Chapter 1

Welcome to Cast-Iron Cooking

In This Chapter

- Cozying up to cast iron
- Reviewing the cooking benefits
- Caring for your cast iron

ast iron has a nostalgic appeal. Watch reruns of old TV Westerns or pick up any book chronicling America's past, from colonial times to the settling of the West to more modern portrayals of cowboy round-ups, and you're bound to find at least one domestic scene that features a cook, a fire, and a cast-iron pot. If you're into history, the idea of cooking the same way that your ancestors did may persuade you that cast iron is for you.

Most cooks today, however, want a few more incentives than the rough-around-the-edges charm that cast iron brings. They want cookware that's conducive to healthy eating; that's easy to use and care for; that can be used for a wide range of cooking methods; and that can withstand the abuse and use that occurs in a busy kitchen.

Cast iron offers all these qualities. Easy to use and easy to care for, cast iron lasts practically forever, and you can use any cooking method to cook anything in it. And most cast-iron cooks will tell you that food cooked in cast iron tastes better than food cooked in anything else. But like any well-crafted cookware, cast iron does require some care, and what you cook in it can turn out better if you know a few tricks.

In this chapter, I introduce you to basic information about cooking in cast iron, explain its benefits, and tell you what you need to know to use it successfully.

Coming Down on the Side of Cast Iron

Most modern-day cooks have never cooked in cast iron, many have never (knowingly, anyway) tasted a cast-iron dish, and even fewer have probably ever cared for a cast-iron skillet — beyond hanging it on the kitchen wall and dusting it periodically. If you're one of these people, you may not realize the culinary wonder that cast iron can be.



Plain and simple, cast iron is a great cookware. In terms of heating properties, economy, usefulness, and health benefits (yes, even health benefits), cast iron has much to offer. And that list doesn't even begin to touch on the area of taste!

So what's so great about cooking in cast iron? Plenty. Cast iron, with the proper seasoning and care, offers all the same benefits — and then some — that more modern cookware offers, and it has a history and longevity that these others lack.

'Til death do us part

Cast iron isn't just a descriptive term. These pots and pans are actually made from *iron* that has been melted and formed in pan-shaped molds or *casts*. (If you're interested in the details of how cast-iron pans are made, see the sidebar "A pan is born.") Made from the same base material that's used in engine blocks and building girders, cast-iron pans can last forever. Well, maybe not forever, but pretty darn close.

Cast iron's longevity is one reason why it can be so easy to find and relatively inexpensive. You don't have to buy it new. Many people inherit their cast iron or buy it at garage and yard sales. Even old pans that have been abused can be reborn with a little work. (Chapter 4 tells you how to save a worn cast-iron pot.)

The essential utensil — until 1940

People have been using cast iron for more than cookware since the 1600s. They also used it to dip candles, dye fabric, make soap, and wash clothes. During the California Gold Rush, folks panned for gold using small cast-iron skillets. Keep reading for more cast-iron trivia tidbits:

- Many people credit Paul Revere with being the creator of the Dutch oven — a fact that the Dutch are none too happy about.
- George Washington's mother bequeathed her cast iron in her will. You can still see some of the selection on display in the National Museum in Washington, DC.
- Lewis and Clark listed their Dutch oven as one of the most important pieces of equipment that they took with them on their exploration of the Pacific Northwest in 1804.
- Cast-iron cookware remained popular in the United States until the 1940s, when lighter, shinier aluminum cookware was introduced. Boo. Hiss.
- Today, the Dutch oven is the official cookware of the states of Texas, Arkansas, and Utah.



If cared for properly, cast iron is extremely tough and can last generations. It won't scratch, chip, or melt. (Well, at least not below 2,500 degrees. And I'm guessing that you're dealing with temperatures slightly below that mark.) The handles don't fall off, and cooking in it won't kill your pet parakeet. (Believe it or not, some other nonstick pans actually release a fume that's deadly to birds; see the sidebar "Keeping Tweety safe" for details.)

In fact, few things can harm a cast-iron pan. The two biggest dangers to cast iron? Cold water on a hot pan and a trip through the dishwasher. Head to Chapter 4 for care instructions.

Growing old gracefully

If you've ever found yourself examining (and cursing) the bottom of a non-stick pan for scratches and peels, you may come to appreciate that cast iron doesn't wear out with age; it actually gets better. The reason is that every time you cook in the pan, you're actually *seasoning* it again, filling in the microscopic pores and valleys that are part of the cast-iron surface. The more you cook, the smoother the surface becomes until, lo and behold, you have a pan that's the envy of cast-iron cooks everywhere.

New cast iron is a gunmetal gray. This color darkens with the initial seasoning. (See Chapter 3 for seasoning instructions.) It grows darker with every use until you reach the *patina* (the dark color and slight shine cast iron develops over time) that's the mark of well-used and well-seasoned cast iron. (See Figure 1-1.)



Figure 1-1: New cast iron (front) is relatively light. Older cast iron (back) has a satiny patina.

Of course, not all old cast iron has been taken care of, and some old pans look their age. Your cast iron may have enough rust spots, cooked-on gunk, and pitted surfaces to earn a place on the junk pile.



Keep in mind, however, that looks can be deceiving. Many battered and beaten cast-iron pieces can be reclaimed, rejuvenated, and restored to life. (Chapter 4 provides details.) With a little work, you can restore most old cast iron to cooking condition. And many consider cast iron to be a collectible, so you could end up with a pan that has value beyond how well it bakes biscuits. (For a word or two about collectible cast iron, see Chapter 2.)

Making dollars and sense

Cast iron is rugged and heavy. It isn't fancy cookware, and it doesn't have a fancy porcelain surface or come in a variety colors that match your kitchen decor. Of course, it has other positive features: It's nonstick when seasoned and, as a rule, it costs much less than other types of nonstick cookware. Add the longevity of cast iron (explained in the preceding "Growing old gracefully" section), and the savings are even greater. Table 1-1 gives you an idea of the cost difference between new cast iron and other nonstick cookware. As you read this table, keep the following in mind:

- ✓ The prices are approximate. You may pay more or less, depending on whether you buy your cookware from a retailer, the manufacturer, or order it from a third party who's offering discounts.
- All the non-cast-iron items listed come from nonstick product lines. When seasoned properly, cast iron has a nonstick surface, so we've only included comparable surfaces.



If you're buying new cast iron, buy preseasoned if you can. Preseasoned pans are only slightly more expensive, and the preseasoning eliminates the need to season your pans before use.

Table 1-1	Cost of New Cast Iron versus Other Cookware	
	10-Inch Skillet	12-Inch Skillet
Cast Iron		
Natural finish	\$10 (10.25 inch)	\$18
Preseasoned*	\$15 (10.25 inch)	\$22

	10-Inch Skillet	12-Inch Skillet
Non-stick Cookware		
All Clad	\$90	\$115
Analon	\$75	\$95
Cuisinart	\$70 (9.5 inch)	\$100 (12.5 inch)
KitchenAid	\$110	\$140
Le Crueset	\$50 (9.0 inch)	\$60

^{*}Lodge Manufacturing is the only domestic producer of cast iron in the United States, and the only cast-iron manufacturer that offers a preseasoned line of cookware.

As a rule, cast iron is inexpensive if you buy it new or as an antique. It's not uncommon to hear of someone buying a cast-iron dish from a rummage sale or farm auction for \$1 or a set of cast iron pots or pans for \$15. For information on what to look for, whether you buy new or used cast iron, head to Chapter 2.



A pan is born

The process used to make cast-iron cookware, sand casting, has existed for many centuries, and the basic technique is still pretty much the same as it's always been: Take a mold shaped in sand, pour in molten iron, let it cool, chip away the sand, and there you go.

Of course, the actual process is a little more complex than that. Lodge Manufacturing, the only domestic producer of cast-iron cookware in the United States, mixes and melts pig iron (basically iron ore) and scrap steel (the leftovers from the manufacture of electric plates — the cleanest scrap steel available) together in a 2,800-degree furnace. After slagging off the impurities, which rise to the top, Lodge tests the molten iron to make sure that it meets quality and safety standards.

Then the molten iron is poured into the *cast*, a sand-clay mold. After it cools, the mold is dumped onto a vibrating conveyor belt that shakes the sand mold loose from the cast-iron product. The cast-iron is then shot blasted with millions of tiny BB's to remove any crusted sand that remains. Rough or sharp edges left over from the molding process are ground by hand, and the pan is literally stone washed to remove any remaining dust and smooth the pan's surface.

Lastly, the pan is dipped in a food-grade, FDA-approved wax dip to protect it from rust during shipping. One final quality control check looks for imperfections or flaws, tossing out any castiron products that don't meet the standards before packaging and sending the product to destinations around the world.

Cast iron is economical in another way. Cooking with cast iron uses less heat. Cast iron absorbs and retains heat so efficiently that you use less fuel when you cook with it. If you cook daily in cast iron, over the course of the average life span, you may save enough to actually make up the cost of the \$10 skillet you're using. Okay, so it's not a huge savings, but it's a savings nonetheless (well, less, actually). Chapter 5 explains the heating properties of cast iron and how these affect the way you cook in more detail.

Offering versatility and variety



As plain as it looks, cast iron offers plenty of variety regarding what you cook and how and where you cook it.

- ✓ The selection is huge. Cast iron comes in just about any kind of pan, pot, and cookware shape you can think of. In addition to fry pans and skillets, you can find cast-iron griddles, grill pans, serving pots, Dutch ovens, pizza pans, melting pots, kettles, casseroles, loaf pans, muffin pans, woks, and more. For information on selecting your cookware and specialty items, head to Chapter 2.
- ✓ A single pan covers a multitude of dishes. Just because you can find all sorts of different cast-iron products doesn't mean that you need to have them to have a well-stocked kitchen. You can use a single cast-iron skillet for just about any cooking task: Bake a cake (Chapter 13), sear a filet (Chapter 6), roast a chicken (Chapter 7), fry potatoes or stir-fry vegetables (Chapter 10) one skillet is all you need. But if, like me, you discover that cast-iron cooking is loads of fun and makes the food you cook in it taste great, you're probably going to want more than a single skillet.



▶ Cast iron isn't particular about where you cook. With cast iron, you begin a recipe on the stovetop, for example, and then move it to the oven to finish. In fact, many recipes in this book instruct you to begin the dish in one place and then transfer it to another. You can even take your cast iron outside to cook under the sun or stars. Let's see you do that with a \$100 Aqua Blue or Fire-Engine Red Dutch oven. (I provide all the ins and outs of outdoor, campfire cooking along with a number of great recipes in Chapter 14.)



- This one probably goes without saying, but you *cannot* use cast iron in your microwave. If you do, you'll ruin your pan and your oven, and the fireworks display won't be worth the cleanup and replacement costs.
- ✓ You can use it for most cooking tasks. Cast iron is great for baking, simmering, braising, roasting, frying, grilling, and more. Really, the only thing that you don't want to do on a regular basis with your cast iron is

- boil water in it. (Water breaks down the seasoning and can cause your cast iron to rust; head to Chapter 4 for information on caring for your cast iron.)
- ✓ You can cook almost anything in it. Although cast iron made its reputation as the cookware to use for good, ol' fashioned cooking, don't let this reputation limit you as to how you use it. Because of its heating properties, its nonstick surface, its ability to withstand high temperatures, and the fact that you can use it both in the oven and on the stovetop, you can cook just about any food in it. Of course, some rules exist for what you can cook in cast iron and how you should cook it. Chapter 5 includes all the cooking tricks and techniques that are an important part of successful cast-iron cooking.
- ✓ It's cookware and serving ware all rolled up in one. Serving from a cast-iron dish has a presentation appeal all it's own (see Figure 1-2). You can't beat it for roasted meats, stews, chilis, pies, cobblers, and anything else that you want to look warm and appetizing. More importantly, cast iron holds heat, so your food stays warm throughout dinner, just the way you want it to for second helpings. One-dish meals, such as gumbo or jambalaya, are ideal candidates for serving straight from the pan. Chapter 9 has several recipes that you may want to try.



Figure 1-2:
Cast iron
can go
straight
from the
stove (or
oven or
campfire) to
your table.

Experiencing Americana

The Pilgrims brought cast iron from the Old World to the New, and the pioneers took it westward. Heavy, dark, and rustic, cast iron has a nostalgic appeal that modern-day cookware lacks. It's the cookware of choice for

countless outdoor enthusiasts, and no cattle drive would be complete — even today — without a cook, a cast-iron pot, and campfire.

Although you can cook just about any highbrow dish in cast iron, down-home favorites and comfort foods are what cast iron built its reputation on. These are also the foods that many modern cast-iron cooks still like to prepare in their black iron pans. And you'd be hard-pressed to find a better pan for many traditional favorites, such as cornbread, biscuits, and muffins. (Chapters 11 and 12 have several scrumptious recipes.)

This book contains several nontraditional cast-iron recipes, but if you like the old standards — the foods that your ancestors may have been inclined to make — head to Chapters 14 and 15, where you can find outdoor dishes and game recipes.

Here's to your good health

Cast iron gets a bad rep because it's often seen in the company of comfort foods and down-home country cookin' — the kind with plenty of fat and butter. And you can't beat it for frying eggs and potatoes — dishes that aren't the centerpiece of any heart-healthy diets that I've heard of.

True. All true. But it's not the whole story. Cooking in cast iron can actually be part of a healthy lifestyle.



Well-seasoned cast iron is virtually stick-free, requiring less or no oil — a characteristic of many heart-healthy recipes. You can cook any of the dishes that you would normally cook in any other nonstick pan in a cast-iron skillet. Cast iron isn't just good for heavy comfort foods; you can also use it to cook healthier, lighter fare. The trick is to keep your cast iron well seasoned. (Chapter 3 tells you how.)

Cooking in cast iron also boosts your iron intake. Trace amounts of iron get absorbed into the foods you cook.

Keeping Tweety safe

Rest assured that cooking in cast iron is safe for your feathered friends. Other nonstick cookware now must carry a warning that the fumes emitted during cooking can kill your pet bird.

So you need to get rid of your nonstick cookware or move your bird from the room. Cast iron doesn't emit such fumes. However, you *can* kill a bird with a cast-iron skillet if you drop it on him.



The World Health Organization (WHO) considers iron deficiency to be the most prevalent nutritional disorder in the world. People at high risk of iron deficiency or anemia include women of childbearing age, pregnant women, older infants and toddlers, and teenage girls. Also at risk are those who suffer a significant or ongoing blood loss, due to a trauma or a disease. After you're diagnosed with an iron deficiency, you can't take in enough iron from the food that you eat to make up for the iron you lost.

Showing Special Consideration to Your Prized Possession

Cast iron can be great cookware. It's tough enough to withstand plenty of rough treatment. You don't have to worry about scratching it, so you can reach back into the far corners of your utensil drawer and grab hold of your long-forgotten metal whisk that would ruin the nonstick coating of your other pans. Now you're free to poke and prod your steaks at will with a meat fork or scrape the crispy fried potatoes from the bottom with a metal spatula. You can move the same pan from your stovetop into the oven and crank the temperature to broil to brown your shellfish or to warm the pan for fajitas. (Chapter 8 features fish and seafood recipes, and Chapter 16 has a great fajita recipe.) But despite how tough and versatile it is, keeping your cast iron in cooking trim does require some special care:

- ✓ You have to season it. Seasoning is the key to cooking in cast iron. Without the proper seasoning, food will stick and taste metallic, and your pan is more susceptible to rust. Seasoning isn't difficult, but it does take a little time. For information on how to season or reseason a pan, skip to Chapter 3.
- ✓ The dark patina takes awhile to achieve. Cooking with your pan frequently can help your pan along; washing and storing it as described in Chapter 4 also helps, but a new cast-iron pan takes a while to break in. After it's broken in, though, you're going to have a hard time finding another type of pan that beats it for usefulness and flavor.



- If you can't stand the idea of seasoning a pan yourself or you want the instant gratification of a pan that's already been seasoned before you lay hands on it, consider wheedling Grandma out of her cast iron or buy preseasoned cast iron, which is now available.
- ✓ To preserve your pan's seasoning, be careful when cooking certain types of foods. Acidic foods, such as tomatoes or citrus products, can react to the iron and mess up your seasoning. So as a rule, avoid cooking these types of foods until your pan is well seasoned. Chapter 5 explains this and other cooking techniques that you need to know.



- ✓ Cooking successfully in cast iron requires certain techniques that may be unfamiliar you. Did you know, for example, that before you pour batter into a cast-iron pan, you should preheat the pan? You'd be surprised at the difference this little trick makes to the consistency and flavor of your foods. You can find other successful tips like this in Chapter 5.
- ✓ You have to follow a few cleaning and storage rules. These rules keep the seasoning intact and help you avoid rust. But don't worry, they aren't difficult to follow: Don't use soap; don't put it in the dishwasher; store the cookware in a cool, dry place, and so on, but they may be different from what you're used to. Head to Chapter 4 for cleaning and storage instructions.
- ✓ Cast iron weighs a ton. You can look at this as a good thing: Because of its weight, it's sturdy, and it'll help you stay buff. Or you can look at its heaviness as a negative: Heaven forbid that you should try to anchor it on the drywall in your kitchen.

Before you throw up your hands and proclaim that cast iron isn't worth the effort, try to keep a little perspective: These care instructions aren't much different from the instructions that come with fancier and more expensive cookware. Various manufacturers include the recommendation that you not wash their cookware in a dishwasher. (The detergent is too abrasive and can mar the surface.) And you're likely to find added warnings: Don't use high heat, or you void your warranty. Don't use metal utensils, or you run the risk of damaging the nonstick surface and ruining your pan.



If you don't follow the care and cleaning instructions with cast iron, what you run the risk of ruining isn't the pan; it's the seasoning. It's a hassle, but you can fix that.