

THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

An iron skillet seasoned with love

By Lisa Waterman Gray

Armed with her now-dark cast-iron pan, our daughter was ready for life in her first apartment.

I had spent much of the spring and summer collecting kitchen utensils for our daughter Stephanie's first apartment at college, but none was more precious than her iron skillet.

Steph and our older daughter, Jessica, grew up eating turkey bacon cooked in olive-oil-coated iron skillets and pancakes that fluffed up as they cooked in thin pools of iron-infused melted butter.

When stormy weather precluded grilling burgers outdoors, the patties sizzled happily against hot iron. And each time Thanksgiving rolled around, diced onions and celery wilted together in the iron skillet before joining crumbled corn bread and savory sage as part of our turkey stuffing.

By the time they each reached seventh grade, the girls began using the iron skillets independently. Within a couple of years, Jessica had learned to melt butter in the large skillet, add and stir flour until a smooth roux emerged, and then add turkey fat and seasoning to create a perfect gravy.

Stephanie prepared golden French toast and sunny-side-up eggs in the skillets for friends who spent the night together in our finished basement.

Throughout her last summer at home, Stephanie's first skillet never left our stove top – except for cleaning. The family skillets retreated to a kitchen drawer so we could spend several months seasoning hers, just as we had seasoned Jessica's first iron skillet three summers earlier. I gave the pan a serious washing with soap and water, dried it thoroughly, and added a thin coating of olive oil. Then we started cooking.

With each pancake Steph flipped, each chicken-and-vegetable stir-fry I created, and each sausage my husband, Mark, fried deep brown and crispy, the skillet surface grew a little smoother and its color a touch darker. As the summer progressed, Steph often experimented with her prized pan. After she cooked macaroni in a saucepan, she stirred it into the skillet with lightly sautéed, diced tomatoes and zucchini. "What seasonings would go with this, Mom?" she asked. "You can add basil, oregano, and thyme, and, of course, garlic." We devoured her creation.

On another day, Steph rummaged through the refrigerator and filled her arms with containers of shredded chicken, grated Colby Jack cheese, half a tomato, and a small bunch of green onions. She chopped tomato and onion into tiny pieces, heated the skillet on a gas burner, waited a few minutes before adding a touch of oil, and then retrieved flour tortillas.

Within minutes, Steph had covered half of a large tortilla with handfuls of the other ingredients, folded the remaining tortilla over the filling, and carefully placed it into the hot iron skillet. As the first side browned, she returned to the refrigerator for salsa and cilantro. Steph flipped the

quesadilla without losing any ingredients, let it cook for another few minutes, and then cut and shared it with me.

The following morning, I heard eggs cracking as I entered the kitchen for a glass of water. "I'm making an omelet," Steph said. "Do you want some when I'm finished?" Ten minutes later, a half moon of golden egg oozing with cheddar cheese emerged from the skillet, and we dug in.

Each time we used Steph's skillet, we drew one month, one week and, finally, one day closer to her departure and a truly empty nest. A week before she left, boxes full of newspaper- and bubble-wrapped treasures for her apartment littered the house. I carefully packed her iron skillet beside a cupcake pan, a garlic press, and several spatulas, and closed the box on a summer of seasoning.