

HFAN

THIS WEEK

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THE HOME PAGE

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By Andrea Lillo

NEW YORK—Cast iron has found a place in the modern home, and, with new features and conveniences, it's not your grandma's cookware.

Innovations such as pre-seasoning, a wider breadth of price points and colors, and much exposure on the Food Network is translating into cast-iron sales.

The category has swelled over the past few years, with double-digit growth in dollar sales, jumping 15 per-
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Striking
While the
Cast Iron
Is Hot

Gottschalks Getting Away From Home in Strategic Shift

By Barbara Thau

FRESNO, Calif.—Shoppers won't find a display bed or towel wall at any of the new stores Gottschalks opens as it ramps up expansion.

That's because the West Coast department store chain is exiting the bed and bath busi-

ness in all of its new stores—which will be in a smaller footprint—as part of a larger thrust to de-emphasize home all together and focus on “the strengths of the business,” such as cosmetics and footwear, Jim Famalette, chairman and chief executive officer, told HFN.

The move comes as the 59-unit retailer out-

lined its new Value Improvement Program, an initiative designed to boost sales, improve operating performance and position Gottschalks for growth.

The plan includes accelerated store openings, a broader store remodeling program, expanded

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CEO Jim Famalette

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Above: Now in its second year, Meyer's Rachael Ray line will add the dutch oven in a new green color this fall.

Left: Raves from NASCAR pit crews led to the production of the Olvida line of nickel-covered cast iron.

Inset below: This year, Lodge debuted its Signature Series cookware line, with stainless-steel, cool-touch handles.

THE CAST IRON IS HOT

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cent from April 2006 to March 2007, according to NPD Group, a market research firm. "I think cast iron has become an essential part of every well-stocked kitchen," said Michelle Israel, divisional merchandise manager of housewares and luggage for Bloomingdale's, where the category is a major part of the cookware business. "It has become a more universally accepted necessity instead of an ancillary."

"The one thing with cast iron is its versatility," said Mark Kelly, marketing communications manager for Lodge Manufacturing, one of the leaders in the category. "It is the utility infielder of the kitchen."

The fastest-growing subsegment in cookware, cast iron is "really skyrocketing," added Doug Kellam, president of Columbian Home Products. Plus, the new growth "is interesting, as cast iron is one of the oldest materials in cookware."

Lodge Manufacturing, which has been producing cast iron for 111 years, saw its business double since adding a pre-seasoning feature to its line, which cuts out a step for the consumer. The company began offering consumers pre-seasoned cast iron in its Lodge Logic line five years ago, and "right away, sales were very brisk," Kelly said. In July, the company discontinued selling non-seasoned cast iron completely.

"Cast iron was always big in Europe," said Jay Zilinskas, chief merchandising officer for Meyer Corp. "but over the last few years, U.S. consumers have become more interested in the category." Earlier this year,

KitchenAid released cast iron, which hits stores this fall and is "very different" from the Rachael Ray products Meyer released last year. "KitchenAid is more upscale and very different from

CAST-IRON COOKWARE DOLLAR SALES

April 2006 to March 2007: **\$18.42** million
 April 2005 to March 2006: **\$16.02** million
 April 2004 to March 2005: **\$12.63** million

SOURCE: NPD



market is opening up. You see vendors jumping in," he said.

New opportunities in distribution are also emerging, Kelly said. Sporting goods stores such as Bass Pro Shops and Cabela's comprise a rapidly growing channel for this category, for example, and now represents 20 percent of Lodge's business, he said. The restaurant business is another avenue, as cast-iron pieces can serve such food as fajitas, soups and stews or hors d'oeuvres.

Though other companies offer celebrity lines, Lodge will not. "We've talked about it, but it doesn't work," Kelly said. "For us, Lodge is a celebrity unto itself."

Celebrities might help, but quality makes the customer buy, said Vinnie Franco, vice president and general manager of Copco, which offers cast-iron pieces in its Mario Batali and Rick Bayless lines. "A lot of people are buying from the Batali line that don't know who Ma-

rio is," he added, but make a purchase because "the product is good-looking and priced well."

Color in cast iron has added a fashion element to the category and remains a big trend. Ayon sees the color palette "moving away from blue and red" toward brighter colors. Also, the

traditional ombre effect is giving way to more solids and brights, she said.

Handles are also a focus, Kelly said. This year, Lodge launched its Signature Series of cookware, which has stainless-steel handles that keep cool thanks to a split-V construction that dispenses heat. At Staub, removable silicone handles are a feature of its new Honeycomb line, which was released earlier this year and features a naturally stick-resistant cooking surface in a raised pattern that resembles a honeycomb.

Other trends in cast iron include pieces that are lightweight and those with a non-stick coating, both of which are seen in Columbian Home Products' new Iron Chef line, based on the Food Network's popular show. The cast iron is made lighter with a new process and a special alloy that allows the material to be "less brittle than traditional cast iron," said Columbian Home Products' Kellam. With this process, the Iron Chef line can be made "thinner and still retain its strength," at about half the weight of traditional cast iron.

The first line of the Iron Chef collection has a red enamel exterior and a Quantanium non-stick coating on the cooking surface. The company recently released another group as well, which features of pre-seasoned

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The cookware category is taking off with the addition of new features to products

Scalpel Company Cuts Into Gadget Business

By Andrea Lillo

REDDING, Calif.—Drawing upon 20 years of expertise in surgical scalpels, plus the president's passion for gourmet food, Lassen Scientific has launched a line of kitchen gadgets under its new division, Van Vacter.

With 12 items currently in the collection and eight more to join by the end of the year, the line will include a special, patent-pending ergonomic handle design that significantly improves the functionality and comfort of the knife, especially when wet.

"As Americans become more health-conscious and sophisticated about food choices," said Nicholas Webb, president and chief executive officer of Lassen Scientific, "we believe that they will demand straightforward, multifunctional accessories to help them quickly and easily prepare foods." Webb, who named the Van Vacter division after his mother's maiden name, anticipates worldwide sales of more than \$8 million next year. He also is a cook who constantly thinks up new tools for the kitchen and has authored four cookbooks: Viva Garlic, Viva Tortilla, Viva Salsa and Guacamole and Viva Avocado.

Besides the growing interest in organic foods, the Van Vacter gadgets target the baby boomer segment, as many have compromised dexterity as a result of soft tissue injury or arthritis. Starting with avocado, ice cream and pizza knives, the collection now offers a pumpkin melon knife, which is a focus for Halloween; a garlic peeler; a cheese grater; and, this fall, peanut butter-and-jelly bagel, citrus and mango knives. The suggested retail for each of these tools is \$19.95, except for the four-in-one garlic press, to be released next year, which will retail for \$29.95. The line is aimed at independent gourmet retailers and is also found on such e-tailers as coolfoodtools.com. The company is on target to receive more than 20 pending patents by the end of the year.

Van Vacter will exhibit at the International Home & Housewares Show next March, where it will introduce another five tools to the collection. ■



1 The four-in-one garlic press will be added to the collection next year and will retail for \$29.95. **2** Van Vacter's citrus knife allows the user to get right underneath the peel. **3** Each handle in Van Vacter's new line of gadgets—in front are the pizza cutter and garlic knife—features an ergonomic design.



Le Creuset's new stainless-steel collection includes this eight-piece set, which retails for \$400.

Le Creuset Adds Stainless-Steel Line

CHARLESTON, N.C.—After offering consumers cast iron and other cookware for more than 80 years, Le Creuset has bowed its new stainless-steel line at retail. Made of a three-ply construction with a pure aluminum core from base to rim, the new line has an 18/0 brushed stainless-steel exterior, making it suitable for all cooktops, including induction, and consists of 16 pieces.

"We understand that consumers will have a kitchen stocked with cookware of varying materials," said Sara Daiber, brand manager for Le Creuset's stainless steel. "By entering the stainless-steel arena, it is our desire to bring the same level of quality and performance that our consumers have learned to expect from our cast iron, as well as offer more variety to the loyal Le Creuset collector."

Manufactured in China, the collection's features include curved, ergonomic handles so pieces can fit easily into the oven; heavy-weighted lids to prevent moisture loss; oversized assist handles; and capacity markings on inside of all casseroles and saucepans. In addition, there are precision pour rims on all pieces to prevent spills and drips, and the collection is dishwasher-safe, even the non-stick. There is a lifetime warranty on all of the pieces, except for the non-stick items, which have a 10-year warranty.

The collection includes three saucepan sizes; a chef's pan; a 3-quart saute pan; three sizes of frying pans, two of which are available as non-stick as well as stainless; a 5-quart braiser; a pasta pot with insert; three sizes of casseroles; and an eight-piece set. Individual pieces retail between \$80 and \$200, while the set is \$400. ■

Striking While the Cast Iron Is Hot

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cast iron for the cooking surface. The collection is also unusual for a category that is primarily open stock: Columbian offers two Iron Chef sets—the Chairman and the Challenger—based on the show. The Chairman is a seven-piece wok set, while the Challenger includes three pieces of cookware and several tools. The version featuring enameled, non-stick coating retails for almost double the pre-seasoned version, he added. A 10-inch pre-seasoned skillet has a suggested retail price of \$29.99, for example, while the non-stick counterpart can be \$50 to \$60.

Nickel-plated cast iron has also debuted recently through the unlikely vendor Advanced

TOP FIVE CAST-IRON COOKWARE MANUFACTURERS

(ranked by unit sales; includes gift with purchases)

- 1** Private label
- 2** Lodge Manufacturing
- 3** Tabletops Unlimited
- 4** All-Clad
- 5** Le Creuset

SOURCE: NPD

Plating Technologies, which manufactures nickel and nickel-alloy pipes, plates and sheets. The company was developing cast-iron components for Ingersoll Rand to conform to a certain engineering specification, and cast-iron cookware ended up being the "guinea pig" for the plating process, said Mike Hanson, the company's owner and manager. Since the company had so many nickel-plated cast-iron cookware pieces on hand, Hanson gave many of them away to the pit crews at NASCAR, for which he also does work.

Suggested retail prices range from \$100 to \$200 for skillets, a grill pan and a 5.8-quart pot. ■

Nespresso Looks for Essenza Line To Be a Runway Hit at Fashion Week

NEW YORK—Nespresso has ventured into a new realm of introducing products with the unveiling of the Essenza collection at the New York City Fashion Week show.

The company slated an exhibition of the collection during the Mercedes-Benz 2008 Spring Collection event. The line consists of seven coffee machines, four of which are priced for retail at \$179 and three priced at \$229. They are available in four runway-inspired colors: twilight blue, "glam" red, stardust gold and cyber blue, and come in curved designs that, according to a Nespresso statement, were inspired by the creations of architects and fashion designers that use bold graphics and glittering and glossy details in their work.

Explaining Nespresso's decision to show at Fashion Week, Veronique Grellier, marketing manager, said, "We recognized a need we could fill ... and felt it was a natural fit. Our machines are highly styled, and we always look to stay on the cutting edge through color and current design trends."

The new machines will be available this fall at department stores, gourmet kitchen and specialty stores, the Nespresso Boutique Bar here and the Nespresso Club, the company's online organization of Nespresso product customers. ■