

Cast Iron Cooking

When my parents were first married, they did not have many material possessions to set up house. In fact, on the way home from their honeymoon, my mother realized they had no pots and pans with which to cook dinner. My mother said before arriving at their new home, they stopped and purchased a cast iron skillet.

When my husband and I married, my mother gave me several large, black cast iron skillets. I thanked her, and then quickly put the bulky skillets away, and reached for my light, non-stick skillets instead.

Over the years, as my cooking skills were honed through trial and numerous errors, I found myself dusting off those heavy cast iron skillets and learning the true value of this tried and true cookware.

Cast-iron is formed by pouring molten iron into a mold. The process is quite old—in fact it originated in the 6th century B.C. in China. The early settlers to North America brought cast iron cookware to America and pretty much every household had at least one seasoned skillet and a Dutch oven. Many homes also had corn stick and muffin pans, grill pans, kettles, and the like.

For modern cooks, the cons of cast iron cookware are obvious: it is heavy, can be difficult to clean, and perhaps most irritating, must be properly seasoned to begin with. After all that, if you are left wondering what the pros of cast iron cookware is, consider these points: Cast-iron pans are extremely reasonably priced—you can find a large skillet for as little as 20 dollars. In addition, if you take care of them, your cast-iron cookware will last you a lifetime or even longer—my mother still has several pieces from my grandmother, which are precious keepsakes. Most non-stick skillets rarely last longer than a few years, especially if you discard them as soon as you see evidence that the coating is coming off. My favorite reason to cook with cast-iron is that you can sear something perfectly, and then immediately pop the pan into a hot oven to finish cooking. This works quite well if you want to cook a thick steak inside on a cold winters' night.

To properly season a new cast-iron pot, wash with mild soapy water. Rinse and dry thoroughly. Coat the entire surface with oil, including the outside and handles. Place the pot in a 300-degree oven and cook for about an hour. Place a baking sheet under it to catch any drippings from the oil. Cool the pan and then wipe it with paper towels. After each use, wash the pan with warm water, but avoid using harsh detergents. If the pan shows signs of rusting, simply re-season. Never put cast-iron pans in the dishwasher. So, dust off your cast-iron skillet and try these recipes to truly appreciate what our ancestors realized.

Country Fried Steak and Gravy

1 pound top round steak, about ½ inch thick, cut into 4 pieces
½ cup canola oil
1 cup buttermilk
Tabasco to taste
1 cup flour
salt and pepper

2 tablespoons butter
2 cups milk
Dash cayenne

Using the pointed side of a meat mallet, pound the steaks to tenderize them, then use the flat side of the mallet to pound them to about 1/4-inch thick.

In a deep, heavy skillet, heat oil until almost smoking.

In a shallow bowl, mix the buttermilk and hot sauce. In another shallow bowl or pie plate, combine the flour, 1 teaspoon salt, and the pepper and mix well. Dip each steak in the buttermilk, then the flour mixture. Reserve 1 1/2 tablespoons of the flour mixture and set aside. Two at a time, deep fry the steaks, turning once, until nicely browned on both sides, about 3 to 4 minutes. Transfer paper towels to drain then place on a foil-lined baking sheet and keep warm in a 200-degree oven while making gravy.

Discard excess oil. With skillet over low heat, melt butter. Whisk in reserved 1 1/2 tablespoons flour mixture. Stir until smooth and bubbly, scraping up browned bits from the bottom of the skillet. Whisk in the milk and ground cayenne, if using, and bring to a simmer. Simmer for about 3 minutes, or until flour taste is gone. Season with salt and pepper to taste and dash cayenne. Serve the steak with the gravy.
Makes 4 servings.

Ham and Red Eye Gravy

2 tablespoons butter
1 slice country ham, about 1/4 inch thick
3 tablespoons strong, brewed coffee
4 tablespoons water

Melt butter in skillet and fry ham until done. Remove ham to plate and keep warm. Add coffee and water to skillet. Bring to boil. Serve gravy with ham.

Skillet Cornbread

1/2 pound bacon, chopped
3 jalapenos, seeded and diced (optional)
3 cups cornmeal
1 teaspoon baking powder
1 teaspoon baking soda
2 teaspoons salt
1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
3 cups buttermilk
2 large eggs, lightly beaten
10 tablespoons melted butter
Preheat the oven to 450 degree.

Brown chopped bacon in a 10-inch cast iron skillet. Add jalapeno and saute until softened.

In a bowl, combine the cornmeal, baking powder, baking soda, salt, and pepper and mix well. In a small bowl, combine the buttermilk, eggs, and melted butter. Add to dry ingredients and stir just to combine. Quickly pour the cornmeal batter into the hot skillet.

Bake for 25 to 30 minutes, or until firm and golden brown on top. Let sit for 5 minutes, and then turn out onto a cutting board. Cut into wedges and serve hot with butter on the side.

Fried Catfish

6 catfish fillets
1/2 cup whole milk
1 tablespoon salt
1 teaspoon pepper
1 cup flour
1/2 cup yellow cornmeal
2 teaspoons paprika
dash cayenne
10 slices bacon

Clean, wash and dry fish. Combine milk, salt and pepper in a bowl. In a pie plate or shallow dish, combine flour, cornmeal, paprika and cayenne. Dip fish in milk mixture then roll in flour and cornmeal mixture. Fry bacon in a heavy skillet until crisp. Remove bacon, leaving bacon drippings in skillet. Drain bacon on paper towels. Fry fish in hot drippings for about 4 minutes. Turn carefully with a spatula and fry for 4 to 6 minutes longer, or until fish flakes easily with a fork and is browned. Drain on paper towels. Serve with bacon or save bacon for another use. You can also substitute canola oil for the bacon fat.

Skillet Fried Chicken

1 (2 1/2 to 3 pound) chicken, cut into pieces

Bacon fat vegetable oil for frying

1/2 cup flour

1/2 cup yellow cornmeal

1 tablespoon poultry seasoning

Dash cayenne

Salt and pepper

Wash the chicken parts thoroughly and dry them on paper towels. Heat the fat to 380 degrees in a heavy cast-iron skillet. Place the flour, cornmeal, and seasonings in a brown paper bag. Add the chicken pieces, a few at a time, and shake well to ensure that each piece is coated with the seasoned flour.

Put the chicken pieces in the frying pan and fry uncovered for 25 to 30 minutes, turning occasionally to make sure that each side is golden brown. Remove the chicken pieces and drain them on pieces of brown paper bag. Serve hot.

