

Coffee Mills Are Beautiful, Easy To Collect

The working parts of a coffee mill are pretty basic - two metal plates that grind against each other. But the shapes and styles of the housing they are contained in seem to be limitless. With everything from plain boxes to artistically embossed cast iron bodies and handles, the thousands of models make coffee mills very collectable.

Collector Shane Branchcomb started innocently enough figuring he'd add a few coffee grinders to his kitchen collectables. Now his 650+ coffee mills surpass his other collections, and he is president of the Association of Coffee Mill Enthusiasts (ACME).

"I collect anything that meets my fancy," he says. "Nothing made after 1950, generally. Mostly late 1800's and early 1900's."

There are plenty of options with everyone from small town blacksmiths to small and large manufacturers creating their own versions of the once must-have appliance. The Charles Parker Co., famous for its shotguns and anvils; Griswold known for cast iron pans; and even Peugeot, the French car maker, all produced coffee mills.

There are tiny ones to grind just enough coffee for individuals and there are 6-ft. floor models that weigh 400 lbs.

"The largest one I have is 40 in. tall and

weighs 190 lbs.," Branchcomb says. "Quite a few of them still work, but some are very worn."

They don't grind coffee fine enough to make the strong coffee people prefer today, he notes. The grounds are more suited for percolators or boiling on the stove.

However, today's obsession for coffee and coffee shops seem to have inspired interest in collecting the mills. eBay and other auction sites offer many options. Enterprise, Bronson & Walton and Arcade are common companies, and folks who want to decorate with an old coffee mill can find something attractive for as little as \$50 to \$100. Highly desirable and scarce pieces can run \$2,000 to \$3,000.

Manufacturing names can usually be found embossed on the handle of cast iron models or on labels or engraved on handles of wooden box mills. You can tell an original box mill by its dovetail or machine-cut finger joints, he adds. Collectors pay attention to details like that to avoid reproductions, which often have plastic parts.

For folks who find an old coffee mill in their home, Branchcomb suggests they go to ACME's website to check out photos and contact members for information.

It's possible they may have a coffee mill



Over the years Shane Branchcomb has collected hundreds of antique coffee mills. They come in an amazing variety of types and sizes.

or grist mill that a collector wants.

For example, there is a photograph of a patented coffee mill thought to be made in Newton, Iowa.

"No one has ever seen one, so does one exist?" Branchcomb questions. "Anyone can collect coffee mills and you don't have to spend a lot of money to build a sizable

collection. It's a fun hobby to be in, but people need to do their homework."

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Kitchen Device Collectors Are KOOKS

If you like the idea of collecting old kitchen stuff, KOOKS may be for you. The Facebook group Collectors of Old Kitchen Stuff (KOOKS) numbers more than 2,000. While not an organization as such, KOOKS has a strong internet presence.

"We have a website in addition to the Facebook group," explains Jeff Kroll, a collector of drying racks for clothes, oil lamps, and more.

The website has links to a list of items members have collected such as advertising crocks, clothespins, egg separators and "yellow ware", which is kitchen crockery made with yellow clay. The gallery is filled with photos of collections and a link to past stories about members and their collections.

"Some members deal with antiques, while others just collect. If you want to know anything about any kitchen item, there is sure to be a Facebook member who will know about it."

Kroll is the resident expert on drying racks. "I have the largest collection of drying racks on the planet with at least 130 unique designs. Of course, it may be the only collection. I have small ones, large ones, and some that are at least 100 years old."

Kroll's search for drying racks, as well as items for his 5 other collections, is part of the fun. It is also a great reason for him to be active on the Facebook page.

"Everyone knows what the others are collecting, and if someone sees something unusual, will send a text to see if you are interested," says Kroll.

Kroll explains the fascination of many kitchen item collectors is often related to the variety and elaborate nature of the items.

"I have drying racks that were manufactured with wood, metal and combinations," he says. "KOOKS member Don Thornton collects eggbeaters and put together a book about them, 'The Eggbeater Chronicles.' It is filled



KOOKS member Don Thornton collects eggbeaters and has put together a book about them.

with eggbeaters from all over the world, some hundreds of years old. So many were designed for such a simple task that you could do with a fork. Finding a different one is part of the fun of collecting."

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He Knows Handheld Corn Shellers



Antique handheld corn shellers come in a variety of styles, including a clam-style model with thumb and finger holds (left) and skillet-style.



Jim Moffet has 26 handheld corn shellers in his collection but his book, "The Hand Held Corn Sheller", includes photos and information on hundreds more. He credits collector Olan Bentley (Vol. 44, No. 2) for many of the photos. Bentley once owned more than 200 handheld corn shellers. The simple devices were everyday tools, shelling corn for chickens as well as for seed. Today they are increasingly rare and valuable.

"I picked up one at an antique show years ago and was intrigued to learn more," recalls Moffet. "I had no idea how many were made. They vary from homemade wooden types to patented cast iron and steel. Some are simple

rings, and others are hinged, and still others have hand cranks."

The earliest shellers are scrubber style. Moffet reports that early colonists imitated Native Americans using seashells. He suggests that may have been the origin of the term shelling.

Scrubbers come in a wide variety. They vary from rough boards to boards with ridges and wire, embedded nails and pegs. Some are made from cast iron. Scrubbers were integrated into straddle boards, as well as stand-alone units on legs with an attached paddle to rub the ear against the board.

T-handle, hand crank and clam-style

hinged plates all speed shelling. Other styles include tong-style, skillet-style and sleeves. All of these involve rotating the device around the ear or the ear within the device.

As with any collector's item, it didn't take long before new "old" items appeared. Moffet suggests checking for patents as one way to verify the actual age of a corn sheller. He has seen fish scalers being sold as corn shellers with an asking price of \$100.

"People are even reproducing original models," he says. "A few years ago someone started reproducing the aluminum Jiffy corn sheller in cast iron. It looked more antique than the original. Most anyone could be fooled, but they misspelled the name as Jiffey."

Moffet sells "The Hand Held Corn Sheller" book for \$50 plus shipping. In addition to the handheld devices, it includes photos and information on a number of other corn-related items. They include box shellers, manual planters and shucking devices.

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Do-It-Yourself Simple Sheller

Need a way to shell a bushel of corn to feed backyard chickens? It would be hard to justify the cost of an antique shelling machine, so here's a simple way to make your own.

Just take a piece of 3 to 4-in. dia. pvc pipe and insert metal screws all the way around one end, spaced equidistant apart. Leave enough of a hole between the ends of the screws to allow the cob to pass through.

Cut the head off a 4-in. screw and insert that end into the chuck of an electric drill. Drive the screw into the end of an ear of corn and then, with the cob spinning, push it through the corn-shelling pipe. The kernels will fall out the other end of the pipe. Some kernels will be damaged so the idea won't work if you're planning to use the seed for planting.