Rating Large Dutch Ovens

To our surprise, we found that shape and color of interior finish are more important than weight—and we don't like nonstick.

BY ADAM RIED WITH EVA KATZ AND DAWN YANAGIHARA

Most cooks own a large, cheap pot for cooking pasta or blanching vegetables. As long as they'll bring water to a boil, the subtler performance characteristics of these pots are unimportant. For braises, stews, soups, and sauces, however—often dependent on moist-heat cooking procedures that begin with browning—these pots will not do. Enter the Dutch oven, a large, lidded pot or kettle designed specifically for these tasks.

As with most cookware products, Dutch oven choices are dizzying and prices vary widely. We wanted to test the same spectrum of brands, materials, finishes, and prices that most cooks would encounter while shopping. So we chose twelve pots, each of which satisfied our two primary criteria: large capacity (we agreed that six to eight quarts was the most useful size) and open stock availability (models sold only as part of larger cookware sets were not considered). In some cases, due usually to our capacity requirement, the pot we tested was not called a Dutch oven, but rather a casserole, sauce pot, or stock pot. If a manufacturer offered several cookware lines that each included a Dutch oven, we asked company representatives which line was the most widely distributed or best-selling and went with that.

As we cooked, the shape of the pots became increasingly important to us. We prefer pots that are wider and shallower because they are easier to see into, reach into, and they offer more bottom surface to accommodate larger batches of meat for browning. This reduces the number of batches required to brown a given quantity of meat, and with it, the chances of burning the flavorful pan drippings.

Though we did include a number of tall, deep pots in our full battery of tests, we eventually realized that comparing them to wide, shallow pots in the type of cooking we were testing was like comparing apples to oranges. To avoid unfair comparisons, we figured all of the pots' ratios of bottom surface area to height by dividing the diameter measurement by the height measurement, and decided to eliminate from further consideration the four pots with diameter-to-height ratios that were less than 2-to-1, including candidates from WearEver, Chantal, Farberware, and Revere.

We had also planned to test the T-Fal Armaral Sovereign Dutch Oven along with the others, until a T-Fal representative confirmed that it was not oven-worthy. Because many of the braised or pot roast recipes for which most home cooks use these pots require oven cooking, we considered the T-Fal's shortcoming to be a fatal flaw and knocked it out of the running.

Our final lineup included pots in stainless steel from All-Clad, Tramontina, and Cuisinart; in enameled cast iron from Le Creuset; in cast iron from Lodge; in cast aluminum from Berndes; and in anodized aluminum from Calphalon and Circulon. The Berndes and Circulon both had non-stick interior finishes.

Running the Tests

We first ran two tests to observe the pots' browning performance. In doing so, we looked at heat conduction, evenness of heat distribution, and response time, as well as the effects of bottom surface area and interior finish.

First, we cooked a pot roast by browning it on the stovetop over medium-high heat and then finishing it in the oven. All-Clad and Le Creuset excelled at browning because the pots did not overheat, so they did not burn either the meat itself or the pan drippings. In addition, both of these pans had light-colored interior finishes that made it easy to judge the caramelization of the pan drippings at a glance. Tramontina and Cuisinart also benefited from stainless steel interiors, though both pots ran a bit too hot during browning, slightly burning both meat and drippings. Pots with dark interior finishes, including both non-sticks, the dark gray anodized aluminum Calphalon, and the cast iron Lodge, masked the color of the drippings, making it difficult to determine whether they were burning. Once the Lodge heated up, which took longer than any other pot, its browning ability was on par with All-Clad and Le Creuset.

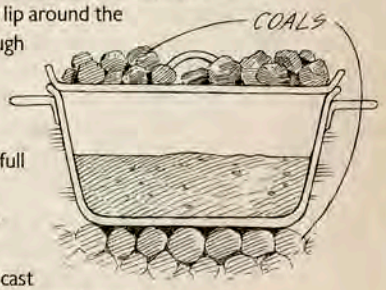
In a second round of testing, we cooked the beef soup recipe (*see* page 13) in each pot. This involved browning six pounds of beef shanks in three batches over medium-high heat on the stovetop. Because the drippings remained in the pot through all three batches, this was a more extreme test of the pots' ability to brown without burning.

Again, All-Clad and Le Creuset ran away with top honors, browning thoroughly, evenly, and with minimal threat of burning. Both Tramontina and Cuisinart did a better job browning the shanks than the roast, largely because the smaller shanks exuded more liquid during cooking. The Lodge cast iron also browned the shanks very well, but despite our attempts to caramelize the drippings in each pot to the same point, soups made in the dark-finished Lodge and Calphalon tasted slightly bitter, indicating that the drippings had overcaramelized or burned. The Berndes and Circulon represented the other side of that phenomenon, both producing soups that tasted thin and light, indicating under development of the drippings. In both cases, a light-colored interior would have made it easier to judge the degree of caramelization.

Dark interior finishes were not the only problem with the non-stick pots. In contrast to our

TERMINOLOGY | BUT WHAT IS A DUTCH OVEN?

A "Dutch" oven is nothing more than a wide, deep pot, usually with a wire handle. It was originally manufactured with "ears" on the side (small, round tabs used to pick up the pot) and a top that had a lip around the edge. The latter design element was important because a Dutch oven was heated through coals placed both underneath and on top of the pot. The lip kept the coals on the lid from falling off. One could bake biscuits, cobblers, stews, beans, just about anything with this method. Some cooks also used it for baking bread and pies; others used it to steam steaks and roasts or cook rice, hominy, and oatmeal. It was, in the full sense of the word, an oven. It was also a key feature of chuck wagons; photographs from the latter half of the 19th century show four or five huge Dutch ovens in use around a campfire, each one cooking a different dish.



And the name? The best explanation that I have read is that, for some time, the best cast iron came from Holland and the pots were therefore referred to as Dutch ovens. —Christopher Kimball

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOYNE

RATINGS OF DUTCH OVENS

RATINGS
★★★ GOOD
★★ FAIR
★ POOR

Eight Dutch ovens, each with a capacity of six to eight quarts and available from their manufacturers in open stock, were tested and evaluated according to the following criteria. All stovetop cooking tests were performed over 10,000 BTU gas burners on the KitchenAid home ranges in our test kitchen. The Testers' Comments augment the information on the chart with observations about unusual or noteworthy aspects of the pots and their performance.

PRICE: Prices listed at Boston-area retail outlets, in mail-order catalogs, or Manufacturer's Suggested Retail Promotional price. Because cookware is often heavily discounted, you may see different prices for the same item in your local stores.

MATERIALS: The materials for each pot (in some cases the exterior and interior are different), as well as the lid, are listed. Stainless steel pots are made with a core of conductive metal such as aluminum. If this layer goes all the way up through the sides of the pot, the note reads "complete aluminum core." If the conductive metal layer does not extend up the sides, the note reads "aluminum sandwich bottom."

CAPACITY AND MEASUREMENTS: The measurements listed are the diameter, measured across the top of the pan from inside edge to inside edge and height, measured from inside of the bottom surface to the top inside edge of the pan wall. Pans with a wider diameter were preferred.

WEIGHT: Measured with the lid on.

BROWNING: In the pot roast test, pots that produced a dark brown, even crust on the meat in two to four minutes were preferred. Pots that produced an uneven crust that was too light or dark in some spots, and took longer than four minutes, were downgraded slightly. Pots that smoked or burned the drippings were downgraded severely. In the beef soup test, pots that browned thoroughly and evenly, at a medium pace, were preferred. Pots that smoked or burned the pan drippings during any of the batches were downgraded.

SAUTÉ SPEED: Pans that produced soft, pale gold onions with no burned edges in ten to twelve minutes were considered medium speed and were preferred. Pans that took a little longer were considered slow and were downgraded slightly, and fast pans that burned the onions were downgraded seriously.

SIMMER: A slow, steady simmer, with bubbles barely visible, that produced evenly cooked, fluffy rice with minimal sticking was rated good. If the simmer was faster, with more bubbles noticeable, and the rice cooked unevenly or stuck a little bit, but did not burn, we rated the pot fair. If the simmer was very fast and looked as though it might approach a boil, with many bubbles visible, and the rice burned or stuck to the bottom, we rated the pot poor.

BOILING WATER: In part one, pots that brought the water to a boil in twenty to twenty-four minutes were rated good; those that took between twenty-five and twenty-nine minutes were rated fair; and those that required thirty minutes or more were rated poor. In part two, pots in which six or more cups of water remained would have been rated good; pots in which five to six cups remained were rated fair; and pots in which four to five cups remained were rated poor.

Brand	Price	Materials	Capacity	Weight	Browning	Sauté Speed	Simmer	Boiling	Testers' Comments
BEST DUTCH OVEN **All-Clad** Stainless Stockpot, Model 5508	$187	Stainless exterior and interior with complete aluminum core; stainless steel lid	8 QUARTS 10 1/4" X 5 1/4"	5 LBS., 8 1/4 OZ.	★★★ POT ROAST ★★★ BEEF BROTH	MEDIUM	★★★	★★★ PART I ★★ PART II	Comfortable heft and great heat distribution. In browning, this pot seemed to need higher heat than the manufacturer's recommended medium.
BEST BUY **Lodge** Dutch Oven, Size 10	$45	Cast-iron pot and lid	7 QUARTS 11 1/4" X 4 1/4"	6 LBS., 13 1/4 OZ.	★★★ POT ROAST ★★★ BEEF BROTH	MEDIUM-SLOW	★★	★★ PART I ★★ PART II	Though it has distinct advantages, its colossal weight will make it difficult for some to use on an everyday basis. Other problems include demanding maintenance in that it must be seasoned regularly.
Le Creuset Round French Oven, Model 2501280901	$170	Enameled cast-iron pot and lid	7 QUARTS 11" X 3 3/4"	12 LBS., 7 OZ.	★★★ POT ROAST ★★★ BEEF BROTH	MEDIUM	★★★	★★ PART I ★ PART II	This handsome pot was clearly the beauty of the group, but heavy to lift and slow to heat up. Once it's hot, it simmers and browns well.
Tramontina Sterling II Dutch Oven/Casserole, Model 6503/28	$70	Stainless steel pot with aluminum sandwich bottom; stainless steel lid	7 QUARTS 11" X 4 1/4"	5 LBS., 15 OZ.	★★ POT ROAST ★★★ BEEF BROTH	MEDIUM-FAST	★★	★ PART I ★ PART II	Very light lid that jumps around noticeably when water is boiled vigorously, yet sticks to the pan via amazing suction when ingredients are sweated without liquid. Browning, simmering, and sauteing all run fast.
Cuisinart Stainless Steel Everyday Collection Saucepot, Model 944-26	$102	Stainless steel pot with copper sandwich bottom; stainless steel lid	7 QUARTS 10 1/4" X 4 3/4"	4 LBS., 12 OZ.	★ POT ROAST ★★ BEEF BROTH	VERY FAST	★★	★★★ PART I ★★ PART II	A relative lightweight that is prone to scorching in key browning, simmering, and sautéing tests.
Calphalon Deep Casserole with Domed Cover, Model GC878B-1/2HC	$194	Anodized aluminum pot and lid	8 1/2 QUARTS 12" X 4 1/4"	7 LBS., 7 1/10 OZ.	★★ POT ROAST ★ BEEF BROTH	MEDIUM	★★	★★★ PART I ★ PART II	The dark gray interior finish made it difficult to see, and therefore judge, whether drippings were caramelizing or burning. Beware the handles, which get scorching hot even on the stovetop, and the lid, on which condenses a lake's worth of steam that splashes over you and the stovetop.
Circulon Covered Dutch Oven	$139	Anodized aluminum pot; grooved nonstick-coated interior; domed stainless steel lid	8 1/2 QUARTS 12" X 4 1/4"	7 LBS., 7 1/4 OZ.	★★ POT ROAST ★ BEEF BROTH	MEDIUM	★★	★★★ PART I ★ PART II	A great shape with which to work, but lackluster performance in key areas. The dark interior finish makes it very difficult to judge pan drippings.
Berndes TraditionCast Casserole/Dutch Oven, Model 74030	$135	Nonstick coated cast aluminum; Pyrex lid	7 1/4 QUARTS 11" X 4 1/4"	5 LB., 15 OZ.	★★ POT ROAST ★ BEEF BROTH	MEDIUM-SLOW	★	★★ PART I ★ PART II	Looks are deceiving with this pot. It appears as though it would be heavy, so mentally you prepare for a real heave. But you end up almost throwing the pot across the room because it's actually quite light.

preference for nonstick interiors in two quart saucepans (*see* "Choosing the Right Saucepan," May/June 1997), we actually do want some sticking in our Dutch ovens. The sticking, caramelization, and deglazing of drippings in the pan is a key technique for building flavor in moist heat cooking methods. Non-stick finishes retard this process in the name of easy cleaning, but what you gain in cleaning ease you sacrifice in flavor. All-Clad and Le Creuset impressed us precisely because they picked up excellent drippings and allowed them to caramelize without burning over the course of continued cooking.

Any Dutch oven will see some sautéing action during the course of normal use, so we sautéed one and one-half cups of minced onion in three tablespoons of butter over medium heat to determine sauté speed and to test even, scorch-free cooking ability. All-Clad, Le Creuset, and Calphalon all sautéed at a steady, medium pace that was ideal. Lodge, Berndes, and Circulon were slightly slow, but generally even. Tramontina was a little faster than ideal, but easily monitored. Don't turn your back on the Cuisinart, though—it sautéed much too fast, quickly burning the onions.

Another important test was to cook a double batch of long-grain white rice over the lowest possible heat. Though most cooks make rice in a large saucepan, this test illustrated each pot's slow simmering characteristics, as well as the presence of any obvious hot spots. All-Clad and Le Creuset maintained the slowest, most even simmers of the group, producing rice that was fluffy and evenly cooked. A little rice stuck to the bottom of the All-Clad and a lot more stuck to the stainless steel interior of the Tramontina and Cuisinart, which otherwise simmered well. The Calphalon and the Lodge also simmered reasonably well and saw some sticking. The non-stick Berndes and Circulon both simmered too fast, but, needless to say, sticking was not an issue.

Though our two boiling water tests carried less weight in the ratings than browning, simmering, and sautéing, we ran them because some cooks may not have a second large pot, and might therefore use their Dutch oven to boil water for pasta or veggies. First, we clocked the time each pot required to bring five quarts of water to a rolling boil over medium-high heat, which we thought to be a good indication of heat conductivity speed. All-Clad and Cuisinart were best, at about twenty minutes. The rest of the pack fell way behind, taking anywhere from twenty-six minutes for the Calphalon to thirty-three minutes for the Tramontina. Our second boiling water test evaluated the fit of the lid, which bears on the pots' liquid reduction characteristics, and therefore the flavor of any sauce made from that liquid. This time, we boiled two quarts of water vigorously for half an hour and then measured the remaining quantity. The tighter the lid fit, the more water remained. None of the pots managed to retain six or more cups of water. All-Clad, Cuisinart, Circulon, and Lodge all kept between five and six cups, beating Le Creuset, Tramontina, Calphalon, and Berndes, which kept five cups or less.

The Dutch Ovens We Tested

BEST DUTCH OVEN
All-Clad Stainless Stockpot, Model 5508
Pricey, but distributes heat evenly, browns perfectly, and boils fast.

BEST BUY
Lodge Dutch Oven, Size 10
Weighs a ton but browns like a pro.

Le Creuset Round French Oven, Model 2501280901
Very attractive, browns well, but heats up slowly.

Tramontina Sterling II Dutch Oven/Casserole Model 6503/28
Burned drippings a bit, very slow to boil.

Cuisinart Stainless Steel Everyday Collection Saucepot Model 944-26
Lightweight pan is prone to scorching.

Calphalon Deep Casserole with Domed Cover Model GC8788-1/2HC
Dark interior is problematic; handles get scorching hot.

Circulon Covered Dutch Oven
Great shape but lackluster performance.

Berndes TraditionCast Casserole/Dutch Oven, Model 74030
Very light pan excelled in no areas.

Recommendations

The All-Clad, which can approach $200, is hardly a bargain, but it is the top-notch performer of the group. It browns, simmers, and sautés reliably; it can handle high heat; its shape and finish are right; and its medium weight makes it easy to handle. If you can spare the cash, it will be money well-spent. The Le Creuset matched All-Clad's performance in the key areas, but it is very heavy to lift and took a little longer to heat up, so it fell to second place. At one-quarter the price of the top two finishers, the Lodge cast iron is also worthy of consideration. Price and great browning are the Lodge's pros; dark interior finish and colossal weight are its cons. In addition, you must remember to season the Lodge regularly.