

As seasons change, cookware business heats up

By Joanne Friedrick

Whether customers are buying individual pieces or investing in sets, cookware sales are brisk for retailers these days, especially as the weather cools off around the country.

Remarking on the resurgent interest in preparing food, Marc Lapides, owner of Northshore Cookery, a cooking school and retail store in Highland Park, Ill., said "people want to cook at home. People want to do what their parents did."

Lapides said his clients are buying cookware pieces based on what they've test-driven in classes. Lapides carries full lines of both Viking and All Clad cookware, along with some select pieces from Gourmet Standard as well as Emile Henry's Flame line. Within his cooking classes, clients can choose among various cookware lines and pieces. "We use only the cookware we sell and what our chefs recommend," explained Lapides. "We don't carry certain brands because our chefs won't use them."

Typically, he said, when a class concludes, customers look for those items that they worked with during the event.

At her store The Well-Tempered Kitchen in Waldoboro, Maine, Gail Montgomery also takes the piece-by-piece approach to cookware sales. "If we had our druthers, we would try to get them to buy just what they need," she said.

She said customers are asked to think about how they cook: Do they prefer to make soups and casseroles or fry hamburgers?

In addition, said Montgomery, one set usually won't address all of a customer's needs adequately. "We feel there are strengths and weaknesses in each line," she said. Montgomery sells two lines of All Clad Metalcrafters cookware, as well as Viking, Le Creuset, the Finnish line Hackman made by Iittala, Scanpan, select cast iron pieces from Lodge and professional-weight copper.

Le Creuset, she noted, "is great for slow cooking," while other lines may be best for frying or sauteing. "We go through each piece with them, so they may put together their own sets," she said. Still, noted Montgomery, "if a set makes sense, we'll order it for them."



Cast iron is must have at Cooking Uptown.



Dianna Burke, owner of Someone's In The Kitchen, offers All Clad and Gourmet Standard at her store in Libertyville, Ill.



Sets as well as non-stick pans sell well at Kiss the Cook, pictured above.

"I don't try to talk people into sets," said Karen Cooley, owner of Cooking Uptown in Charlotte, N.C. "To me, there is a pan for everything. Most people want a non-stick skillet, but you also want a saute (pan) that's stainless steel, so you look at the different options."

Like Montgomery, Cooley said her approach is to talk people through their needs. Still, she said, some customers "want me to tell them what to buy. I'm a Southern girl, so my advice is if you don't have a cast iron skillet, you need one."

Cooley carries a wide variety of cookware in her 3,200-square-foot store, including Scanpan stainless and copper, Cuisinart stainless, Lodge Logic cast iron, Meyer Corp.'s commercial-weight non-stick cookware, RSVP steamers and roasters, NorPro steamers, an Italian risotto maker, Kuhn Rikon pressure cookers, Staub enameled cast iron and the most recent addition in May, All Clad Metalcrafters stainless. She is also planning to add some items for fall, including Emile Henry's Flame line, Viking stainless and Chef's Planet arc42, a line of ergonomic stainless steel cookware.

People who buy sets, said Cooley, usually purchase Cuisinart because it's the most economical and it makes a good gift.

It is usually among newlyweds or at the holidays, Lapidés said, that cookware sets are popular.

Although some retailers are seeing customers putting together their cookware collections piece by piece, Bren Kirschbaum, co-owner of Kiss The Cook in Wimberley, Texas, said customers "are really price conscious right now," which is causing them to choose sets. "If you buy in sets there is considerable savings," she noted.

Kiss The Cook offers sets from Viking, All Clad and Berndes, along with some pieces such as double boilers and steamers from Demeyere and Gourmet Standard. She also offers Lodge cast iron.

Dianna Burke, owner of Someone's In The Kitchen in Libertyville, Ill., agreed that sets offer "more bang for the buck."

She said her Baby Boomer customers are buying sets to replace the cookware they may have received as a wedding presents many years ago. Burke offers All Clad and Gourmet Standard. She said each has its own audience, with Gourmet Standard providing the more economical choice for similar quality. "It just doesn't have the marketing dollars behind it," she said.

Burke said she is also considering adding chef Mario Batali's cookware line, which is supplied by Copco. It features pieces such as a 6-quart pot and a panini grill and press. Before she adds anything, she said, she has to use it herself.

As winter approaches, she said, customers are adding roasters, stock pots, double boilers and indoor griddles or grill pans.

Pieces that are being added to customers' collections, said Kirschbaum, include items such as a panini press or other specialty pans. "Some pieces will never be put in a set," she explained, such as pancake griddles or paella pans.

Lapidés said within the cookware arena, customers tend to be loyal to the brand they've chosen. "People want to stick with the same line and grow their collections," he said.

Most popular add-ons now are saute pans in various sizes, he said, ranging from Gourmet Standard's 12-inch to 3-quart models from both Viking and All Clad. Following behind the saute pan are sauce pans and non-stick frying pans, he said.

The trend has definitely been toward stainless and away from non-stick, said Lapidés. "Non-stick is on the wane," he said, adding "it's stainless first, even in frying pans."

However, at Kiss The Cook, Kirschbaum said non-stick Berndes skillets "sold fabulously" during a recent sale that featured an in-store demonstration. "We sold a lot more skillets," she said. "When you can put cheese in a hot skillet and pick it up in one piece without it sticking, they (customers) won't leave without it."

She acknowledged that non-stick has gotten some bad publicity related to alleged health risks when using the pans at high temperatures, but "I think most people realize it was overblown." She said she instructs customers not to cook with non-stick pans on very high heat, and the manufacturers put out that caution as well.

Montgomery said her newest addition to the store, Viking cookware, is also the hottest selling. "We brought it in in June," she said, "and we've re-ordered it three times already."

Features that set it apart, said Montgomery, are its seven-ply construction, ergonomic handles and weight.

"Viking has done its homework," she said regarding its entry into the cookware market. "They looked at the features of competitors that are good-and bad-and put together what they thought was best."

She said it doesn't hurt that customers are also familiar with the Viking name because of its line of high-end appliances.

Cooley said she sells more skillets than any other pan, and in all sizes. Just recently, she added, she has had special orders for covered saute pans from both Scanpan and All Clad, although she wasn't sure what sparked those sales.

While customers tend to focus on the capabilities of their cookware, fashion also plays a role in what sells. Montgomery said Le Creuset's hot color has been kiwi, while Lodge has offered spring green. She said she brought in those colors "as something fresh and nice," but wasn't sure how they would translate into the fall.

Cooley said she has "high hopes" for both ergonomic cookware and those featuring colors. "We've gotten good feedback on both of those things," she said. By looking to color or other features, she said, it allows customers to diversify their cookware.