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THE MINIMALIST

A No-Frills Kitchen Still Cooks

By [MARK BITTMAN](#)

THE question I'm asked more often than any other is, "What kitchen equipment should I buy?"

Like cookbooks, kitchen equipment is a talisman; people believe that buying the right kind will make them good cooks. Yet some of the best cooks I've known worked with a battered batterie de cuisine: dented pots and pans scarred beyond recognition, an old steak knife turned into an all-purpose tool, a pot lid held just so to strain pasta when the colander was missing, a food processor with a busted switch. They didn't complain and they didn't apologize; they just cooked.

But famous TV chefs use gorgeous name-brand equipment, you might say. And you'd be right. But a.) they get much of that stuff free, the manufacturers hoping that placing it in the hands of a well-known chef will make you think it's essential; b.) they want their equipment to be pretty, so you'll think they're important; and c.) see above: a costly knife is not a talisman and you are not a TV chef.

Finally (and this is crucial), the best chefs may use the best-looking equipment when they are in public view, but when it is time to buy equipment for the people who actually prepare those \$200 restaurant meals, they go to a restaurant supply house to shop for the everyday cookware I recommend to people all the time.

In fact, I contend that with a bit of savvy, patience and a willingness to forgo steel-handle knives, copper pots and other extravagant items, \$200 can equip a basic kitchen that will be adequate for just about any task, and \$300 can equip one quite well.

To prove my point I put together a list of everything needed for almost any cooking task. I bought most of the equipment at Bowery Restaurant Supply, 183 Bowery Street (Delancey Street), where the bill came to just about \$200. Throw in a few items the store didn't have and a few extras, and the total would be about \$300. (New York happens to have scores of restaurant supply shops, but every metropolitan area has at least one.)

I started with an eight-inch, plastic-handle stainless alloy chef's knife for \$10. This is probably the most essential tool in the kitchen. People not only obsess about knives (and write entire articles about them), but you can easily spend over \$100 on just one. Yet go into any restaurant kitchen and you will see most of the cooks using this same plastic-handle Dexter-Russell tool. (Go to the wrong store and

you'll spend \$20 or even \$30 on the same knife.)

I found an instant-read thermometer, a necessity for beginning cooks and obsessive-compulsives, for \$5. Three stainless steel bowls — not gorgeous and maybe a little thin — set me back about \$5. You are reading that right. Sturdy tongs, an underappreciated tool: \$3.50 (don't buy them too long, make sure the spring is nice and tight, and don't shop for them at a "culinary" store, where they'll cost four times as much).

For less than \$6 I picked up a sturdy sheet pan. It's not an ideal cookie sheet but it's useful for roasting and baking (not a bad tray, either, and one of the more common items in restaurant kitchens). A plastic cutting board was about the same price. For aesthetic purposes I'd rather have wood, but plastic can go into the dishwasher.

At \$3, a paring knife was so cheap I could replace it every year or two. I splurged on a Japanese mandoline for \$25. (It's not indispensable, but since my knife skills are pathetic, I use mine whenever I want thin, even slices or a real julienne.)

You, or the college graduate you are thinking of, might own some of the things I bought: a \$4 can opener; a vegetable peeler (I like the U-shaped type, which cost me \$3); a colander (\$7, and I probably could've gotten one cheaper).

You are thinking to yourself: "Humph. He's ignoring pots and pans, the most expensive items of all." Au contraire, my friend; I bought five, and I could live with four (though I'd rather have six): a small, medium and large cast-aluminum saucepan (total: about \$30); a medium nonstick cast aluminum pan (10-inch; \$13); and a large steep-sided, heavier duty steel pan (14-inch; \$25). I bought a single lid (\$5; I often use plates or whatever's handy for lids because I can never find the right one anyway).

I like cast iron, and I have used it in some kitchens for nearly everything; but it can be more expensive than this quite decent cheap stuff, and it's very heavy. What you don't want is the awful wafer thin (and relatively more expensive) sets of stainless or aluminum ones sold in big-box stores.

Other things, like the mandoline, are almost luxury items: a skimmer (I like these for removing dumplings or gnocchi); a slotted spoon; a heat-resistant rubber spatula (which can replace the classic wooden spoon); a bread knife (good for crusty loaves and ripe tomatoes); and a big whisk (which I might use three times a year).

You should also have a food processor (you want 12-cup capacity, and Amazon.com, for example, has an adequate 14-cup Hamilton Beach for \$60); a salad spinner (the one at Bowery Restaurant Supply was as big as my kitchen; you will find one for \$15 somewhere); a Microplane grater (the old box graters have been largely replaced by the food processor, but you'll need something for cheese, nutmeg and your oft-used asafetida; it'll set you back less than \$10). A coffee and spice grinder is

another \$10 item.

A blender is a bit more optional. An immersion one is nice, but standard ones are more useful, and you can find them for as little as \$15.

And, finally, something with which to keep those knives sharp. A whetstone costs about \$6, and if you use it, it will work fine; a decent steel is expensive enough that you may as well graduate to an electric sharpener. Though sharpeners take up counter space and cost at least \$30, they work well.

The point is not so much that you can equip a real kitchen without much money, but that the fear of buying the wrong kind of equipment is unfounded. It needs only to be functional, not prestigious, lavish or expensive.

Keep that in mind, stay out of the fancy places and find a good restaurant supply house. If you make a mistake — something is the wrong size or of such lousy quality you can't bear it — you can spend 20 bucks more another time. Meanwhile, you'll be cooking.

The Inessentials

YOU can live without these 10 kitchen items:

BREAD MACHINE You can buy mediocre bread easily enough, or make the real thing without much practice.

MICROWAVE If you do a lot of reheating or fast (and damaging) defrosting, you may want one. But essential? No. And think about that counter space!

STAND MIXER Unless you're a baking fanatic, it takes up too much room to justify it. A good whisk or a crummy handheld mixer will do fine.

BONING/FILLETING KNIVES Really? You're a butcher now? Or a fishmonger? If so, go ahead, by all means. But I haven't used my boning knife in years. (It's pretty, though.)

WOK Counterproductive without a good wok station equipped with a high-B.T.U. burner. (There's a nice setup at Bowery Restaurant Supply for \$1,400 if you have the cash and the space.)

STOCKPOT The pot you use for boiling pasta will suffice, until you start making gallons of stock at a time.

PRESSURE COOKER It's useful, but do you need one? No.

ANYTHING MADE OF COPPER More trouble than it's worth, unless you have a pine-paneled wall

you want to decorate.

RICE COOKER Yes, if you eat rice twice daily. Otherwise, no.

COUNTERTOP CONVECTION OVEN, ROTISSERIE, OR “ROASTER” Only if you’re a sucker for late-night cooking infomercials.

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