

# Foodie Freak: The Kitchen Gallery

Contributed by Ross A. Christensen  
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I love living on the east side of the lake. It's more rural than the west side, quieter, and feels simpler. I do however have a burning jealousy of some of the things that the west side of the lake has to offer.

For instance, The Kitchen Gallery in downtown Lakeport has been open for just over a year, and if I had the choice I would spend entire days shopping there. If I only lived closer I'd be making regular trips to it, probably weekly to keep up on new arrivals.

As I've said before, I prefer to spend my money locally and benefit the Lake County economy, but far too often in the past I have had to buy kitchen equipment online. Now, anytime I have a reason to run to the other side of the lake or need a food-related bobble I always make a stop in The Kitchen Gallery.

The first time I was in there I was amazed to see they had butter curlers in stock. I haven't seen one of those for probably 25 years or so back in my grandparents' home. For those of you who didn't have the benefit of growing up with terribly proper and formal grandparents, a butter curler is used to shave cold butter into decorative curls to be served tableside instead of a totally proletarian stick of butter. My grandparents were amazing people, but they would scold my mother for my lack of upbringing if I held my fork in the "wrong hand" and ate like "an American," and don't get them started on my brutal food cutting technique (or lack thereof)!

The Kitchen Gallery has all of the high-quality kitchen equipment that you could ask for. Spice racks, utensils, tableware, cutlery, Lodgeware ... I could go on and on. They offer cookware in a variety of price ranges, though all are of good quality. They have a unique assortment of all kinds of kitchen gadgets, in addition to books and product lines from Food Network stars. Items are available in a variety of styles as well, ranging from quirky modern martini glasses to elegant Japanese bamboo placemats to french toile napkins. They also stock picnic baskets, soy-based candles and tea kettles. Really, just about anything you could hope for, they have in this charmingly laid out shop.

When I enter The Kitchen Gallery I must look like one of the children in Willy Wonka's edible garden, running from item to item saying things like, "This is totally cool!" "Wow! I don't have one of these!" "Popover tins! I've always wanted to make popovers!" The staff at The Kitchen Gallery is friendly and jumps at the chance to help with any questions or special requests (believe me, I'm the king of special requests). Owner Leslie Firth is sociable and loquacious, openly talking about her family and her favorite items in the store that she uses.

Yes, it is possible to buy kitchen equipment many places in the county but let me warn you: kitchen equipment is the one place you don't want to skimp. This is definitely a "You get what you pay for" thing. When I buy kitchen equipment I fully intend on it lasting for the rest of my life, and you should too. After all, it's a waste of money to buy something over and over again, unless it's eggs.

I'll be honest, I do have a block of cheap knives in my kitchen and they have occasional uses, but the lion's share of my kitchen work is done by my high quality knives. Good quality cookware makes the work so much easier, and there is a good feeling you get when you look down at your utensils and realize that it is as beautiful as it is a pleasure to work with.

I can hear some people questioning how the quality of a kitchen tool can affect your preparation, so think of it this way: My car has over 250 horsepower, my wife's has 100, my car is more comfortable to drive, gets better mileage, and has more gumption than her car, so naturally we take my car when we have to go somewhere together. You feel the difference everywhere we go although we are doing the same task in both vehicles. The higher quality makes for a better trip. Does that make sense?

I don't want to give you the impression that everything good has to be expensive, but I do want you to think before you buy a new can opener, "Am I buying this because it's the best one or because it's the available one?" For example, I have a cheap but good quality meat tenderizing mallet that I bought at a dive shop where I worked years ago. It's a good quality item without breaking the bank. Good quality doesn't necessarily mean expensive.

Every once in a while my wife gets quixotic and buys kitchen utensils. I have no idea why she does it because she rarely cooks, but intermittently she'll bring home a plastic ladle or some goofy utensil and claim "We needed it!" How does a woman who doesn't cook figure out what we need in a kitchen utensil? Please somebody help me to understand that one! As a compromise to spare her feelings, I have a place in the pantry that these unusable tools get stashed that, if she really seeks them out she can use them. Most often they get put there never to be seen again. Life's too short to adapt to inferior tools.

I have yet to see an item in The Kitchen Gallery that I thought wasn't excellent quality or a useful item. OK, I'll personally never get a butter curler, but that is mainly due to the fact that I never entertain at home and don't see a need to do it for my family. The magnetic spice holders though, they are fantastic! They come in a set with six canisters and a metal plate that can be mounted on the wall. I own three sets of them and have freed up an entire shelf in my kitchen. A little hint; take a strip of cellophane tape and attach it to the side of the spice canister and write what the spice is with a marker for easy identification later. It's faster than looking and wondering "Is this chipotle powder or paprika?"

Instead of a recipe this week ...well maybe it is a recipe, I wanted to help people with the care of their Lodgeware, a.k.a. cast iron cookware. My directions as always may be unlike others you may have seen, but my process has developed over many years of experimentation.

When you first purchase your cast iron pan you need to put it through a process called seasoning. This provides the pan with protection (after all, iron has a tendency to rust) and a somewhat non-stick surface. Cast iron cookware is not pre-seasoned at the manufacturer, but is coated with a food-grade wax to prevent moisture from causing problems during shipping and storage. When you bring home your pan, you can put it in your dishwasher for a nice heavy cleaning to remove this coating, but you should know that this will be the last time your pan sees soap and water ever again. When the wash cycle is finished, take the pan out of the dishwasher and put it on high heat on the stovetop for about a minute, then turn off the heat and let it cool down for half an hour. Why did you heat the pan after the washing? To remove any microscopic traces of water that might be hiding in the pores of the metal before "seasoning"; it. That's the next step.

Preheat your oven to 350 degrees. Cover your cooled pan entirely, inside and out, with bacon grease, lard, or vegetable shortening. For this original seasoning, liquid oils such as corn oil or even peanut oil will not work as well. You need a high saturated fat type item for this first seasoning to prevent rancidity. Once the pan is completely covered, place it directly on the top rack of your oven with the bottom rack below it covered in aluminum foil or a large cookie sheet placed beneath the pan to catch the grease as it drips (or just buy some oven cleaner for you to scrub the oven with later).

Bake the pan for an hour. Then (WITH HOT MITTS!) remove and let cool on the stovetop. Your pan is now seasoned, but repeating this process one or two more times will give you an even better result.

Some people recommend cleaning your cast iron ware after use with hot water and a stiff brush ... Not me. Hot water breaks down and removes fats from surfaces and you want to protect those, so I propose when your pot needs cleaning you first empty out any excess grease or fat, wipe it out with a couple of paper towels, and then add a half a cup of kosher salt. Using that salt as an abrasive, take a moist sponge or wad of paper towels and scrub the pan clean with it. When the pan bottom is clean and smooth again the salt will be a dirty ugly color so just dump it into the garbage and with a dry towel remove any left over salt. Cleaning your pan like this will save the original seasoning and add an additional layer of seasoning, further improving the condition of your pan.

How do you know if you are doing a good job at keeping your pan seasoned? The inside bottom should feel slick and smooth like a Teflon pan. If you wash your pan with soap and water or it doesn't feel slick and smooth then repeat the original seasoning process again. Taking care of your cast iron like this and it can be handed down for generations.

Ross A. Christensen is an award-winning gardener and gourmet cook. He is the author of "Sushi A to Z, The Ultimate Guide" and is currently working on a new book. He has been a public speaker for many years and enjoys being involved in the community.

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