

JIM'S FAVORITE KITCHEN EQUIPMENT



Cookware stores and catalogues are filled with every conceivable kind of gadget, tool, and appliance. Unfortunately, many of them are either useless or nearly so. The problem is, because cooking is such a personal activity, it is difficult to say which is which. A tool one person uses every day may languish for months in another's drawer. Alton Brown contends that you should not have anything that is only used for one task. I suppose that is a good rule of thumb, but I would not like to give up my apple corer, the hinged device that quickly forms nearly

perfect empanadas, my juice extractor, and many other things that I may not need often, but when I do I really need them!

Rather than deal with negatives, I decided to describe some of the items I have learned to value through many years of trial and error. I will not mention things as basic as kitchen tongs (which I think are the most important item in any kitchen) but will deal with things that may be less familiar.

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Tojiro Knives

One of the greatest gifts cooks can give themselves (or others can give to them) is great knives. They provide a reward every time you pick them up, and they improve the quality of whatever is being prepared. I started with a set of German knives and liked them. During that time, many years ago, well before Japanese style knives became popular, I bought one from an obscure trading company that placed an advertisement in the fine-print area of a cooking magazine. I was amazed at how much better it was and what a difference it made. For example, for the first time I could mince parsley without crushing it! Unfortunately, that knife got misplaced during a move, and I forgot about it,

Over the last few years, I bought numerous Japanese knives that cost anywhere from \$100 to \$150 on sale. They were great in that they were much sharper and had better balance than anything else I had used (except that first Japanese knife), but something seemed to be missing. Then one day I found the misplaced knife in a dusty box in the attic. I washed it, tried it, and immediately decided it was better than anything else I had, regardless of price, and wanted to get more of them. I had no idea who made them or if they were still in business, as everything on the blade was in Japanese except the notation DP. A web search for a knife with that inscription told me that the knife I had was made by a company called Tojiro, and amazingly the price for an 8.2 inch chef's knife was under \$60! I decided to order it. If anything, it was better than my original model, and much better than the other much more expensive Japanese knives. Since then I have acquired a utility knife, a bread knife, and a set of steak knives and think they are superior to anything else I've used, and at equally low prices. (Although the 4 steak knives did cost over \$100, you can sharpen them and they will last a lifetime). Tojiro knives can be found in various places, including Amazon and Chef Kinves to Go.

Vita-Mix Blender

I probably went through a couple dozen blenders from the most popular manufacturers until I spent some time in a commercial kitchen using a Vita-Mix. They are simply not in the same league with most consumer models in terms of both performance and longevity. For example, put some soy milk, apple juice, pieces of frozen banana, and an upeeled, uncored apple cut in half in a Vita-Mix. After 1 - 2 minutes you will have a totally smooth and delicious drink. The entire core and seeds will miraculously disappear. When you make a sauce with dried chiles in a normal blender, even after several minutes you have to strain the puree through a food mill to remove bits of skin. Not with a Vita-Mix. They're gone! And a separate blending bowl will even allow you to grind wheat into flour. With a capacity of 2 quarts the Vita-Mix handles quantities much larger than most blenders. The only downside to the product is the price — at this time between \$400 and \$600. However, they are often available at Costco road shows for under \$400. And since they work so much faster and efficiently than regular blenders you will save a great deal of time, and everything from sauces to sorbets will be better.

Infrared Grill

For years the only way I could put a good sear on everything from thin hamburger patties to steaks like fajitas was with a very hot wood or natural charcoal fire. Nothing wrong with that, except that sometimes, particularly on weeknights, I did not want to take the time required to build the fire and wait for the coals to develop.

Most regular gas grills will not solve the problem. They simply do not put out enough heat to crisp the outside of thin items before the interior is overdone. Also, the average gas grill takes 10 to 15 minutes to properly preheat, which is not that much faster than charcoal. Then I bought a [Texas Pit Crafters](#) infrared grill, and all that changed. After a five minute warmup I now have enough heat to match the results of upscale steak houses, and do so on thin pieces of meat, poultry, or seafood. My grill has stayed under the roof of my outdoor kitchen but has otherwise been exposed to the elements for nearly twelve years. A little cleaning makes it as good as the day it was delivered. In that regard, another benefit of an infrared grill is that it burns so hot that most of the usual drippings that lead to extensive cleaning on normal grills are vaporized, much like an automatic oven cleaner. I did have to replace the burner, but discovered that the new one cooks even better than the original. Again, the only downside is price. I have the least expensive model and it currently costs a bit under \$1,300. However, the superior results and durability make it well worth it.

Cookshack Electric Smoker

For many years I pit-smoked food with either a smoker with an offset smoke box or by the direct heat method often used in Central-West Texas, where the meat is placed 1 ½ to 3 feet above coals. Both methods rely on constant vigilance for the up to 18 hours needed to complete the smoking process. During that time you must add wood or coals to maintain the proper temperature. When I did not want to go to that much effort I used an electric water smoker. It did a decent job, but still needed some vigilance in terms of adding wood chips and water, and accurately regulating the heat was difficult. Then I bought a [Cookshack](#) electric smoker. It looks like a well-made stainless steel oven, and all you need to do to obtain superb results is to put 1 to 3 ounces of whatever hardwood you fancy (yes that little an amount) in the slide-out box, put the meat in the oven, close the door, plug in the unit, and set the temperature for anywhere between 140 and 300 degrees. A digital readout gives the interior temperature. The unit came with a plug-in temperature probe that you can insert in large pieces, such as brisket or pork butt.

The meat's internal temperature is displayed next to the oven's temperature. I have even used it successfully on much thinner cuts, such as skirt steak. There are also models that will automatically turn down the heat to a holding temperature of 140 degrees. That means you can put something like a small brisket in before you leave for work and it will be ready to serve when you get home and decide to have dinner. It's that simple! The results are terrific, especially considering the nearly complete lack of effort, and especially in comparison with other smoking techniques. I am told that these electric smokers are so good and so easy to use that they are banned from most barbecue competitions. There are similar smokers available, but many of them require you to buy specially formulated fuel pellets. The unit I have is the Smokette Elite, which currently costs \$899.

Molcajete

A *molcajete* is Mexico's version of the mortar and pestle, one that I think it is much more versatile and works quicker and better because of its rougher grinding surface. It is the ideal tool for making Mexican salsas and allows you to achieve the perfect texture for guacamole. With the addition of a pinch of salt you can quickly turn garlic into paste. While they usually cost around \$5 - \$10 in Mexico, the shipping cost of the fairly heavy items brings them to \$35 - \$60 in the U.S. When you get a new one it will be fairly rough and need to be "cured" before using to remove some of the hard edges and grit. I have found the best way to do this is to grind ½ cup of rice to a powder and repeat several times. Wash the *molcajete* well, and it will be ready for a lifetime of service!

Food Scale

Amateur cooks are quickly learning what the pros have always known: that there are many items that do not lend themselves to volume measurement, especially when trying to obtain the precise amounts needed for baking. Examples include things like sliced onions, chopped cilantro, and whole potatoes. With a measuring cup a lot of guesswork is required, but with an electric food scale there is none at all. Fortunately there are now many models on the market that perform well, priced from \$30 - \$60. The best one I have used is made by [Salter](#) and cost \$35.

Thermometers

Laser thermometer: Part of the joy of cooking is mastering the craft part of it: things like being able to judge when a pan is just the right heat, removing an ice cream base from the burner just before it curdles, and tempering chocolate. Like all crafts, learning to cook requires a great deal of trial and error, which necessarily means a certain amount of failure. I used to judge when cooking oil reached various temperatures by the reaction of a tiny drop of water when it hit the oil. Other people, less risk prone, toss in a piece of bread and time how long it takes it to brown. Yes there are deep fry thermometers, but many of them take time to adjust to temperature changes and most of them do not work when there is less than a couple inches of oil, and they often get in the way of stirring or whatever you want to do.

Several years ago I discovered that using a laser thermometer eliminates the uncertainty and accelerates the learning process, while minimizing failure. All you do is aim the pistol shaped device at whatever you want to take the temperature of, pull the trigger, and the temperature will appear in a digital display. I use mine to know when a griddle is the perfect temperature to cook tortillas or when a sauté pan is ready. I use it while working with chocolate, deep frying, and, since mine goes over 1000

degrees, to check my grill's temperature. One disadvantage is that the temperature readings may not be accurate on light shiny surfaces like stainless steel, but they work perfectly with iron pots and pans and most non-stick surfaces. I bought my most recent one from ThermoWorks, which makes the most accurate culinary thermometers I have found. The model I use is the IRK2 and currently costs \$89.

Oven Thermometer: There is a great deal of truth to the statement that although much of cooking involves art, baking is mostly science. There is no question that when baking, cooks have much less latitude to play around with ingredient amounts and temperatures. And temperature is as important as anything else in the process. The problem is that too many home ovens do not cook at the temperature to which they are set. When a recipe says to bake bread, a pie, or flan at 350 degrees, it does not mean 300 or even 325 degrees. Fortunately, for a just few dollars you can purchase an accurate oven thermometer. (I use two of them just to make sure).

If you discover that your oven is not cooking at the proper temperature you have two choices: you can call a repair man and have it calibrated, or if you find that it consistently cooks at, say, 25 degrees lower than its setting, you can compensate by putting the heat 25 degrees higher than called for. I have found the least expensive way to buy these thermometers (and many other kitchen tools) is at restaurant supply houses.

Lime/Lemon Juicer

I am always amazed to see experienced cooks squeezing lemons with their hands (try that with one that's not completely ripe, or with just about any lime) then filtering the juice through their fingers to remove the seeds. Another less than ideal implement is the type of juicer that is shaped like a stubby, grooved spearhead. You push the point into the fruit while turning it. If nothing else, that means you have to pick or strain out any seeds. Now catching on in this country are the hand-sized, hinged juicers that Mexicans have used for years. In Mexico they used to be made of aluminum, whose reaction with acidic juice gives the food police nightmares. Nevertheless they worked well, and most people disregarded the fleeting contact the juice had with the metal. Now these handy gadgets are either made or coated with non-reactive materials. Some even have a clever design that allows them to squeeze both limes and larger lemons, usually for \$10 or less. I use mine nearly every day!

Portable Kitchen Wood and Charcoal Grill

Sometime in the early 1950's Hilton Meigs, known as the Barbecue King of Texas, designed and built what he thought was the perfect grill. He called it the Portable Kitchen. It was made of highly reflective, durable, and un-rustable aluminum, which is also an excellent heat conductor. It had two dampers in the bottom and two in the top to allow for quick and accurate heat adjustment. The grill was hinged to allow access to the coals to facilitate adding soaked wood chips. It worked so well it was an immediate hit!

My family bought one when I was a teenager, and I had never tasted steaks with such a deep smoked flavor and perfectly golden brown crusts. I was so impressed that years later my wife and I took one with us when we moved to Hawaii. Unfortunately, five years later when we moved back to the mainland it was lost in transit. By the time I looked for a new one, cheap stamped-out metal grills and a lack of grilling sophistication by the public had put the Portable Kitchen out of business.

Years later I was thrilled to learn that Paul and Sarah James had found one of the original grills at a garage sale and made the investment required to reintroduce the product to the market. I bought one

and quickly assured myself that the grill was as good or better than I remembered. I quickly bought another one for my home in California.

Just as so many people were unfortunately sold on poorly made and performing grills in the eighties, they are currently hooked on the convenience of gas grills, none of which impart the smoke flavor of a wood or charcoal fueled grill, much less the Portable Kitchen which is possibly the best of the lot. Even the aforementioned infrared grills, which put a terrific crust on meat, do not produce the same smoke flavor.

When I want to impress someone, (including myself) with a perfectly grilled steak this is the tool I use! The grills, the bodies of which will easily last a lifetime, currently cost about \$370.00. The grate and grill, which should last at least 10 - 15 years, are available for about \$65 per set. For more information and to purchase go to pkgrills.com.

Iwatani Portable Burner

These inexpensive, cleverly designed burners are the ideal appliance for picnics, camping, or any other outdoor activity. Powered by a hairspray-size bottle of butane they generate enough heat for just about any task. I first tried one when I did a demonstration at the Mexican Cultural Institute in Washington D.C. and was so impressed that I bought one as soon as I got home. They are used mostly by chefs for catering and demonstrations. You can find them at restaurant supply houses, at some Japanese food product stores, and on the internet. At around \$80 they can quickly become an important (and economical fixture) of an outdoor kitchen.

Anova Precision Cooker

A couple of years ago my wife and I had an incredible meal at one of our favorite restaurants. She had a seared chicken breast and I had a pork shoulder steak--items that would not usually illicit superlatives. But the chicken was perfectly tender throughout, with no toughness toward the outside, and the pork, from a usually tough cut, was just over medium rare and as tender as a filet mignon. The chef confided that he had prepared the items using the technique called *sous vide*, which means "under pressure" in French.

Sous vide (pronounced "sue veed") involves vacuum sealing the items to be cooked then heating them in a water bath at a precise temperature for from less than an hour to as long as 3 or 4 days, depending on the food's size and toughness. What makes it work is that the item can never reach a temperature that is higher than the temperature of the water. But, up to a point, the longer it cooks the more tender it becomes. This means that, for example, cooking a ribeye at 130 degrees produces a perfectly tender medium rare steak, with none of the grey transition from the center to the outside where the extreme heat from a pan or grill would normally have been applied. In order to capture the beloved brown crust, after coming out of the water bath, the meat is brushed with a little oil and seared for 30 - 45 seconds on each side on a hot skillet or grill.

While the technology of *sous vide* is extremely simple, achieving the necessary constant temperature for a long period of time previously required expensive laboratory quality equipment or a scientific bent. My first *sous vide* cooker was the Sous Vide Supreme, and that is still a decent choice. The only problem is that it is as large as a small ice chest, and it is difficult to fill and empty and takes up a lot of space. More recently I tried the Anova Precision Cooker. Instead of being an all in one cooker, it consists only of the

part that heats and circulates the water. It can be used with almost any large pot or similar container, is dead easy to use. and can be stored in a small space. I use it to produce sealed packets of perfectly cooked diet and gourmet food (more often than not the same item) that are easily frozen into the best and least expensive "T.V. dinners" you have ever had. You can use it to make beef, chicken, pork, seafood, vegetables, and perfect soft boiled eggs.