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The 17 Must-Have (Affordable) Home Cooking Tools, According to 10 Chefs

By [Alex Robinson](#)

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Let's get cookin'! | Amazon | Emily Carpenter

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Before this month, there were two things I could cook extremely well: eggs and cacio e pepe. Now? I can still only cook eggs and cacio e pepe. But I've been trying out new things, and I think by May I'll have at least four dishes under my belt. And surely I'm not the only one. A quick scan of Instagram will show you breads, confections, casseroles, and everything in between that people are making at home -- often for the first time. The simple truth is the world is cooking more because we must cook more. So, why not make the most of it and arm yourself with some of the best, affordable kitchen tools on the market.

I spoke with 17 chefs about their favorite kitchen tools, why they're important, and how you can use them to elevate your skills. The answers ranged from the obvious (chef's knife) to the idiosyncratic (a monkey peeler). Now, let's get cookin'.



Gotta get a good chef's knife | Amazon | Emily Carpenter

A (good) chef's knife

The operative word here is good. You can find a chef's knife at a corner store for \$7. And sure, it'll cut carrots for a couple of days, but that blade will grow duller than a C-SPAN marathon. Adriana Velez, Thrillist's very own senior food editor and gourmand, told me "One of the most important pieces of equipment everyone should own is a quality chef's knife. Shitty cheap knives make cooking such a chore." If you're serious about cooking, she recommends Wusthof's 8" Chef's Knife. Though if you're on a budget, she said go for one from Ikea, like this stainless steel 8" number.

Lisa Chernick, food writer, author of *Your Starter Kitchen* (a book to help newbies start cooking), and James Beard Award judge agreed, "if you are going to have one knife in your starter kitchen, make it a chef's knife. A good one is an investment and it will be an indispensable tool you will use for a lifetime cooking."

Lisa McManus, the Executive Tasting & Testing Editor of America's Test Kitchen loves the \$32 Victorinox Swiss Army Fibrox Pro 8" Chef's Knife. "With this cheap but excellent knife, I'm all set, whether I'm dicing onions, breaking down a whole chicken into pieces, mincing herbs, or quartering a hard butternut squash. It's beautifully made, comfortable to handle, and takes and holds a super-sharp, precise cutting edge. At this price, you're not tempted to save it for special occasions, you'll use it every single day."



Take of your cast iron and it'll take care of you | Amazon | Emily Carpenter

A dependable skillet

"A medium skillet is perfect for all your stovetop needs like scrambled eggs, steak, and pork chops -- plus it's easy to clean," Chernick said. The OXO 10" skillet is a great option here. And as a self-proclaimed expert egg cooker, I love a good skillet. I've been using a 10" All-Clad skillet for years now and I can't recommend it enough.

Of course, we can't talk skillets without recommending a cast iron one. McManus thinks everyone should have the \$43 12" Lodge Classic Cast Iron Skillet. "It's affordable, absolutely indestructible, and actually gets better and more nonstick with use over time. We love its thick walls and heat-retaining properties that give you an amazing sear on foods and help you roast or bake beautifully."



Oh, saucy! | Amazon | Emily Carpenter

A saucepan you enjoy

Saucepans, frankly, come down to aesthetic and brand loyalty. There isn't a whole lot of difference from one to the other, but Chernick counts it as a kitchen necessity. You'll want "a mid-size saucepan (2-3 quarts). That size is perfect for soup, pasta, or reheating leftovers." Try this 2-quart stainless steel one from Cuisinart. Caraway also makes an excellent ceramic-coated chemical-free non-stick model (in five fun colors). However, if you're looking for savings, check out Faberware's model for \$16.

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A slow cooker

If you've been sleeping on the slow cooker, it's time to wake up. "Without any hesitation, I'd say the best affordable cookware is definitely going to be a slow cooker," said Stella Metsovas, the author of the cookbook Wild Mediterranean, "The convenience of being able to make anything from a braised whole chicken, soups, meats, fish, breakfast recipes like a frittata, and more tops my list as a must-have. All you have to do is literally throw a bunch of ingredients together, cover, and cook." Her favorite is this digital model from Hamilton Beach. However, if you're new to the idea of cooking things slowly, you might want to start out with this budget-friendly Crock Pot, which is currently on sale for \$29.



Rice, rice baby! | Amazon | Emily Carpenter

A rice cooker

If you want to save money, be non-committal about cooking, and make delicious meals, a rice cooker should be at the top of your list. Hiro Mitsui, Executive Chef and founder of

the DC hotspot Ramen by Uzu, had this to say: "As an Asian man, a good rice cooker is absolutely essential. I have to have a good bowl of rice, and being from Japan, rice is a staple in a lot of meals I make at home for my family." If you're as serious about rice as Hiro, you'll definitely want to grab his rec -- the Zojirushi NS-TSC10.

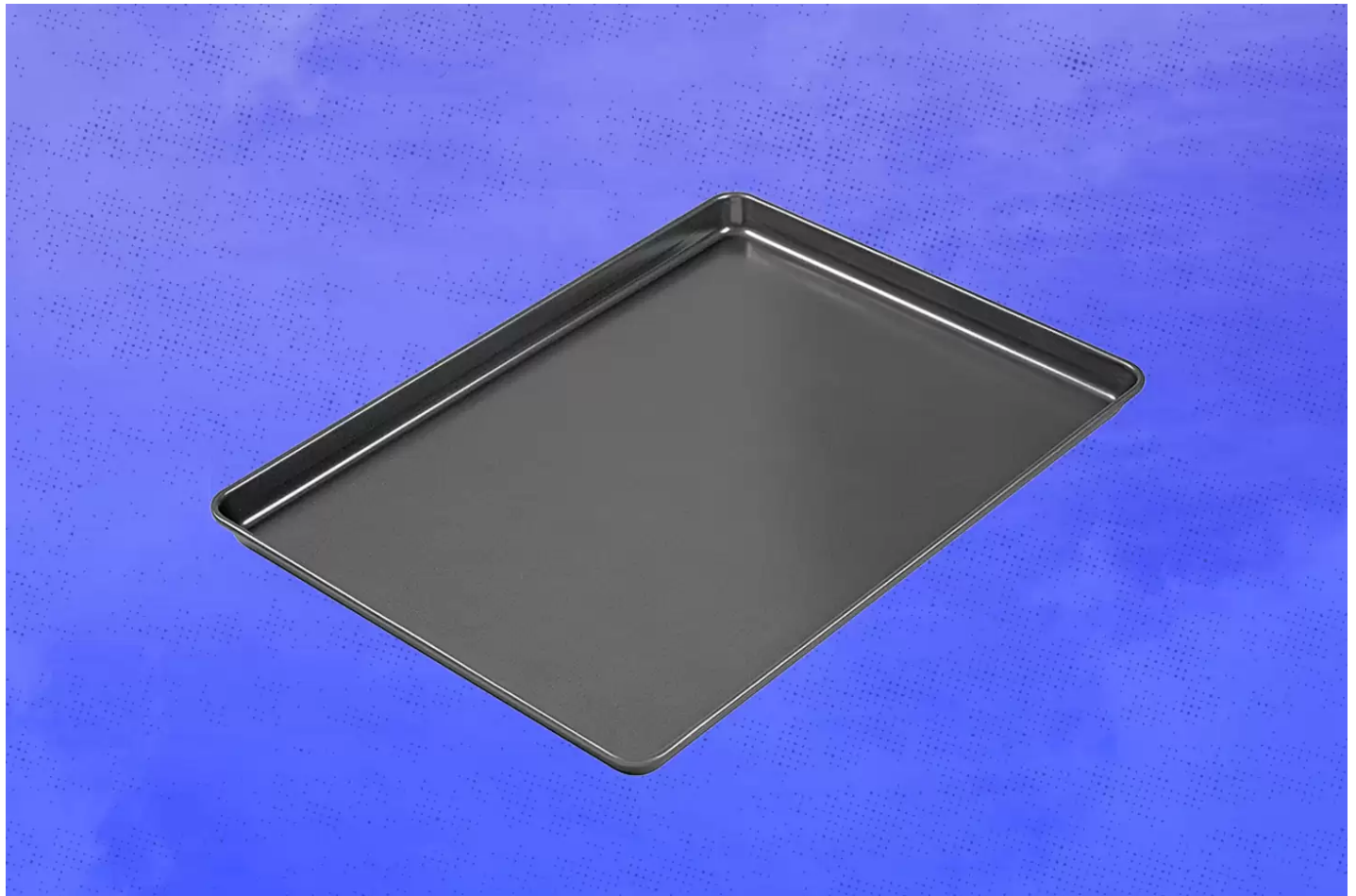
McManus is a big fan of the Aroma 8-Cup Digital Rice Cooker, Multicooker and Food Steamer which will set you back about \$30. "This compact rice cooker is a great appliance at a bargain, and it produces perfectly cooked sushi rice, brown rice, long-grained white rice at the touch of a button, and then keeps it perfectly hot and steamy for hours without scorching or drying out the rice. A small steamer tray can sit above the rice as it cooks to steam fish, chicken, vegetables or dumplings at the same time. I use my rice cooker several times a week, and I wouldn't want to do without it."



This will cook literally everything | Amazon | Emily Carpenter

An Instant Pot/pressure cooker

While none of the chefs I spoke to specifically recommended an Instant Pot as an essential, I have one and it's the single most important piece of equipment in my kitchen. Making Instant Pot recipes has become a routine in my household and we use it at least three times a week because it cooks nearly everything to perfection. Pasta? Yep. Pork shoulder? You betcha. A cake? Yeah, it'll bake a freakin' cake. Put everything in, press a couple of buttons, wait 20-30 minutes, and you'll end up with a restaurant-quality meal. I own the Instant Pot Duo 7-in-1 model and really can't sing its praises enough.



It'll all pan out | Amazon | Emily Carpenter

A sheet pan and cooling rack

A decidedly boring piece of kitchen equipment? Yes. An essential one? Absolutely. You can make countless meals, sides, snacks, and desserts on a sheet pan: veggies, roasts, cookies, cakes, your roommate's Totino's pizza rolls that she definitely didn't forget about. The point is you need one.

ATK's McManus writes, "Our favorite half-sheet pan (also known as a rimmed baking sheet) is the Nordic Ware Baker's Half Sheet. This versatile workhorse, combined with a grid-style cooling rack that fits inside, is at least five or six inexpensive, sturdy pans in one: A cookie sheet, a jelly roll, cake and pie pan, pizza pan, broiling pan, roasting pan, and a drip-catching draining rack for keeping breading on fried foods crisp and intact. We found that everything prepared in this sturdy, warp-resistant sheet pan cooked well and evenly." As for the cooling rack, you'll use that "when you want to lift up foods like crispy oven-fried chicken wings for excellent heat circulation -- or use it on its own to cool your entire tray of cookies without crowding."

Chernick echoes the sentiment: "Sheet pans are perfect for roasting in the oven and it will transform any dish, from pork chops to roasted vegetables. You can even section off the pan to roast your entire meal -- half for your meat and the other half for your vegetable of choice." Of course you can buy the sheet and cooling rack separately, or you can get them bundled like this set from Kitchenatics.



A Dutch oven will last you for years | Amazon | Emily Carpenter

A Dutch oven

When it comes to the Dutch oven, our experts said there are really only two choices: The \$72 Cuisinart Chef's Classic Enameled Cast Iron Covered Casserole, which McManus

said "...costs less than a quarter of our top-rated Dutch oven by Le Creuset, and performs beautifully. We use this large, heavy-duty pot for boiling, searing, frying, braising, and baking food and for sous vide cooking. We turn it into a smoker, steamer, cooler, and panini press. It might just be the busiest pot in our test kitchen -- and in my house."

The other? The Dutch oven by Le Creuset. Chef Jeff Osaka, who owns several restaurants in the Denver area (including Sushi-Rama, Osaka Ramen, 12@Madison, and The Empire Lounge & Restaurant) "can't live without it." He acknowledges that it's "not affordable as an initial investment, but it pays off BIG TIME over a lifetime." Osaka keeps it real, simple, and real simple: "it's durable, holds its heat, ovenproof, and easy to clean."

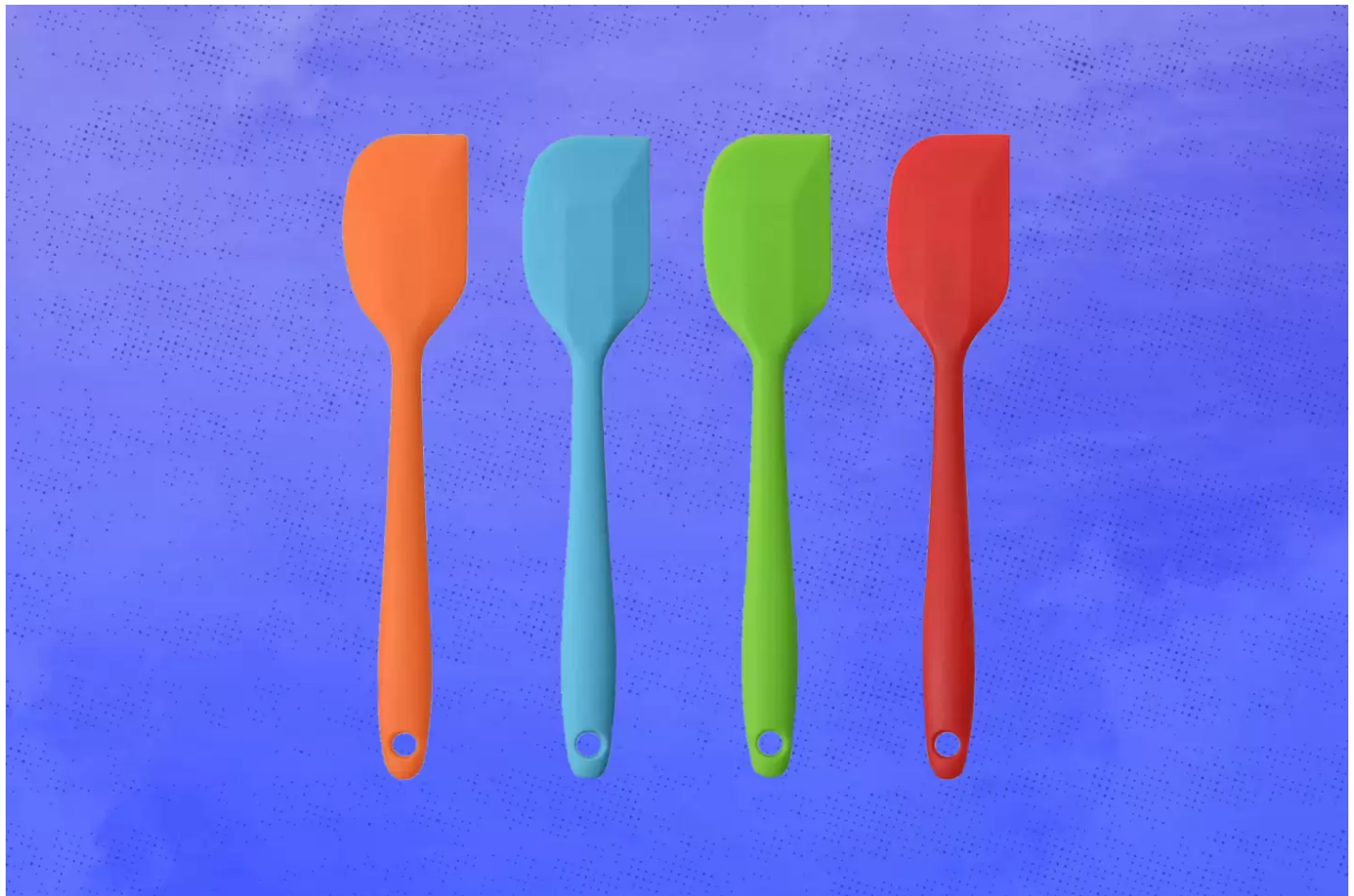


The ultimate tool for making guac | Amazon | Emily Carpenter

A mortar and pestle

This is a bit more niche than some of the other items you'll see here, but nevertheless, it's something that came up repeatedly. Tim Hollingsworth, winner of Netflix's *The Final Table* and chef/owner of Otium in Downtown Los Angeles, said it's his favorite piece of

affordable cookware. "I love my mortar and pestle because the flavor you get from fresh ground spices is unparalleled. I'm from Texas so I make a lot of Texas style BBQ when seasoning my meats. Not only can you grind spices, but you can crush different herbs to make different pastes, sauces or dips like pesto, salsas, guacamole." Velez also mentioned it made the list of her faves, as it's perfect for grinding spices and nuts. [Amazon has a huge selection.](#)



Never scratch a frying pan again | Amazon | Emily Carpenter

A rubber spatula

Ah yes. The pragmatic rubber spatula. It'll help you slide eggs off the frying pan without scraping it, get cookies off the baking sheet without breaking them, it'll effortlessly flip

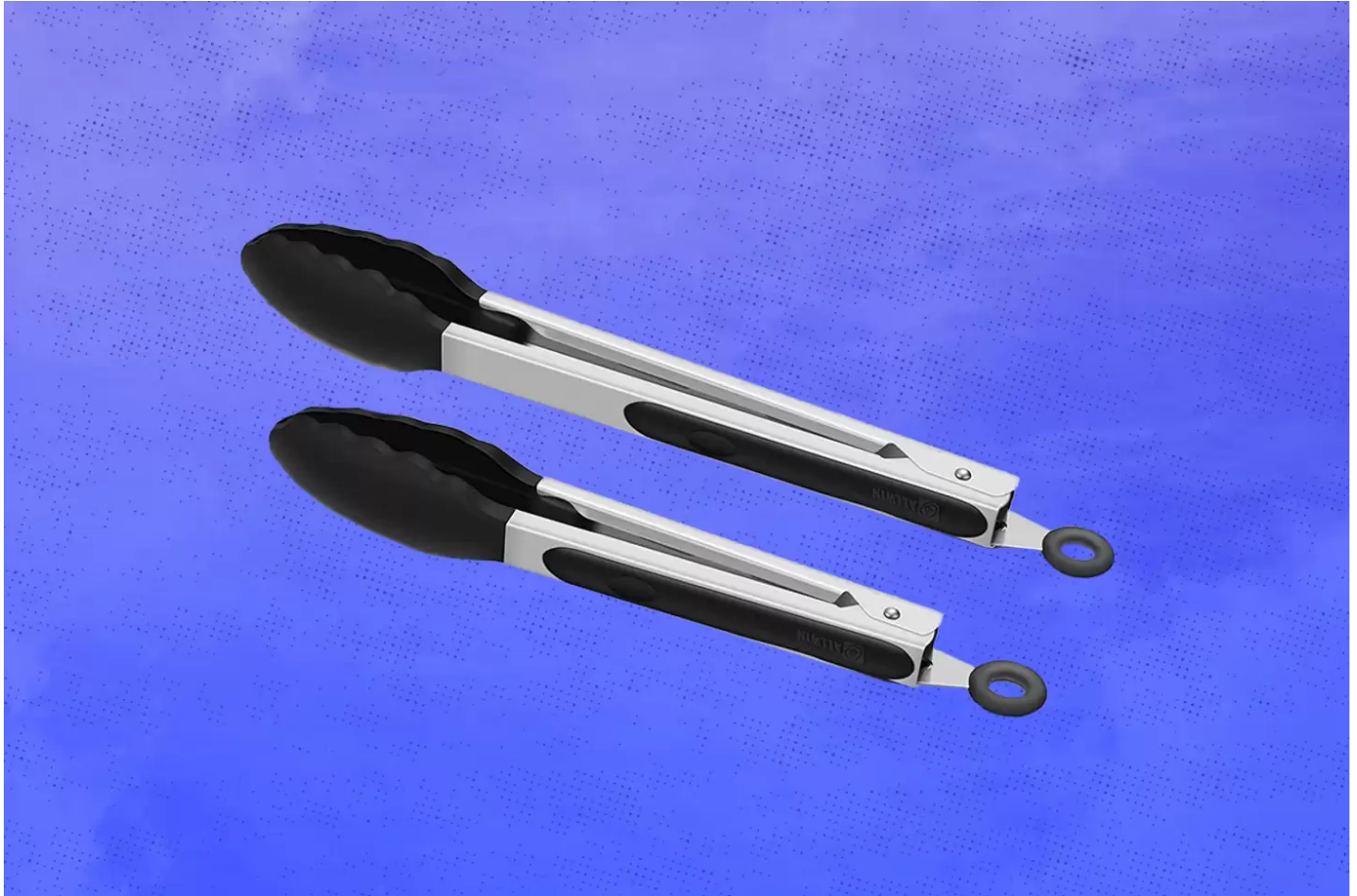
your pancakes. It truly is the most egalitarian of cooking utensils. When I asked Velez for her top tools, she promptly replied, "I couldn't cope without a silicone rubber scraper." Grab a pack of four for \$10 and never scratch a pan again.



Slice it, mince it, chop it | Amazon | Emily Carpenter

A food processor

Britt Berlin, who runs the drool-worthy Instagram account, The Banana Diaries, loves the Hamilton Beach 10-Cup Food Processor. "My Hamilton Beach processor has lasted me 6 years and it's still going strong. I really love the high-speed controls because it allows you to finely process ingredients much better than using a blender or even other smaller food processors." And best of all? It's under \$50.



You will use these way more than you think | Amazon | Emily Carpenter

Tongs

"Tongs would be another one of my top must-have items and tie with the chef's knife. Tongs are essential to any kitchen and are a multi-purpose tool," said Chernick "They can be used to flip a steak, stir pasta, and turn vegetables." In other words, they're a no-brainer must-have, and you can grab yourself a set of two right here for under \$10.



Perfect for cooking pancakes, bacon, and eggs. At the same time. | Amazon | Emily Carpenter

A cast iron plancha (a.k.a. stovetop griddle)

If you need to grill up bacon and eggs for 4 or 5 people, this is calling your name. Chef Andrew Weismann, head chef & owner of Signature at La Cantera Resort and Spa in San Antonio, calls it his go-to workhorse cooking tool. “It reheats tortillas and breakfast tacos like a son of a B,” he said “It’s an essential South Texas must-have item. It’s so easy to clean, we just wipe it down after every use. I’ve even got my kids hooked. They cook a mean fried egg and even pancakes on it. My favorite is searing steaks and scallops and even whipping up another south Texas favorite, quesadillas.” You can grab one now for just \$40, and as long as you treat it right it’ll likely last you decades.



Gotta store those veggies somewhere | Amazon | Emily Carpenter

Storage containers

Plastic or glass storage containers are a necessity. And although you'll have to pry my copy of *Microwaving Cooking For One* from my cold dead hands, I understand that cooking a meal usually means having leftovers. If you're looking for something top of the line, this set from Uncommon Goods reigns supreme. If, like me, you end up with 4 lidless containers sitting around taunting you every time you open a cupboard, maybe these ones from Rubbermaid are more your speed.

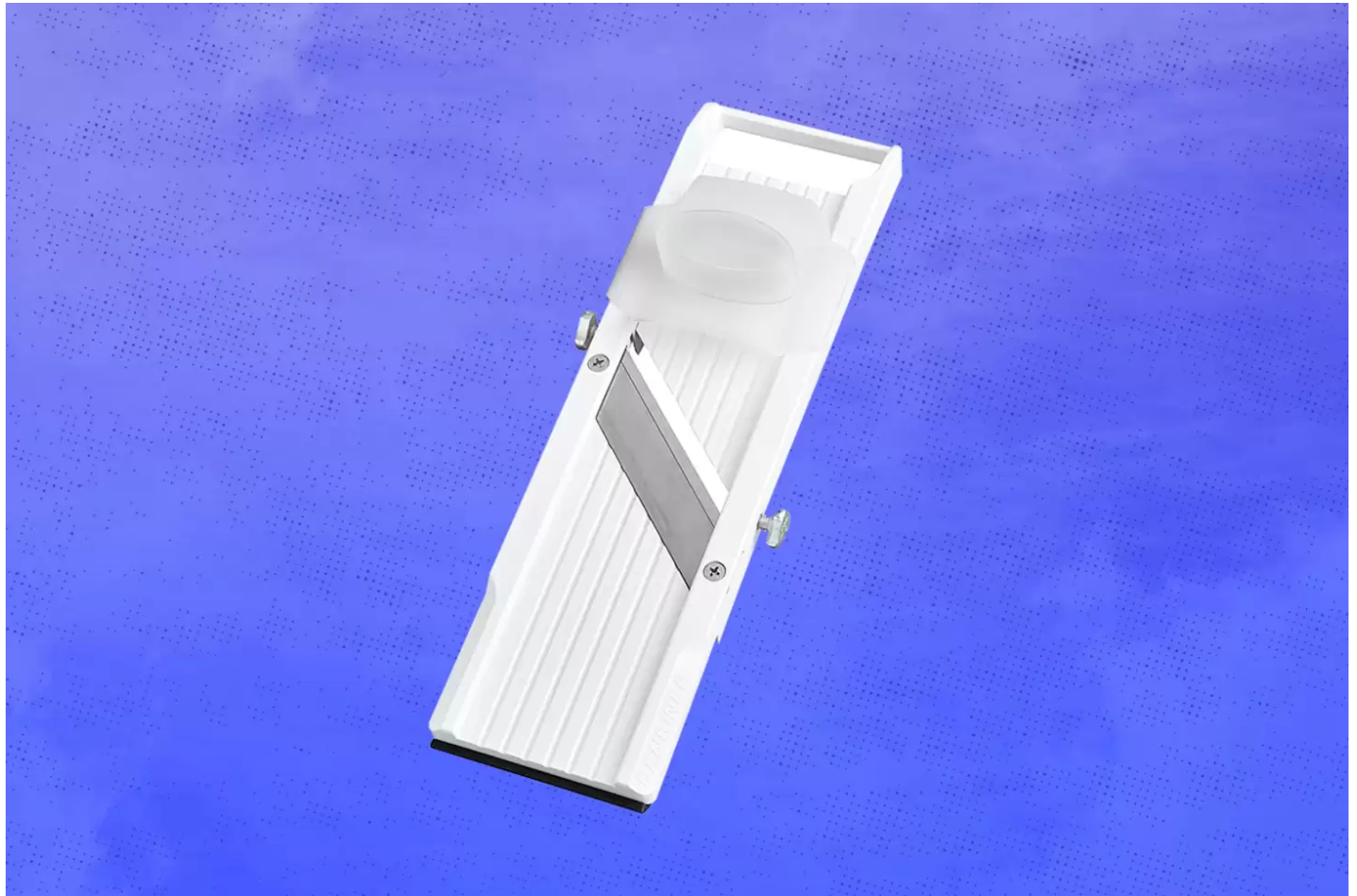


Will not actually seal your vacuum however | Amazon | Emily Carpenter

A vacuum sealer

Small, useful, and can even seal clothing! Talk about a workhorse. Mitsui had this to add: "I'm a huge fan of my vacuum sealer. Especially in a time like this when opportunities to

go grocery shopping are scarce, if you're purchasing fresh meat or items that don't stay fresh for very long, having a sealer at your disposal can make all the difference." They run anywhere from \$35 to \$200 depending on your needs, but for home cooking, you should easily be able to get a solid one for under \$40.



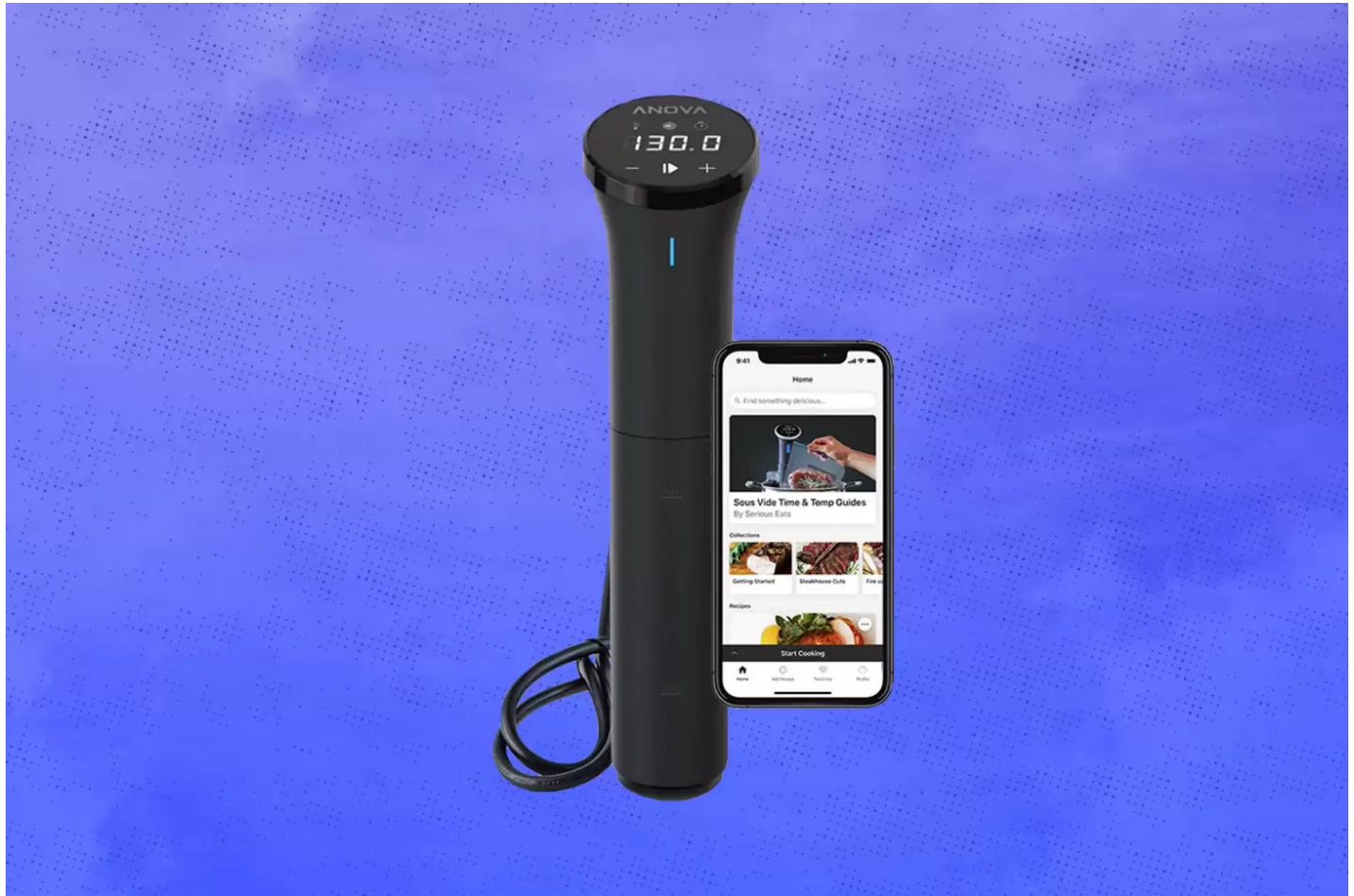
A great tool, no matter how you slice it | Amazon | Emily Carpenter

A peeler/mandoline

Ben Tenner, Chef de Cuisine and partner at Espita DC counts a mandoline slicer as a must. "A Japanese style mandolin (specifically this one made by Benriner) is in my essential toolbox, it makes slicing large quantities of super thin vegetables a quick endeavor (think French onion soup)," he said "It's also how I get that perfect julienne or superfine mince, which takes your home garnish game to the next level."

For something a little more affordable, Mitsui recommends this hand mandoline, which he insists is "perfect for when you want to slice your vegetables extra thin, evenly, and

beautifully. Just make sure you don't slice your fingers." As for Velez? She's obsessed with this monkey peeler.



Sous Vide... did she ever go by Sousan? | Amazon | Emily Carpenter

A sous vide

Chef Mitsui made clear that everyone should invest in a sous vide “because it’s an easy way to cook extremely tender meat without much effort (truly, if you've never had a steak cooked in a sous vide, you’re in for a revelatory experience). "They make cooking a breeze,” he said. “I love this one from Anova, and it's just under \$100.”

And I know this is just scratching the surface. If you ask anyone who cooks -- as a hobby

or profession -- they'll tell you five different things you need almost every time (aside from a chef's knife, apparently). But if you've decided to bust out the recipe books and try your hand at the culinary arts, hopefully you gleaned a bit of knowledge and confidence about where to start. Maybe with some cacio e pepe. Bon appetit.

Alex Robinson is a writer and editor who WILL perfect cacio e pepe before the end of April. Follow his misadventures on Instagram.

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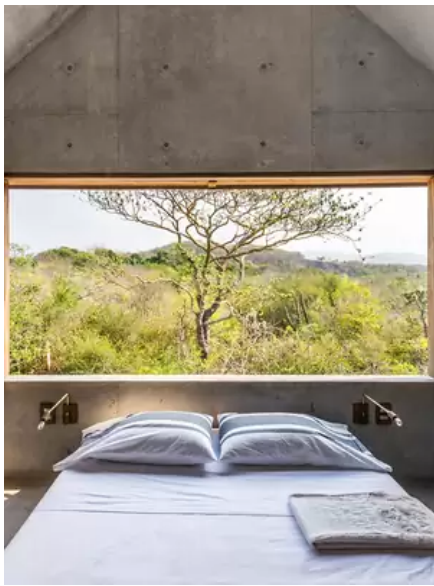


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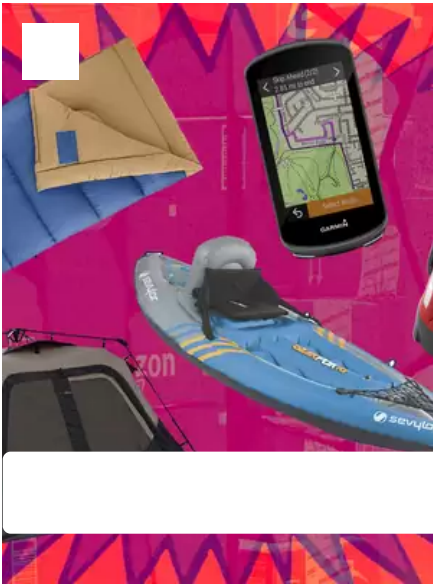
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