

# Same Heart, Different Home

BY CANDACE WALSH / PHOTOGRAPHS BY BLAIR CLARK

The kitchen tools on display in the *Heart of the Home* exhibition at the New Mexico History Museum are, unlike many other kitchen tools presented for display on prominent streets of destination cities, not for sale. You can't add them to your registry, or put them on a wish list, or find yourself on line with one in your hand, because *suddenly*, you just can't imagine living without it.

These are relics, of the most careworn kind. As with many other items on display at the museum, you can see the mark of the brush, the sculpting press of fingertips, the patina of frequent use. But unlike those paintings and sculptures, these items remain tools, accorded their status as museum display items merely by virtue of how old they are. Like someone who suddenly becomes famous for an unexpected reason, they have the humble air (and under-dressed charm) of retiring folk dragged into the spotlight.

Not only are the tools works of art, but they also allowed the women who relied on them to bring artistry to their cooking and home-keeping. And yet the oeuvres of the women who created with these tools are lost to us. The cherry pitter, made in 1890, lessened prep work for pies and jams that were consumed long ago. The

The *Heart of the Home* exhibition, in the New Mexico History Museum's La Ventana Gallery in the lobby, includes a six-burner Monarch Woodburning Stove, ca. 1915, made by the Malleable Iron Range Company and used by Bloomfield resident Blacida Archuleta until 1995.

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potato masher (1890), made mashed potatoes, soups, toppings that were pressed over stews and baked ... and otherwise broke up the monotony of eating roasted whole potatoes night after night. The meals and the women who made them have passed into the great hereafter. And yet the tools remain. We must often imagine the rest.

The *Heart of the Home* exhibition at the New Mexico History Museum provides such a glimpse into the daily life of some early New Mexicans—our forebears, if not in blood, then certainly in terms of our shared reliance on the kitchen and its implements as a sphere in which to nourish ourselves and our loved ones.

Ironically, unlike the comparatively humble tools featured in the *Heart of the Home* exhibit, today's kitchen tools and accoutrements seem designed with an eye toward their future discovery and fate as *objets* that will one day be displayed in a museum



## PERSPECTIVE

exhibit. And given the many different statements people make when they furnish their kitchens, we'll be able to infer a lot more about the owners, although a surfeit of information can lead to jumping to the wrong conclusions.

There are people with trophy kitchens who don't actually cook. There are people with modest kitchens who are completely obsessed foodies. There are gadget-free traditionalists who swear by their one cast iron pot, and molecular gastronomists, counters littered with *sous-vide* machines, blowtorches and liquid nitrogen. There are the décor faddists, who had duck-printed wallpaper borders in the 1980s, sunflowers in the 1990s, and Tuscan tile in the aughties. And there are people who have a couple of scratched Teflon saucepans they picked out of the free bin at a yard sale.

If you were to come into my kitchen, you'd suss out a few of my secrets.

1. I'm a hoarder. I keep my kitchen tidy, but every drawer is packed with accoutrements. I've got three different kinds of pizza cutters: one red Kitchen aid model with a rotating blade (from when I was going through my red kitchen period), one white cutter that Laura brought over from her household when we moved in together (it doesn't have the heft of the KitchenAid but it's less dull), and a newfangled thing called a Scizza, which is essentially a large scissor designed to cut pizzas,

by an Australian design firm called Dreamfarm. I also have three fondue pots, and an Ebelskiver pan with which I make heavenly filled Danish pancakes twice a decade.

2. I live in horror of having mismatched silverware. I grew up with a flatware drawer piled with mismatched, higgledy piggledy forks, knives and spoons. During my mother's second marriage, her husband, who supervised mail delivery onto airplanes, added to the mishmash by bringing home a bunch of purloined airline silverware. I felt that my family's silverware stash was a drawer of disrepute. And ever since then, I've had sets of silverware.

So, now that you've peeked into my kitchen, you know that I like lots of options, even to the point of redundancy, and that

my silverware drawer is a hotbed of class anxiety. We live in an age in which the ability to accumulate kitchen tools is almost rococo in its gestural frills and furbelows. That's why it is such a rich reality check to spend time with the *Heart of the Home* exhibit at the New Mexico History Museum.

To my view, before lifestyle "wraps" applied themselves to utilitarian objects, the objects had more authority, more weight. At the exhibit, I stare covetously at the homely, beaten-up, rust-kissed waffle maker (1905), which is so much more sublime than plastic-cased waffle irons that you plug in or opportunistically avail of in hotel lobbies. How much more satisfying to place the base on top of your burner, pour batter onto the heated plate, close it, flip it, and enjoy the interval of baking with its soft sizzle—without the robotic beeping that prompts you to rush your breakfast on out of there.

The Jones family made sauerkraut in their homestead kitchen with the cabbage shredder (ca. 1910) that leans against the oak table (ca. 1800). An 1870 crock sits on the table with other historic pieces of kitchen equipment. In the foreground is an 1890 steel cherry pitter.



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**Anna Kennicott** mops up spilled milk in the kitchen of the Kennicott ranch, Westcliffe, Colorado, ca. 1900. Courtesy Colorado Historical Society, CHS.X9237

The 1920 dutch oven was donated by New Mexico historian Bruce T. Ellis, an associate editor of *The New Mexico Historical Review*. Although I wasn't able to access specific information about the dutch oven's history, I imagine that it lent itself to being used to cook big batches of posole, green chile stew, and frijoles.

The canning jars included in the exhibit look exactly like those used by friends of mine today when they can their extra produce each fall. Gardening and canning has experienced a renaissance after a lull due to the appreciation for modern conveniences, but at one time, these unassuming jars revolutionized people's ability to put up food for the long winter. Prior to 1858, people preserved their produce by sealing a flat tin lid to a glass jar with sealing wax. But then John Mason, an inventor and tinsmith, created a machine that cut threads into lids. Jars were soon made to nest with the lids, and that combination, along with a zinc lid with a rubber ring, made a seal. Other variations followed by Henry William Putnam and the Ball brothers. To this day, many New Mexican food staples such as green chile, red chile, and salsa come in (commercial) cans and jars.

The corn-cob knife (1850) looks at first glance like a rustic "make-do," and it is, but not in the way one might think. According to the museum's acquisition files, the knife's handle broke, and the owner repurposed a corncob as the new handle. Today, things are thrown out at the first sign of deterioration. It's much less expensive to buy a new knife than to have the handle repaired. The ingeniousness of using a piece of potential compost as a knife handle inspires me to be more resourceful.

"Today's world gives us more access to many devices that

quickly become what we consider a necessity rather than just making do," says Louise Stiver, curator of the exhibit. The cherry pitter included in the exhibit hails from the year 1890, just ten years after David Henry Goodell of Antrim, New Hampshire, made a product called the Family Cherry Stoner. It's a much more rough-looking, closer-to-prototype model

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than the cherry pitter in the *Heart of the Home*—which manages to be both beautiful and useful. Its silhouette resembles a giraffe's neck topped by a snail. Stiver shares, "My guess is that families would have brought them with them, expecting the New Mexico environment to be similar to their former home. The cherry pitter would

have come in handy if a family had a large crop of cherries that weren't eaten by the birds. Areas where an abundance of cherries grow in New Mexico now include Cloudcroft and Carrizozo."

Goodell, who later became the governor of New Hampshire, also invented the first apple peeler in 1864. We have a later model in the exhibit: it was made by the Sinclair Scott Company of Baltimore, in 1900. Computers aren't the only things that get smaller every year; the apple peeler made in 1900 is about one third of the size of Goodell's invention.

We tend to have a natural fondness for the cooking tools of our childhood ... the nesting Pyrex bowls, the egg cups, the handmade pot holders. As we spend time with the carefully selected objects in the *Heart of the Home* exhibit, we are able to connect meaningfully to that emotion in terms of forming relationships with our state's culinary history. Stiver says, "My favorite piece is the Monarch stove. It reminds me of my grandmother laboring over her wood burning stove, preparing every meal every day of her life."

And that brings me to my closing statement: I'd like to pay homage to a favorite labor-saving device that you won't find in a modern kitchen or at the *Heart of the Home* exhibit: the Santa Fe restaurant. Because even people who love to cook ... love to cook even more when they get the occasional night off. ■

The *Heart of the Home* exhibition is in the La Ventana Gallery of the New Mexico History Museum, in the lobby off the Lincoln Avenue entrance, and runs through November 27, 2011. A slideshow exhibition of objects from *Heart of the Home* is online at [elpalacio.org](http://elpalacio.org).

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