

Sourcing cookware from China: a buyer's guide for first orders

What to put in a purchase order, which documents actually apply to the United States, how to verify a supplier's claims, and how long a first order really takes. Written to be useful whether or not you buy from us.

1. Specify materials by dimension, not by adjective

"Tri-ply", "professional grade" and "premium stainless" are marketing terms, not specifications. A meaningful share of products sold as tri-ply use undersized aluminium cores, capsule-bottom construction under a full-clad label, or 201 interior steel instead of 304. None of this is visible in a catalogue photograph — it becomes visible when your customers complain about hotspots on a pan sold as professional cookware.

A purchase order that cannot be argued with states numbers:

Example clause. "Full-clad tri-ply: total wall thickness 2.8 mm minimum, 304 stainless interior, aluminium core thickness to be confirmed by cross-section photograph, interior surface free of coating." Ask for the cross-section photograph with the quotation. A factory producing genuine full-clad tri-ply has no reason to refuse; one that deflects has answered your question.

For carbon steel, the equivalent variables are steel thickness, whether the body is spun or stamped, and whether the seasoning is factory-applied. For cast iron, they are pour weight, wall thickness and whether the mould is sand or die. For non-stick, they are the coating brand and system (for example a three-coat PTFE system versus a two-coat ceramic), plus the substrate alloy and its thickness.

2. Compliance documents: what applies to the United States

Certificates are marketing documents; reports are evidence. Test reports typically expire within one to two years, and material sources change between batches — a report from three years ago does not describe the goods in your container.

Document	Market	What it confirms
FDA food contact	United States	Food-contact material safety under 21 CFR — the baseline requirement for US imports
California Prop 65	US — California	Heavy-metal and chemical disclosure; required by any buyer distributing into California
NSF / NSF ANSI	United States	Commercial food equipment approval, relevant to foodservice, restaurant supply and hotel channels
LFGB	EU / Germany	Food-contact migration limits — generally stricter than FDA. Not a substitute for US testing
REACH	EU	Chemical substance restrictions, relevant to coated cookware
ISO 9001	Global	Factory quality management system
BSCI / Sedex / SMETA / WCA	Global	Social and labour audit, normally requested by supermarket and mass-market retail
SGS / Intertek report	Global	Third-party test evidence for a specific product and batch
Mill certificate (MTR)	Global	Stainless steel grade verification, traced back to the steel producer

CE marking does not apply to cookware. CE covers electrical and mechanical products. If a supplier presents a CE certificate for a frying pan, the document has no relevance to your market — which itself tells you something about how they treat compliance.

3. Verifying a supplier — six checks that take one afternoon

#	Check	How to run it
01	Verify the certificate number	Look the number up in the certification body's own public database. If the listing does not exist, the document is decorative.
02	Ask for a current report	Require a product-specific report dated within the last year, not a general certificate. Compare the sample description on the report against what you are buying.
03	Request the mill certificate	Genuine 304 has a predictable chromium and nickel ratio. Mill certificates trace the coil to the steel producer; a factory-generated certificate proves nothing. Cross-check with a \$50–\$150 XRF test through SGS or Intertek, and write it into the contract as grounds for refund.
04	Separate factory from trader	Chinese business licences state the registered activity type, and manufacturer and trading company hold different categories. Ask for the licence, then ask a narrow technical question about production and see who answers it.
05	Demand a cross-section, or a live call	A wall cross-section photograph, or a live production-floor video call rather than a showroom tour, tells you more than any catalogue.
06	Commission a pre-shipment inspection	Above roughly \$5,000 order value, an SGS, Intertek, Bureau Veritas or QIMA inspection costs a few hundred dollars and verifies quantity, quality and packaging before the container is sealed.

4. Timeline: plan the calendar, not just the unit price

Unit price is the number everyone negotiates, and the least likely to sink a programme. For a first OEM order with custom elements, plan roughly **18–22 weeks** from first supplier contact to product in your warehouse:

Stage	Typical duration
Supplier shortlisting and sample evaluation	2–3 weeks
Sampling rounds, revision and approval	2–3 weeks
Production (first order, new tooling or new artwork)	4–6 weeks
Final inspection and container loading	1 week
Ocean transit, US port to port	2–4 weeks
Customs clearance and inland delivery	1–2 weeks

Repeat orders on established SKUs with no tooling changes compress to around **10–14 weeks**. Plan your first order at least four months before your required in-stock date, and treat a quoted MOQ as a starting position rather than a fixed wall — established suppliers will often negotiate the first order down when a clear reorder plan is on the table.

5. What belongs in landed cost

- FOB unit price
- Ocean freight or air freight
- Drayage, inland freight and receiving
- Inspection and testing
- Defect allowance and spare parts

- Import duty (varies by material, classification and country of origin)
- Customs brokerage and ISF filing
- Carton and pallet compliance for your warehouse or Amazon FBA

A first order quoted at FOB also carries sample cost, artwork and plate setup and, if the product is custom, tooling. Ask for those as separate line items rather than folded into the unit price — it tells you which costs are one-off and which scale with volume.

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This guide is general industry information compiled for procurement teams. It is not legal advice and does not replace a review of the current regulations applicable to your product, market and channel.