

Jill from Colombia, Mo., was stumped. Her pasta recipe called for leeks. Not having a clue what leeks were, she threw in broccoli instead.

Yikes.

That's where chef Billy Parisi came in.

After some good-natured ribbing ("Jill, only God knows why you substituted broccoli for leeks in this dish"), Parisi showed her what a leek was and how to slice and clean it. And in a matter of minutes, he walked her through the recipe — all streamed from his Humboldt Park kitchen to the Internet.

Parisi, 27, is the face and culinary talent behind the three-month-old Web site, *www.FixMyRecipe.com*, which, as the name implies, helps hapless cooks with recipes that are failing them.

Think of it as a virtual Dear Abby for the kitchen challenged.

Or, as business partner Thatcher Kamin says, "It's Mr. Food meets 2009."

Or, as one of their buddies says, "It's 'Pimp My Ride' meets Emeril Lagasse."

Whatever the comparison, it appears the Web site, which is updated daily, is in a category all its own.

The Internet is littered with cooking and recipe Web sites, but most deal with someone else's recipes, not your own. Web-based services such as Chef'sLine.com, which employs professional chefs, talk you through a recipe live — for a fee.

FixMyRecipe.com, which launched in November, is free. Viewers submit their problem recipes by e-mail.

Parisi, a Detroit native and graduate of the Scottsdale Culinary Institute, reviews each recipe to see where it, or the cook, might be going wrong.

Within a week, he and Kamin take to Parisi's kitchen to tape a two-minute video "fix" and post it on the site.

"This sounds like one of those unique ideas like Threadless Tees [the Chicago T-shirt company]," says Chris Haack, senior market analyst at market research firm Mintel. "It's creating a sense of community."

And it's hitting at a time when people say they are cooking more at home.



Chef Billy Parisi (left) and Thatcher Kamin produce the Web site *FixMyRecipe.com* out of Parisi's Humboldt Park kitchen. The site, which launched in November, helps home cooks with problematic recipes. "It's Mr. Food meets 2009," Kamin says. | KEITH HALE-SUN-TIMES

GET YOUR FIX

Go to *www.FixMyRecipe.com* to watch a recipe video or to submit a recipe.

The site has its own Facebook and MySpace pages, with more than 200 friends on each. You also can find some of its recipe videos on YouTube.

Parisi and Kamin, 26, a LaGrange native with a degree in broadcast journalism, have filmed about 80 fixes since the Web site launched.

Recipe problems usually fall into one of three categories — baking, flavor enhancement and recreating a recipe. Parisi says he often can tell what the

problem is just by looking at the recipe.

He has helped a woman who wanted to lighten up a flourless chocolate cake recipe by omitting the butter altogether and another who was trying to revive a 100-year-old family recipe for stuffing made with potatoes.

It's a bare-bones operation. Parisi shops for groceries in the morning ("They know me really well at Dominick's," he says). After lunchtime, Kamin dons a headset and sets up the camera in Parisi's box of a kitchen.

During a recent shoot, Parisi wore socks and flip-flops with his jeans. Kamin, also in jeans, opted just for socks.

"Dude, that is going to be awesome,"

Parisi said off camera as he finished layering a lasagna (the recipe was from a college friend whose version of lasagna typically includes "a can of Ragu and ground beef").

Still on the agenda after an hour of cooking and filming: bruschetta and buttermilk biscuits.

Leftovers often are distributed to Parisi's neighbors in the building — all guys.

The site isn't exactly a moneymaker yet. Kamin says the plan is to provide media companies with a widget for their own Web sites, for a fee.

"It's sustainable content," Kamin says. "You're never going to run out of recipes to be fixed."