

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

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So. What are you cooking on?

And what do you know about how it was made? And why it was made the way it was? And who made it?

If people are desperate to discover the origins of a cut of beef, it feels only a little obvious that the next deep dinner discussion should be about how that food was cooked — in what vessel and why.

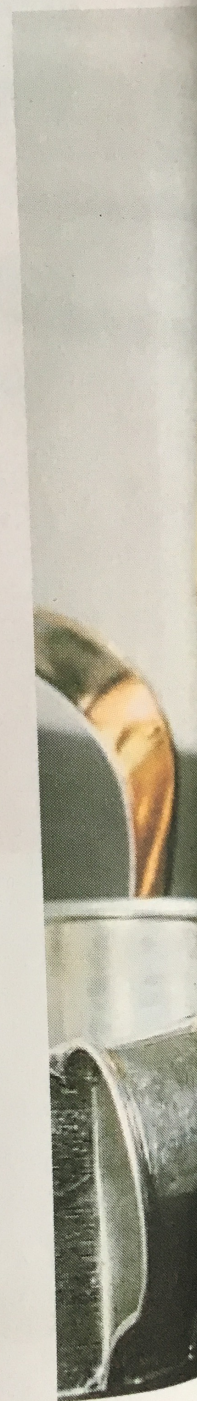
The science and history of cookware is fascinating to anyone brave enough to go there, and not just to a metalhead chick like me who is very good at boring people to death with talk about coefficients of thermal expansion and the differences between cramped vs crimped seams. See what I mean?

Long before the Industrial Revolution, but definitely after the Bronze and Iron Ages, people had access to metal. It was precious, it was desirable, and it was ridiculously expensive. We celebrate the rediscovered anti-microbial properties of copper and are fascinated at how the ancient Egyptians used the metal for water vessels. (Excuse me, the rich Egyptians. Everyone else used pottery.)

Pottery was THE kitchen tool of choice for millennia. Why? Because it was cheap, it kept food cool, protected and insulated, and it could be made pretty much anywhere in the world. Today when we talk about ceramic cookware, some of us remember that it comes with a 10,000-year historical platform, but we forget its scientific properties, namely, that ceramic is an insulator, not a conductor of heat. The science of pure cookware, dudes.

That's what we're talking about!

After we stopped being obsessed with using metal as a war material (we didn't make cast iron pots 4,000 years ago, but we sure as shit made a lot of pointy swords) and got better at building furnaces and smelting copper and steel into sheets, we suddenly had the ability to make more items out of metal, including cookware, than ever before.





We developed cookware based on our cultures and our preferences. They say Cleopatra had a plethora of kitchens at her disposal, and we can find the remains of iron cooking pots in Viking archeological sites. We create modern tools now that can do outrageously cool things.

But before those CNC machines spun the stainless cooking pot, or the copper was smashed, or the iron was poured, cookware was made by hand. We hammered the hell out of everything. Smiths had to perfect the furnaces to melt the metal hot enough to pull the slag off, and suddenly everyone started to think about what made metal do what it does: whether that's conducting heat, being hard but brittle, oxidizing topically or rusting away.

The old adage 'they broke the mold with that one' comes from making cookware. The early thirteenth century smiths created a 'lost wax' process, finished by pouring red-hot metal into multiple-pieced clay cavities. Puddlers stirred molten iron for hours in the 1700s. Coppersmiths worked side-by-side with tinsmiths and together they used sheets of metal to bend, curl, snap and snip the average metal cookware into existence. If you want a dearly vintage copper boiler, look for something that has been braised and soldered together out of a few sheets of flat copper and lined with tin. It took a long time to get to that silicon spatula.

Without the first smiths, we wouldn't have graduated to aluminum cookware in the early 20th century. Without those more ambitious alchemists, we might not have found the metals we use and cook on every day. Cookware is one of those things we built instead of shattered. We find something that works.

"Hey Romulous. If I smash this copper super hard, it gets crazy flat, but it doesn't really break. Maybe we could like... make a wine cup."

"Let's tell Caesar!"

And then those smiths built on what they saw and learned, knowledge that feeds the cookware we use today.

So when you're making that next meringue, you might think more about the ancestry of your copper bowl, instead of the peaks in the egg whites. It's probably not too far removed from the past at all.

