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BACK TO BASICS

Make 2016 the year of the tried and true

Charlotte Living would like to thank South End Kitchens Design Studio for graciously allowing us to shoot these must-have gadgets in their beautiful showroom located at 1500 South Blvd. Check out southendkit.com or call 704.594.2018 to find great ideas for your dream kitchen.

Spring cleaning. Out with the old and in with the new and improved; well sometimes. Other times it's better to forget the new fangled gadgetry and simply get back to the basics.

So once you've cleaned your kitchen of the old, the broken and the-not-ever-as-good-as-was-promised gizmos and gadgets, look to fill cabinetry back with culinary essentials that really do work.



Design your space so that everything has a place. I'm the first to admit that I'm a gadget girl, and the biggest problem with wanting to purchase every new gadget that slices and dices is storage space. If you're at the crossroads where you are ready to make 2016 the year of your dream kitchen, you don't have to go into the project alone. Our friends at South End Kitchens Design Studio are ready to help when you're ready to get started. Located at 1500 South Blvd., South End's expert staff will help you transform all those photos you've been collecting into the reality of a new dream kitchen.

One of my favorite new cabinet features is a rethinking of the kitchen drawer. Here banks of utensil drawers may be custom designed to your size specifications, so you'll have a place for every fork, spoon, knife and tool. Simply brilliant!



In the time before crock pots there was the Dutch Oven, the vessel that is essential to braising. Braising is by definition, the method of cooking meat or vegetables by browning in fat first, and then simmering in a small quantity of liquid in a covered container. One can start and finish a Dutch oven braise on the cooktop alone; or begin on the stove, then transfer the pot to the oven for several hours of low and slow cooking. Classic braised dishes include Beef Bourguignon, Coq au Vin and Osso Bucco, but you'll find your Dutch oven indispensable for roasting chicken, making pot roast, and preparing all sorts of soups and stews.



No more fear of frying, do it the classic way. Make a run to the hardware store and invest in one or two cast iron skillet for the very best flavor and finish. Use cast iron pans for fried fish or chicken, for fried eggs, to sauté vegetables or to bake cornbread or biscuits.

Start by seasoning the new pan. Scrub it clean once you have it home, then fill half way full with canola oil. Place a clean dry wooden spoon in the pan and place it on a hot burner to heat the oil. Don't walk away. Keep on eye on things and when little bubbles start to form around the wooden spoon, then move the pan off the heat. Let the oil cool completely. Repeat the process a couple of times and then pour off the cool oil. Your pan is now seasoned and ready for use.

To clean your cast iron pan after you cook, rinse it out with hot water. You can use a sponge or a Scrub Daddy (see my next entry), but don't use any soap or detergent. If something sticks, use coarse Kosher salt to act as a scrubbing agent. Once the pan is clean, place it on the stove top over low heat to dry thoroughly. Then use a paper towel dampened with a bit of oil to wipe down the pan before you stow it for another day's use. A well seasoned pan will take you far.



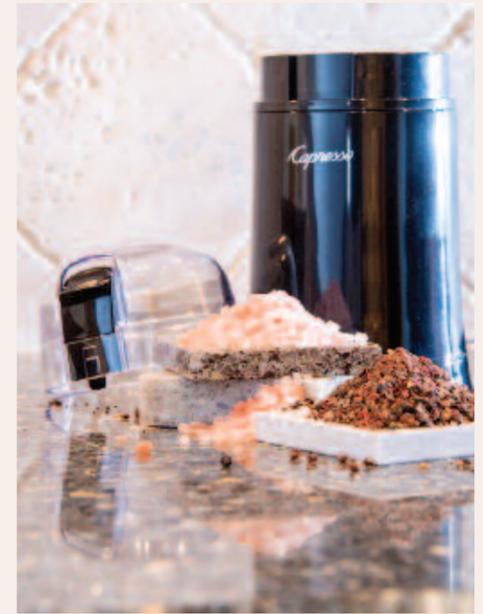
Julienne slicing made easy. Even with the very best knives, cutting a perfect Julienne slice takes some skill. While you practice with a bigger blade, make the job easy with a simple Julienne peeler. There are many varieties on the market – several "As Seen On TV" and a few less advertised that work quite well. These spiral slicers make short work of cutting ribbons of your favorite vegetables. My preference is for the bigger model with the handle that turns – you can just get more out of each vegetable, and it works on bigger cuts like potatoes or large summer squash. My go-to in this category however, is the simple hand held model, available in most kitchen shops and at a slightly better price in the housewares section of many local Asian markets. Just pull the double cutting blade down the side of any carrot, cucumber, squash or a block of Parmesan cheese for thin even cuts that look like pasta noodles. This summer use the julienne cutters to make "zoodles" instead of noodles – cut from zucchini and then cooked as you would any pasta. Delish!



Once the cooking is done, it's time to clean, and my newest favorite sponge/scrubber on the market is the Scrub Daddy. As originally seen on ABC's series *Shark Tank*, the television show that gives budding entrepreneurs a shot at making their dreams come true, the Scrub Daddy really delivers everything it promises. This amazing scrubber changes texture to stay firm in cool water and soften a bit in hot water. I love that particles of food do not become trapped in the sponge, and the smiley face styling is not only fun, it's practical. Hold the sponge, so your fingers slide into the holes that are the "eyes", this way you don't ruin your nails while you're cleaning. The smile on the face is perfect for getting food residue off of spoons and other cooking utensils. The Scrub Daddy stays fresher longer than any other sponge I've found on the market and the trademarked smile, just makes you smile back!

Grind it yourself for the very freshest of dried herbs and spices. Anything you cook is only as good as the quality of ingredients you add. The finest flavor comes from freshly ground spices. Think fresh ground pepper as opposed to fine ground out of a jar and apply that to every other spice you use. Purchase whole spices at my go-to-spice-store, The Savory Spice Shop in Southend; but instead of messing with a variety of grinders, just buy one good electric grinder or coffee mill. Use the same grinder for coffee and spices. After you grind coffee, simply brush out the remaining grinds before you grind your favorite spice. After you grind spices, grind a tablespoon of coffee beans to clean the grinder. The coffee acts as a filter and will totally remove any taste of the spices before you grind for your next morning cup-o-Joe.

Start your daily grind this season with "Heidi's Hot Pepper Blend" – equal parts of a trio of peppercorns – lampong, tellicherry and pink reunion; coarse ground as needed. Spice it up with the addition of coriander seeds for a lemon pepper of sorts or mustard seeds for a slightly spicier condiment.



Honing your skills. Any chef is only as good as the tools he or she uses, so above all else get good knives – they will last you a lifetime! Allow me to introduce Charlotte bladesmith Steve Watkins of Ironman Forge. Steve makes custom made knives that will keep you on the cutting edge. Carbon steel blades hold an edge for a long time, and the beautiful wooden handles assure this knife will stand out from the crowd. Check the Ironman Forge website for all the details on several lines of hand forged and finished knives – which come in a custom made wooded sheath – or if you are interested in collaborating with Steve on a fully personalized custom knife, email him at Steve@ironmanknives.com. Tell him you read about it here in *Charlotte Living*.

