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Should You Buy a Bargain Sauté Pan?

Paying top dollar for a saucepan or skillet isn't hard to justify. But how much should you spend on the infrequently used sauté pan?

This is an update of two previous [articles](#). For related content, see our review of [Traditional Skillets](#).

Back in 2001, All Clad was the winner of our testing of sauté pans, but now our top choice costs more than \$180. While a sauté pan--basically, a lidded skillet with straight rather than flared sides--is essential when you pan-fry cutlets and braise chicken parts or vegetables, it seems like an awful lot of money for a pan that might see action just once or twice a week, even in a busy home kitchen. Given the dizzying number of choices in the cookware aisle these days, we wondered if we could get similar performance for less money.

To find out, we assembled a lineup of eight "bargain" brands to compete against the All-Clad: Cuisinart (\$54.95), Emerilware (\$69.95), Farberware (\$69.99), Gourmet Standard (\$73.36), Henckels (\$79.95), Oneida (\$29.99), Scanpan (\$99.99), and Sitram (\$49.99). Every pan had a capacity of 3 to 3 1/2 quarts (fine for most tasks) and a traditional (rather than nonstick) cooking surface, the better choice for developing the sticky browned bits-fond-that give pan sauces and braises deep flavor.

Disparate but Equal

For our first test, we prepared white rice. An hour later, we had nine batches, each one just as fluffy as the next. When we sautéed chopped onions over medium heat, a few pans browned them very quickly, while others left them pale, but slightly adjusting the temperature easily corrected both tendencies. Evenly pan-fried chicken cutlets? Check. Nice pan sauce from the drippings? Check. As every pan passed every test without incident, we wondered how much we'd overspent on cookware over the years--until we had our first casualty.

During the crêpe-making session--an unconventional test for finding hot or cool spots on a pan's cooking surface--every pan produced perfect crêpes except one: The Sitram's crêpes turned dark brown around the edges. The problem was obvious. The thick aluminum disk stamped to the pan's bottom did not quite extend to its outer edge, leaving an unprotected 3/4-inch ring.

If dark-edged crêpes were the Sitram's only problem, all would be forgiven. (Who but a Cook's equipment tester makes crêpes in a straight-sided pan?) But in a subsequent test-browning chicken thighs--that unprotected ring wreaked havoc again, burning the fond.

Fond, Farewell

Clearly, an expensive sauté pan isn't crucial for basic tasks. But what if we pushed these pans to their limits? After combing through the Cook's recipe archive, we had just the challenge: pan-seared steaks, cooked five minutes per side over very high heat (450 to 500 degrees). To see how well pans negotiated the fiery heat below versus the cold steaks above, we fastened a temperature probe to the cooking surface.

Our test taught us several lessons, the first of which revealed itself before the steaks even hit the pan. With the probes in place, we let the pans preheat until the surface reached 500 degrees. The variation in preheating times was shocking. From fastest to slowest: Scanpan (2:55), Gourmet Standard (3:07), All-Clad (3:11), Henckels (4:22), Cuisinart (4:45), Oneida (4:50), Sitram (5:00), Farberware (5:01). Emerilware? A whopping 7:36. No wonder the Emerilware had been on the slow side in some of the other tasks--it was probably still preheating!

The four fastest pans (Scanpan through Henckels) had one thing in common: clad-style construction, meaning that the entire pan is made of layers of stainless steel sandwiched around an aluminum core. The

slowest five (Cuisinart through Emerilware) all had thick aluminum-core disks attached to the bottom. Because the clad pans were much thinner on the bottom than the disk pans, they heated up more efficiently: At 0.05 inches thick, the Scanpan was the responsiveness champ, while the 0.30-inch-thick Emerilware--six times thicker--was the least responsive of all.

Of course, responsiveness is only part of the equation. A pan also needs to retain heat well. When the cold steaks hit the pan, the tables turned: The heat-retention champs were the Emerilware and the Farberware, two thick, disk-bottomed pans that kept the cooking surface between 450 degrees and 500 degrees for almost the full 10 minutes. The clad pans were much more volatile--dropping precipitously, then recovering, only to drop off again when we flipped the steaks. Despite the drama, the clad pans produced fine steaks, with the exception of the hyper-responsive Scanpan, which heated up to such extremes that it scorched the steaks and ruined the fond.

The steak test convinced us that the ideal sauté pan would balance responsiveness and heat retention--too much of one or the other meant either having to wait forever to get the pan hot enough or having to be super-vigilant in monitoring the temperature roller coaster. The clad-style All-Clad, Gourmet Standard, and Henckels and the disk-bottomed Oneida struck that balance well.

Design Matters

Although performance was our key concern, design details figured in as well. First, the size of the cooking surface matters. The pans tested ranged in cooking-surface diameter from 8 1/2 to 10 inches, and that extra inch and a half is not insignificant: We easily fit a cut-up 3 1/2-pound chicken in the larger pans, but the smaller models were too cramped to ensure proper browning.

Most pans had long metal handles that stayed cool, but the stubby Henckels handle heated up uncomfortably. Only one pan (Oneida) had a plastic handle, which stayed cool on the stovetop but precluded use in an oven hotter than 375 degrees. Five pans came with a "helper" handle, a small, loop-shaped second handle that made it easier to keep the pan level during transport. A deal breaker? No. The occasional tiebreaker? Yes.

In the end, it turns out you can get a great sauté pan for less than \$100. The modestly priced Gourmet Standard (\$74) matched the performance of the All-Clad (\$184) task for task.