

EATING & DRINKING

So Hot
Right Now

Once relegated to restaurants, carbon steel is coming home

By GABRIELLA GERSHENSON

IN RECENT YEARS, the skillet de rigueur has been cast iron. This material goes from stove top to oven, distributes heat well and develops a natural non-stick surface. Meanwhile, another metal with these qualities has remained largely off the radar of home cooks.

Carbon steel has long been the workhorse of professional kitchens. Like cast iron, this metal is composed of carbon and iron, but in differing proportions. Cast iron's higher carbon content makes it more brittle and prone to breakage; carbon steel is nearly indestructible, hence its suitability for knocking around restaurant stoves. The weight difference is considerable, too: A 12-inch Lodge cast-iron pan is close to 8 pounds, while a 12.5-inch Mauviel carbon-steel pan weighs 5.

At last, it seems, consumers are catching on. Direct-to-consumer cookware retailer Made In introduced its first French-made carbon-steel skillet a year ago, then a larger skillet, a wok and, this fall, a roasting pan. According to co-founder Jake Kalick, the first shipment of Made In's new pan sold out in the U.S. before it made it off the boat.

Chef Elizabeth Karmel, author of "Steak and Cake," now prefers carbon steel over cast iron to get a steakhouse-quality char. "The surface is smoother, slicker and gives an end-to-end crust perfectly in a shorter amount of time," she said. Pastry chef François Brunet, former head baker for Daniel Boulud, favors carbon steel for a tarte tatin, the French upside-down apple tart. "It's especially good for caramelization," he said.

Seasoning, a process of burning fat onto the surface of a pan to make it naturally non-stick, tends to be time-consuming with cast iron. A carbon steel pan is much quicker to develop a patina so slick a fried egg will slide around on it like an air-hockey puck.

Chinese cookery expert Grace Young recommends a method traditionally used to season carbon-steel woks. First, remove the factory coating, usually oil or wax, according to the manufacturer's instructions. Ms. Young scrubs a new wok inside and out, many times over, with a stainless-steel scouring pad and dish soap, and rinses with hot water. Dry on the stove over low heat until all water disappears. When a drop of water drizzled onto the pan vaporizes in one or two seconds, add two tablespoons of an oil with a high smoke point, such as grapeseed, a half bunch of Chinese chives or a half cup of sliced ginger, and a bunch of scallions cut into 2-inch pieces, and reduce the heat to medium. Cook for 15-20 minutes, occasionally smearing the vegetables around the entire inner surface of the pan, right up to the edge, adding a tablespoon of oil if the mixture gets dry.

"The heat opens up the pores of the metal so the oil can coat it as it burns into the pan, and Chinese chives and scallions contain sulphide, which has anti-fungal and antiseptic properties," said Ms. Young. The metal might look spotty; this is normal. With use, the pan will turn mostly black.

According to Corry Blanc, founder of Blanc Creatives, a Virginia-based manufacturer of carbon steel pans, the best cleaning method is to pour out oil after cooking, wash with hot water, wipe the pan dry and place it on a burner to evaporate remaining moisture. Before storing, put a few drops of oil on a paper towel and apply a light coating to guard against rust—a low-maintenance proposition for such a high-performance pan.

Skillet Tarte Tatin

Sticky apples slip off the surface of well-seasoned carbon steel, making it easier to invert this apple upside-down tart.

Total Time 1¼ hours **Serves** 8-10

1 sheet all-butter puff pastry
7 medium Royal Gala or Honey Crisp apples, peeled, cored and quartered
6 tablespoons butter, salted or unsalted
1 cup sugar

1. Heat oven to 375 degrees. Roll out puff pastry, and use a sharp knife to cut out a round slightly larger than 9 inches. Refrigerate.

2. In a 9-inch oven-safe skillet over medium heat, melt butter. Turn off burner, and sprinkle on sugar in an even layer. Arrange apples snugly, cut-side down, in concentric circles.

3. Cook apples, undisturbed, over medium heat. Juices, butter and sugar should bubble as you cook. Adjust heat as needed. When caramel starts to turn golden, after 25-30 minutes, use two forks to flip apples and submerge reverse side in caramel. Cook until apples are soft enough to easily pierce with a knife and caramel is deep golden, 5-7 minutes more.

4. Let apples cool slightly, then place chilled pastry round on top, tucking in dough at edges. Transfer pan to oven and bake until pastry is golden, 25-30 minutes. Let cool 10 minutes.

5. Run a knife around edge of pan to loosen tart. Place a platter or parchment-lined baking sheet over pan, and invert. If some apples do stick to pan, gently pry them off and position onto the tart. Serve warm or at room temperature, with vanilla ice cream or crème fraîche.



PRO-GRADE PERFORMANCE

Cookbook author and carbon-steel aficionado Andrea Nguyen likes a pan made from a thicker gauge of steel, which will better conduct heat. That's what sold her on the 11-inch Mauviel 651.28 M'Steel. The commercial-grade pan is versa-

tile—the size is suitable for everything from pancakes to seared fish. The wax coating is easy to remove, and the manufacturer's seasoning instructions are extremely effective. In our tests, fried eggs were slipping around the surface of the pan in no time. \$80, perigold.com



ENDURING DESIGN

Handcrafted by blacksmiths in Charlottesville, Va., Blanc Creatives' creations are works of functional art, with thoughtful touches. Take this 11-inch skillet. Its

handle, attached with two rivets, features a "y split"—a gap between handle and pan that effectively disperses heat and keeps the handle cool during stovetop cooking. \$240, blanccreatives.com



YOUR EVERYDAY GO-TO

The blue carbon-steel skillets produced in France for Made In are the workhorses they promise to be. They're sturdy, reasonably light and easy to season. Convex, high-walled sides make them suitable for sautéing unwieldy

ingredients—or baking the tarte tatin pictured here (recipe at left). If you're cooking for one to three, get the 10-inch. The 12-inch is suitable for bigger batches, like French toast or latkes for a crowd. \$69 for a 10-inch skillet, \$89 for a 12-inch skillet, madeincookware.com

Powerhouse Pans

A good carbon-steel pan is exceptionally versatile. When buying one, be sure to investigate maximum temperature capacity. For instance, the Mauviel (below left) can tolerate 900 degrees, while another brand sets its limit at 400—precluding the possibility of roasting and other high-heat methods. Concerned about chemicals in non-stick coatings? The patina that develops on carbon steel is natural—just fat plus heat, which combine to create a singularly slick surface.

IDEAL FOR A ONE-PAN MEAL

This medium-size rectangular roaster from Made In is ideal for nestling a chicken on a bed of root vegetables and calling it dinner. Thanks to the heat-holding power of carbon steel, the vegetables brown beauti-

fully while the chicken roasts. Celebrity chef Tom Colicchio, a Made In investor, favors this model because it lets him start cooking on the stove top before transferring the roast to the oven. "Everything is done in one pan," he said. \$99, madeincookware.com

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