The Tong Show

Are the new design features on some tongs more than just gimmicks? We tested 11 pairs to see if it was possible to improve on this kitchen workhorse.

BY ADAM RIED

Professional chefs often joke about having "asbestos hands" that can take the heat from searing-hot food and blazing-hot sauté pans. For those of us whose hands are made from skin, flesh, and bones, using a pair of kitchen tongs is a decidedly safer approach. In the test kitchen and our home kitchens alike, we use them to lift, flip, turn, rotate, and otherwise move every conceivable type of food while it cooks, from ramekins of custard in a water bath to small shrimp sautéing in a pan to gargantuan prime rib roasts emerging from the oven.

Believe it or not, tongs are no longer the straightforward affair they once were. Of course, you can still buy a basic model—two plain metal arms connected by a spring, with scalloped pincers for gripping—but you are just as likely to find tongs that fold in half, telescope, or pull double-duty as a spatula. Arms come cushioned or curved, and pincers can be nonstick-friendly and have various degrees of scalloping around the edges. With so many innovations, our question here was simple: Are these newfangled tongs any better than basic, old-school models?

Get a Grip

The business end of a pair of tongs, the pincers, can be smooth or scalloped, and we found that those with scalloped edges get a better grip on food. But that's not the end of the story. The shape of the scalloping can vary. Our tests showed that edges with deep, sharp scalloping were more likely to break through the delicate breading on a chicken cutlet or shred meat fibers on a pot roast than edges with wide, shallow scalloping. Pronounced scalloping did not necessarily spell disaster, but we preferred the gentler touch of wide, shallow scalloping.

Pincers that were slightly concave, or cupped, did a good job of grasping hard, irregularly shaped, and large objects. The nearly flat pincers of the KitchenAid tongs, for instance, had a tenuous hold on lobsters, ramekins, and pot roasts. Imagine shooting a basket while wearing a stiff oven mitt that limited the flex of your hand. Using your palm and fingers to cup the ball improves control; the same proved true with the pincers—the concavity helped tongs cradle the curved sides of the ramekins and lobsters.

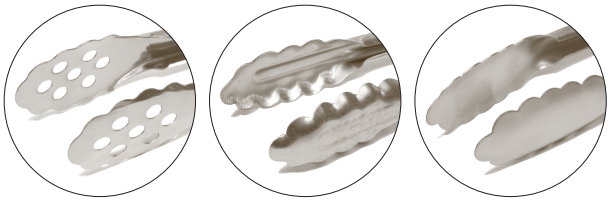
Two of our contestants featured nonstick-friendly pincers, made of nylon on the Oxo (and heatsafe up to 400 degrees) and silicone on the Chef'n. The nylon Oxo really surprised testers, matching the aim and precision of the regular Oxo move for move until hard, slick lobsters slipped right out of the pincers. Because of their wide-body design and bulk, the silicone pincers on the Chef'n suffered the opposite problem—they were clumsy and imprecise for fine work such as moving a scallop or a spear of asparagus.

The Kuhn Rikon tongs had unique pincers, shaped like spatulas and made of wire. Unfortunately, unique does not equal effective. The flexible wire tines offered a poor grip on hard, large, and heavy items, and they were too wide to position small items accurately.

What's the moral of the pincer story? Whether you go nonstick-friendly or not, look for pincers with gentle concavity and wide, shallow scalloping.

A Pincer Is Worth a Thousand Words

After weeks of testing, we found that we could tell a lot about the performance of a pair of tongs just by noting the shape of its pincers. Tongs with flat pincers (left) had trouble keeping hold of awkward or bulky items, such as ramekins and pot roasts. In general, we preferred models with concave, scalloped pincers. Of those, we found that pincers with deep, sharp scalloping (middle) had a tendency to tear apart delicate foods. Our favorite style? Pincers with wide, shallow scalloping (right).



FLAT | DEEP SCALLOPING | SHALLOW SCALLOPING

Armed and Dangerous

The arms of several contenders featured unusual designs that, by and large, made little sense to our testers. We failed to see any advantage to the curved arms of the Chantal tongs, or the 10- to 14-inch telescoping arms of the Amco tongs (which could not be set to 12 inches, our preferred length). Worse yet, the G&S Design tongs, which fold up along the length of the tongs for easy storage, infuriated us by ratcheting downward under strain—bad news during the pot roast trials. The good news is that the soft cushioning on the arms of both the Oxo and the Chef'n models kept hands comfortable, firmly planted, and cool in case the tongs heated up during use. (Flipping frying chicken can make all-metal tongs unbearably hot.)

After all the testing was done, the Oxo tongs—both nonstick-friendly and regular—proved to be the best of show. If you wield your tongs with wild abandon (and worry about scratching your nonstick cookware), Oxo's nylon-tipped tongs ($9.95) may be the way to go. But if you really want just one pair that will do it all and are willing to use them gingerly when using nonstick cookware, you can't beat Oxo's regular, metal-tipped tongs ($9.95).

Tweezer Tongs: A Fine Job

Though appearance may suggest otherwise, those gigantic tweezers—nearly the same size as regular tongs—billed as "fine" or "precision" tongs were not invented so the Jolly Green Giant could pluck his eyebrows. Said to be the brainchild of Japanese cooks working with small morsels of raw fish or vegetables, fine tongs are billed similarly here—for precision work with delicate foods that require accuracy and the gentlest touch. We wouldn't think of replacing our all-purpose kitchen tongs with fine tongs, but we did wonder if they would make a useful supplement.

We tested four pairs—including the $36 Global Chef's Tweezers, $22 Rösle Fine Tongs, and $4 R.S.V.P.—on the most delicate foods in our tong trials: scallops, breaded cutlets, and asparagus spears. Long story short, none of the precision tongs outmaneuvered the best of the regular tongs, and four of the five testers said they'd never use them at home. –A.R.

PRECISION WORK ONLY

The Rösle Fine Tongs were the best we tested, but they aren't necessary unless you're a food stylist charged with adjusting strands of pasta a millimeter to the left or right.

RATINGS
GOOD: ★★★
FAIR: ★★
POOR: ★

RATING KITCHEN TONGS

We tested 11 pairs of 12-inch tongs (or as close to that size as possible from some manufacturers) and evaluated them according to the following criteria. A range of testers (large- and small-handed, more and less experienced) participated in the performance tests and evaluations of overall handle comfort, ease of use, and pincer design. Testers rated the tongs on a scale of 1 to 10, and those scores were averaged into ratings of good, fair, and poor. Scores were averaged to determine overall rank, and tongs are listed in order of preference.

PRICE: Prices paid in Boston-area retail, national mail-order, or online outlets.

CONSTRUCTION: Materials and style.

PINCER DESIGN: The pattern of the edge that comes into contact with the food.

PERFORMANCE, LARGE ITEMS: Testers lifted a cooked, 4½-pound beef roast from a deep pot of braising liquid and rated tongs for strength and grip security.

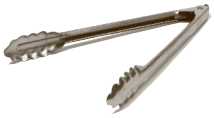
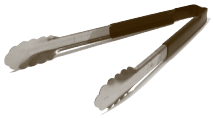
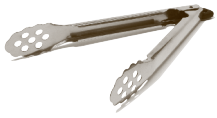
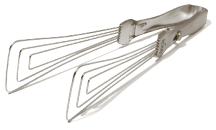
PERFORMANCE, SMALL ITEMS: Testers moved 1 pound of cooked asparagus in a skillet and rated tongs for precision and grasp.

PERFORMANCE, HARD ITEMS: Testers lifted 1¼-pound lobsters from tall pots and custard-filled ramekins (round and deep as well as oval and shallow) from a water bath and rated tongs for grip security.

PERFORMANCE, SOFT ITEMS: Testers turned both sea scallops and breaded chicken cutlets in a skillet and rated tongs for grip precision and gentleness.

HANDLE COMFORT: Testers evaluated handle comfort based on shape, materials, and fit in hand.

TESTERS' COMMENTS: These comments augment the information on the chart with observations about the tongs' design or performance in specific tests.

RECOMMENDED	PERFORMANCE	TESTERS' COMMENTS
Oxo Good Grips 12-Inch Locking Tongs PRICE: $9.95 CONSTRUCTION: Stainless steel and Santoprene; spring-loaded, locking PINCER DESIGN: Shallow scallop	LARGE ITEMS: ★★★ SMALL ITEMS: ★★ HARD ITEMS: ★★★ SOFT ITEMS: ★★★ HANDLE COMFORT: ★★★	Missed a perfect score only because one picky tester thought the pincers bruised cooked asparagus—a minor complaint. Class valedictorian in every other respect.
Oxo Good Grips 12-Inch Tongs (Nylon Tips) PRICE: $9.95 CONSTRUCTION: Stainless steel, Santoprene, and nylon; spring-loaded, locking PINCER DESIGN: Shallow scallop	LARGE ITEMS: ★★★ SMALL ITEMS: ★★★ HARD ITEMS: ★★ SOFT ITEMS: ★★★ HANDLE COMFORT: ★★★	Nonstick-friendly and effective with everything but hard objects. We could get a (tenuous) grip on ramekins, but lobster was a no-go.
 **Edlund 12-Inch Locking Tongs** PRICE: $9.25 CONSTRUCTION: Stainless steel; spring-loaded, locking PINCER DESIGN: Deep scallop	LARGE ITEMS: ★★★ SMALL ITEMS: ★★★ HARD ITEMS: ★★★ SOFT ITEMS: ★★ HANDLE COMFORT: ★★★	Described as light and natural; one tester remarked, "They just belong in your hand." Sharp, deeply defined scalloping can tear delicate foods.
RECOMMENDED WITH RESERVATIONS		
 **Vollrath 12-Inch One-Piece Utility Tongs** PRICE: $7.65 CONSTRUCTION: Stainless steel with coated handle; nonlocking PINCER DESIGN: Shallow scallop	LARGE ITEMS: ★★ SMALL ITEMS: ★★ HARD ITEMS: ★★★ SOFT ITEMS: ★★ HANDLE COMFORT: ★★★	Performance equaled (surpassed, in fact) that of many of the locking tongs, but storage is less convenient. Some testers found the tension a bit too stiff.
Chantal Contoured Kitchen Tongs PRICE: $14.99 CONSTRUCTION: Stainless steel; spring-loaded, locking, curved handles PINCER DESIGN: Tapered	LARGE ITEMS: ★★ SMALL ITEMS: ★★★ HARD ITEMS: ★★★ SOFT ITEMS: ★★ HANDLE COMFORT: ★★	Several testers noted that the pincers shredded fibers on the surface of tender meat and the crust of chicken cutlets. The curved handles left testers more puzzled than impressed.
Amco Houseworks 10-Inch and 14-Inch Telescoping Tongs PRICE: $12.95 CONSTRUCTION: Stainless steel; spring-loaded, locking PINCER DESIGN: Small scallop	LARGE ITEMS: ★★★ SMALL ITEMS: ★★ HARD ITEMS: ★★ SOFT ITEMS: ★★ HANDLE COMFORT: ★★	Forget about picking up a roast with these tongs in the 10-inch position. Many testers disliked both lengths, finding that "the long is too long and the short is too short."
 **KitchenAid Utility Tongs** PRICE: $9.99 CONSTRUCTION: Stainless steel; spring-loaded, locking PINCER DESIGN: Shallow scallop	LARGE ITEMS: ★★ SMALL ITEMS: ★★ HARD ITEMS: ★★ SOFT ITEMS: ★★ HANDLE COMFORT: ★★	The nearly flat pincers made for a compromised grip on large, hard, and soft objects alike (but created a nice spatula effect). Pincers and handles struck some testers as too broad.
NOT RECOMMENDED		
Chef'n Tongo 12-Inch Silicone Tongs PRICE: $14.99 CONSTRUCTION: Stainless steel and silicone; spring-loaded, locking PINCER DESIGN: Smooth	LARGE ITEMS: ★★ SMALL ITEMS: ★ HARD ITEMS: ★★ SOFT ITEMS: ★★ HANDLE COMFORT: ★★	Tongs with a double whammy: bulky pincers that were too flexible to be precise and arms that had a proclivity for pinching unsuspecting fingers.
 **Kuhn Rikon Easy-Lock Wire Tongs** PRICE: $19.99 CONSTRUCTION: Stainless steel; locking PINCER DESIGN: Wire	LARGE ITEMS: ★ SMALL ITEMS: ★★★ HARD ITEMS: ★ SOFT ITEMS: ★★ HANDLE COMFORT: ★★	Hybrid spatula/pincers slid under asparagus and breaded cutlets easily but could neither fit around nor lift lobsters and pot roast.
G&S Design Compactables Locking Tongs PRICE: $16.99 CONSTRUCTION: Stainless steel and Santoprene; spring-loaded, locking PINCER DESIGN: Scalloped	LARGE ITEMS: ★ SMALL ITEMS: ★★ HARD ITEMS: ★★ SOFT ITEMS: ★★ HANDLE COMFORT: ★	The folding arms collapsed under the weight of the pot roast, causing a tidal wave of hot braising liquid when the meat dropped into the pot. Testers found the handles awkward.
Progressive Multi-Purpose (10-Inch) Kitchen Tongs PRICE: $1.99 CONSTRUCTION: Stainless steel/PVC-coated handles; scissor type, nonlocking PINCER DESIGN: Smooth	LARGE ITEMS: ★ SMALL ITEMS: ★ HARD ITEMS: ★ SOFT ITEMS: ★ HANDLE COMFORT: ★	When it comes to these hardware store standards, one word says it all: flimsy. More words? How about "misaligned, uncomfortable, and loose"?