

CHAPTER SIX

# SHOPPING AND COOKING

A CRASH COURSE IN  
BECOMING A KITCHEN NINJA

# 10 Reasons You Hate to Cook (and What to Do About Them)

I don't like the word "hate" and try not to use it. I especially dislike it when it is applied to any kind of food or cooking. Do you really hate asparagus? Or are you just whining about something you haven't bothered to learn to appreciate? Yeah, I thought so.

You don't have to love cooking, but knowing the basics and feeling competent in the kitchen can open a world of opportunity to improve your quality of life. But sure, go ahead and hate it if you want. For the cautiously curious, here are a few of the obstacles that may be preventing you from getting past your pessimism and what to do to get over them.

## 1. You suck at it

The first thing you need to do is understand the difference between not liking cooking and not liking to be bad at cooking. Big difference. I didn't like being bad at cooking either, but there is a pretty easy solution: learn how. It's much easier than you think.

## 2. You're slow

I know you're busy. We all have better things to do than slave away over one lousy meal. But when you aren't experienced in the kitchen, the planning, shopping, chopping, cooking, and cleaning can feel as if they take forever. That's because they do.

I can always spot kitchen rookies by how long it takes them to chop an onion (seriously it takes like twenty seconds max). The good news is that with a little practice and some decent knives (see the next reason), you can slash the time you spend making a meal until you barely notice. Ditto for cleaning up. Seriously, put some muscle into it, and it's over in no time.

## 3. You have crappy knives

I generally don't advise spending money to solve problems, but knives in the kitchen are an exception. Spending \$50 on a halfway

decent chef's knife can do wonders for your kitchen confidence and efficiency. And you probably already know what an inspiration a shiny new toy can be.

#### **4. You pick complicated recipes**

Some of the best meals I've ever eaten had less than five ingredients. If you've never cooked anything in your life, cassoulet shouldn't be the first recipe you try.

Rather than finding a recipe and deciding to cook it, start with an ingredient that is seasonal and you know you enjoy. It's hard to mess up kale and garlic (try Sautéed Kale with Pistachios and Garlic, p. 239). Learn to fly before you jump off a cliff.

#### **5. You choose out-of-season ingredients**

The main reason people don't like (*fill in the vegetable*) is that they have only had it from industrial farms that grow foods out of season. I agree, you'd have to be a masochist to like those clones.

Farmers markets and dedicated produce stands are your friends. In-season ingredients taste worlds better than the out-of-season stuff shipped from the opposite hemisphere. Your food doesn't have to be 100 percent local, but at least pick foods that grow in the same season you happen to be living in. This alone could completely change your cooking experience.

#### **6. Your pantry is inadequate**

It can be really annoying to flip through a recipe book or food blog and realize that you need to make one or many grocery trips in order to make any dish, because you don't have olive oil, salt, pepper, red wine vinegar, or red chili flakes. A well-stocked pantry and fridge will remove many of the barriers to cooking at home.

#### **7. You cook everything to death**

Just because your mom cooked broccoli until it was dark gray and could be eaten by an infant doesn't mean that's how food is supposed to be prepared. Most vegetables cook quickly and taste better when they haven't been boiled beyond recognition. When your

vegetables turn bright green in the pan, that's your cue that the cooking is nearly done.

### **8. You only cook for large groups**

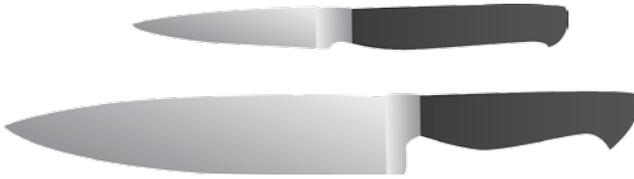
Your first cooking forays shouldn't be huge productions. Instead of hosting a big dinner or bringing food to a potluck of thirty people as your cooking debut, start by volunteering to help in the kitchen with someone who knows what he or she is doing. Or make a side dish or a simple one-pot meal for yourself. Practice makes perfect, and you want your first experiences to go smoothly, so your elephant doesn't get scared away.

### **9. You only cook for special occasions**

New cooks don't need any extra pressure in the kitchen. If you're just learning your way around the range, maybe you should hold off on cooking for your Valentine's Day date. It can be stressful to just coordinate a special meal; you don't need the added pressure of possibly ruining a holiday. Start your real kitchen adventures in the privacy of your own home.

### **10. You don't ask for help**

If you are truly new to cooking, you may as well acknowledge that you will be slow and lack the basic skills and intuition of a seasoned chef. You are definitely capable of getting there, but in the meantime make your experience as pleasant as possible by letting others contribute their expertise and knife skills when you want to cook. It is also nice to have an extra pair of hands for cleanup.



*Basic knife set*

## A FOODIST'S PANTRY

Once you have your gear, it's time to focus on your pantry. A well-stocked pantry will enable you to turn almost any random ingredient into a delicious meal, since it can provide flavor, variety, and sometimes even substance to other ingredients. Here are the essentials, plus a few more worth keeping around for good measure.

### OLIVE OIL

You'll be cooking pretty much everything in olive oil, so it is important to find a brand you enjoy and can afford in large quantities. I don't recommend buying a superfancy kind for everyday cooking, so any cold-pressed olive oil should do the trick. I do, however, recommend finding a nicer extra-virgin olive oil for dressing salads and drizzling on finished dishes. These come in smaller bottles and are more expensive, but you use less, and the flavor is worth the extra cost.

### SALT

Like olive oil, salt is indispensable. Though you've probably seen headlines that salt is the devil's seasoning, the truth is that 75 percent of the sodium consumed in the United States comes from processed foods. If you aren't eating those foods, then salt isn't a problem for you. And if

it makes your vegetables tastier (and therefore make you more likely to eat them), I'd argue that using salt is healthier than not.

For a basic kitchen I recommend stocking two kinds of salt, one chunky sea salt that you can grind onto dishes and a carton of plain iodized table salt for adding to boiling water, soups, and other liquid-based dishes. Iodine is an essential nutrient, and unless you eat a lot of seaweed (which I do recommend, but may not be practical for everyone), using the occasional pinch of iodized salt is a good idea. More advanced cooks can experiment with the fancy salts from around the globe.

#### PEPPER

Yep, you'll need pepper. I recommend getting a grinder with some high-quality whole peppercorns. It'll taste better than the generic pre-ground stuff or even the peppercorns that come with the grinder you bought. Call me a snob, but I usually toss those out, because they don't have any flavor. A cheaper option is the spice aisle of the grocery store, which will sometimes carry good peppercorns with their own disposable grinder built into the container.

#### VINEGAR

Vinegar is one of those things that can sound unappealing if you haven't had much experience with it, but once you start your kitchen experiments, it will become your secret weapon. Vinegar adds acidity to foods, which your palate translates into a sour taste. This might not sound good on its own, but think about what a squeeze of lemon adds to a lobster tail or a splash of lime juice to guacamole (or cold Mexican beer). A hint of acidity can add a brightness to foods that taste dull or flat and is often the best way to fix a boring soup, sauce, or stir-fry. Different vinegars also impart different character to dishes depending on what they are made from. For instance, I prefer a nutty brown rice vinegar when I'm cooking Japanese food, but for a spring salad vinaigrette

grette, I adore a low-acid red wine vinegar mixed with some fruity extra-virgin olive oil, chopped chives, and a hint of Dijon mustard. Balsamic vinegar is another must, because of its distinctive sweet flavor. It's easy to go crazy with vinegar, but if you're just getting started I recommend some decent balsamic, rice, and red wine vinegars to start. They don't have to break the bank, but don't choose the cheapest stuff in the store either.

#### STOCK

Having chicken, beef, and vegetable stock in your pantry means that on any day of the week you can have soup for dinner. Stock can also add boatloads of flavor to ordinary vegetable and meat dishes, making you wonder how and when you became such an amazing cook. Though die-hard foodies insist on making their own stock, I've found that no matter how many chicken carcasses I save in my freezer, I never have enough stock around to rely on consistently. Consequently, I keep store-bought chicken and beef stock in my pantry for whenever I don't have the real stuff. My favorite lately is the bouillon paste that comes in little jars. I think the flavor is better than bouillon cubes, and they are easier to store than the big boxes or cans of broth. Remember to refrigerate your paste once you open it.

#### BEANS AND LENTILS

At any given time I have about half a dozen dry bean varieties in my pantry. I also keep several kinds of lentils for good measure. Beans and lentils are both members of the legume family, since they are fruits that grow in pods. I always make at least one large batch of beans or lentils to supplement my meals throughout the week.

#### GRAINS

Intact grains are another staple worth stocking in bulk. Of course, I always keep a big container full of my morning muesli and enough

rolled grains to make another batch when I run out. I also have an impressive stock of farro, my favorite grain to cook with, and two or three kinds of quinoa (pronounced *keen-wah*)—red and black are my favorite. My rice collection includes containers of short-, medium-, and long-grain brown rice as well as some Japanese haiga rice, which has had the bran polished away but retains the nutritious (and flavorful) germ. Though I use all of these sparingly, I consider them essential components of my foodist pantry.

#### JARRED TOMATOES

Ironically, tomatoes (my website's namesake) are one of the few vegetables that survive the canning process with a lot of their qualities intact. Because of the presence of bisphenol A (BPA) in the plastic lining of cans, these days I usually opt for jars of tomatoes instead. But regardless of the vehicle, I've come to depend on preserved tomatoes whenever I'm low on fresh ingredients or just feeling as though I need more red foods in my life. Added to meat, vegetables, beans, or all of the above, a jar of tomatoes can turn a few simple ingredients into a full meal.

#### NUTS

Nuts are one of those miracle ingredients that make almost everything taste better and more satisfying. They even bring an air of elegance to a dish that may otherwise seem a little lackluster. The beauty of nuts is they come in so many different sizes and flavors that they're nearly as useful as herbs for mixing up the taste of a dish. I always have a stock of walnuts, pine nuts, pistachios, pecans, almonds, hazelnuts, and macadamias in my pantry, but your imagination is your limit. Go nuts.

#### BASIC SPICES

I don't recommend buying one of those giant prefilled spice racks that take up half of your kitchen counter with sad, expired herbs. However,

there are a few basic spices worth having at all times. For me these include Vietnamese cinnamon, red chili flakes, coriander, cumin seeds, curry powder, dried oregano, cayenne pepper, paprika, garlic powder, and sesame seeds.

## FOODIST PANTRY 2.0

The list above is more than enough to get you started, but veteran foodists will probably want to expand their pantry with a few more esoteric goodies. Here are some items that, although not 100 percent necessary, can really take your cooking to the next level. These will let you dabble in some ethnic cuisines without a complete pantry overhaul. Feel free to add or omit whatever you please from this list. This is just to give you a sense of what I keep in my own pantry to get you started.

### SOY SAUCE

There's so much tastiness you can make with soy sauce that it's worth always having a supply in the house. Be careful, though. Soy sauce usually contains gluten. So if you are sensitive, be sure to find the gluten-free kind.

### FISH SAUCE

I know it doesn't sound appealing, but fish sauce is a wonderful ingredient that, like soy sauce, adds salty and umami\* components to Southeast Asian foods. Thai soups are delicious and easy to make, but you'll need some fish sauce in your pantry.

### DASHI

If you like Japanese food, you need to keep some dashi around. Dashi is the delicate bonito- and seaweed-based broth that appears in seem-

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\* *Umami* describes the savory flavor characteristic of proteins.

every Japanese dish. It's heavenly, and you can't make good Japanese food at home without it. It's fairly easy to find instant dashi in dried pellets. It tastes pretty good, but I prefer the bottles of concentrated dashi from the Japanese market here in the city. You may need to bring a Japanese friend to translate if you want to try and find your own.

#### COCONUT MILK

Cans of coconut milk are an excellent way to mix up a stir-fry, soup, or sauce, so it's worth keeping a can or two in case you get inspired to make something a little different. These days I can often find the little half cans, which are the perfect size for most dishes. If full-size cans are all that are stocked at a grocer near you, remember to freeze whatever you don't use.

#### DRIED CHILIES

My dried chili collection is almost as impressive as my bean collection. I have dried dragon peppers, ancho chilies, Thai chilies, cayenne chilies, you name it. Dried chilies have a more complex flavor than fresh chilies, and you can amplify this by toasting them a bit in a pan before using them. If you are among the capsaicin intolerant,\* remember that not all peppers are spicy, so even you can benefit from keeping a few in the pantry. I usually dry fresh chilies myself in a low oven during the peak of chili season, but even if you buy predried chilies, they're great to keep around to add depth to any dish.

#### DRIED MUSHROOMS

Similarly, dried mushrooms have a different flavor from fresh mushrooms and can turn a boring broth or sauce into an amazing one. You don't need a lot. I like to keep a small supply of dried porcini mushrooms for Italian dishes and dried shiitake mushrooms for Chinese

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\*Capsaicin is the active chemical in hot peppers.

cooking. Mushroom broth is also an excellent substitute for beef broth if you're looking to make a recipe vegetarian-friendly.

#### ANCHOVIES

Another misunderstood ingredient, anchovies are more than just small, salty, tangy little fish. Think of them as a seasoning, like salt or bouillon. Rather than adding a fishy taste, they bring depth, complexity, and of course saltiness to a dish. Italians really know how to use them, so if you'd like to explore what anchovies are capable of, find a good Italian cookbook and enjoy. Trust me, you'll love them.

#### SARDINES

Sardines are less of a seasoning and more of a main ingredient than anchovies. I keep sardines and other preserved fish like smoked mackerel and trout in my pantry for snack emergencies. I find that a can of sardines is a great source of instant protein when I've been unable to make it to the grocery store and have run out of eggs and yogurt. They're an acquired taste, but delicious. If you're a little squeamish about the idea of fish in a can, look for the boneless, skinless sardines. They're a little less alien for first-timers.

#### PARMESAN CHEESE

Forget about those green cans of processed goop and go directly to the cheese aisle for a slab of fresh parmesan. Like so many other items on this list, you should think of parmesan cheese less like a single entity and more like a seasoning to enhance an already excellent dish. Parmesan is another way to get that salty, umami flavor into drab meals, and just a couple of slides across the cheese grater can transform meat and vegetable dishes alike. A block of parmesan lasts virtually forever in the fridge (small mold patches can be scraped off and the rest of the cheese is still good), and you can even use the rind as flavoring in broths and soups.

## PRESERVED LEMONS

Though not as easy to find as the rest of the items listed here, preserved lemons are one of those ingredients that can trick everyone into thinking you're a brilliant chef. Like anchovies, they bring a tangy, salty flavor, but their added spices also create a rich complexity. Use them like a condiment in soups and stir-fries, and on fish and meat dishes, and be amazed. There are many great resources online to make your own if you can't find any in your town. Store them in the fridge.

## CAPERS

Capers are another way to fancy up a dish without much effort. They're easy enough to store that I always have some in the pantry or fridge, and they've been known to save the day on multiple occasions.

## OLIVES

Although expensive olives are nice if you can get them, I find that it never hurts to keep a jar of pitted kalamata olives in the pantry for olive emergencies. They happen. If you have tomatoes, garlic, anchovies, capers, olives, and chili flakes around, you always have a puttanesca sauce available for dinner. What more could you ask for, really?

## EXPANDED SPICES

Chinese five spice, turmeric, smoked paprika, star anise, cardamom, mustard seeds, and ground cloves are all spices I cannot live without. Though I don't do it every day, once a week or so I like to make a dish inspired by some of my favorite ethnic cuisines—Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Thai, or Vietnamese. Of course, these kind of kitchen experiments aren't a requirement, but they can make your time in front of the stove more fun and less monotonous.

## ESSENTIAL GROCERIES

A stocked pantry is half the battle in building a foodist's healthstyle, but to make tasty meals you'll also need a few fresh grocery items in your fridge at all times. Most of these store well, so if you pick them up every week or two, you're in business. Once you've got these basics, you're ready to start shopping for dinner.

### SMALL ONIONS

I rarely buy the big yellow onions (unless I'm making soup, chili, or something similar), but I always have some more delicate onions on hand. There are lots of options to choose from, including shallots, leeks, green onions (scallions), cipollini, ramps, and chives. Unlike their big yellow or red cousins, these have mild flavor and will not overpower a dish or make you cry when you cut them. I rotate through my different options depending on the season. Spring is my favorite time for onions of all denominations.

### GARLIC

I don't use a ton of garlic, because too much of it can mask the subtle flavors of the delicious ingredients I buy. But I always have garlic in the house, and I use it almost every day. One clove can absolutely transform a bunch of kale until even kids and teenagers are begging for more. I'm not picky about my garlic; whatever you can find will probably work just fine. Just make sure it's fresh.

### LEMONS OR LIMES

The finishing touch of a dish is often what turns it from something good into something great. Sometimes this is a sprinkle of good sea salt or a drizzle of fancy olive oil. But oftentimes it takes a squeeze of lemon or lime juice to get the flavors perfectly balanced. They store well

in the fridge, so it's worth picking up a lemon or lime on most of your shopping adventures.

#### PARSLEY

I don't know when exactly parsley got relegated to garnish status, but it's a tragedy that must be remedied. Flat-leaf, Italian parsley is the most versatile herb I've ever found. Its flavor is fresh and bright, and just a handful of chopped parsley makes any dish taste better. Another bonus is that, unlike some of the more delicate leafy herbs, parsley stores incredibly well in the refrigerator for well over a week. It's the best.

#### FRESH HERBS

For all other fresh herbs I use a different strategy. Since a little goes a long way, I usually only pick one or two to have in my kitchen each week (in addition to parsley). Which I use depends on the other foods I'm buying. For example, Mexican food thrives with cilantro and oregano. French vegetables are beautiful with thyme. Roasted meats and potatoes go best with rosemary. Mint is wonderful on Vietnamese and Moroccan food. Basil makes almost everything taste amazing. Experiment. Fresh herbs can change the way you approach cooking.

#### EGGS

Eggs are my number one go-to easy meal or snack. Scramble some up with those green onions we mentioned earlier for a quick two-minute breakfast or lunch. Add an egg to anything to make it more substantial and extra tasty. Boil some eggs and bring them to work for a filling, satisfying snack. I adore eggs. And, no, they do not cause heart disease.

#### PLAIN YOGURT

Though I go in and out of my yogurt phases, I think it is a great grocery item to keep around for a quick, filling snack. It's great for breakfast with a little muesli and cinnamon. Plain yogurt is also a wonderful

condiment and garnish for dishes that can be a quick substitute for sour cream or crème fraîche. Just don't get the sugary fruit (or vanilla) kind that is often closer to dessert than a healthy snack.

## CONDIMENTS

My fridge is never without mustard (for salad dressings and marinades), tahini (sesame paste that makes vegetables taste amazing), a tube of tomato paste, and kimchi (spicy fermented cabbage) or sauerkraut (non-spicy fermented cabbage). Though there are a few other miscellaneous condiments in my fridge, these are the ones I find indispensable.

## 42 Code Words for Sugar

brown rice syrup	coconut palm sugar	brown sugar
cane sugar	beet sugar	pear juice
maltodextrin	fruit juice	concentrate
corn-syrup solids	concentrate	maple syrup
refiner's syrup	maltose	simple syrup
evaporated cane	treacle	muscovado
juice	agave nectar	corn syrup
sucrose	molasses	dextrose
glucose	inverted sugar	grape sugar
evaporated cane	palm sugar	sweetened
juice crystals	date sugar	condensed milk
caramel	gum syrup	barley malt
dextrin	carob syrup	corn sweetener
golden syrup	high-fructose corn	dehydrated cane
dried oat syrup	syrup	juice
crystalline fructose	honey	sorghum syrup
malt syrup		

# How to Find Real Food at the Supermarket

