

Homes & Real estate

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Ways to make pots, pans last longer

Follow these guidelines for choosing and maintaining sustainable cookware and bakeware.



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With all the reality-cooking shows on TV, maybe the next one should be a competition to choose safe, durable cookware. To make sure it has the required drama and suffering for a reality show, the producers could arrange for an eco-friendly, cast-iron skillet to fall on a contestant's head.

Ouch! But going “green” with your pots and pans doesn't need to be painful. Just follow these guidelines for choosing and maintaining sustainable cookware and bakeware that can last a lifetime.

Don't get burned

The most common cookware-related worry among consumers is that nonstick cookware emits toxic fumes. Just last month, a California-based environmental blogger recommended that readers immediately toss out all their nonstick cookware.

That's not necessary. Nonstick cookware should be safe in normal use, according to Consumer Reports magazine and various regulatory agencies.

Cooks still need to be careful, however. The chemical PTFE (polytetrafluoroethylene) in Teflon and many other nonstick cookware coatings may create hazardous fumes if a pan gets extremely overheated, say to 500 degrees or more. Never leave a pan unattended or empty on a hot burner.

Go for a guarantee

Although nonstick cookware that does not contain PTFE may sound tempting, consumers usually have no assurance that alternative nonstick coatings are any safer. Several environmentalists and researchers have expressed concerns about “nanoparticle” cookware coatings.

On the plus side, a potential health benefit of nonstick cookware is that you can use less oil and butter when cooking.

But a significant environmental problem with nonstick PTFE pots and pans is that many last only two or three years. Choose pots and pans, especially nonstick cookware, with a lifetime or 25-year warranty. Check online reviews as well.

Mix it up

Even if it seems like a great deal, resist buying a large set of cookware with items you'll never use. A 10-piece set will serve the needs of most households, since lids are considered pieces and that usually means six pots and pans and four lids.

However, rather than using a set of a single type of cookware, many serious cooks use a mix of cast iron, stainless steel, copper and aluminum pots and pans.

Look for cast-iron skillets, one of the greenest choices, at thrift stores or antique shops. Never buy nonstick cookware used, since the coating may not last. When you're done with a nonstick pan, put it in the garbage.

Take good care (rhymes with cookware)

Extend the life of your cookware by treating it right. Different types of pans have specific care requirements, so read and follow manufacturers' care advice.

As a general rule, don't put cookware through the dishwasher. It will last longer if you scrub it out by hand with soap and hot water.

New cast-iron pans are usually "pre-seasoned." That means they have been oiled to make them nonstick. But you'll still need to re-season them yourself occasionally, which involves oiling and baking them.

Bake with caution, or duck

Do you know anyone whose glass bakeware has exploded during or just after baking? Many folks have experienced this, including Seattle-area residents. According to Consumer Reports, Pyrex and Anchor Hocking bakeware products are made from soda-lime glass and are more likely to shatter than European-made bakeware, which is usually made of a more expensive glass called borosilicate.

Even though this problem has received national publicity for several years, the ConsumerAffairs consumer-news website continues to receive complaints, including more than 20 about exploding Pyrex in the past three months.

Anchor Hocking and World Kitchen, the maker of Pyrex, generally blame the users, but they do offer practical advice for keeping your bakeware in one piece, such as this on the Pyrex website: "Always place hot glass bakeware on a dry, cloth potholder or towel," and "Never place hot glass bakeware on top of the stove, on a metal trivet, on a damp towel, directly on a counter or in a sink."

If you aren't comfortable using soda-lime bakeware, search online for "borosilicate bakeware" to find sources for those products.

Whether you aspire to be on "Top Chef" or just dabble in the kitchen on weekends, you'll get more out of cooking and baking when you have the right tools for the job.

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