



# MEET THE *Makers*

THE 21ST CENTURY HAS SEEN AN UPTICK IN PRODUCERS OF CAST-IRON COOKWARE, AND THESE ARE FOUR TO KEEP YOUR EYE ON

BY GEORGIA CLARKE

A Lancaster Cast Iron pan in progress.



**W**hen people think of cast-iron skillets, they tend to envision a skillet of cornbread fresh from the oven or a pan spitting and splattering as flour-battered chicken meets hot oil. Unless you're privy to the ins and outs of cast iron production, it's likely you haven't given much thought to the makers behind these beloved pans. But the reality is, these artisans spend months—and sometimes

years—sketching designs, testing prototypes, and perfecting the cast-iron cookware that bring nuanced innovation to a centuries-old tradition.

"A cast-iron skillet is something that you're able to pick up, hold and use for the rest of your life," says John T. Hoffmann, a cast-iron tool that has a lot of meaning to the people who use it.

AS SEEN IN -  
SOUTHERN CAST IRON  
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When John and his wife, Liz Seru, founded Borough Furnace ([boroughfurnace.com](http://boroughfurnace.com)) in the Finger Lakes region of New York, the cast iron industry looked different than it does today. It was 2011, and most folks were cooking in passed-down pans made by manufacturers like Wagner, Griswold, or Lodge, and there were not many options when it came to cast iron companies. “At the time that we started doing this, there were no other US makers of cast iron beyond Lodge, certainly no independent makers like there are now,” says Liz. “It was a big project to even conceive of the idea and then build our foundry and get it done.”

Despite the challenges of being forerunners in the world of small-scale cast iron producers, there was something about cast iron that hooked Liz and John from the start: a cast-iron skillet wasn't like any other cookware; it was cookware that, when well made, could last for generations. After a couple of years of careful development, tests, and design work, Liz and John, who studied metal casting and craft work, introduced their first pan—a sleek 9-inch frying skillet made entirely from recycled iron. With a contemporary, utilitarian look, this



Above Left: John Truex and Liz Seru of Borough Furnace. Above Right: The lid of Borough Furnace's enameled Dutch features pips on the underside that help baste food while cooking.

skillet boasts a long handle attached with a spacious bridge that helps it stay cool while cooking, as well as a large helper handle. It should be no surprise that this hand-polished skillet quickly gained fans. Since that first pan, Borough Furnace has added two more skillets, roasting and baking pans, a grill pan, and more recently, Dutch ovens, one of which is enamel coated.

Beyond their purposeful use of materials and their expert designs, what makes Borough Furnace even more impressive is how they master each and every aspect on their own in their small foundry while still placing an emphasis on minimizing their carbon footprint. They built their own equipment, including the furnace; they developed the casting process, and eventually, they made a skillet from scratch. “It was very much of a home-brewed set up when we first got started, but now that we've grown the workshop a bit, it's hard to think about how difficult it was to get that first skillet completed,” John says.

But Borough Furnace has come a long way, even so far as conquering the enameling process for their Dutch oven, making them the only known company in the country to enamel their



Top Right: Sean Girdaukas of Austin Foundry Cookware. Bottom Right: From start to finish, Austin Foundry Cookware's patented pans are made in their family foundry.



cast iron stateside. Today, you can find them working on mastering different sizes of Dutch ovens that are set to hit the market in the near future, but you won't see the finished products until they've been perfected. If there's one thing that most cast iron makers have in common, it's the perfectionist mentality.

One maker who embraces perfection is Sean Girdaukas of Austin Foundry Cookware ([austinfoundrycookware.com](http://austinfoundrycookware.com)). He and his wife, Lisa, started their cast-iron cookware business as a sister company to Austin Foundry, the company Sean's grandfather founded in 1946. Sean is the third generation of family-owned Austin Foundry, which produces iron castings for a number of industries. But in 2018, his idea of creating his own cast-iron cookware came to fruition. Lisa remembers they were cooking dinner in their outdoor wood-fired oven one night when she began to pull the skillet from the oven. It had a small handle, was extremely front heavy, and was hard to keep level. “I remember Sean saying, ‘Oh, it's the design; I know I can make a better skillet than this,’” Lisa says. “And it wasn't too long after that moment that I think his wheels started spinning, and he thought maybe it was a good time to design his own.”

Between Sean's father being an avid cast iron cook and small-scale collector and his family owning a foundry, designing his own cast-iron cookware was a natural fit, but that didn't mean it was easy. Of course, one aspect of the skillet that Sean and Lisa wanted to perfect was the handle, one of the most unexpectedly important parts of a pan. Sean wanted it not only to be aesthetically pleasing but also to provide proper leverage, to have a comfortable grip, and to be easy to use.

“I carved it [the handle] out of wood, Styrofoam, clay, sketched it out, you name it,” Sean says. “We finally came up with a design.” During this time, Lisa remembers Sean handing her a different handle each day asking if it felt better than the handle she'd held the day before, and this creative process went on for some time.

The first pan that made its debut was the beautifully smooth 9-inch skillet with two pour spouts and a generous helper handle. The next was the 10-inch skillet with two pour spouts and a generous helper handle, emblazoned with the AFC logo. The hefty pan was followed by the 11-inch skillet with two pour spouts and a generous helper handle. From start to finish, Borough Furnace, Austin Foundry Cookware is made from recycled iron.

by the same people who sell it. While many other companies hire out foundries to do the brunt of the work, these companies are involved in the entire cast-iron cookware process, from developing the molds and testing prototypes in their own family kitchens to hand-finishing the products before selling them. The attention to detail is evident in every pan.

The same year Austin Foundry Cookware came on the cast iron scene, Mark Longenecker and Brandon Moore quit their jobs and went on the adventure of a lifetime driving from Pennsylvania to the Arctic Ocean. It was on this trip that the two college friends rediscovered their love for cast-iron cookware. Mark grew up eating meals made in a 120-year-old Erie Griswold skillet, and when he and Brandon designed their own pan, it was skillets like that beloved Griswold and many other early 20th-century pans that inspired their venture, Lancaster Cast Iron ([lancastercastiron.com](http://lancastercastiron.com)).

The company began with a Kickstarter campaign that turned into a booming success when cooks got ahold of Lancaster's first and currently only pan, the 10.25-inch No. 8 skillet. But before they ever made that first skillet, Mark and Brandon did their homework by thoroughly studying vintage cast iron and also asking home cooks about their preferences. What they learned was that many folks avoided cooking in cast iron due to its hefty weight. With Lancaster, the duo made it their mission to create a lighter skillet without forgoing the benefits of cast iron. They married a vintage-inspired design, featuring a handsome rounded handle and heat rings (a nod to pans from yesteryear), with a lighter construction and a seriously smooth interior. If multiple sellouts are any indication, Pennsylvania-made Lancaster Cast Iron is a top contender in the cast iron industry.

Farther south, 2018 was also the start of another cast-iron cookware company whose founders were anything but new to the cast iron industry. KochCookware ([kochcookware.com](http://kochcookware.com)) may have officially launched in Miami, Florida, but their story began more than 60 years ago when siblings Anil and Arda Koch's grandfather emigrated from Greece to Turkey and opened a foundry in 1958. The foundry is still run by the family today and produces materials for a number of industries in Eastern Europe, one of the most well-known being SINGER Sewing Company for which they've been machining parts for more than 30 years. But when it came to producing their own cast-iron cookware, the family aspect of the company was what inspired it all.

"There are very few products in the world that can serve you throughout your lifetime, and cast-iron cookware is one of them," says Arda. "It lives with you; it progresses and becomes more fascinating as you use it. Even after you, your loved ones will inherit it, and they will continue to use this heirloom with great joy."

At KochCookware, every pan, from start to finish, is made by hand with recycled iron in their Turkey family foundry. Their



No. 305, a 10.25-inch skillet with an unpolished interior that they call "old-school," was their first pan, but their most technologically advanced skillet is the No. 306 whose interior is polished so smoothly that even the most stubborn eggs would glide across it.

They also offer unseasoned cast iron, which is a rarity in today's market. "Everyone has their own opinions and preferences when it comes to seasoning," says Arda. When determining the best seasoning method for KochCookware's pieces, they did a lot of research and determined a solid coating of flaxseed oil to be the superior choice. But in their findings, they also discovered just how much some people favored a specific kind of seasoning. "Because people cannot find the seasoned cookware of their choice, they strip and re-season the cookware they purchase with a lot of effort," says Arda. The unseasoned skillet gives cast iron fanatics the satisfaction of choosing the finish, which is an option that he says has been appreciated by customers and sets their product apart from others on the market.

By now, you've realized that most companies tend to start by making a skillet, but not Milo ([kanalifestyle.com/collections/milo-cookware](http://kanalifestyle.com/collections/milo-cookware)).

In 2018, they also burst onto the scene with their gorgeous 5.5-quart enamel-coated Dutch oven. Since then, Milo has been touted for producing cookware whose beauty and function exceed their modest price point. Their Dutch ovens feature a clean design and colors including beautiful tones of emerald green and navy, as well as classic black and white, and the removable stainless-steel knob is just the cherry on top. Costing one-third of the price of comparable French-made Dutch ovens, Milo has become a popular buy on the cast iron market, and there's no question why. Today, their line also includes enamel-coated skillets, as well as several seasoned cast-iron pieces.

Some may be partial to vintage or heirloom cast-iron pieces, but these industry newcomers are making a name for themselves. "We want to leave a brand legacy that will be remembered with respect even after we're gone, just like Griswold or Wagner," says Arda Koch. In the past decade, cast-iron cookware has seen a resurgence. What was once the pan that you associated with your grandmother has now become a top tool in restaurant and home kitchens spanning the country, and it's companies like these that are leading the way into the future of cast-iron cookware.