



Tools of the Trade: Essential Kitchen Tools

by Rocky Dunnam, CEC, CDM, CFPP

In a world of convenience and ease that's perpetuated by celebrity chefs and "As Seen On TV" infomercials, it's easy to get bogged down and overwhelmed with the newest gadget, gimmick, or tool. I admit that I too have found myself in a store or online eyeing that new spiralizer, immersion circulator, or avocado peeler. These things are "cool" and convenient. I fully understand the attraction. But what about the functionality?

Do you really need a 4200-degree infrared oven? How about a combination steamer/convection oven? Is the conventional oven just not enough?

Do you really require an avocado peeler, a pineapple corer, a cherry pitter, and a zester?

We all see things advertised every single day that are easy, convenient, and surely appealing to us who consider cooking and kitchens our way of life. But the simple truth is this: gimmicks are gimmicks. Nothing beats the absolute basics of cookery as a craft...an art...a love.

As an American Culinary Federation Certified Executive Chef, there are a few things that I always carry with me, and a few things that every kitchen I operate absolutely



MUST-HAVE
CULINARY
TOOLS FOR
EVERY KITCHEN



must have. These might surprise you because they aren't the fad items that many operators "need." But keep in mind that certain locations have limitations and there is a need sometimes to adapt to the equipment your facility and budget allow, and that's unquestionably okay. So what's in my arsenal?

KNIFE KIT

A knife kit is almost every professional's personal EDC (Everyday Carry). Now the contents of said kits vary from chef to chef and cook to cook, but the idea remains the

same. You can tell a lot from the items that a culinarian keeps in their kit, from the skillset of their hands, to the confidence of their abilities. For example, a simple knife roll with five knives and a honing steel portrays to me that this person has loads of pride in their ability to perform many different tasks with the same tool. The other side of that spectrum is the "toolbox" chef/cook that has a multitude of personal items ranging from various knives, to spatulas and spoons, to garnishing and plating tools. This person tends to be more detail oriented, and shows precision in most job functions. I think that like most things in life, a happy balance between the two works best, but also firmly believe that a chef's knife is the single most important tool any cook can have. Personally, I tend to lean more toward the minimalist approach. Here's

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what's in my kit:

1. **Knife Roll:** Chef's knife, slicer, boning knife, paring knife, serrated bread knife, and honing steel.
2. **Plating Kit:** Sauce spoon, long tweezers, long/offset tweezers, small brush, and ring molds.
3. **Toolbox:** My toolbox houses my knife roll and plating kit along with various slotted spoons, spatulas, tongs, and miscellaneous items.

That's it. In most situations you find yourself in (no matter what kitchen you are working), these EDC essentials will act as your tools of the trade—just like a baseball player has his bat and glove regardless of the ballpark at which he's playing, or the plumber has his toolbox of wrenches no matter the job he's called to fix.

Now let's talk about two things that every kitchen must have in order to operate with high levels of efficiency. One is a simple *range*, and the other is an *immersion blender* (or stick blender). And in my opinion, that's it! Here's why: you can perform the functions of an oven, grill, steamer,

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fryer, etc., by using a range. The immersion blender, while not quite as diverse as a range, is a great multi-function tool that can be used to pulse, puree, process, and blend. Let's look at these items a little more in depth to show what I mean.

RANGE

A range may sound like an obvious choice for the title of Favorite Kitchen Equipment, but it's a title that's well deserved. Ranges come in many forms. There's the traditional gas-burning range that many kitchens contain. There's also induction or electric ranges that have made their way into establishments that are built without gas. While gas is most commonly the 'chef's choice' in cooking, some great chefs in this country are using induction and/or electric. I personally prefer gas for its classic simplicity, but only minor adjustments need be made when looking at the diversity of this equipment.

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TRY AN IMMERSION BLENDER TO CREATE SMOOTH SAUCES AND SOUPS RIGHT ON THE STOVETOP.

When we look at a range's broad capabilities we gain a fuller knowledge of the applications it holds. A pot/pan of boiling water on the range can easily become a double boiler, a steamer, a pasta cooker, a rice cooker, or even just a warmer and hot-holding apparatus. By simply adjusting the pan, your range becomes a place to sear, sauté, poach, braise, boil, grill, flambé, fry, simmer, or hot-hold. Covering a pot/pan over indirect heat acts much the same way as a conventional oven or warmer (depending on the heat applied). Wow! A modest range can deliver so many different options. That's why I've deemed the range "King of the Kitchen."

IMMERSION BLENDER

Sometimes referred to as a hand blender or stick blender, the immersion blender is a great multi-tool. and a must for every kitchen. If you've never seen one, let me describe it. It's a small, hand-held device that has a motor (which is encased in the handle), a long cylinder shaft, and a rotating blade protected by an umbrella-like covering. Typically the handle is hard plastic and the shaft/blade is made of aluminum or stainless steel. This tool is designed to be immersed into a food item however long the shaft is. I've seen some with 6-8 inch shafts (which I use frequently), and some with 4-5 foot shafts (which are specialized for job-specific use), and everything in between. Then once the blade mechanism is fully submerged, a simple push button turns on the rotating blades. This allows us to create smooth sauces and soups much the way a blender does. The difference is, you blend the item directly in the cooking vessel so that you can continue to reduce or hold hot for service. No need to use a blender here, and then dirty another pot/pan to house your smooth item. The immersion blender can also be used in cold applications to create perfectly emulsified vinaigrettes, sauces, and condiments. I use mine for so many items



Review Questions

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- What item should foodservice operators consider carrying with them so they have the tools they need?
 - Knife kit
 - Sous vide vacuum sealer
 - Food handler's card
- What does EDC stand for?
 - Each decision cancelled
 - Efficient dress code
 - Everyday carry
- What is considered the single most important tool a cook can have?
 - Slotted spoon
 - Tongs
 - Chef's knife
- What can a range *not* do?
 - Poach
 - Steam
 - Grill
- What earns the title “King of the Kitchen” due to its diversity?
 - Microwave
 - Range
 - Tilt skillet
- What is another name for an immersion blender?
 - Stick blender
 - Wire whip
 - Immersionator
- What is the length of an immersion blender shaft?
 - 12 inches
 - Varies from 4 inches to several feet
 - There's no shaft on an immersion blender

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that I can't even list them all here—soups, sauces, jellies, jams, marmalades, garnishing paints, chutneys, relishes, salsas, etc. Then, instead of the daunting task of cleaning a processor or standing blender, you simply pop the shaft/blade off the handle and wash the item as you would a knife.

These are just a few of my favorite kitchen tools. You may find that an item on my EDC is unnecessary or think I should carry something else too, but to that I say “to each his own.” Surely you can now see the simple range for the innovation it carries in so many wonderful aspects of our operation. Likewise, the less common tool I must have, the immersion blender, and its innovative capabilities are endless. **E**



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