

# How to Select Essential Kitchen Tools

By Carl Hall

*“Think Pyrex, Corningware and Rubbermaid – particularly if you find yourself microwaving leftovers or other types of meals, glass and plastic from these manufacturers and more come in well put together sets at good prices that are versatile, convenient, and tough enough to become family heirlooms.”*

If you're a kitchen neophyte, a trip to Bed, Bath and Beyond or Williams Sonoma or the housewares department of your local department or discount store can be an exercise in confusion. There's so much to choose from these days at every store, from the basics to material for the professional cook and a lot of crossover in between. Deciding how to outfit your kitchen depends to some extent upon the kind of cook you are and what you've got to work with (a hot plate requires less equipment than a six burner Viking stove with grill, wok burner and warming oven, for example.) Are you strictly a warmer-upper or do you want more? Do you only make meat and potatoes, or is creating elaborate cakes and pies something you dream about? Are you filling out your wedding registry, or outfitting a first-time-away-from-home student, or filling the kitchen in a vacation home? Though everyone is going to have different needs – and that's part of what's wonderful about a kitchen, the way gadgets and implements collect as cooking becomes more sophisticated, here are a few tips:

- 1) Don't skimp on knives. Though you needn't buy the most expensive knives in the store, cheap, un-sharpen-able knives are always a waste of money. Buy steel or carbon steel knives that can be honed with a steel and sharpened with a sharpener – which you should also have. Sharp knives, while serious tools, do more to improve your cooking preparation than any single other item in your kitchen. Many reputable manufacturers from Cuisinart to Wusthoff to Sabatier sell sets of knives that often include other useful items like kitchen shears and sets of steak knives (for which, like a bread knife, it's okay to be serrated.)
- 2) Choose your electrics wisely. Nothing can be more annoying, every day, than a cheap coffee maker or wimpy blender. So buy the best you can afford and look for combination deals – manufacturers like Cuisinart and KitchenAid often make tools with multiple uses – food processor/blenders and mixer/grinders. KitchenAid's classic stand mixer can be purchased with a variety of accessories from pasta makers to ice crushers. By the same token, let the tool fit the task – your college student may need a hand mixer to whip up a brownie mix but a full-blown 600 watt stand model is overkill.
- 3) Buy plain dishes and silverware on sale to mix and match and always consider service for 12 – though those sets of silver and dishes and glasses for four and eight can be attractively

priced, you never know how many people are going to show up, things break, and eventually your service for four is service for two and a half. Buying in large quantities in simple patterns is cheaper in the long run.

4) If you're an inexperienced cook, expensive pans can only do so much – so don't buy the cheapest, but don't buy the most expensive either unless you're truly committed to learning how to cook – which includes how to take care of your expensive pans. Again, many fine brands of cookware make ranges for home cooks with features like non-stick surfacing and cool handles that may not be quite as versatile as professional models, but are more suited to the occasional chef. On the other hand, if you're going to be baking, buy the best you can afford – good quality heavy bake ware will give you a far better result than cheap drugstore pans.

5) Think Pyrex, Corningware and Rubbermaid – particularly if you find yourself microwaving leftovers or other types of meals, glass and plastic from these manufacturers and more come in well put together sets at good prices that are versatile, convenient, and tough enough to become family heirlooms. Many of these items from bowls to bakeware come with lids and carriers and go from freezer to oven to table. (You can clean that varnished look clear bakeware sometimes get with cream of tartar.)

6) A final word to the wise – never be without a mechanical (not electric) can opener, a corkscrew and a “churchkey” type bottle and can opener. Other essentials: a slotted spoon, a selection of whisks, a colander, a strainer, a box grater, a selection of brushes, zip loc bags, a potato peeler, an apple corer and a melon baller and microplane grater for citrus zesting. KitchenAid, Oxo Good Grips, Cuisinart and many others make a wide variety of high quality, well designed kitchen gadgets available separately and in sets – and get that cherry pitter while you're at it, you never know when you'll need it.