

13. GreenPan



The green Pan



Cooking in an environmentally friendly way is not limited to the use of organic ingredients or vegetarian menus, because even the pots and pans you use are important. GreenPan is a Belgian company that uses as much recycled material as possible, but the composition of non-stick coating is even more important. “Normally, a nondegradable chemical substance that could even be carcinogenic is used for this. But now there is an ecologically sound alternative: the Thermolon non-stick coating”, says Jan Hoekstra, who is both industrial designer and GreenPan’s Product Director.

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People who cook hardly even consider the fact that there is a good deal of innovation hiding in the non-stick coating. Well, perhaps innovation is too much honour for a technology that hasn’t changed in 30 years. “The non-stick coating was a revolution in cooking because things no longer got stuck to the pan. The innovation lay in a synthetic compound called polytetrafluoroethylene, better known as PTFE”, says Jan Hoekstra who was involved from the word go in innovative GreenPan as an industrial designer.

There has already been a lot of to-do about PTFE, although in fact the subject of the discussion should be another chemical component, namely PFOA. “PFOA is the additive that you need to be able to apply PTFE.” PFOA is a harmful substance that for many years has been the subject of a lot of scientific research which increasingly shows that it is carcinogenic. Even if there is only a hint of suspicion, you wonder why they don’t immediately ban the stuff, if only as a precaution. The US Environmental Protection Agency – which is the

government agency for the environment and public health – has issued a ban, but only as of 2015.

“It’s not something you think about, because you don’t buy a new pan every year, but this is a sector that sells 600 million non-stick pans every year. Then I’m sure you understand the context of the ban, because a lot of manufacturers don’t have an alternative.” The danger above all lies in the heat-resistance of the existing non-stick coating because as soon as the temperature exceeds 260° C, chemical substances are released. It’s not nonsense because there are sufficient testimonials, but I’ll stick to one case in which a canary – the coalminers’ early warning system for gas – died because a PTFE non-stick pan was being used to fry food in the kitchen where his cage stood.

“You can imagine that a fully-fledged alternative has a lot of potential”, says the GreenPan Product Director. And that fully-fledged alternative effectively exists thanks to the Belgian entrepreneur Wim De Veirman, CEO of GreenPan, who in Korea found a ceramic coating that fulfilled the same product requirements: scratch-proof, heat-resistant and non-stick properties. “This coating was patented under the name Thermolon and the great thing is that its heat-resistance even lasts up to 450° C instead of the 260° C with PTFE pans. But most of all much less energy is needed to fry in the pan.”

GreenPan commercialised the Thermolon in a range of non-stick pots and pans that keeps growing and also takes care of the accompanying story. Every aspect, from packaging to communication has to contribute to informing people about this ecological alternative. “Of course not using two chemicals in production is important, but the fact that we succeed in applying the coating with an emission of CO2 that has been reduced by a good 60% compared to a normal coating process is at least just as important here.”

If we look once again at an annual production of 600 million pans worldwide then enormous progress can be made with that reduction in CO2 alone. But as becomes its name, GreenPan is not resting on its laurels and it wants to become even greener by also taking the other materials required for production from recycling. Figures show that at present 30% to 40% of the aluminum is currently already taken from recycling and half of the stainless steel. GreenPan wants to increase those percentages without detracting from the quality.

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As Product Director, Jan Hoekstra, who has already made some designs for GreenPan himself, watches over the philosophy of sustainability and that doesn't end with designing a Thermolon pan. "On the one hand we watch over the principle that all the GreenPan products can be recycled, which is our strategic design vision. On the other hand we try to think about further innovations in cooking with the whole team." He clarifies what he means by that with a type of salad bowl that contains a pot. Hoekstra explains the hay-box method, a lost cooking technique with which you let the food cook in the pot without adding more heat.

"You took the pot off the heat and put it in a wooden box filled with hay which offered perfect insulation so that the heat in the pot kept working and everything cooked. Cooking without adding energy or without burning the food. Well, with this Hot Pot we are trying to breathe new life into the technique in a modern way." The double-walled bowl that we described as a salad bowl is the insulating hay box whilst the pot and the bowl remain two complementary kitchen utensils. "It is ecologically produced,



Dubai Cookware for GreenPan
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Dubai Cookware for GreenPan
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the cooking technique is ecological and it is ecological because you can use the pot and the bowl on their own as well."

The ecological vision has not done GreenPan any harm, and in barely 3 years the business has undergone a gigantic boom. Production is above all in Asia, but even there GreenPan attaches great importance to ecology and all the companies have ISO certification. There are some two dozen GreenPan employees in Hong Kong to streamline it all and all transport for the American and European markets occurs by ship, which is still the least polluting way. "Those movements and fine-tuning the distribution network are also fundamental to the GreenPan story", Jan Hoekstra concludes. "Our products are also on sale at retail chains such as Colruyt because they are a fully-fledged alternative for other pans, also with regard to price. Except that with GreenPan we propagate an ecological philosophy and that message should stick!"

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Christophe De Schauvre for REcentre
Interviewee / Jan Hoekstra, Industrial designer and Product director GreenPan

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Sector • Cooking utensils

Year of foundation • 2007

Number of employees • 75

Turnover • N/A