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January 11, 2006

latimes.com : Food

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TOOL DEPARTMENT

Tempest in a teakettle

By Cindy Dorn and Laurie Winer, Special to The Times

A spot of tea makes a bad day better — ask a resident of the United Kingdom at 3:30 p.m., or any human who appreciates one of the world's great restoratives. How about a cup right now?

You've got your fresh, loose leaves, your favorite cup, a little honey, maybe, standing by. You've got the connoisseur's drill down. But hold on. What's the best way to boil water for that tea?

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This may sound like a simple question, even a dumb one. But your third-grade teacher was right. There are no simple or dumb questions.

Europeans, including the British, have long preferred electric countertop teakettles to heat water destined for tea; Americans tend to like the stove-top "whistle when ready" models. Of course, it was the only real choice we had.

But in recent years, Euro-style electric kettles have hit the U.S. market and the resulting controversy — should we toss our stove-tops for the novel new electrics? — has created a tempest in the Test Kitchen.

We tested many examples of both styles, selected the best of each and then staged a dramatic face-off between the winners in the two categories. We called it the Thrilla on the Grilla. (Microwaves are simply unacceptable for this purpose. In that unnatural way they have, they heat the water without boiling it, leaving a flat and disagreeable taste).

We pitted five electrics against four stove-top teakettles, scoring each with a numerical system that rated time to boil, design (ergonomics and aesthetics), as well as workmanship and value. Although these four factors were most important, we also took into account heat retention and the weight of the kettle.

The championship round was a duel between the winners in each category: the Chef's Choice International Deluxe Cordless Electric versus the Oxo Good Grips Uplift stove-top kettle.

To boil four cups of water, the Chef's Choice clocked in at 4 minutes, 11 seconds; the Oxo stove-top kettle took 6 minutes, 54 seconds. We poured the water, waited until it cooled to 180 degrees and steeped Dragon Well green tea for two minutes.

We both enjoyed our cups of tea as we continued arguing.

The kettles weren't the only thing steaming. One of us favors electric kettles. They're faster. They don't sit on the stove and collect grease from non-related cooking activities. They are designed so that there is virtually no chance of burning yourself.

The stove-top kettle advocate was not swayed, starting with the faster-is-better argument. "What's two minutes in the course of a day?" she asks.

Besides, she likes her whistle and she will not do without it. That way she doesn't have to stand there twiddling her thumbs while she watches a pot. And the grease build-up issue? Just wash it, she says.

Hence, our numerical rating system. Math settled the score. The kettle that won the most points, 33, was the electric Chef's Choice. The Oxo scored a 29. Case closed.

Here's how the finalists in each category performed, listed in order from excellent to not-so-good.

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Electric kettles

Kettle King

The stainless International Deluxe Cordless Electric from Chef's Choice (model 685) has an ample 1 1/3 -quart capacity and a detachable lid. Weighs less than 2 pounds.

What's the difference: It boils water second-quickest of all the kettles tested — 4 minutes, 11 seconds. It is well designed, with a handle that offers an especially comfortable grip.

What we thought: This is our all-around winner because it has all the essential features in an effective package for a good price. Our rating: 33 points.

How much: About \$70 at Sur La Table; similar pricing at <http://www.amazon.com> and other online sites.

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Nifty and thrifty

The stainless utililTEA Variable Temperature Kettle has a relatively small capacity (just under one quart) and weighs in at 1 1/2 pounds. It comes with a guide that indicates brewing times and temperatures for different kinds of teas.

What's the difference: It doesn't just boil water, it has specific settings that will bring it to either 180 degrees (in 2 1/2 minutes) for green tea or 220 degrees (in 4 minutes, 23 seconds) for black tea.

What we thought: An excellent kettle for the price, compact and pours well. It lacks some of the bells and whistles of the more expensive models but is functional and kind of cute. 29 points.

How much: About \$50 plus shipping at <http://www.adagio.com>.

PHOTOS



Bodum Electric Tea Kettle
(Spencer Weiner / LAT)



Le Creuset Stovetop Tea Kettle
(Spencer Weiner / LAT)

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