

# IRON CHIEF

Cast-iron cookware is safe, adds iron to food, and is a joy to use.

BY MARY GUNDERSON

**L**ong associated with cowboy campfires and rustic cooking, cast-iron cookware is on the comeback trail. Cast iron lost its kitchen supremacy in the 1960s and '70s, when pan choices expanded to include plastic-coated nonstick surfaces like Teflon, as well as lighter, more stylish designs made of alloyed stainless steel and aluminum.

These days, however, cast iron is getting a second look. The sturdy pans boost dietary iron and cook most foods

beautifully. Also, they're free of the health concerns associated with coated cookware. Heated beyond 450 degrees F, certain nonstick pans made with Teflon release fumes that are toxic to birds. And, one of the chemicals used in nonstick cookware — PFOA (perfluorooctanoic acid) — is linked in some studies to cardiovascular disease and certain cancers.

Stainless-steel cookware is a potentially less-hazardous option, but it's quite a bit more expensive than cast iron. For all these reasons, many folks are willing to finally learn how to properly season a cast-iron pan. (Spoiler alert: it's easy.)

# Seasoning and Cleaning

Cast-iron cookware intimidates most people for one reason: seasoning. While other cookware doesn't need the extra few minutes of attention the process requires, the payoff is a naturally nonstick cooking surface that will last beyond your lifetime.

Plan to season your cast-iron pan before you use it, even if it's new and pretreated. If you find a cast-iron pan at the thrift store that is pretty rusted or scratched up, it might take a couple of seasoning cycles to bring it back into shape. After you cook in the pan, be sure to follow these cleaning steps to ensure that the well-seasoned layer builds up over time. And as a result, old or new, your cast-iron cookware should be good to go.



## Seasoning a New or Used Cast-Iron

**Pan:** Add a tablespoon of flaxseed oil, vegetable oil, or lard to a clean, dry skillet or Dutch oven. Heat in a 300 degree F oven for about 20 minutes. Wipe the surface with a paper towel. Repeat two or three more times. Turn off the oven and leave the pan inside it to cool. The more you use your cast-iron cookware, the more seasoned it gets. If the seasoning becomes worn or food starts to stick to the pan, simply repeat the process.

**Cleaning:** After cooking, add water to cover the bottom of the pan and bring to a boil, stirring with a wooden spoon to remove particles. Drain the water. If you have stubborn patches sticking to the

cast iron, rub with a nonscratch brush or a wet cloth and coarse salt. (Metal, including steel wool, can scrape away the seasoning layer.) Wipe the skillet with a paper towel and coat with a very thin layer of vegetable oil, flaxseed oil, or lard. Heat for five minutes over low heat. Wipe the surface with a paper towel

and cool before storing. Never use dishwashing detergent, which is designed to cut grease and will degrade the seasoning.



## Cast-Iron Throwdown

**Embraced by nutritionists and foodies alike, cast-iron pots and pans come out ahead of other cookware contenders on a range of issues.**

### Holds Heat Well:

Cast iron takes a few minutes longer to heat than most other pans, but once it heats up, it holds that heat very well. The material's relative superiority to stainless steel, copper, and aluminum pans is due to its weight and thickness. When a piece of refrigerated meat is added to hot cast iron, for example, it starts cooking immediately, because cast iron, unlike other materials, doesn't react to the food's cooler temperature. Cast iron also manages high heat particularly well, making it especially effective for sautéing and browning meats, poultry, or fish.

Pop a lid on a cast-iron pot that's sitting on the range top or in the oven, and it transforms into a slow cooker. It's

this sort of thermal efficiency that makes for outstanding baked golden-brown cornbread, puffy pancakes, pineapple upside-down cake, or the apple-almond tart we feature on page 50.

### Goes Almost Anywhere:

Like any metal cookware, cast iron can't be used in a microwave. But it functions beautifully on the range top, in the oven, on the grill, directly on hot coals, or dangling over an open fire. (Also, when cooking with electric heat that cycles on and off, cast iron maintains a steadier temperature than other pans.) Best of all? It can be taken straight to the table as a serving vessel. Remember, no matter where you cook, don't forget an oven mitt. The

cast-iron handle will be almost as hot as the pan itself.

### Adds Iron to Your Diet:

Cooking with cast iron will naturally boost your iron intake, a plus for almost everyone, but especially vegetarians, vegans, and those at risk for anemia.

Brand-new pans add the most dietary iron. What's more, cooking with acidic ingredients, such as tomatoes, lemon juice, and vinegar, draws out more iron from the pans. (In high-acidic recipes, such as spaghetti sauce and tomato-based chili, the final dish might have an iron flavor and be discolored. It's safe to eat, but if you don't like the color or the taste, simply use a stainless-steel pan.)

Dishes that have a higher

percentage of moisture — for example, braised or boiled foods versus baked goods — also absorb more dietary iron, as do dishes with a longer cook time. (For more information about iron in your diet, see "When Nutrients Go Missing" at [ELmag.com/missingnutrients](http://ELmag.com/missingnutrients).)

### Is Durable, "Green," and Renewable:

Cast iron will never flake, bend, or break. It simply doesn't wear out. Because cast-iron pans are ageless, never hesitate to use an old one. In fact, the more it's used, the better it gets. The secret is in the seasoning. Even rusty or scratched cast iron can be rejuvenated with the seasoning process.







# Classic Recipes



## Sweet-Potato Latkes

Makes four servings

*Traditionally made with potatoes, these little fritters are wonderful paired with applesauce and sour cream.*

- 2 cups grated sweet potato (one large sweet potato)
- ¼ cup minced yellow onion
- ¼ cup quinoa flakes
- 2 eggs, beaten
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
- 1 tsp. chopped fresh herbs, such as marjoram, sage, or rosemary
- ¼ cup coconut oil or extra-virgin olive oil

Mix the sweet potato, onion, quinoa flakes, and eggs together in a medium mixing bowl. Season with salt, pepper, and herbs. Shape the sweet potato mixture into 12 small pancakes. Heat the oil in a preheated cast-iron skillet until hot. Fry latkes for about two to three minutes on each side, until golden brown. Drain on a paper towel and serve hot.



## Whole-Roasted Chicken With Ginger-Tamari Glaze

Makes four to six servings

*Cast-iron pans are great for roasting vegetables and meats because they hold heat so well. Feel free to substitute your favorite veggies halfway through the roasting time for a delicious (and easy) one-pot meal.*

- 1 roasting chicken, about 4 to 5 pounds
- ½ cup tamari
- 1 tbs. minced gingerroot
- 1 tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
- 3 cloves garlic, smashed
- 4 cups whole Brussels sprouts, trimmed

Preheat the oven to 500 degrees F and put a large cast-iron pan on the middle rack of the oven. Allow pan to heat in the oven for 30 minutes while you prepare the chicken and vegetables. Cut through the skin of the chicken between the thigh and the body so that the thighs splay out. Mix the tamari and ginger together and rub the chicken inside and out with the mixture. In the hot cast-iron pan, drizzle the olive oil, add the garlic cloves, and place the chicken in the pan, breast side up. Press the chicken thighs into the pan so they sear. Return the pan to the oven and roast the chicken for 20 to 25 minutes. Add the Brussels sprouts and roast for another 15 minutes, until the chicken is cooked through and the Brussels sprouts are tender.



## Corn Spoon Bread

Makes six to eight servings

*A great side for Thanksgiving or any fall meal. To zing it up, replace the cheddar with pepper-jack cheese.*

- ¼ cup butter
- 4 cups frozen corn kernels
- 1 cup diced red bell peppers
- ¼ cup diced jalapeño peppers (optional)
- 1 cup whole milk or coconut milk
- 4 eggs
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
- ½ cup grated sharp cheddar cheese

Preheat oven to 400 degrees F. Add butter to a 9-inch cast-iron skillet and place in oven to melt butter. Stir in 2 cups corn kernels, the bell peppers, and the jalapeño peppers if using. Roast for 10 minutes while you prepare

the batter. Blend the remaining 2 cups corn kernels with the milk and eggs until frothy, and season with salt and pepper. Pour into the hot skillet and stir in the cheese. Bake for 20 to 25 minutes until browned and puffed and cooked through. Serve warm.



## Frittata Provençal With Caramelized Onions and Mushrooms

Makes four servings

*Frittatas are a perfect dish to make and serve in a cast-iron pan. Leftover frittata is also delicious enjoyed cold.*

- 1 tbs. butter
- 1 tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 large onion, thinly sliced
- Pinch of salt
- 2 cups mushrooms, washed and sliced
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
- 1 tbs. chopped fresh herbs, such as basil, parsley, or sage
- 8 eggs, beaten
- 4 ounces goat cheese, crumbled

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F. Over medium-low heat, melt butter and olive oil in a 9-inch cast-iron skillet. Add the onions and salt, and cook slowly until the onions are golden brown and soft, about 20 minutes. Add the mushrooms and cook until tender. Season with salt, pepper, and herbs. Add the eggs, and gently stir to evenly distribute the onions and mushrooms. Remove from heat, top with the crumbled goat cheese, and bake in the oven until the eggs are set, about 10 to 15 minutes. When the frittata is fully cooked, allow to cool for five minutes and then cut into wedges and serve.



### WEB EXTRA!

For another cast-iron recipe featuring sausage, lentils, and greens, go to [ELmag.com/castiron](http://ELmag.com/castiron).



## Apple Tarte Tatin With Almond-Flour Crust

Makes four servings

*A classic French dessert made by caramelizing apples in a cast-iron pan and then topping with a pastry crust. Our gluten-free crust is extra rich and nutty because it's made from almond flour.*

- 2 cups almond flour
- ½ tsp. sea salt
- 2 tbs. coconut oil
- 1 tsp. almond extract
- 1 egg
- ¼ cup maple syrup
- 6 to 8 baking apples, such as  
Granny Smith or Haralson, peeled,  
cored, and cut into slices

Preheat oven to 400 degrees F. Mix the almond flour, salt, coconut oil, almond extract, and egg together in a food processor until a smooth dough forms. Shape into a flat circular disc on a piece of wax paper and chill while you prepare the apples. Heat the maple syrup in a 9-inch cast-iron skillet and arrange the apple slices to cover the skillet



bottom. Cook over medium-low heat until the bottoms of the apples are caramelized and brown. Remove from heat. Roll out the almond pastry dough to make a 12-inch circle, place the pastry on top of the apples, and tuck it down the sides of the pan. Place the pan in the oven and bake for 12 to 18 minutes until pastry is golden brown. Remove from oven and place a plate on top of the pastry. Carefully flip the pan over onto the plate to invert the apple tart. Allow the tart to cool on the plate for at least 20 minutes, cut into wedges, and serve with a scoop of ice cream or a drizzle of yogurt if desired.

## SHOPPING HOW-TO:

The most prized cast-iron pans are vintage ones manufactured by either Griswold or Wagner. They are lighter in weight than new pans (and often more expensive). If you score one from eBay or a thrift store, reseason and use often.

The Lodge Manufacturing Company, the only active cast-iron cookware foundry based in the United States, markets new, preseasoned cookware. (Lodge's entire line of cookware, except the enameled cast-iron pans, is made in the United States.) Another U.S. company, Camp Chef, sells preseasoned cookware manufactured mainly in China. Whichever preseasoned pan you choose, it's important to note that these pans need the same care, initial seasoning, and reseasoning as older pans.

Enameled cast-iron cookware (think Le Creuset) is another time-tested option. Although these pans also hold heat well and move seamlessly between the range top and the oven, enameled cast iron is often heavier than uncoated cast iron, can get scratched (if you use metal utensils), tends to discolor, and is more expensive. It also is not recommended for grilling or campfire-style cooking. It's true that enameled cast iron never needs to be seasoned or reseasoned, but the sealed surface prevents the food from picking up dietary iron and is less nonstick than plain cast iron. 🍴

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All of these recipes were created by **Betsy Nelson** (a.k.a. "That Food Girl"), a Minneapolis-based food stylist and recipe developer.

**NOTE:** Readers sometimes ask us why we don't publish calorie, carb, and fat counts with our recipes. We believe that if you're eating primarily whole, healthy foods (an array of sustainably raised vegetables, fruits, nuts, seeds, legumes, meats, fish, eggs, whole-kernel grains, and healthy fats and oils), you really don't need to stress about the numbers (which are often inaccurate or misleading anyway). We prefer to focus more on food quality and trust our bodies to tell us what we need. — Eds.