

A Guide to Selecting Cooking Utensils

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There are an infinite variety of cooking utensils. Some are necessary, some are not. To complicate things further, some of the unnecessary cooking utensils can still make your time in the kitchen easier, more enjoyable and more productive. Some utensils are designed for a very specific purpose, to do one particular job in the kitchen, while others are more general purpose, all-in-one tools.

Your first step is to figure out what type of cooking you prefer to do. This will inform your selection of cooking utensils. If you prefer to bake you will need an entirely different set of cooking utensils than if you prefer to cook Asian stir-fry. Once you've decided this, you can make a list of the types of utensils you will need.

Just as the way you cook should inform which cooking utensils you choose, so should also consider what will work with your cookware. Different cooking surfaces require different utensils. For example, if you use a frying pan, you need a spatula. If you use a nonstick frying pan, you will need a spatula that is soft enough so as not to scratch the all-important cooking surface. Thus when choosing cooking materials, material is key.

The most common materials for cooking utensils are wood, stainless steel, and plastic. Each has its advantages and disadvantages. Like pots and pans, you may buy utensils in sets if you wish, or you may buy cookware one piece at a time.

Wood is a popular traditional choice for some utensils, such as spoons and spatulas. One of the distinct advantages of wood is that it will not scratch even the most delicate cooking surfaces. Another advantage of wood as a material for utensils is that it does not conduct heat. Wood is also very durable and won't melt, even in an unattended pan.

The disadvantage of wood utensils is that they are harder to clean than stainless steel or plastic cooking utensils. Additionally, if used in soups and sauces, the soup or sauce can penetrate the wood, which could make it necessary to replace the wooden utensil. Also, if you purchase wood, make sure you buy utensils that are treated to inhibit bacteria growth, as wood can tend to present a favorable environment for bacteria.

Stainless steel cooking utensils are by far the least likely to allow bacteria to thrive, and are by far the easiest cooking utensils to clean. They are attractive to look at, and are available with a wide variety of handle styles and tool heads.

The downside of stainless steel cooking utensils, however, is that they can scratch nonstick or cast iron pots. Even if you are very careful, you risk damaging the all-important cooking surface, as stainless steel is typically harder than cast iron or the materials used for nonstick cookware.

Plastic utensils are made expressly to avoid scratching the surfaces of nonstick or cast iron pots, and tends to be easy to clean. That's the good news. Plastic, however, has its

disadvantages. Plastic cooking utensils are not as resistant to heat as wood or metal, and may actually melt if left in a hot pot unattended. That could at best be difficult to clean, and at worst, ruin the pan. Additionally, if a plastic utensil melts, it can contaminate the food it melts in.

Wooden cooking utensils are typically not terribly expensive, with simple sets being even below \$5. Special use items may cost more, up to \$50 or so. Plastic utensils tend to be very affordable, also, with single pieces going for around \$2, and specialty items in the \$45 range. Stainless steel is the most expensive, but still very reasonably priced, at \$10 for a single piece, or \$15 for a top quality 9 piece set.

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Summary

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