

Inspector gadget

A new guide gives you the lowdown on must-have items **By Lisa Sweetingham**

Jobs, apartments, boyfriends—the best of these usually come from the recommendations of people we trust. And the same ought to be true of the gadgets and everyday items we buy: That's the idea behind *Cool Tools*, a new collection of reviews on hundreds of useful products, edited by tech guru and *Wired* cofounder Kevin Kelly.

Cool Tools sprang from Kelly's personal website (kk.org/cooltools), where he collects reviews and information on tried-and-true "tools"—from the best spam filter (Spamfire, \$40 at matterform.com/spamfire) to the best noise filter (Max earplugs, 80¢ a pair at store.yahoo.com/earplugstore).

Last November, Kelly (whose book *Out of Control: The New Biology of Machines, Social Systems and the Economic World* was required reading for the cast of *The Matrix*) decided to take his favorite tool reviews from the website archives over the past three years and compile them in a softcover book. While the 140-page, low-design *Cool Tools* lacks a table of contents, has b&w-Xerox photos and includes a number of items that can be filed under "Duh" (double-stick tape is useful, Mephisto shoes are comfortable), more often than not it's a fascinating read, with such gems as how to buy Silly Putty by the pound and reviews of the 300-page *Cartoon History of the Universe Vol. III* and the iTrip tuner that uses radio bandwidth to let you listen to your iPod on the road. Reviews are organized in sections like "More tools for the highly evolved medical chest"



TOOL GUY Kevin Kelly shares some of his favorite things.



(body-fat meters, Superglue stitches) and "True films" (listing such docs as *Revolution OS*, about the history of the open-source software movement, and *Feed*, unedited footage of politicians as they prepare for news interviews). And there are randomly placed reviews of nifty little gadgets like the \$5 EZ-CD Opener (slice open jewel cases easily), the \$13 Drain King (unclog drains using water pressure, not chemicals) and the \$20 solar battery-charger (good on camping trips).

The *Cool Tools* website, and in turn the book, evolved from Kelly's work as an editor for the *Whole Earth Catalog*. The irreverent *WEC*, first published in 1968 by tech frontiersman and Merry Prankster Stewart Brand, promoted a DIY education with similar "tool" recommendations. "As *Whole Earth* dwindled to the point of death," Kelly

says, "I upped my frequency of swapping recommendations among friends." Today, his site has about 30 contributors, but he still writes a majority of the reviews, and many are passed down by his tech brain-trust cohorts Brand and *Smart Mobs* author Howard Rheingold. "But I never intended to

BYTE MARKS



Pod people You win some, you lose some with the new iPod mini. First the bad news: It lacks the voice-record and image-storage functions of its 40GB elder, and instead of 10,000 songs, this 4GB version holds about 1,000. The good news? It's superlight, about the length and height of a business card, and at just \$249, who needs more than a 1,000-song capacity? But best of all—the original oh-so-sterile white has been supplanted by silver, gold, pink, blue and green versions. It's like Easter in January (\$249; Apple.com).

sell any books," Kelly says. The idea was to print about 200 copies through a small press to send as gifts to friends and reviewers. He then put the rest on Amazon.com for about cost (\$20); "in case anyone said, 'Can I have an extra?' I could just point to Amazon and say, 'Yeah, buy one.'" But when *Cool Tools* was

blogged on culture-trolling site Boingboing.net, Kelly's tome of under-the-radar knowledge went into high demand. "Right before Christmas, I woke up and there were 500 orders on Amazon. I was so embarrassed—I didn't have 500 copies!" He's since cooked up another 700 copies, and the orders keep coming.

So what are the criteria for inclusion on his hot list?

"I require that someone really be using this tool for a while," Kelly says. "There's a Darwinian force at work here: I'm not interested in things that look cool or are the newest, I'm interested in the things that survive. If someone says, 'I've used this for five years, and there's newer stuff, but this is still the

best'—that's the kind of thing I love." What Kelly loves right now is his chainless bike (chainless.com)—an easy-to-shift alternative to standard bikes that pinch pant legs and leave greasy chain marks behind. For hearty-weather New Yorkers, Kelly recommends Yaktrax (yaktrax.com), plastic "chains" for the bottom of your shoes, to keep you from slipping on snow-covered roads (a boon for die-hard joggers who need extra traction); and studded bicycle tires (peterwhitecycles.com/studdedtires.asp) for those who get a charge from icy off-road cycling.

Kelly plans to expand *Cool Tools* to include more of the items he's accumulated over the past 30 years. But the real impetus, he says, is to create a send-off package for his three kids—ages 7 to 15—when they leave for college. "I want to be able to hand them a crate full of tools, to include the kind of things and ideas they might not encounter in college—sort of hard-won knowledge and secrets," Kelly says. "And in addition to that would be a copy of the book, pointing them to things that didn't fit inside the crate." ■

ONES & ZEROS

TECHNOLOGY

IF YOU WANT TO BE LISTED

Submit information, releases or comments by mail or e-mail (tech@timeoutny.com) to Lisa Sweetingham. Deadline is noon on Monday, ten days before publication date.

Watch blog

Are the Democratic Presidential

candidates telling white lies in their ad campaigns? Are GOP staffers making false policy claims? The nonpartisan www.factcheck.org, run by University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center, aims to "reduce deception and confusion in U.S. politics" by monitoring the accuracy of ads, debates, speeches and interviews.

Derisive action

At BlackHeartsParty.com (inspired by the raunchy annual anti-Valentine's bash of the same name), you'll find reviews of the best restaurants to dump someone at, along with insult gifts for exes (NEEDY AND CLINGY tees, BAD IN BED coffee mugs) and breakup sympathy cards for pals.

Unfortunate site of the week

Mad cow? Cruelty to animals? C'mon, who doesn't just love a juicy cheeseburger? Well, after a long hard look at the tools of the trade—spinal-cord removers, head splitters, etc.—graphically pictured in action at jarvisanz.com.au/products, our meat-eating days are kaput.