

Now we're just some gadgets that you used to know

Be it a spit wheel, a pudding prick or a tongue press, many kitchen utensils once considered essential have long been consigned to obscurity, laments Neil Buttery

Illustrations by Sholto Walker

DO you have drawers, cupboards or garages full of redundant kitchen gadgets? The likely answer is 'yes'. According to research by Tap Warehouse in 2022, the average UK household is cluttered with \$822 of neglected culinary kits, the most unused being the cafetière: one in four owners have never taken theirs out of its box.

The word gadget usually applies to a tool designed for a specific purpose. We couldn't imagine kitchen life without some of them, yet digital scales, can openers and timers were all new once and seen as fangled or fashionable. Most gadgets, however helpful, have a lifespan—fondue sets, yoghurt makers, electric meat carvers—as fashion and technology move on.

‘Will your spiraliser or air-fryer end up on the rubbish heap with the butter curler?’

Sometimes, several stages of development exist together. Take the whisk. Almost everyone has at least one, but it had to be conceived and there had to be a reason for it to exist: that it was bloody hard work whisking eggs and sugar for an hour or more for a meringue or cake with a bunch of birch twigs. The balloon whisk—only invented in the 19th century—made meringues more luscious in a fraction of the time, which informed the hand-cranked whisk, the stand mixer, then the electric hand whisk. Which stages of its evolution do you own?

Similarly, there are dead ends: a time when meat lockers and ice houses were obsolete was once inconceivable. The best example is the clockwork spit jack, for roasting meat by the fire. Roast meat used to be enjoyed only by the wealthy: it required a great deal of fuel and a dog or a servant to turn the spit, who, thus engaged, was unable to do anything else. Waterwheel-powered and steam-powered jacks helped, but things completely changed with the 1740s invention of the clockwork jack, which was weighted and wound like a grandfather clock.



Tin hat or colander? Kitchens are a smorgasbord of inventions, yet not all stay the course

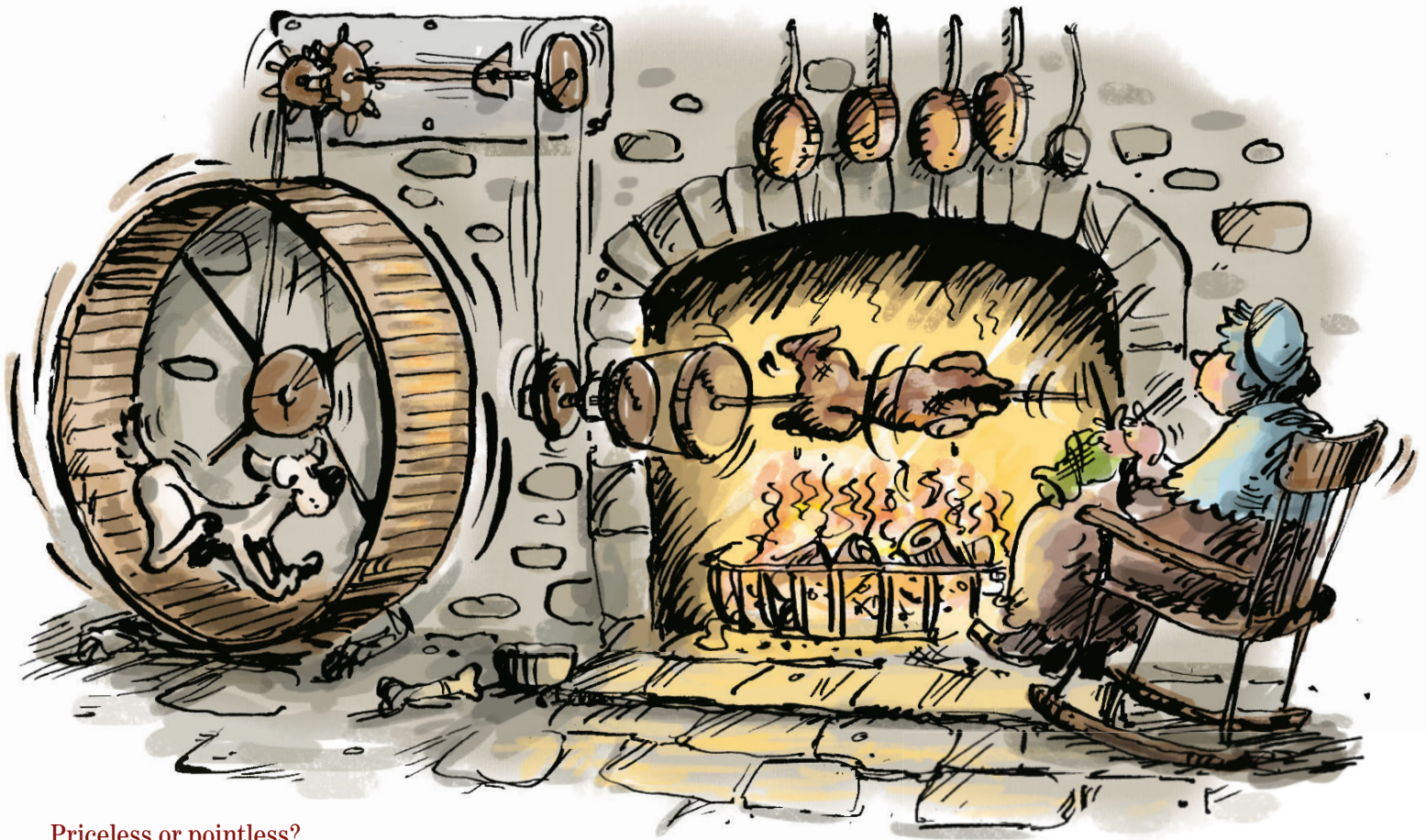
This was adapted into the bottle jack, hung vertically from the ceiling with the meat hooked on beneath, good for households with small fires. It was improved further with a shiny half dome of steel that reflected heat back towards the meat, greatly increasing fuel efficiency.

All was eclipsed by the cast-iron range with its attractive fuel efficiency and fusion of gadgets—hot plate, hobs, hot-water tank, plate warmer and oven, all in one place. The sure-fire hit that was the clockwork jack was dead. Of course, the range would be superseded by the gas cooker. I wonder what will render today's cutting-edge induction hobs obsolete?

One gadget waited in the wings for centuries before it became popular: the pressure cooker (*Full steam ahead*, August 14). Invented in the 17th century, its potential was obvious,

cooking the toughest of meats to tenderness in a fraction of the time with a fraction of the fuel—yet it would take 300 years of modification before one that was safe and affordable was available. Its popularity wavered in the 1990s, but it seems secure... for now.

Today's kitchen essential is often tomorrow's charity-shop donation, especially those made not because of an obvious gap in the market (such as the can opener), but because a gap has been created; does anyone need a can drainer, automated pan stirrer or banana slicer? The question is: will your spiraliser, air-fryer and *sous vide* end up chucked on the rubbish heap to join the butter curler and electric can opener or will they achieve god-tier ranking to sit among the vegetable peeler, food processor and electric toaster? Only time will tell.



Priceless or pointless?

Spit wheel and dog

Little dogs on wheels turned the kitchen's spit before the clockwork spit jack was invented. These spit dogs were a special breed, now sadly extinct.

Garths

This Georgian device was essentially a large wooden hoop that was employed instead of a metal cake tin to bake massive cakes, which were prone to burning when baked in a tin. They have recently been reinvented as 'bake-even strips'.



Pie dolly

Anyone making many pies at once needs a pie dolly, a cylindrical stub of wood with a turned handle for shaping pies quickly and consistently. Still available today.

Pudding pricks

When Tudor 'pudding wives' made black puddings in guts, they fixed the ends with wooden pegs to keep the intestines nice and tight when boiling.

Cheese toaster

This handy Georgian device melted cheese before the fire, mustard and wine were added and the whole thing poured over toast. You can keep your fondue set, thanks.

Tongue press

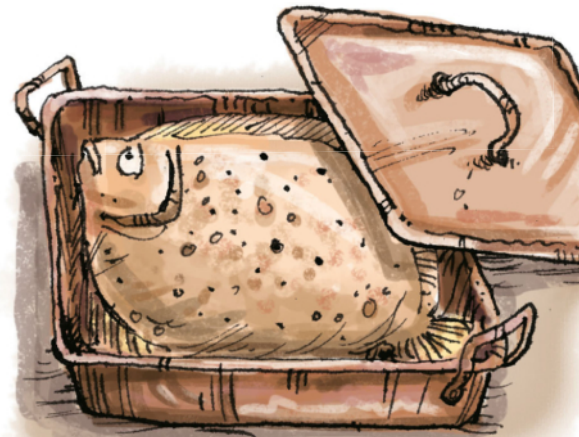
A little device for pressing a cooked, coiled, pickled ox tongue for sandwiches. Every home should have one.

Hay box

A large wooden crate into which a casserole was placed, together with plenty of hay, which was lit and allowed to smoulder all day; the original slow cooker.

Cauldron

You may not consider this a gadget, but cauldrons were a chef's complete system, cooking several things at once and rarely used for big stews and witches' brews.



Turbot kettle

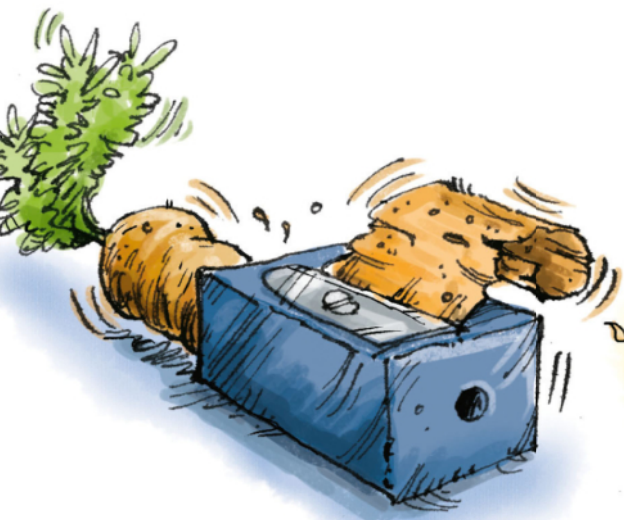
We've all been caught short trying to poach the weekly turbot (*'Turbot-charged'*, November 8, 2023). This huge, diamond-shaped copper fish kettle, measuring 35in by 26in, will make light work of the task.

Bladders

Before Kilner jars and their airtight lids, pigs' bladders were stretched over jar tops.

Wire slicer

If you own one of these, you've probably been using it wrong, because it's a mushroom slicer, not an egg slicer (you can tell because it's not very good at slicing eggs). →



Carrot sharpener

It turns out our steamed carrots have been too blunt all this time. How embarrassing.

Pastry blender

Still available today, these are perfect for rubbing rock-hard butter into flour. They resemble a rather terrifying knuckle-duster.

Larding needle

A wide-bore needle in which a piece of fatty bacon could be threaded, it was used to spear the bacon through lean meat to prevent drying when cooking.

Hippocrates' sleeve

Named after the father of medicine, this medieval felt cone was used to strain the spices from a spiced wine called Hippocras.

Strawberry huller

Now what's wrong with a knife?



Duck press

Not for the faint-hearted, this Edwardian fine-dining favourite was an elaborate plunger for crushing rare-roasted ducks to make blood sauce. Grotesque opulence (*'I'll have a side of drama, please'*, November 29, 2023).

Asparagus pan

These tall, slender pans cook your asparagus spears on their ends. Completely pointless—use a steamer.

Ice-cream churn and spaddle

The Georgians made their ice cream by spinning a tub of mixture in a bucket of ice and salt, the sides scraped with a wooden spatula called a spaddle. The skilled could make a sorbet in 15 minutes.



Salamander

Before grills and chefs' torches, the caramel top to your crème brûlée was created with this device—a red-hot circle of iron. Still the best tool for the job.

Steeple jelly mould

The best-selling jelly mould of the Victorian era, steeple moulds made jellies of a ribbed column shape, which had a tendency to wobble very suggestively.

Egg cuber

This makes cube-shaped boiled eggs, for some reason.

Attelets

These ornate silver skewers were shoved into joints of boiled meat and threaded with black truffles, boiled crayfish, cockscombs and cubes of aspic.

Spurtle

Essentially a wooden spoon without the spoon bit. Excellent for stirring things that are prone to sticking, such as porridge. Requires a comeback.

Melon baller

Chunks of melon are vulgar, apparently. Thank goodness we said goodbye to this waste-creating nonsense tool. 🍈