

Cookware:

A basic kitchen set of pots and pans doesn't have to be terribly complicated: many sets bump the price of cheap or poorly made cookware by adding pots or pans that are redundancies: duplicate pans in different styles (do you really want to make three different sizes of omelettes? That's the question they're hoping you don't ask). Unless you do a lot of cooking for a lot of people, owning sets of identical pans in different sizes is pointless. It's better to buy higher quality cookware than more pieces. It'll last longer, cook better, and generally provide you with more for your money: you'll use it more often.

The best choice for someone who regularly and casually cooks is stainless steel with a copper bottom or with an aluminum core. Steel doesn't react with food, so it's good for cooking just about everything. The drawback is that it's not as conductive as other metals, so it's necessary to employ different metals in order to get it to the needed temperatures. Non-stick pieces have the same problem with the added issue of requiring a certain amount of care not to scratch off the coating. If you don't do much cooking, a non-stick set will be fine, but in all likelihood, you'll eventually want to spend the money on stainless steel.

Here are the pieces you should start with:

A 8-12 quart stockpot.

A large saute pan or iron skillet. If going with the iron skillet, remember to just wipe it out when it cools after you're done using it, not wash it.

A small (1-1.5 quart) and a medium (2-3 quart) saucepan with straight sides.

An 8" (or other size, if you prefer) omelette pan.

And if you live at high altitudes (3,500 + feet), a pressure cooker.

Each piece should have a handle firmly riveted or screwed to it and should be sturdy enough to handle while cooking. Your stockpot should have nice wide handles to accommodate oven/cooking mitts.

Baking and Bakeware.

A roasting pan is necessary for cooking chickens, turkeys, roast beef and other holiday favorites, while assorted bakeware is needed for cookies, cakes, and breads, as well as casseroles.

- Anodized aluminum roasting pan w/ rack
- Cookie sheets
- Cupcake pan (s)
- 8" x 8" baking pan
- 9" x 13" casserole pan
- 9" round cake pan (spring-form or regular)

And, if you like:

- A 5" x 10" loaf pan for bread and pound cake
- Pizza stone
- A set of glass ramekins
- A pie pan or two

The casserole can be Pyrex glass. One nice feature about a glass casserole dish is that many come with snap on plastic covers to preserve your leftovers right in the dish.

Non-stick steel is appropriate for bakeware: that makes up the majority of what's available on the market today. It makes serving and cleaning easier, though you should take care not to use any type of abrasive brush while washing. Coated anodized aluminum will absorb and distribute heat evenly through the roasting rack and the coating will allow you to baste or spoon up drippings for gravy with ease. Find one that comes with lifters that will allow you to transport your roast to the serving platter for carving. Deep handles that will accommodate oven mitts should be standard. Bakeware with non-slip silicone handles will prevent any accidents that might be caused by a hesitant or unsteady grip when removing something from the oven.

Over the counter: basic appliances.

Your basic appliances are going to enable your cookware and bakeware. Your non-electric needs are: a set of mixing spoons, a set of measuring spoons, a colander, a can opener, a corkscrew or cork puller, a four sided grater, a potato masher (don't use the food processor: you'll end up with potato slush), a cutting board, mixing bowls, a flour sifter, and a cocktail shaker (for courage).

Your counter appliances:

- Blender. If you're planning on blending ice for drinks, get a bar blender with three speeds and high wattage: 1000 watts is a good place to start. If you're just doing light blending, a less-powerful multi-speed model will do just fine.
- Mixer/ Stand mixer (If you do a lot of baking, a stand mixer is a good investment, otherwise, get a multi-speed handheld mixer with two beaters)
- Food processor for dips, sauces, soups, and food prep. Don't bother with multi-speed. Just get one with on/off/pulse switches, a high capacity (9+ cups) and a wide feed tube. A continuous feed attachment and extra blades are nice extras.
- Toaster oven (larger, but more versatile than a regular toaster)
- Countertop grill (convenient for grilling meats, but also may also be used as a panini/sandwich press)

Cutlery:

The basic, one-stop knife for a kitchen is an 8-10 inch chef's knife. The gently curved blade gives you leverage to quickly chop vegetables while the edge will slice through meats without tearing. The best steel comes from forges in Japan and Germany: these are knives meant to last a lifetime with the proper care. Look for knives with full tangs--where the metal goes all the way through the handle--or one piece construction for correct balance. An unbalanced knife doesn't cut efficiently. The very best chef's knives need professional sharpening, but very good knives

can be sharpened on diamond or ceramic rod sharpening systems or with a sharpening steel, which is usually a component of the cutlery sets that come in blocks.

Water Systems:

A water filter reduces metals, particulates, and, depending on the type, pathogens that may be present in household water. It significantly improves the taste of tap water in cities with heavily chlorinated water supplies. Although there are filtration systems that connect at a home's main water source and it's possible to buy a water filter that installs under the sink, most consumers are going to be interested in either an on-faucet or pitcher filter for their water needs.

Filtered water...on tap:

An on-faucet filter uses a carbon filter to remove impurities and absorb odors that affect the taste of tap water. It snaps or screws on to the end of the faucet. Turn the water on and it flows through the filter. The challenge with on-faucet filters is that they significantly slow the flow of water: not great for cooking or washing dishes. The other problem is that they attempt to mount something fairly bulky--a water filter--onto the relatively narrow surface of a faucet. The hardware provided with these things isn't the best, so they're known for being knocked off or for randomly falling off. Weak seals, bad mountings...not the best. If you're thinking about one of these, make sure its ANSI and NSF rated for whatever it claims to remove. Also look for metal hardware rather than anything made of plastic. Or, better yet, look for a filtered water pitcher.

As with on-faucet filters, filter pitchers rely on charcoal filters to improve water quality. Unlike faucet filters, filter pitchers are pretty straight forward: you run water into the top part of a plastic pitcher. It trickles through a filter and into the main reservoir of the pitcher. You don't have to worry about anything falling off, leaking, or requiring installation. Look for models that feature reminders or color-changing strips to indicate when you need to change the filter.