



DEMO NOTES

CAST IRON

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Questions? Comments? Contact Julie Cross, at (530)758-2667 or jcross@davisfood.coop

This article first appeared in the January 1998 Co-op News and we ran it again in April 2000. Since I consistently get 2 or 3 requests each month for copies of it, it seemed appropriate to make a handout on the subject. I've added a couple of things my Dad wanted to tell you.

I went up to visit my family in early December, which means that at 11:30 on a Friday night I was discussing cast iron skillets (well, gloating over them, really) in preparation for a midnight feast of hamburgers and french fries.

For the uninitiated, let me explain that a cast iron skillet is the best possible form of cookware. While it does require some care (and the occasional fight with new roommates or partners over that care) for a relatively small investment in cash and time you can get a cooking utensil that will work perfectly for the rest of your life and beyond. It will also heat evenly on almost any type of heat, including a campfire, and develop a virtually non-stick surface that is entirely scratch resistant.

If you're putting on your coat to run out and buy one before another day passes, hold on for just a minute more. The truth of the matter is that you can't buy a cast iron skillet that works the way I've just described. Such things are created with patient work, or inherited, or, just possibly, swiped during a breakup. What you're going out to buy is the raw material, which comes in two forms. At the hardware store, you can get a set of three skillets (the big one is for main dishes; the medium one is for sautéing onions; the small one is a complete mystery) for a reasonable price -- just about what you'd pay for one thin, nasty, stainless steel pan. At the thrift

store, you'll eventually find those same skillets, slightly abused, for a much lower price. Having obtained them, you can set about treating them for use, a process called seasoning.

If you buy a cast iron skillet at the thrift store, you'll probably find that it is (a) burned black on the bottom inside (b) scratched on the burned part and (c) rusty everywhere it isn't burned. All of these problems are correctable with a bit of elbow grease. Using hot water, scouring powder and either steel wool or a heavy scouring pad, strip the skillet down to the bare metal. Don't skimp on this job; the future of your fried eggs depends on getting an absolutely smooth surface. When you think you've got every bit of rust and burned grease off, dry the skillet with a white cloth towel. Invariably you'll find a streak of rust on the towel; figure out which part of the pan it came from and scrub that bit some more.

If you buy skillets new, you can skip the scrubbing part. Do wash them well with soap and hot water to remove the protective rust coating put on at the factory.

No matter where your skillet has come from, the next step is to dry it thoroughly and coat it liberally with vegetable oil. This is the only use that I have for solid vegetable shortening, but in this one case I strongly recommend it. Liquid oils, when used to coat cast iron, tend to get gummy and shortening does not. While you're at it, buy the large can. It will keep for a year or so, if your kitchen is cool enough, and you'll want it to oil the pans when you've been a bit rough on them. Put your greasy skillet in

the oven and bake it at 350 degrees for about two hours. Unless you have a great oven, rotate the pan once or twice to make sure it cooks evenly. Cool completely. Your skillet will be dark brown.

What you have now is a usable, but not great, cast iron skillet, which will become better with each use. For the next year or two, avoid cooking liquids, especially tomato sauce, in your skillet. Do as much frying or sautéing in this pan as possible. To clean, wash while still hot with cold water and NO soap. Dry carefully. Wipe the inside of the skillet with shortening after each washing. Once the skillet is well seasoned, you can reduce the greasing to once in a while - certainly after you've cooked liquids in the pan, and any time it looks particularly dry. Although we've all been raised to wash every dish after every use, in some cases (grilled cheese sandwiches come to mind) you may not wash the pan at all, but just wipe out crumbs with a paper towel.

After the first year or so of use, when your skillet is pretty evenly blackened, you can start using my Dad's favorite cleaning trick. If you've cooked something that has stuck slightly, do this. Remove the food from the hot pan and pour in about a cup of cold water. As the water boils, scrape the pan with the spatula to loosen any stuck food. Pour out water and clean as usual. Don't use this technique on a pan with a lot of grease in it - pour out the grease first, or you risk being splattered.

Every once in a great while you'll find a thrift store skillet which is a flat, dull black with no rust. This means that the skillet has been properly seasoned, but hasn't been taken care of. Snatch it up, even if you don't need another skillet, because it's much less work to get this sort of thing in shape. You don't need to re-season a skillet like this. Just wash it and wipe it out with shortening.

Although I've talked about skillets here, you can also find cast iron dutch ovens and griddles, corn bread pans and even bread pans. All of them are well worth buying, and should be treated in pretty much the same way. If you bake much bread, keep an eye out for the bread pans, which produce a really superior crust.

While taking care of cast iron is more work than washing out a non-stick pan, it's well worth doing. Aside from the fact that cast iron cooks better than any of the alternatives, I like the idea of using something that will last, literally, forever

Cast iron is particularly well suited for deep fat frying, and the hot fat helps to keep the skillet in good shape. Be warned, however, that deep fat frying is one of the trickier and more hazardous cooking methods. If you're not experienced in the technique, consult a reputable cook book, such as *The Joy of Cooking*, for safety precautions before deep fat frying.

Homemade French Fries

2 small organic russet potatoes per person
Enough vegetable oil to fill the skillet 1/2 full

Scrub, then boil, potatoes until tender. Let them cool completely. Cut into wedges lengthwise, about 8 per potato, trying to keep them all close to the same size for even cooking. Heat oil in cast iron skillet to 365 degrees on a deep fat or candy thermometer. Slip the potatoes into the hot fat very carefully. Do not overcrowd the skillet. When the furious bubbling dies down, check potatoes for browning. Remove from the skillet just before they're brown enough for you, as they will cook a little more while standing. Drain on paper towels. Salt. Eat immediately.

If you're cooking a second batch, be sure to let the oil come back up to 365 degrees. Oil can be cooled completely, strained through a coffee filter and saved for reuse.

