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Cast Iron's Comeback: Inside The Colombian Brand Transforming Cookware

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Victoria cast iron is a third-generation family brand from Medellin, Colombia. ... [+] VICTORIA

Cast iron cookware is [having a moment](#), and it's [not just a passing trend](#). This kitchen essential, popular since the late 19th century in the U.S. and Europe, remains highly sought-after for its incredible versatility and durability. Chefs particularly appreciate its ability to provide a robust, high-heat surface, perfect for achieving that ideal sear on their dishes.

Although often thought of as an American or French kitchen staple (and occasional [cartoonish defense weapon](#)), a venerable South American brand is building a reputation in the U.S. and elsewhere for its line of workhorse products that also bring design sense (I love those brass inserts) to cast iron. [Victoria](#) cast iron is a three-generation family business located in Medellín, Colombia. Founded by 16-year-old Raúl Mejía in 1939, the company began with metallic toy soldiers and decorative crosses before branching into presses, skillets, pots and pans.

Manuel Mejía Warren is the founder's grandson and directed the development of Victoria's latest product line. I had the opportunity to ask him about the brand and why cast iron continues to be popular. Here's our conversation:

David Hochman: Cast iron cookware has seen a resurgence in recent years. What distinctive qualities set Victoria Cast Iron apart from other competitors in this revitalized market?

Manuel Mejía Warren: Seven years ago, when we were planning our new state-of-the-art foundry, we made a deliberate choice to approach our design process through the lens of first principles, primarily: "How and why do consumers currently engage with cast iron?" and "Why hasn't cast iron design changed in over a century?"

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To do an even deeper dive into consumers' use of cast iron cookware, we bought twelve different brands of skillets – ranging from vintage pieces like Griswold and Warner, to budget-friendly choices, to luxury options priced at \$200 plus – and subjected them to real-life testing scenarios.

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Suffice it to say, our team is proudly geeky about food, cast iron design [and the health benefits of cooking with it](#). Team members were given a small notebook and we started playing musical chairs with the skillets – trading them every few days so that we all had a chance to test and document our opinions and exchange notes.

David Hochman: What did you discover?

Manuel Mejía Warren: The consensus was that most brands had neglected human ergonomics in their designs, which had remained virtually unchanged for decades, if not over a century, mostly due to outdated manufacturing limitations. For example, handles were uncomfortably small and posed burn risks, narrow and shallow pour spouts led to messy oil spills, and surface textures were either too rough or too smooth, making it difficult to build up the coveted seasoning.

In response to this research, and because we were building a new foundry, we took the opportunity to revamp our portfolio, crafting more ergonomic and functional designs that featured elongated, curved handles, wider pour spouts with built-in oil traps, and a visually appealing, softer surface.

David Hochman: So they don't just look cool? There's function behind the design, right?

Manuel Mejía Warren: Exactly. These improvements might seem modest, but they immediately resonated with cast iron [geeks](#) [see [here](#) and [here](#), too], and over time have also been recognized by everyday consumers, too. We've continued innovating with our new [Signature series](#), which I spearheaded, and [which won a 2023 Red Dot Design Award](#).

David Hochman: Nice. Congratulations. Victoria has been in the family for generations. What's the challenge in staying innovative when you're dealing with a legacy family brand? Do you feel your father's eyes watching over you?

Manuel Mejía Warren: The legacy motivates us. In the 1950s, my grandfather was manufacturing spare cast iron parts for the thriving international textile industry. Over the years, however, this market devolved into one that rewarded the lowest cost producer and punished quality and innovation. Looking to pivot our product line, he focused on creating the best and most innovative cast iron cooking tools for consumers, which spawned our now iconic [Corn Grinder](#). Other beloved product lines in our portfolio include: [Skillets](#), [Comales](#), [Griddles](#), [Dutch Ovens](#) and [Meat Presses](#).



Victoria's flagship tortilla press is a workhorse. VICTORIA

My father, Andres, too, felt enormous pressure to maintain his father's legacy. Specifically, he understood that we needed to modernize our manufacturing technology because, at the time, our foundry relied on hand-casting methods, which many of our competitors still use. In 2015, after years of planning and securing funding, he opened a facility that would have made my grandfather proud. The new technology in the foundry allowed us to make more products per mold, at a much faster rate with, most importantly, consistently higher quality standards.

It was my father's vision for this foundry that inspired me to join the company full-time. In 2013 I graduated from college with a degree in product design engineering and was planning on starting a vertical garden business. But after discussing the planned plant modernization project with my father, realizing the remarkable team of metallurgical engineers and product designers he had on staff, I decided to formally join the family business. Back then, we sold 50 percent of our own products and 50 percent

from other companies. Today, 75 percent of the company's sales are exclusively for Victoria's own line of tools.

David Hochman: What's the most popular Victoria product and what's so special about it?

Manuel Mejía Warren: Our flagship product, [the tortilla press](#), holds the top spot in its category in the United States. We embarked on an extensive journey of iteration and refinement to ensure our press could withstand the rigors of customer use with regular gray iron, which is what most cast iron manufacturers use. To do that we focused on the geometry of the product, reinforcing it on the principal pressure points without increasing its weight too much. The result was an extremely resistant tortilla press of average weight. People love it. We also introduced our premium [Heavy Duty Tortilla Press](#), tailored for professional use. It is virtually indestructible.

David Hochman: What's your favorite story about a Victoria cast iron product? Is there one in the White House? Does Sofia Vergara have one?

Manuel Mejía Warren: I don't know if Sofia has one. I hope so, I'm a big fan. If you happen to have her contact information, do let me know, and we'd be delighted to send her one! We are fairly certain [JBalvin](#) has at least one because [I saw him using our cast iron in this viral social media video with BBQ influencer Rober Grill](#). Needless to say, it got the entire team quite excited.



Style and durability. Victoria's latest series was designed by the grandson of the founder. VICTORIA

As for my favorite story, I'll say this. Seven years ago we found ourselves in the midst of setting up our new foundry and we had a massive 30,000 skillet order looming from our U.S. partner Macy's. This posed a formidable challenge as we had never tackled such a high-volume production in such a

tight timeframe. At this juncture, we were still perfecting the gating system — the arteries that feed the iron into the mold— a complex endeavor encompassing mechanical fluid engineering.

The challenge of working with the sand and gating systems is akin to the chemistry one applies in baking. In this high-stress environment, I found myself on the verge of balding due to the pressure of meeting our delivery commitments. A substantial portion, approximately 70 percent, of the pans initially failed to meet our stringent quality control standards due to too many pores on the surface of the iron. Some brands might have still sold those pans at that quality level, but our research suggests we have the highest quality standards in the industry and what we had at that moment wasn't going to cut it.

Moreover, we knew that as an emerging brand in the U.S., our products would be subjected — as well we should — to intense scrutiny. After exhausting all possible avenues, we landed on the cast iron “recipe” finish just three weeks before our shipping deadline, allowing us to fulfill the entire order on time and to Macy's great satisfaction.

This pivotal large order earned Victoria industry recognition in the U.S. and marked a significant milestone in our history. Above all, it galvanized our team, spanning administrative and production departments, to accomplish what initially seemed insurmountable.

David Hochman: You are as tough as the product, it sounds like! Cast iron has a reputation for durability and longevity. But people need to treat it right. What are your quick tips for ensuring that these products last for a lifetime?

Manuel Mejía Warren: There are two main factors that influence cast iron's durability and longevity: the iron itself and the seasoning. Gray iron — which, to my knowledge, is traditionally used by all other cast iron brands — is a hard material, albeit brittle. Therefore, I have two suggestions: Don't

drop it because it may break, as the molecular structure is low in tensile strength, and don't subject it to intense temperature changes, which can cause warping.

In contrast, our trademarked Spherrous iron, the material we employ in our heavy duty commercial tortilla presses and our Signature series, effectively eliminates these concerns. Cast iron crafted from Spherrous iron has enhanced tensile strength, rendering the products virtually indestructible. For example, here is a [video of a truck running over one of our Signature series skillets](#).

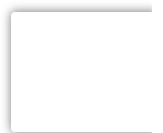
As for proper seasoning: To prevent rust, thoroughly dry after washing, then simply apply three drops of oil to the cooking surface and spread it thinly using a rag or paper towel. You can also heat it on the stove or in the oven to speed up the seasoning.

David Hochman: Treated right, how long do these things last?

Manuel Mejía Warren: A very long time. Even a century-old skillet with multiple layers of rust can typically be restored to its former glory. Just remove the rust with any abrasive sponge, wash, dry and oil it with any cooking oil and then put it in the oven at 400 F for an hour, and voila, you have a brand new pan.

The global reach of Victoria Cast Iron is impressive. Does the brand adapt in any way to cater to diverse cooking styles and cultural preferences across different continents?

Manuel Mejía Warren: Victoria is an international brand (in 38 countries) influenced, product-wise, by our Latin roots (e.g. the corn grinder, comal, tortilla press). We continually explore cooking techniques from around the world to develop new products, often driven by requests and suggestions directly from our customers.



For instance, our distributor in [South Africa](#) asked us to create content and recipes for [Bobotie](#), South Africa's national dish. We happily obliged and the response was overwhelmingly positive. We've also ventured into customizing products for specific regions. In the Netherlands, for instance, we introduced a [Poffertjes](#) pan, tailored to the local preference for a particular style of pancakes. We conducted extensive research, bringing five local samples of them to our test kitchen, and incorporated engineering solutions to address the most common complaint: uneven heating that led to some pancakes being undercooked and others overcooked. Interestingly, as part of our research we discovered that the Poffertjes pan can also be used for [Provoleta](#) (Argentina), [Khanom Krok](#) (Thai), [Aebleskiver](#) (Danish).

In [Germany](#) and [Denmark](#), where bread-making is a beloved tradition, we recognized home bakers' preference for long, oblong breads. Since our Dutch ovens were primarily round, we responded by designing an [Oval 6 Quart Bread Pan](#) (see link to photos) pan set to launch this January.

This cultural exchange isn't a one-way street; we also export our own culture through our products and content. We have established ourselves as a trusted source for traditional Latin cast iron tools in other markets. For example, [our tortilla press is popular in Japan where it's also used to make dumplings](#).

David Hochman: What about in the U.S.?

Manuel Mejía Warren: Our Signature series, which took three years to develop, caters to users in the US and Europe that covet high-performance tools. We noticed that Americans and Europeans place a lot of value on functionality and well-thought-out design. Frankly, the materials, design and processes in this line make them cost prohibitive to the average customer. We've basically taken our commercial grade production process and latest functional improvements to create the most beautiful, enduring products in the category you can buy.



This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

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