

Gifts for foodies: Gadgets

Written by Cindy Welch - Food Columnist
Tuesday, 02 December 2008 15:13



I may be biased, but I think gifts are easiest to buy for foodies. Give us a bag from Williams and Sonoma or the Kitchen Collection and we are delirious with anticipation of what might be inside. There are so many possibilities from stocking stuffers to large gift items that will delight the foodie on your Christmas list. Over the next few weeks, I want to share some of my current kitchen favorites and some new items that intrigue me.

Gadgets for the kitchen can be incredible time-savers. Some make great stocking stuffers while others are a little more on the higher end of your gift giving list. Almost all can be found in a wide range of prices and quality.

My first favorite gadget is the horizontal peeler. The blade rests perpendicular to the handle instead of parallel to it. With the old-style peelers, I was always bumping and scraping my knuckles. A horizontal peeler allows you to pull straight down and remove larger sections of potato or fruit skin. I prefer a stainless steel peeler such as the Rosle Horizontal Peeler (\$20 to \$25). Some less expensive, but good choices include the OXO Goodgrips Swivel Peeler (\$8 to \$12) and any of the peelers by Swissmar. Swissmar has a great three-piece set that includes a scalpel blade, julienne blade and a serrated blade (\$17 on line). All of these can be found in kitchen stores, discount stores and online.



Next is the mandolin. No, not the instrument used in bluegrass, although it's also one of my favorites. I mean a slicer used for home fries, thin-sliced tomatoes and other fruits and vegetables that need a consistent, accurate volume of slices. It can make slicing onions into rings and tomatoes for hamburgers lots of fun. I often use it when I cater a large dinner that requires pounds of vegetables instead of just one or two.

My favorite mandolin is the Pampered Chef Mandolin. It costs about \$60 and has a great cover that protects your fingers when you slice. The blades are also retractable and are only activated when the food goes across the blade. It is a hard plastic with stainless steel blades and the blades are stored in a case that clips to the mandolin for convenient storage.

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If you have never used a mandolin, you might try the less expensive versions available in kitchen stores and at Wal-mart. I carry in my personal chef bag. They usually run about \$15, are light-weight and though not as durable as the higher end models, they give you a good idea if a more expensive one is worth the investment. The most expensive ones are stainless steel versions and sell for \$150 to \$200.



Anyone who loves grilling will long for a Jiccard Meat Tenderizer. The Jiccard Company originated the 16 and 48 blade "needle-style" tenderizers. They average about \$20 for the 16 blade and about \$35 to \$40 for the 48 blade. They are great for steaks and cheaper cuts of meat. The retractable blades move up and down as you punch them into the meat.

Many companies have copied the idea. Some are relatively inexpensive, but be sure they are easy to clean and have stainless steel blades or they will rust. The Doni company has a round shaped tenderizer (\$25) that some might find more comfortable to hold than the traditional models. They can be found at kitchen stores and in many places on the internet. Some companies are offering great bargains on these right now for Christmas.

Any person who uses fresh garlic needs a good garlic press. Knowing how to quickly peel and mince garlic is a basic knife skill, but when you have a large quantity to mince or if you require very finely chopped garlic, a garlic press is the way to go. The best garlic presses are strong enough to crush unpeeled garlic. They will also have a method to easily clean out the holes in the press.

Although OXO Goodgrips has a great garlic press for \$12 to \$15 and fancy ceramic garlic presses can be found by Kuhn Rikon Epicurean at \$40, my favorite is once again a Pampered Chef product. This garlic press is brushed steel and washes up perfectly in the dishwasher. It can handle large cloves of unpeeled garlic and even pieces of ginger. It has an attachment that cleans out the holes for another use or before it goes in the dishwasher. It sells for \$16.



I also like to prepare ginger with my micro-plane grater. When a box grater is too cumbersome

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to use, these little one handle graters are perfect. They can stay on the counter in your utensil crock for a quick shave of ginger, cheese (particularly hard cheeses like parmesan), and fresh nutmeg.

Graters can be found with larger teeth for cheese grating or smaller ones for nutmeg. Prices range \$10 per grater to a great gift package with five graters by Microplane for \$60. They even have graters that specialize in shaving sea salt.

A French Rolling Pin might not actually qualify as a gadget, but it does make baking so much easier. I especially like the style with tapered edges. They are easier to grip and I find I have more control with them than I do with the old-style rolling pin with handles. They can be found in a wide price range from as low as \$7 to as high as \$50. The type of wood and the process for shaping the rolling pins determine their quality.

Be sure to find one made from a hardwood that will not absorb bacteria and odors/ They also stay smooth longer and roll easier. And never, never, let one soak in the sink or put it in the dishwasher. And although it can be tempting, don't use them to crush crackers or tenderize meat. This will ruin the texture of the rolling pin and dough will stick.

A new type of French rolling pin is the silicone model. It is scratch resistant, easy to clean and offers a surface that is less sticky. It is especially great for rolling out fondant. Target is currently selling a bright pink one that benefits breast cancer research.



Finally, of all the tools and gadgets I like in my kitchen, the most efficient, practical, universal and worth investing in is a chef's knife. This is the best gift you can give a beginning chef. The size and style you choose depends on the size of your hand, how the knife balances in your hand, how often you use it, and how you store it. The general rule of thumb is to use the largest knife you can easily handle. There is a very wide price range for chef's knives. If you use one on a frequent basis or hope to have one set of knives the rest of your life, invest in a more expensive version and be sure you have a good source for having it re-sharpened.

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If you don't use one more than once or twice a week then a mid-range knife will work fine. Cheaper knives will start out okay, but tend to dull easily. A dull knife is a very dangerous tool because it can slip and hit fingers instead of the food.

A popular knife choice right now is the Santoku style chef's knife with the blunt nose. I like to use mine when I want to rock the knife from nose to handle. Rachel Ray has several great combos of her special East/West knife that is a combo of the Santoku style and a regular chef's knife.

Lots of choices. Lots of shopping fun and some great deals for your favorite foodie.

Next week: Cookbooks – How to narrow down the choices.

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For the past 20 years, Cindy Welch has been involved with all aspects of cooking, including formal culinary training, experience as food service director for First Baptist Church of Euless, a personal chef and owner of Cindy's Casa Cuisine. Cindy's favorite hobby is "providing delicious food for the people of Sulphur Springs." Her columns cover all aspects of the cooking experience.