



From the makers of the Sil-Pin rolling pin comes Head Chefs, a fun line of cool kids tools with bendable arms and legs. \$9.99.

Courtesy Fiesta Products



Silicone's flexibility, durability works wonders in the kitchen

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Published: 4/9/2008 12:09 AM (Chicago, IL)

It's been more than a decade since Martha Stewart trotted out Silpat baking mats on her cooking show. These beige-toned, French-made mats replaced the need to grease cookie sheets or line them with parchment paper.

Despite this domestic diva's endorsement, home cooks were slow to catch onto the idea that the flimsy sheets could really hold up to hot ovens, and still only a handful of suburban bakers I know use them.

That consumer reluctance hasn't stopped manufacturers from cooking up all sorts of uses for this material.

At the International Home and Housewares Show held recently at Chicago's McCormick Place, colorful, useful products that feature silicone filled the aisles, proving that the material has come a long way from those drab mats.

Rainbow-colored whisks, collapsible steamers, kid-sized spatulas and much more will be heading to stores later this year.

Still not sure what I'm talking about? Here's a primer:

Silicone is a rubberlike material that starts out as a pure form of a very fine grain of sand, according to Nancy Siler, spokeswoman for Darien-based Wilton Industries. Wilton uses silicone for whimsical cupcake holders and molded baking pans, for example.

The material is heat resistant between 400 and 600 degrees (depending on the manufacturer); it's nonporous so it retains no food odors or flavors and cleans up easily; it does not melt in the microwave as some plastics might and leech into food; it can go into the freezer and, of course, it's malleable.

Companies first started making cake pans and loaf pans out of silicone, and now create an array of pans in intricate shapes.

Oh, and it can be adapted to just about any color.

"In some instances, it's as simple as the colors you can bring into your kitchen," said Rudy Keller, president of Kuhn Rikon. The California company uses silicon in a host of kitchen tools, including its new rainbow-colored whisks.

Other companies have added a touch of silicone to tool handles for improved aesthetics and grip.

As manufacturers keep putting silicone out there, customers are starting to buy. According to Chris Nielsen, vice president of the Amazon.com Home and Garden Store, "we know that silicone products sell well. There are a breadth of products that are using it and that fuels innovation."

Amazon.com's top sellers in the Chicago market include cake pans, spatulas, baking mats and egg poachers. Once these products hit, I expect that list will change.