



The History of Cookware

It's easy to take for granted the conveniences of the modern kitchen: gas and electric ranges, stainless steel pans and utensils, and efficient options for refrigeration and reheating. We don't often have to give a moment's thought to what kind of vessels we heat our food in, except to make sure that we don't put anything metal into the microwave.

But a deep dive into the history of cookware tells a **very different story**: one in which the kitchen was filled with an assortment of materials, some of which **wouldn't be recognizable** to us.

As recently as 100 years ago, choosing the right cookware meant understanding which foods were likely to interact with certain metals, and which combinations might be corrosive or even toxic. It's a fascinating history that can teach us a lot about the tools we use today.

Let's take a step back to see how cookware has developed over thousands of years to bring us the pots and pans that we use in modern kitchens, both at home and in restaurants.

What is **cookware**?

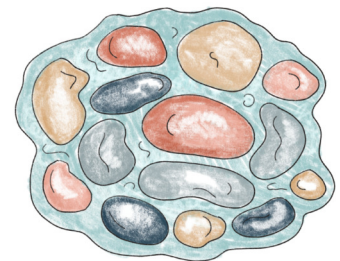


So what is cookware, how do we define cookware? How does it differ from bakeware and other vessels that we might use in the course of making a recipe? Specifically, cookware refers to vessels that are designed for use on a stove: saucepans, frying pans, skillets, woks, stockpots, kettles, griddles, and more.

Bakeware refers to tools that are used in the oven, such as cake and muffin tins, cookie sheets, pie pans, and roasting pans. Some vessels can be used either on the stove or in the oven, like the casserole pot, which can handle a variety of cooking methods.

A complete collection of cookware and bakeware is known as a batterie de cuisine, or “kitchen artillery” in French, and can be found in many professional kitchens. Other appliances, such as refrigerators and ovens, aren’t typically included under the umbrella, although the development of the range played a major role in the evolution of cookware.

The **first** cooking pots



There’s some debate among historians over when the first cooking equipment appeared on the scene. While boiling a pot of water on the stove sounds simple to us today, it wasn’t necessarily intuitive to the first cooks sitting around an open fire.

After all, many “natural” cooking vessels, such as shells, are too small to contain much liquid, while hard gourds may not have been sufficiently waterproof or heatproof.

In *Consider the Fork: A History of How We Cook and Eat*, Bee Wilson writes that the first true boiling method might have involved using animal stomachs, similar to the Scottish dish haggis, a traditional meat pudding that’s encased and boiled in a sheep’s stomach lining.

The first true boiling method might have involved using animal stomachs

Around 30,000 years ago, humans developed hot stone cookery, which involved heating stones in a fire before dropping them into a pit filled with water. Once a large enough quantity of stones were added to the pit, the water would start to boil, and the pit could be covered with leaves or animal skins to retain the heat. This had the advantage of separating the cooking area from the open flame, which was safer for the cook and reduced the likelihood of setting the cooking vessel on fire.

Early versions of hot stone cookery may have used baskets, but the really important innovation was the invention of ceramic pottery. Pottery made it possible to cook soups, stews, and other dishes that required a stable, waterproof container that could be used repeatedly.

Some of the dishes we make today, such as pasta or rice, would be difficult to cook using the hot stone method, but for slow cooking meats and vegetables, it was ideal. In fact, it wasn't just a culinary step forward, but a major boon for human health too. Before the adoption of cooking pots, getting enough to eat required lots of chewing. As Bee Wilson writes, "If you couldn't chew, you would starve."

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Ceramic pottery made it possible to lose your teeth, and still be able to eat: "Pottery enabled our ancestors to make food of a drinkable consistency: porridgy, soupy concoctions, which could be eaten without chewing. For the first time, we start to see adult skeletons without a single tooth. The cooking pot saved these people."

Not only that, but hot stone cookery allowed for the consumption of additional nutrients. When the inhabitants of Mesoamerica used limestone rocks to heat up their water (beginning around 1200-1500 B.C.) it interacted with maize to reduce toxins and release nutrients. This process, called nixtamalization, is still used to process corn for tortillas and tortilla chips today.

Other regions also benefited from expanded cooking options. In South America, writes Wilson, "once it was possible to boil cassava in a pot, it went from useless toxin to valuable staple, a sweet fleshy source of calcium, phosphorus, and vitamin C (though little protein)." By boiling them for hours at a time, toxic and indigestible plants were suddenly on the menu – which hadn't been the case when the only option was to roast them on an open flame.

Speaking of menus, where can we find the first recorded menu in history? It may have been this ancient recipe found on a stone slab in Mesopotamia, dating to 4644 B.C. Archaeologists have translated the cuneiform writing so you can recreate the recipe in your own kitchen. What does it make? A simple vegetable broth, likely made with animal fat and beets.

Metal cooking instruments



The next major step forward in the history of cookware was the development of metal cooking instruments. While copper tools have been around since at least 9000 B.C., it wasn't until the Bronze Age, around 3000 B.C., when metalworking techniques had advanced enough that it became possible to make specialized cooking pots and cauldrons.

The ancient Romans were the most inventive, creating metal colanders, steamers, frying pans, and more. They experimented with various metals, and spearheaded the process of frying fish in oil – in a large, flat pan called the *patella*, the precursor to the Spanish *paella*.

The ancient **Romans** were the most inventive

Metal cooking pots were superior to pottery in many ways, not least because they were more durable and could be placed right above the fire without breaking. But they were also easy to clean, and could conduct heat more evenly.

The downside to metal pots is that they were very expensive to produce, and in large parts of Europe, they remained in limited use for many centuries. After the fall of the Roman Empire, many cultures stuck to the essentials: a metal cauldron, and a spit for roasting meat, both of which could be used over an indoor hearth.

The Battersea Cauldron shows just how durable metal cooking pots could be. This bronze cauldron was discovered in the River Thames in 1861, but dates back to 800 B.C. Now, it's housed at the British Museum in London.

The cauldron is 15 inches high and can hold up to 70 liters (18 U.S. gallons). It's made out of seven separate pieces of bronze that have been riveted together. It has a flared opening and two handles, and would have made a stunning centerpiece in any kitchen.

In the **Middle Ages**, a household that could afford to obtain a **cauldron** treated it as a **sizable investment**.

A cauldron might cost 50 times as much as an earthenware pot, so many of the medieval cauldrons that have been discovered show signs of repair. Tinkers, or traveling metalworkers, would roam the countryside using molten solder to patch holes in leaky cauldrons.

The cauldron was used to make the original one-pot meal – primarily variations on stews and porridges – and could be swung on a crane over the fire to control the temperature. Still, cooking over an indoor fireplace was dangerous work. The heat was unbearable, a cook's clothes could easily catch fire, and the smoke inhalation alone could be deadly.

That's why the next major invention in the history of cookware was such a lifesaver – and could still save lives if were used more widely in developing countries today.

The **indoor** range



The modern range, or stovetop, is a major part of what makes cooking not just tolerable, but fun and enjoyable for today's home chefs. It wasn't inevitable that it would turn out this way. Even in wealthy homes in the Victorian Era, homeowners were rarely found in the kitchen.

In fact, the concept of a "kitchen" is a recent phenomenon. English country houses had several different rooms for food preparation, such as a dry pantry, a larder, a smokehouse, and a dairy. Rooms for cooking had to be built some distance apart from rooms for cooling, and might even be built in a separate facility, to avoid the risk of setting the whole house on fire. Cooks and maids specialized in different aspects of food production, not unlike the delegation of duties in a modern restaurant kitchen.

It wasn't until the development of the closed range, by Benjamin Thomas (also known as Count Rumford) in the 1790s, that it became possible to bring all of the components of the kitchen into a single room, in which multiple cooking surfaces were heated to a "range" of temperatures.

His design managed to contain the flame within a stove and direct the smoke into a chimney, (later deemed the range hood) making kitchens safer, less unbearably hot, and more energy

efficient. Closed ranges caught on during the Industrial Age, allowing roasting, baking, frying, and even boiling water to become commonplace in the home kitchen.

Instead of wood fires, closed ranges could be heated with coal, which was cheap and widely available. Many of them were made with cast-iron, which was also used for pots and pans.

Kitchen ranges became even more efficient when they transitioned to gas burners and electric ovens, both of which became widespread in the early 1900s.

Asian cookware



While European cooks were making slow, one-pot meals in cauldrons, Chinese cooks had been mastering another type of metal cooking pot: the wok. Although made from similar materials (usually cast-iron or steel), the wok had a different shape than pans used elsewhere in the world: a rounded floor with gently sloping sides, in contrast to the deep, vertical sides of skillets and saucepans.

The **wok** was likely developed in the **Han** dynasty
(206 BC-220 AD)

Why did these pans develop differently? One reason is that European cooks had plenty of fuel — including coal and firewood — to keep a consistent flame, so they didn't have to worry so much about fuel efficiency when making a slow-cooked roast or a stew. China, on the other hand, didn't have the same abundance of firewood, so its traditional cooking methods were designed to cook food quickly while using the least amount of fuel possible.

This quest for efficiency even extends to the traditional Chinese cooking knife, the rectangular cleaver known as the tou. While Europeans developed knives for every occasion — paring knives for fruit, carving knives for meat, and so on — the *tou* could be used to cut up everything, meat and vegetables alike, into tiny, even pieces that could be stir-fried to perfection in the wok.

Another piece of traditional Asian cookware that still sees widespread use today is the dolsot, a round bowl used to cook and serve popular Korean foods like *bibimbap*. Made out of agalmatolite, a type of soapstone, it's designed to keep the meal hot while eating it, and contributes to the iconic crust of rice that forms at the bottom of the dish.