

Finely wrought copperware reflects the masterful workmanship at the Mauviel factory in Villedieu-les-Poêles, France.



MAUVIEL'S ENDURING SHINE

In a Normandy workshop, **the best copper pots in the world** are forged, shaped, and polished just the way they were two centuries ago.

by Lindsey Tramuta



PEAK INTO THE kitchens of France's leading chefs and you'll likely see a battery of copper cookware: saucepans, pots, mini cocottes, giant *poissonnières* made for poaching whole fish. Look closely, and you'll see the same name stamped on every piece: Mauviel.

Since 1830, Mauviel has manufactured tinned copper cookware in Villedieu-les-Poêles (loosely, "God's city of pans"), on the shores of the Mont Saint-Michel Bay, 190 or so miles west of Paris. The small village (population 4,000) was founded in the 12th century as the home of the Knights Hospitaller, a crusading brotherhood. Craftsmen who learned metalworking from North African artisans settled in the town, and by the 14th century a formal collective of pan makers had been established. Villedieu became so renowned for its copper craft—a loud affair involving lots of hammering and pounding—that residents were (and still are) known as *les sourdins*, or

"the deaf." In the 19th century, the inauguration of a railway line to Paris brought a new generation of workers that would elevate Villedieu, and subsequently Mauviel, to international fame.

"Early on, most of the village specialized in decorative copper items," explains Valérie Le Guern-Gilbert, Mauviel's president, who represents the seventh generation of her family to run the business. "But we were one of the few to focus on cookware, which ended up being our greatest point of differentiation." Known for its products' durability, even heat distribution, and design, Mauviel has become the Rolls-Royce of copper cookware.

Today, visitors can tour the company's

Only a handful of highly skilled artisans in France know how to tin the interior of copper pots (the fiery process pictured upper right), and all of them work at Mauviel.

expansive headquarters, where they'll observe a process that hasn't changed much in centuries.

The noisy workshop is lined with floor-to-ceiling

shelves stacked with copper sheets, half-completed pieces, and goods awaiting the final Mauviel stamp. Stations divide the space, each helmed by an artisan responsible for a step in production. Visitors first see sheets of copper get compressed by one of four presses into rough forms, which are then cleaned and further shaped at a different station.

Then a worker dips each piece in a series of trays containing acid, water, and a mix of acid and hydrogen peroxide, which strip the copper of any impurities that may have formed in the foundry—and sends the item off for another round of cleaning and firing.



Among the final steps in the creation of Mauviel cookware are “shelving” and “spinning,” left, and a chemical-bath color treatment, right.



For some products, hammering—which lends a dimpled texture—comes next. It’s handled primarily by one man, on one machine. Seated, he gently positions the piece between his legs and uses his hands to guide its rotation as the machine’s round-tipped hammer marks the circumference. Hammering isn’t merely an aesthetic step—it also serves to make the copper more durable.

A third round of cleaning comes next before the piece goes to *rayonnage*, a rotational process that uses sandpaper to smooth the exterior. Then an artisan adds the tin lining. He or she melts tin in the bottom of the pot and smears it around with cotton balls until the interior surface is coated, creating a barrier that makes the pan safe for cooking. After a good polish, a hefty handle is attached and the product is ready to be packaged and shipped to retailers in 45 countries around the world.

Like many centuries-old companies, Mauviel’s survival depends on a fine balance between tradition and innovation. Le Guern-Gilbert continues to introduce new collections and works with the world’s top leaders in food—three-Michelin-star chef Yannick Alléno hosts master classes and developed a pan for the brand. She also works

with students to design new cookware (such as a partitioned sauté pan and a ladle that doubles as a sauce boat), and she has branched out into food education at the factory’s new culinary center. But Le Guern-Gilbert is also responsible for preserving an endangered tradition: Mauviel is the sole re-tinner left in France. Her concern for sharing institutional knowledge sparked her biggest development yet, an on-site school—led by a former Mauviel coppersmith—to train future artisans in cop-

persmithing, metalworking, and tinning.

Mauviel’s employees also maintain French heirlooms, such as the presidential palace’s 900-piece collection of copper tableware, a sauté pan stamped with Napoleon’s name, and serving utensils that date back as far as 1740. Le Guern-Gilbert shoulders a responsibility that extends far beyond her family’s company. “I see myself as [bearing] the torch,” she says, “for both the eighth generation of Mauviel and the treasures of France.” **A**

How to Visit

Take a train or rent a car and drive from Paris to Villedieu-les-Poêles, about a three-and-a-half-hour trip. The Mauviel showroom, boutique, event space, and workshop are located a 15-minute walk or five-minute cab ride from the train station. The factory offers tours by appointment from July to October for \$6 (deductible from purchases of at least \$60). And Mauviel’s new culinary atelier hosts private dinners, cooking classes, and demonstrations with the in-house chef, Alex Néel. mauviel.com