

SMITHEY IRONWARE

NEW CAST IRON
WITH AN OLD SOUL

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—ISAAC MORTON
FOUNDER, SMITHEY IRONWARE

A sturdy stalwart of the Southern kitchen, the cast-iron skillet has long been relied on as a faithful vessel for bringing our best recipes to life. But as devotion to cast iron grows and those who were once mere admirers become avid collectors, one begins to wonder—is there enough to go around?

Enter our reverence for the cast-iron creators of today. One such cast-iron maker with a fast-growing following is Isaac Morton, creator and owner of Smithey Ironware, based in Charleston, South Carolina. His beautiful, handcrafted skillets have become a beacon to those searching for modern, quality cookware with traditional craftsmanship. The design of his pieces is so classic and their surfaces so smooth that one would think Isaac had apprenticed in the hallowed halls of long-gone foundries, or at the very least, had a family tradition handed down to him. But Isaac's cast-iron curiosity was first sparked when his sister-in-law gave him a vintage Griswold skillet. "Before that, I always enjoyed cooking with cast iron, but I'd never really cooked on the smooth surface of a vintage skillet," Isaac says. "I'd always struggled to get comfortable with the grainy surfaces of the more modern pieces."

The Griswold skillet opened his eyes to the craftsmanship that went into each piece of vintage cast iron. He began reading collectors' books and amassed cast-iron pieces to restore. "They made great gifts to people who appreciated cooking and artistry," Isaac explains. But the more he learned about the history of cast iron, the more he felt there was something missing. "I realized there was a gap—the cast-iron foundries that produced these premium pieces were lost 50 or 60 years ago," he says. "So I started trying to figure out how to create a modern piece that represents the quality of those older pieces."

He began by learning about the foundry industry and cast-iron cookware design. He reached out to foundries about producing new pieces and received rejections. Finally, in late 2014, he identified a foundry that was the perfect fit. "I think it takes a heavy dose of curiosity and the ability to be comfortable with failing a few times," Isaac says. "I don't have a metal-smithing background, but I do have a good feel for how products are designed." He started working with a designer in Charleston to create a model for the foundries to work from, and as samples came in and problems arose, Isaac faced each hurdle head-on. "It takes a lot of time and effort, but I enjoy the challenge," he says. "It's so rewarding once you know you've created something great."

BY GINNY HEARD
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SOUTHERN CAST IRON
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He knew that he wanted his pieces to be premium cast iron, and he took time to consider exactly what that meant. “Surface smoothness is the most important aspect to me,” Isaac says. His pieces are hand-ground and seasoned in his workshop in Charleston, and the end result is a perfect, glassy surface. “The design and weight also need to be beautiful and functional—something you can get comfortable with so you can sear with authority,” he says. He also thought the design should have some practical additions, like a helper handle and a pour spout. “These are secondary aspects,” Isaac says, “but they make a big difference in usability.” Smithey Ironware skillets also have a heat ring—something that is a straight throwback to the older pieces that got Isaac started on his cast-iron journey. “I think it adds to the design,” Isaac explains.

“IT HARKENS BACK TO THE HISTORY OF CAST IRON’S ROOTS, WHEN PANS INCLUDED A HEAT RING TO MATCH UP TO THE STOVETOP. THAT HISTORICAL CONNECTION IS SOMETHING I WANTED, ESPECIALLY IN OUR FIRST PIECE.”

—ISAAC MORTON

Isaac also appreciates the simple aesthetic of the vintage pieces even when it comes to their logos. He particularly liked the design of the Griswold and Wapak logos, and used this simplicity as a basis to create the logo for Smithey. “We worked on it with a dear friend and graphic designer,” Isaac says. “We were thinking of referencing something you might actually cook in the skillets, but we didn’t want it to be your everyday barnyard animal—we didn’t think that would look right visually.” Having each spent time in San Francisco years before, Isaac and his designer eventually landed on a sketch of a California quail. “The design was striking and represented a bit of the wild,” Isaac says. “It felt right for our style and is memorable in its simplicity.”

It’s important to Isaac that his skillets are made in America, and he worked hard to find foundries that would produce the quality he was looking for. Each of the Smithey Ironware pieces is cast in a foundry in the



Midwest, and then is sent to Charleston for finishing. They polish each skillet into the smooth-surfaced finished piece by hand. “We take these raw, rough, sandpapery, gritty castings, and we transform them here in Charleston into skillets with elegant, beautiful surfaces,” Isaac explains. “It involves six or seven steps—sometimes more. They start in our workshop, then they go to our machine shop; they come back to our workshop where we grind them by hand, we mill them, and then we season them.”

“Most of the effort and cost of creating the skillets is tied up here in Charleston,” he says, a fact he is proud of. “We’re pretty focused on doing everything we can to stay here in town.” Charleston seems to be the perfect spot for this creative venture—celebrated for its rich food culture, architecture, and historical significance, the city is an ideal base for cast-iron production.

Because of the high quality and usability of the Smithey Ironware skillets, they are bound to be passed down as family heirlooms. And while cast iron sometimes has a reputation for being difficult to clean and keep seasoned, these beautifully polished surfaces are easy to maintain. “A light scrub under warm water is all you’ll need,” Isaac says. Dry your piece thoroughly and follow up with a light layer of oil, and it will be ready for its next use. “You have to work pretty hard to destroy a cast-iron skillet,” Isaac laughs. “And even then you can usually bring it back to life. They last nearly forever—they’ll outlast you!”

But while cast iron’s shelf life is lengthy, the last thing Isaac wants you to do is keep it on a shelf. “I want it out on your stove, ready for its next use,” he says. With their beauty and functionality, these skillets don’t belong anywhere else. ●

Visit Smithey Ironware (smitheyironware.com) to learn more and to purchase your own heirloom skillet.



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