

# Sweeten THE POT

THE SEARCH FOR GREENER COOKWARE  
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Like many moms, I am always seeking balance. When it comes to cookware, I try to balance health and safety, impact on the planet, and the overall ease of making a meal. Choosing greener cookware is more than simply avoiding Teflon pans: it's a choice about avoiding toxins and reducing your footprint while still getting your hands on reliable and usable products. In a market inundated by so many options, not all of them high quality, how do you choose the right cookware for the job that's also long-lasting, durable, and easier on the planet?

## COOKWARE UNCOVERED

### Nonstick

Teflon is the patented name for the nonstick chemical also known as *polytetrafluoroethylene* (PTFE), and most of us at one time or another have been the proud owner of a slick-surfaced Teflon pan. Not limited to pan coating, this chemical is also used in everything from carpets to industrial applications.

PFAS commonly refer to a group called *per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances* which includes *perfluorooctanoic acid* (PFOA) (also known as C8), a chemical used in the process of making PTFE. While claims have been made that most of it is burned off during the manufacturing

process, exposure to PFOA may have serious health consequences.

The American Cancer Society notes that PFOA remains long-term in the body and environment and that exposure is often ongoing. The consequences of long-term exposure are still being studied but there have been noted correlations with testicular, kidney, and thyroid cancers and possible associations including prostate, bladder, and ovarian cancers. In addition, PFOAS has been linked to thyroid hormone disruption, while the chemicals as a group have been connected to low birth weight and immune dysfunction. It should be noted that the greatest risks of this chemical have been linked to manufacturing contamination of the environment in ways such as in drinking water rather than at the scale of periodic cooking, but many researchers feel the risk factor is still too high.

By 2015, the Environmental Protection Agency had significantly limited the manufacturing of PFOAS but "Existing stocks of PFOA might still be used and there might be PFOA in some imported articles."<sup>1</sup>

For more on Teflon, check out [ecoparent.ca/teflon](https://ecoparent.ca/teflon)

**BOTTOM LINE:** Avoid Teflon and PFOAs.

### Nonstick Ceramic

Most newer nonstick ceramic cookware can go safely from stovetop to oven and requires less oil to cook with. High-conducting metal, typically aluminum or stainless steel, is covered by a nonstick coating made from chemically altered sand or stone. *Thermolon*, a patented non-stick coating used by multiple brands, is third-party certified as free from PTFE, PFOA, PFAS, lead, and cadmium.

Aluminum is safe from reacting dangerously to acids as the lightweight metal is then coated or anodized. In terms of sustainability, it rates well as a material that is both highly recyclable and also one whose producers have taken significant efforts to reduce energy used in manufacturing. However, it is notoriously difficult to recycle mixed material products.

**BOTTOM LINE:** If you need a nonstick pan to cook delicate foods, ceramic nonstick is your best option.

### Ceramics

You've probably seen ceramic items on many wedding registries, as they're typically deemed to be expensive non-essentials that look gorgeous sitting proudly on tabletops. Ceramic typically refers to hardened, nonmetal materials, and can be commonly found in kitchens as earthenware, stoneware, and porcelain, with stoneware being the most versatile and useful for everyday cookware.

Stoneware is fired at higher temperatures than other types of ceramics and does not require a glaze to be water-resistant. But when glazed, stoneware is about as close as it gets to nonstick (at least in this author's opinion). The bakeware is great for the oven, and most can also go in the microwave and dishwasher for extra convenience. Stoneware should not be used directly on a stovetop or exposed to extreme temperature shifts.

Ceramic cookware is made from kiln-hardened natural clay. Any toxic materials in the soil are removed in the process as heavy metals like lead, cadmium, and arsenic vapourize below 1500°F and a ceramic kiln is heated somewhere between 1800°F and 2400°F. Do be cautious of older stoneware, however, as toxic dyes may have been used in many of these glazes.

As far as sourcing goes, ceramic clay may be the most plentiful and least harmful material in this guide and requires minimal processing before market. Further, they can be recycled into other products—although consumers won't have an easy time finding a specific ceramic recycler.

**BOTTOM LINE:** Ceramic cookware works well and can be made from minimal materials, but its price point may be out of reach and its fragility can be intimidating for many families with small children.

### Cast Iron

Cast iron pots and pans are time-tested, kitchen stalwarts. If kept and managed well, they can be passed down through generations, developing a nonstick-style patina from fastidious seasoning and

A note on greenwashing: While terms like "natural", "eco-friendly", "sustainable", "recyclable", "biodegradable", and "nontoxic" may appear to signal an environmentally safe product, these words don't actually mean much. They are intentionally vague descriptions that many brands use to capitalize on the growing demand for more ecologically conscious goods. Known as greenwashing, this marketing tactic uses various techniques to mislead consumers into thinking that a product is more environmentally friendly than it is, rather than investing those advertising funds into making products that match their claims.

To confuse matters more, while many types of cookware are lauded as the sustainable choice based on materials used and longevity, the mining and production of these materials may be of environmental concern. The precise impact is difficult to measure as a whole and can vary significantly from brand to brand. Nonstick cookware and bamboo kitchen utensils are probably the most prone to greenwashing, so it's crucial to be aware of actual sourcing and manufacturing techniques that may well be associated with the very toxins or unethical practices you're avoiding.

use. While virtually indestructible, cast iron does have an Achilles' heel: namely, moisture. Rust is the bane of most cast iron owners' existence, making it a little more finicky than most cookware as it can't be tossed in the dishwasher, left to soak for prolonged periods in the sink, or piled together in a place where humidity can take hold. It's also pretty heavy, doesn't work well with certain foods, and can result in discoloured meals.

Cast iron gets high sustainability points for its lengthy lifetime: just ask anyone who's been handed down a vintage cast iron pot or who's picked up and lovingly restored a junk store cast off! It's also recyclable. To up the cast iron happiness, opt for those made in the US or Canada. As an added bonus, cast iron pans can actually add iron into your food! (How much iron and how well it's absorbed can depend on several factors, so if you are severely deficient in this mineral consult with a medical professional for additional supplementation.)

**BOTTOM LINE:** Cast iron provides the longest-lasting cookware and offers the best return on investment in sustainability and versatility.

### Steel

Steel has long been used for cookware, but the exact benefits and disadvantages are based on the specific alloy used. The most common mixtures are shiny-looking stainless steel and darker-appearing carbon steel.