



THE BEST MADE PANS

Gleaming copperware used to be seen only in chefs' kitchens. Now, as prices tumble, it has become a must-have for serious home cooks, too. **CLARE HARGREAVES** explains the miraculous properties beneath the shiny surface

"Use no iron pans... for they are not proper; but let them be copper, brass, or silver," advised Hannah Glasse in *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy*, first published in 1747. Of those three, copper would become the cooking-pan material of choice for professional and well-to-do home cooks alike, as anyone who has toured the kitchens of National Trust houses such as Petworth can testify. It was eventually ousted from many domestic stoves by the arrival of aluminium and stainless-steel pans, but in professional kitchens, it carried on being king.

Now copper is back. Inspired by chefs cooking in copper pans on television, home cooks are returning to the metal once again and a gleaming set of chic copper pans is the latest must-have kitchen gadget along with the juicer, the KitchenAid mixer and the espresso machine.

"Copper is a growing trend," says Wendy Miranda, the customer ambassador at Lakeland, which launched a range of copper pans 18 months ago. "I've worked for Lakeland for 20 years and this is the first time we've had a complete range. Sales are up 50 per cent on last year."

This is partly due to copper's handsome classic looks. Traditionally, it was just the heirloom-preserving pan that we, and many a country pub, displayed. Now we're showing off entire sets. "They warm up a kitchen," says Miranda.

Matthew Couchman, a buyer for John Lewis, agrees. "Copper pans are seen as a thing of beauty, something you'll keep for ever. They're popular on wedding lists."

Their quasi-divine quality, however, does mean eye-watering prices. At Harrods, a six-piece set of Mauviel copper pans lined with stainless steel will set you back £1,499 and a single 18cm Mauviel pan with lid at Selfridges costs £255.

But now, mass production in the Far East is creating copper pans at a fraction of the price.

So you can pick up an 18cm copper saucepan with lid at Lakeland for £76.99, or at John Lewis for £85 – not much more than you'd pay for a good stainless-steel pan. Lakeland's range starts at just £16.99 and now even the cut-price chain Aldi has got in on the act, with a range of copper pans starting at a mere £19.99 for a milk pan (they've sold fast, but some do remain in shops). Of course, the mass-produced pans don't have the artisanal beauty of a solid, hand-crafted Mauviel, but nor do they have its considerable weight – or price tag.

Both Lakeland and Selfridges say their best-selling copper pan is the 9cm "mini", with Selfridges reporting a 30 per cent increase in sales this year. Inspired by copper-crazy chefs on programmes such as *Great British Menu*, home cooks are now using the diddy pans to make sauces, mini crumbles and other desserts. According to Miranda, we're also borrowing the idea from such shows of using the pans as stylish serving dishes for starters. We're all professionals now.

But it's not just aesthetics. Behind copper's enduring popularity are its fantastic cooking qualities. As any chef, jam-maker or engineer knows, copper conducts heat brilliantly, helping food to heat quickly and cook evenly. "Copper is great for making things like scrambled eggs or custards," says Camilla Schneideiman, the managing director of Leiths School of Food and Wine in west London, which provides its students with a handsome collection of copper pans to cook with. "At home, I swear by my copper sauté pan for cooking steak – you can get it up to a high heat and control it really well."

Copper bowls have traditionally been used to beat egg whites, as the metal makes them come up higher and firmer than whites beaten in other metals. "Back in the day, a copper sabayon whisking bowl was something every young chef would dream of owning and using," says



the two-Michelin-starred Michael Wignall at Pennyhill Park in Surrey. In Mont Saint-Michel in Normandy, the fluffy omelettes produced by auberge owner La Mère Poulard by whipping the eggs in copper bowls were – and still are – legendary, with fans ranging from Leon Trotsky to Marilyn Monroe and Margaret Thatcher. La Mère Poulard would then cook her omelettes over a wood fire in wonderful long-handled copper pans, a spectacle you can still watch today.

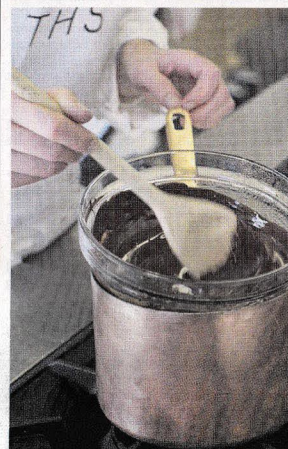
One reason for copper's comeback is new technology enabling it to be lined with stainless steel. This is harder-wearing and far easier to maintain than the tin traditionally used to line copper. It's also safer. A lining is vital, as copper can be toxic if used to cook acidic foods (though solid unlined copper is fine with eggs, or with sugar-packed jams), but tin linings wear out, so need regular replacing. In the old days, cooks often allowed tin linings to wear thin, with disastrous results, as Mrs Beeton realised when she observed that "people are often taken ill after eating food that has been cooked in copper saucepans".

Traditionally, the finest copper pans have been made in France, with names such as Mauviel considered the crème de la crème. Purists still buy nothing but. Selfridges, Harrods and Divertimenti sell Mauviel pans, crafted for nearly two centuries in the poetically named town of Villedieu-les-Poêles, or "Town of God and the pans", in Normandy. In the town's

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Hot stuff: Lakeland's copper pans (left); and in use at Leiths (below)



CARING FOR COPPER

Keep pans shiny by polishing with a metal cleaner. Or use old-fashioned methods such as rubbing with half a lemon dipped in salt, then rinsing in warm water before drying with a cloth.

A tin lining will eventually wear off. Do not use the pan if the copper is showing through the lining; get it re-tinned at a specialist shop such as London's Divertimenti.

Never heat an empty copper pan or use on a high heat, particularly if it's lined with tin or silver; the melting point of these is low, so they could start to bubble and run. Copper heats up fast, so you require a lower temperature to cook on it than you would use with other metals.

Do not use copper pans on induction hobs unless labelled induction-friendly (which will mean a base of stainless steel rather than copper).

If your pan is tin-lined, cook with wooden implements, and don't leave your pan to soak overnight.

Wash while still fairly hot, in warm water, using detergent and a soft pad/brush. Never put copper pans in the dishwasher.

If you have an unlined copper pan that forms verdigris or green spots after being left unused, remove these at once, as copper salts can be toxic. Rinse the pan in a strong solution of water and vinegar or rub it over with half a lemon dipped in salt.

pretty stone courtyards you can still see the ancient workshops of its many copper workers, known as *les soundins* ("the deaf ones") because of the effect the hammering had on their hearing. Visitors can see modern-day copper workers at work in the Atelier du Cuivre (atelierducuivre.fr) as well as in Villedieu's ear-tinting bell foundry (cornille-havard.fr), whose methods and materials (including horse dung and goat's hair to make the moulds) have barely changed since medieval times. The Mauviel factory that Ernest Mauviel started in 1830 to equip France's army canteens may have been updated but it's still run by the same family. Its copper pans' godly associations can only have helped its worldwide reputation.

The only big downside of any copper pan is the cleaning. Because copper tarnishes, where there's copper, there's cleaning. At Leiths, students spend part of Friday afternoons scrubbing their copper pans with a special home-made mixture. At Pennyhill Park, Wignall and his team spend more than an hour every Saturday cleaning with a similar solution. "It's a massive pain in the bottom," he grumbles.

For some, such as David Everitt-Matthias, the two-Michelin-starred owner-patron of Le Champignon Sauvage in Cheltenham, all this cleaning and maintenance makes copper a no-no. "It takes up too much time. Most copper pans can't be used on induction hobs, either," he says. "I do have a sabayon whisking bowl, but it's in the loft."

Many of us clearly feel the cleaning is a price worth paying. Could expending elbow grease on cleaning copper pans be the new middle-class workout? Sales figures suggest the copper craze is here to stay. Not just because copper pans are "proper" (in the words of Hannah Glasse), but because lower prices have suddenly brought these beautiful objects of desire within reach of ordinary mortals. ●