

## “From the chef's gift list: Serious cooks need more than just basic tools”

By Jennifer Biggs

Posted December 17, 2008 at 12:04 a.m



Any cook knows there are a few things in a kitchen you can't do without.

A baker without a heavy-duty stand-mixer is just making life harder than it has to be. A bon vivant without a collection of cocktail glasses and shakers is still in the aspiring stage. A country cook without an iron skillet? Please.

Serious cooks need tools. There are a few basics: You've got to have high-quality knives that you know how to use. At least one excellent sauté pan, the best you can afford. Tongs. Spatulas and wooden spoons.

A little of this and that, then you start moving to specialty equipment that suits your style. We asked area chefs to tell us some of their essentials so you can be sure to grab the perfect last-minute gift for your favorite home cook.

Patrick Reilly, chef/owner of The Majestic Grille, loves his cataplana, a hand-hammered copper pot from Portugal. A seafood dish named for the pot is cooked in it. Here's what Patrick's wife, Deni Carr Reilly, had to say about her introduction to the dish:

"We enjoyed our first cataplana at a hillside restaurant outside Faro while dining underneath a 300-year-old fig tree. After devouring grilled local prawns the size of most Maine lobsters, we were treated to a cataplana of razor clams, mussels, fish and local sausages, all swimming in a savory broth I can only describe as tasting like the air at sunset over the Rio Formosa -- I was on my honeymoon, so please forgive the sappiness! It was an amazing meal."



Expect to spend \$50 up to \$120 for a cataplana, depending on the size. Check out [spanishable.com](http://spanishable.com) and [surlatable.com](http://surlatable.com).

But cooks also need good ingredients. One thing you'll always find in Kelly English's kitchen at Restaurant Iris is Allen Benton's bacon.

"I'd have to say it's my favorite affordable gift for foodies," he said. "He's in Tennessee and in my opinion, the best bacon maker in the world. ... It's literally a revelation in your mouth the first time you eat it. I also love it for the bacon grease it produces."

Buy online at [bentonshams.com](http://bentonshams.com) (and don't forget the country ham or the prosciutto; read the Whining & Dining column).

Jose Gutierrez, chef/owner of Encore Bar and Restaurant, has an indispensable item in his Vita-Mix. Don't even *think* of comparing this bad boy to a blender. It'll make a mean daiquiri indeed, but you can also mill flour, make ice cream, soup and about a hundred other things in it.

Gutierrez has them at work and at home, although he acquired the one at home in an unconventional manner. A few years ago, he posed with nothing more than a Vita-Mix (think fig leaf!) for an issue of Food Arts.

"He says even though he had to pose naked for the one we have at home, it was worth it," says wife Colleen DePete. At home it's used for smoothies every day and for numerous dishes at the restaurant.

Expect to spend about \$400 for a low-end model that is fine for the home cook, and watch the prices soar if you want a commercial model. Google for sites that sell the Vita-Mix; the prices vary considerably. Go to [vitamix.com](http://vitamix.com) to see what it can do.

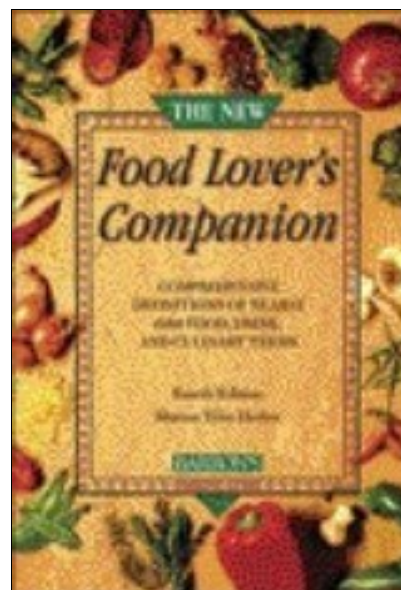
How about something more along the stocking stuffer line? Jackson Kramer, executive chef of Interim and Sole, has two favorite kitchen items: A Swiss-made vegetable peeler that's shaped like a "T." "They peel way better and faster than the regular peelers. But they have to be the Swiss-made ones." Another item is a flat spatula with rivets on the handle.

"They're a crucial tool when cooking delicate fish. They're slotted and thin, so it's easy to get under the piece of fish you're cooking."

And here's real good news: Kramer says each item cost under \$20. Check out [williams-sonoma.com](http://williams-sonoma.com) or other cooking sites. You should also be able to find these at local stores that carry kitchen equipment, such as Macy's, Dillards, Bed Bath and Beyond and perhaps even Lit.

Cullen Kent, chef/owner at Café Society, recommends a good digital scale for anyone who bakes at home. "Baking by weight vs. baking by volume is so much more accurate and the results much more easily repeated when using weight," he said. Another gift on his list is "On Food and Cooking: The Science and Lore of the Kitchen," Harold McGee (Scribner, \$40; available for \$26.40 on [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)). "It's historical, technical, but also easy to understand and I find it a fun reference."

Karen Roth at Erling Jensen: The Restaurant has three items. "The first and most important would be a high-quality 8-inch chef's knife... If you take care of it, it will last you forever." Next is a copy of "The Food Lover's Companion," by Sharon Tyler Herbst (Barron's; \$16.95), and finally, the original microplane. "It's an inexpensive tool that can perform many jobs ...zest a lemon, grate cheese, shave chocolate or grate nutmeg." Jeff Dunham, chef/owner at The Grove Grill, also recommends a microplane.



Paula Naumcheff, chef/owner of Sweet Bistro, wants folks to make panini. She recommends a panini press ("If buying an electric one, make sure the top is hinged to keep ingredients evenly pressed, and removable plates are wonderful for cleaning."). But a cast iron reversible stove-top grill with a hand-held panini press is also OK. You can find these in most stores that sell kitchen equipment.

### **Cataplana**

- 2 tbsp. extra virgin olive oil
- 2 large onions, peeled, halved, and thinly sliced
- 2 red peppers, thinly sliced
- 1 lb. linguica or chorizo sausage, thinly sliced
- 3 large tomatoes, seeded and chopped
- Sea salt and freshly ground pepper
- 2 lbs. whitefish fillets cut into 2" pieces (use monkfish, cod, halibut or grouper)
- 12 medium shrimp (peeled and deveined)
- 12 large scallops or 15 small
- 1 small bunch cilantro
- Red pepper flakes
- 12 small clams
- 12 mussels
- 1 cup white wine

Pour olive oil in heated heavy skillet, add the onions and saute until soft. Add peppers and cook another 5 minutes. Add sausage and saute a few minutes, until the sausage renders its fat.

Toss in tomatoes, season with salt and pepper and remove from heat.

In a heavy cataplana pot, place a ladleful of vegetable mixture.

Over it, place a layer of fish, a few shrimp and scallops. Top with cilantro and pepper flakes (as much or as little as you like). Continue layering and end with clams and mussels.

Pour white wine over all and close cover. Place in 350 degree oven for 30-40 minutes. Discard any unopened mussels and clams.

Ladle into warm bowls; serve with crusty French bread.

Note: If you do not have a cataplana you can use a heavy dutch oven with a tight fitting lid. This recipe can be cut in half.

*Source: Patrick Reilly, The Majestic Grille*

### **Corn Muffins**

1/2 cup sugar  
2 cups cornmeal  
2 cups all purpose flour  
2 tbsp. baking powder  
2 cups buttermilk  
1/2 cup canola oil  
1/2 cup Benton's bacon fat  
2 eggs  
1 tbsp. salt  
1 bunch chopped green onions  
Kernels of two ears of corn, fresh and sliced off the cob

Combine all ingredients and let rest. Grease a muffin pan and bake at 350 degrees until a tooth pick comes out dry in the center (approximately 15 minutes).  
Makes about 24 muffins.

*Source: Kelly English, Restaurant Iris*

### **Sweet Bistro's Three-cheese Pesto Panini**

2 slices of sourdough bread or a hoagie roll  
4 tsp. of basil pesto (found in refrigerated deli area of most supermarkets or make fresh)  
1 oz. each of sharp cheddar, havarti and smoked gouda cheeses, thinly sliced  
3 strips of sugar-cured bacon (see below)  
Thinly sliced tomato  
Melted clarified butter or olive oil

Preheat grill to medium high setting. Assemble sandwich by spreading 2 tsp. of pesto on each slice of bread, then layer with cheeses, bacon and tomato. Close sandwich, brush both sides with butter or olive oil. Place on electric grill and lightly press for 3-5 minutes. Alternatively, place sandwich on cast iron ribbed grill top and place a heavy press on top of sandwich for 3 minutes, turning over once to press the other side for an additional few minutes. Remove from grill and slice diagonally with serrated knife. Makes 1 sandwich.

Note: To make sugar-cured bacon, place slices of raw bacon on an ungreased sheet pan lined with parchment paper. Bake at 400 degrees for 8-10 minutes, or only until bacon is partially cooked and bacon fat has melted onto sheet pan. Remove pan from oven and turn each slice over once. Sprinkle slices generously with light brown sugar. Return to oven for 3-5 minutes, or until bacon is crisp and medium brown. Be careful to watch bacon after adding brown sugar as it will go from being done to burnt very quickly. Remove pan from oven and place on wire rack to cool.

*Source: Paula Naumcheff*

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