

Think you're a bad cook? Could be your pans

By MARNI JAMESON

I am a passable cook. Not great. I get the job done mainly because I get hungry. Eating is my sole motivation for cooking.

However, since COVID has me cooking most every night, I have more motivation to become a better cook starting with my previously ignored pans. Until lately, my relationship with pans went like this, "Oh, this is a pan. It will work."

But the other night, as I was cooking meatballs, I experienced pan panic. I buy the meatballs pre-made at the grocery store, cook them in a skillet for 25 minutes, turning them so they brown on all sides. I pour a jar of Italian sauce on them, let them simmer, add a side salad, and that's dinner.

Like I said, passable.

I had made these meatballs dozens of times, only this time after just a few seconds, they were instantly black on one side, not brown. What the heck? The only difference was I'd grabbed a different skillet. This tripped the what-don't-I-know light bulb, which is how most of my columns start.

I place an SOS call to Lisa McManus, executive editor of America's Test Kitchens reviews, who reassured me, "It's not you. It's the pan."

A multimedia company devoted to making home cooks feel more confident, ATK teaches basics through public TV shows and cooking magazines including Cook's Illustrated and Cook's Country.

"How do you know it's the pan and not me?" I asked.

"You've made this recipe before successfully, and the pan is the only factor that changed," said McManus, whose job involves cooking the same recipes in different pans to find out which cookware performs better and why.

"Everyone can cook," she said. "But often home cooks have a bad experience, blame themselves and give up. They buy ingredients for a recipe and make a mess of it. It's not their fault. They're ill-equipped. Their cookware lets them down."

"I feel so much better," I said, claim-

ing redemption.

"Your pan should be your partner, not your adversary."

Next, I shared my meatball story with my friend Heather McPherson, a food writer and cookbook author, and asked, "How have I come to this stage in life and not know pan basics?"

"It's not too late," she said.

Then McManus and McPherson gave me a crash course in cookware and the assurance that better meals were just a pan away. Here's what they said to keep in mind:

- *Don't buy a set.* Both experts

agreed, cookware sets are full of pieces you don't need that take up space. Retailers like sets because they can sell 21 pieces for \$199, but most people never use half the pieces. Buy pots and pans one at a time. It's not important that they match. What matters is that they work.

- *Get the right grip.* How a pan feels in your hand is important. Don't buy a pan online that you haven't held, McPherson said. A good grip is more important than comfort.

You want to lift the pan in your non-dominant hand and turn the

handle without it slipping, added McManus. Avoid pans with plastic or squishy handles. You want metal handles that can go from stove to oven.

- *Know your metals.* Most cookware is made of stainless steel, aluminum, cast iron (and its cousin carbon steel) copper, or a mix. Each has distinct properties. Stainless steel and cast iron are durable. Copper and aluminum have excellent heat conductivity, but they react to acidic foods, like tomatoes, changing food's flavor. Some need more maintenance. Here's a quick rundown:

— Copper is the Ferrari in the kitchen, fast to react, expensive, and high maintenance, said McManus. "Though its responsiveness has made it a favorite among famous chefs, for most of us, it's overkill. It's costly and requires care and polishing beyond most people's patience."

— Aluminum is the next best heat conductor, and far less expensive, making it a favorite in fast food restaurants, where chefs want to turn food out fast. The problem with alu-

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