

GADGETS

Thank goodness my father never watched late night cable TV shows. Although he held degrees from both Stanford and Harvard, he was a complete sucker for any sort of gadget he saw advertised on television—particularly kitchen gadgets. If he were alive today the house would be full of Ginsu knives and Ronco kitchen thingamajigs.

As it was, he was forever buying gadgets for my mother to use in the kitchen. (Note that MY MOTHER didn't buy the gadgets—she knew better.) Dad bought several different kinds of ice shavers and glass frosters and salters—which was interesting because he didn't like frozen daiquiris and rarely asked for a Margarita and ate snow cones only at an amusement park. He bought a handy little gadget for shelling and deveining shrimp all in one handy movement—which worked basically as a shrimp masher, leaving you with a large glob of shrimp meat with the crushed shell mixed in.

And then there was the Veg-o-matic, that handy machine that would slice all sorts of veggies, even tomatoes. It all looked so easy the way it was demonstrated on the TV commercials. The happy housewife stuck the vegetable in one end, turned the handle, and lo and behold out came perfectly made French fries, or cucumber spirals, or sliced tomatoes. Hah! When used by an ordinary mortal, the Veg-o-matic's mechanism promptly jammed, or if you tried it with tomatoes, you got mashed tomato pulp, with seeds. In fact when I was in law school, we studied the Veg-o-matic in my class on products' liability and false advertising! But we had one in the back cupboard, thanks to Dad.

Then there was the espresso machine, which worked for a little while, but when the very fragile glass carafe broke, we discovered that ordering a replacement was about as easy as getting accurate information from the government. And there was the heat-sealing machine, which left a nasty burn scar on the thumb when first used. At least the pickle forks and cheese knives and demi-tasse spoons of my grandmother's generation took less room.

That said, there are a few gadgets that I do use. For one, I am constitutionally incapable of making decent homemade bread. I tried making a loaf from scratch once and you could have used it as a deadly weapon. But the bread machine makes excellent bread. And it has the advantage of a timer, in that you can add the ingredients to the machine the night before, set the timer for when you want the bread, and go away and leave it. Then, in the morning, you are awakened to the smell of delicious freshly baked bread.

Which is true—although there are a couple of things they don't tell you about. First, the bread has to have time to rise, which means the machine starts mixing and kneading the bread about 3 in the morning. And this is not a quiet process—it sounds like you've either got a very clumsy burglar or a demented poltergeist in the kitchen. Lots of thumping and banging. Not very conducive to sleep in the wee hours of the morning—let alone the fact that the dog goes nuts. And you've got to set your alarm to when the bread is done, because the loaf really has to be taken out of the oven as soon as the bell goes ding. (These are the things they don't tell you in the directions.)

For a while I used the electric orange juicer, which made the most delicious orange juice in the morning. But it was kind of a bother, and living with bags of fresh oranges rolling all over the countertops soon got old.

But the cherry pitter works as advertised. So does the egg timer. A micro-plane grater is wonderful for grating fruit peel, chocolate and small amounts of hard cheese. I use kitchen tongs so often I just broke the spring in my favorite pair. The salad spinner does dry the lettuce.

And for the bigger gadgets, the food processor and the Kitchen-Aid are essential for their purposes. The microwave gets used every day, although I rarely cook meats or poultry in it. My personal favorite gadget is the electric rice cooker. I love rice and eat it often, and this is a gadget that has more than proven its use on a weekly basis. It actually works as it's supposed to and makes cooking the rice a snap and something I don't have to worry about.

So what's your favorite gadget—or your entry in the useless gadget sweepstakes? This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.