



Introduction

Welcome to my guide exploring the fundamentals of cookery. This is not a cookbook, but rather a guide to the foundational techniques, which will allow you the freedom to cook and follow recipes with confidence.

As a professional chef, I know that even the most complex dishes rely on mastering the basics. What may appear as a mystery, almost to the point of sorcery for the uninitiated, relies on three fundamentals.

1. Buy the best quality products that you can.
2. Use the right cooking techniques.
3. Season the food well.

Take care of these aspects of preparing food, and you will be well on the way to becoming a great cook. It's as simple as that!

Of course, there are many other skills and much knowledge that can elevate your cooking. Just remember that every day, it is possible to learn something new, a process that never ends.

This guide provides straightforward instructions for essential techniques, empowering you to choose quality ingredients, understand recipes, and create delicious meals. My ambition is that you feel confident enough in your skills, that when you go to the market or shops, you can identify a quality product at a good price and know how to prepare it when you get home.

We'll cover everything from maximising flavour to specific cooking methods, including poaching, steaming, sautéing, braising & stewing, grilling & broiling, deep frying, roasting, and stir-frying.

Whether you're a beginner or an experienced cook, this resource offers valuable insights and tips to enhance your skills and bring joy to your cooking.

On my website, www.ChefsNotebooks.com, I have recipes to cover all needs, from professional recipes for 40 gallons of soup, to a pasta dish for the family and everything in between. The Chef's Spice Chest is a free area of the website and grows daily, so if there is something that you would like a recipe for, just ask!

Happy Cooking!

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Foundations of Flavourful Cooking

Welcome to the exciting world of cooking!

This section lays the groundwork for your culinary journey, covering essential principles that will elevate your dishes from good to great. These insights are drawn from my broader experience as a chef (detailed further in my book, "The Business of Being a Chef"), but are summarised here for practical application in your kitchen.

By spending a little time on some key areas, you will be surprised how fast you can go from a complete novice to an accomplished cook.

Once you have these skills, adapting to the dishes that you want to cook or following recipes will be a lot easier.

Key Principles for Culinary Success

- **Organisation and Cleanliness:** *Mise en place* (everything in its place) is paramount. A well-organised workspace and clean-as-you-go approach will streamline your cooking process and prevent mistakes.
- **Basic Knife Skills:** Practice makes perfect. Developing proficiency with essential knife cuts will improve your efficiency and the presentation of your dishes.
- **Mastering Cooking Techniques:** Understanding fundamental cooking methods (which we'll explore in the following chapters) is crucial. These techniques are the building blocks of all great recipes.
- **Developing Your Palate:** Cultivating your sense of taste and understanding how to balance flavours through proper seasoning is essential. Taste frequently and adjust as you go!

The Importance of Quality Ingredients

The formula is very straight forward.... Focus on purchasing the best products that you can afford, cook them using solid techniques and let the natural flavours speak for themselves.

Some guidelines for evaluating quality are provide in the resources section.

Simply prepared items, that are seasonal, will lead to excellent tasting food.

Common Cooking Mistakes to Avoid

Even professional chefs make mistakes! Be mindful of these common pitfalls:

- 👨‍🍳 **Under-seasoning or Over-seasoning:** Seasoning is crucial for bringing out the best in your ingredients.
- 👨‍🍳 **Lack of Flavour:** Taste your food throughout the cooking process and adjust seasonings as needed.
- 👨‍🍳 **Using Out-of-Season Produce:** Seasonal ingredients offer the best flavour and value.
- 👨‍🍳 **Overcooking or Undercooking:** Use proper cooking times and temperatures to ensure perfectly cooked food.
- 👨‍🍳 **Serving at the Wrong Temperature:** Food should be served at the appropriate temperature to maximise enjoyment.
- 👨‍🍳 **Poor Flavour Balance:** Strive for harmony in your dishes by balancing sweet, sour, salty, bitter, and umami flavours.

The Role of Seasonality

Embrace the seasons! Farmers' markets are excellent resources for finding peak-season produce.

Seasonal ingredients are not only more flavourful but also often more affordable.

For most locations, the seasons are spring, summer, autumn, and winter.

Keep your eye out for items coming into season.

As noted in the quality section in resources, don't get hung up on perfectly shaped produce. Items grown with care in the right environment and ripened well will be far superior.

Unlocking Flavour: A Multifaceted Approach

Flavour development is a combination of several factors:

- **Mastering Cooking Techniques:** Proper technique is essential for extracting the best flavours from your ingredients.
- **Selecting Quality, Ripe Ingredients:** Start with the best ingredients you can find.
- **Thoughtful Use of Seasonings and Flavourings:**
 - **Herbs:** Fresh herbs add vibrancy and brightness.

- **Spices:** Whole spices, when roasted and ground, offer the most intense flavour.
- **Acids:** Vinegar, lemon juice, and other acids add brightness and balance.
- **Liquids:** Stocks, wine, and juices contribute depth and complexity.



Supercharging the Flavour in Your Food

The Power of Tasting

Taste, taste, taste!

This is the single most important tip for creating truly delicious food, and if you were to take one learning from the book, this is it!

Understanding the Five Basic Tastes

Recognizing and balancing the five basic tastes—salt, sour, sweet, bitter, and umami—is crucial for creating harmonious dishes.

1. **Salt**
2. **Sour**
3. **Sweet**
4. **Bitter**
5. **Umami**



Key Steps in Preparing Flavourful Food

- Season food at each stage of cooking.
- Use fresh herbs, usually at the final stages of cooking.
- Roast and grind spices when possible.
- Use correct techniques, i.e., browning on a sauté to add flavour.
- Taste frequently and adjust seasoning to taste at the end of cooking.

Seasoning: The Foundation of Flavour

Salt and pepper are the foundation of seasoning, but don't be afraid to explore other flavours. Experiment with different spices, herbs (fresh and dried), and spice blends, which you can purchase or even create your own..

Additionally, there are many seasonings and flavourings available which can add vibrancy, heat, and flavour according to how they are used. It is also worthwhile to make some of your favourite spice blends to have on hand and use in your kitchen.



Balancing Flavours: A Culinary Art

Balancing flavours is key to creating memorable dishes. Consider how sweet, sour, salty, bitter, and umami interact and complement each other. A squeeze of lemon juice or a pinch of sugar can often make a world of difference and “brighten” flavours, improving balance.

The guide provided offers a good starting point for flavour balancing.

Success in cooking is achieved by combining ingredients in a balanced way, while enhancing and bringing out their flavour. For instance, a sauce or soup, when tasted, may seem to be lacking something. A drop of lemon juice or vinegar added, can “brighten” the flavours and improve the balance.

A Guide to Balancing Flavours

-  Balance Sweet with Salty and Sour Foods.
-  Balance Umami with Salty and Sour Foods.
-  Balance Salty with Bitter and Sweet foods
-  Balance Sour with Salty and Sweet Foods.
-  Balance Spicy with Salty and Sweet Foods.
-  Balance Sour and Sweet with Spice.
-  Balance Bitter with Salty and Sweet Foods.

The Importance of Condiments

Condiments are used globally to add additional layers of flavour, texture and visual appeal, elevating even simple dishes.

They are prepared items, usually cooked or pickled, and a quick look on the shelves in supermarkets will reveal an astounding variety of options.

From basic tomato ketchup in the west to coconut vinegar with chili and garlic in Asia, condiments are used to enhance most meals.

Imagine that you have cooked a curry, nicely prepared and tasty, served on a plate with rice. Now take the same dish and serve it with some sweet mango chutney, pickled lime, yoghurt raitas and some crunchy cucumber and tomato relish on the side. With very little effort, your curry will go from very good to amazing!

Presentation Matters

While taste is paramount, presentation also plays a role in how we perceive flavour. A well-presented dish enhances the dining experience.

Top 10 Tips for Cooking Success

1. Invest in quality ingredients.
2. Choose a few high-quality pots, pans, and knives over many cheap ones.
3. *Mise en place* is essential: Organize your ingredients before cooking.
4. Read recipes carefully before starting.
5. Learn basic cooking techniques.
6. Taste your food as you cook and adjust seasonings.
7. Clean as you go.
8. Don't be afraid to experiment with recipes (except for baking, where precision is key).
9. Marinate ingredients for enhanced flavor and tenderness.
10. Prepare ahead when entertaining.



A Shopping Guide

Quality

It is important to understand the points to look for in the freshness and quality of items that you purchase.

Here are some highlights to be aware of. A more detailed chart on specifics is provided in the resources section.

Supermarkets Strategy

Supermarkets operate on tight margins and carefully monitor “shrinkage” – the amount of unsold stock. To reduce waste, they often use tricks to sell products before they become unappealing. By recognising these tactics, shoppers can ensure they’re buying truly fresh and high-quality food rather than being misled by clever marketing.

1. Fresh Produce: The Illusion of Freshness

✓ Look for:

-  **Vibrant colour** – Dull or faded colours often indicate age.
-  **Firmness** – Fruit and vegetables should feel firm and crisp, not soft or wrinkled.
-  **Attached stems and leaves** – If the greens on carrots, radishes, or beets look fresh, the produce is fresher.

✗ Avoid:

-  **Artificial shine** – Wax-coated apples, cucumbers, and peppers can mask age.
-  **Condensation or slimy texture** – Moisture build-up on greens or pre-cut produce can indicate deterioration.
-  **Too-perfect appearance** – Ultra-shiny, uniform produce may have been grown for appearance rather than taste and nutrition.
-  **Pre-cut fruit** – Whole fruit is fresher and often better value. Pre-cut fruit is typically older stock being moved before it spoils.
-  **Coloured nets** – Used to enhance the appearance of fruit, such as orange nets making dull-looking oranges appear brighter.

2. Meat & Seafood: Tricks to Watch Out For

✓ Look for:

- 👨‍🍳 **Natural marbling (in beef)** - A good balance of fat within the muscle rather than just on the outside.
- 👨‍🍳 **Bright red beef, pinkish pork, and pale, moist chicken** - Natural colours without excess liquid in the packaging.
- 👨‍🍳 **Firm seafood with a fresh, ocean-like smell** - Avoid fish that smells strongly of ammonia or “fishy.”

✗ Avoid:

- 👨‍🍳 **Overly bright red meat** - Carbon monoxide is sometimes used to maintain colour, even if the meat is ageing.
- 👨‍🍳 **Water-heavy packaging** - Excess liquid suggests the meat was frozen and thawed or injected with water to increase weight.
- 👨‍🍳 **Pre-marinated or seasoned meats** - This often disguises older cuts nearing expiration.
- 👨‍🍳 **Packaged steaks** - Often, the top steak looks good, but lower ones in the pack may be of lesser quality.
- 👨‍🍳 **Pre-packed mince (ground beef)** - Sometimes, the top layer appears fresh while the inside is older or lower quality.

3. Dairy & Eggs: Hidden Quality Issues

✓ Look for:

- 👨‍🍳 **Milk and yoghurt with a recent production date** - The fresher, the better.
- 👨‍🍳 **Eggs with minimal cracks and a rough, chalky shell** - Very smooth eggshells can indicate older eggs.

✗ Avoid:

- 👨‍🍳 **Milk and cream in clear containers** - Light exposure can degrade nutrients and cause spoilage faster.
- 👨‍🍳 **Cheese with a dry or oily surface** - It should be slightly moist, not cracked or greasy.

4. Baked Goods: Don't Be Fooled by Appearance

✓ Look for:

- 👤 **Bread that feels slightly heavy for its size** - Light, airy loaves often contain excessive preservatives.
- 👤 **Minimal ingredient lists** - Fresh bread should only contain flour, water, yeast, and salt.

✗ Avoid:

- 👤 **Pre-sliced bread with an overly soft, spongy texture** - Often a sign of preservatives rather than natural freshness.
- 👤 **“Freshly Baked In-Store” claims** - Many supermarkets use frozen, pre-made dough instead of baking from scratch.

5. Packaged & Ready-to-Eat Foods: Beware of Hidden Age

✓ Look for:

- 👤 **Short ingredient lists with recognisable items** - More additives usually mean lower-quality products.
- 👤 **Longer expiry dates** - Some stores push nearly expired goods to the front.

✗ Avoid:

- 👤 **Pre-cut fruit with a watery look** - It may have been sitting in storage for days.
- 👤 **Salads with browned edges or excess moisture** - These are signs of deterioration.
- 👤 **Special offers on fresh items** - These are fine but should be used quickly, as they are often nearing expiry.
- 👤 **Items labelled “fresh” that were previously frozen** - These should not be refrozen unless cooked first.

Supermarket Tricks That Make Lower-Quality Products Seem Premium

1. Glossy Packaging & Branding

- 👤 **Premium-Looking Labels** - Budget products may have sleek packaging to appear high-end.
- 👤 **“Farm Fresh” or “Artisan” Terms** - Words like “handcrafted” and “rustic” are often meaningless marketing phrases.

2. Artificial Freshness

- 👤 **Mist Sprays on Vegetables** - Makes produce look fresher, even if it's days old.
- 👤 **Wax Coating on Fruits** - Adds shine to disguise ageing.
- 👤 **Cold Lighting** - Cooler-toned lights make meats appear redder and fish fresher.

3. Deceptive Meat & Seafood Practices

- 👨‍🍳 **Gas-Flushed Meat Packaging** – Carbon monoxide keeps meat red even as it ages.
- 👨‍🍳 **Water Injection in Chicken & Fish** – Adds weight to increase the price.
- 👨‍🍳 **Pre-Seasoned or Marinated Meat** – Often used to disguise older cuts.

4. Bulk Buying Manipulation

- 👨‍🍳 **“Family Pack” Savings That Aren’t** – Some bulk packs cost the same or more per unit than smaller packs.
- 👨‍🍳 **Misleading “Buy One, Get One” Deals** – Prices may have been raised before the offer was introduced.

5. Hidden Lower-Quality Ingredients

- 👨‍🍳 **Diluted Products** – “100% Juice” may be bulked out with cheaper apple or grape juice.
- 👨‍🍳 **Processed Meats with Fillers** – Sausages, burgers, and deli meats may contain starch, soy protein, or excessive water.
- 👨‍🍳 **Fake Cheese** – Some “cheese” slices or shredded blends use vegetable oil instead of real dairy.

6. Strategic Shelf Placement

- 👨‍🍳 **Store Brands at Eye Level** – Often designed to look like well-known brands but may be lower quality.
- 👨‍🍳 **Expensive, Lower-Quality Products First** – Bakery bread, pre-cut fruit, and ready-to-eat meals are placed up front to drive sales.

7. Bakery Tricks

- 👨‍🍳 **“Freshly Baked In-Store” Loaves** – Many supermarket bakeries simply bake pre-frozen dough.
- 👨‍🍳 **Aroma as a Sales Tool** – The smell of baking bread or roasting chicken is used to encourage impulse buys.

Final Thought

Supermarkets have mastered the art of making lower-quality products appear premium. By being aware of these tricks and knowing what to look for, shoppers can make informed decisions and get the best value for their money.





The Techniques

THE TECHNIQUES



1 - Basic Techniques

The key to successful cooking is in the foundation.

Basics That Will Help

- Organisation and cleanliness - Start organised and clean as you go.
- Basic knife skills - Practice will help.
- Cooking techniques - Master the basics that follow in the technique sheets.
- Developing a palate and understanding of seasoning.

Food Quality

The formula is very straight forward.... Focus on purchasing the best products that you can afford, cook them using solid techniques and let the natural flavours speak for themselves.

Simply prepared items, that are seasonal, will lead to excellent tasting food.

Cooking Mistakes to Avoid

These even occur in professional kitchens!

- Poor seasoning of ingredients and dishes.
- Poor flavour of ingredients and dishes.
- Using unseasonable produce.
- Dishes are overcooked or undercooked.
- Dishes are served either too hot or lacking sufficient heat.
- Poor balance of flavours.

Bringing Out Flavour in Your Food

There are some principles of flavour that can serve to improve the results of your cooking.

Flavour is developed through:

- Correct application of cooking techniques.
- Using quality, ripe ingredients.

- Thoughtful use of seasonings and flavourings.
 - I. Herbs
 - II. Spices
 - III. Acidic ingredients
 - IV. Liquids- stock, alcohol, juices

Key Steps in Preparing Flavourful Food

- Season food at each stage of cooking.
- Use fresh herbs, usually at the final stages of cooking.
- Roast and grind spices when possible.
- Use correct techniques, i.e., browning on a sauté to add flavour.
- Taste, taste, and keep tasting throughout the cooking process.
- Adjust seasoning to taste at the end of cooking.

Balancing and Adjusting Dishes

Success in cooking is achieved by combining ingredients in a balanced way, while enhancing and bringing out their flavour.

For instance, a sauce or soup, when tasted, may seem to be lacking something. A drop of lemon juice or vinegar added, can “brighten” the flavours and improve the balance.

Be mindful of how adjustments can be made to the balance of sweet, salty, sour and bitter in your dishes.

Use condiments to enhance and add dimension to the taste of a dish.

Presentation

The impact that presentation has on perception of flavour should not be ignored. It is commonly understood that people eat with their eyes first.

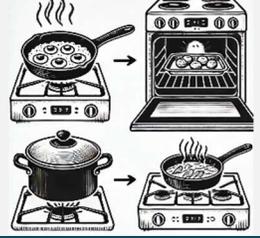
There is no need to go overboard on this but be aware when you are serving your dishes.

Top 10 Tips for Cooking Success

1. Buy the highest quality ingredients that you can afford. (quality over quantity).
2. Purchase a few high-quality cooking pots and pans rather than many cheap ones. (the same applies to knives and other tools).
3. Organise all your ingredients before you start cooking (mise en place in culinary terminology - a cornerstone of working in an organised way).
4. Read the recipe carefully before you begin cooking.
5. Become familiar with the basic techniques of cookery. (these will be your foundation for all preparations, regardless of recipes). This will give you the confidence to adjust things like temperature and timing as you go.
6. As you cook, check on progress, and taste, taste, taste! (adjusting seasoning as needed).
7. Clean as you go to avoid a painful cleanup when you are finished.
8. Don't be afraid to change or substitute ingredients. (pastry is the exception - the balance of recipes/chemical interactions are more critical).
9. Marinate ingredients where an option to improve flavor and tenderness.
10. When entertaining, prepare ahead wherever possible, to alleviate pressure to "perform" and to enable more time with your guests.



Step by Step – Basics

<p>1. Organise and Clean</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start with a clean workspace and organise all ingredients before cooking. <p>2. Source Quality Ingredients</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose fresh, seasonal ingredients for better flavour and texture. 	
<p>3. Master Knife Skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice basic cuts to improve efficiency and safety. <p>4. Use Quality Cooking Equipment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invest in high-quality pots, pans, and knives for better results. 	
<p>5. Understand Cooking Techniques</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn foundational techniques like sautéing, roasting, and poaching. <p>6. Control Cooking Temperatures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain proper heat levels to avoid under or overcooking. 	
<p>7. Develop Your Palate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taste frequently while cooking and adjust seasoning as needed. <p>8. Balance Flavours</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adjust sweet, salty, sour, and bitter elements to create harmony. 	
<p>9. Clean As You Go</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep organised and minimise cleanup at the end. <p>10. Be Flexible</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feel free to change or substitute ingredients. (Refer to reference charts for ideas). 	
<p>11. Present Food Thoughtfully</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arrange dishes simply but attractively for better appeal. <p>12. Keep Learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep refining your skills by tasting and learning from each dish. • Take notes as you learn and journal favourite recipes. 	



2 - Poaching Technique

Overview

Poaching is a gentle and healthy cooking method where food is submerged in liquid, resulting in moist and flavourful dishes. It's particularly well-suited for tougher cuts of meat and poultry, transforming them into tender delights. The poaching liquid often becomes the base for a delicious sauce that complements the main ingredient. While traditionally used for tougher cuts, poaching can also be used for delicate items like fish and eggs.

What to Poach:

- **Meat:** Tougher cuts like beef chuck, pork shoulder, or lamb shanks.
- **Poultry:** Older chickens or other poultry parts.
- **Fish:** Delicate fish fillets (cooked at a lower temperature).
- **Eggs:** For perfectly cooked "eggs Benedict" and other dishes.
- **Fruits:** Pears, peaches, and other fruits can be poached in syrup for desserts.

Menu Inspiration:

- Poached Eggs with S. Salmon & Hollandaise
- Corned Beef with Cabbage and Root Vegetables.
- Poached Salmon with Dill Sauce
- Poached Pears in Red Wine

The Poaching Process – Step by Step:

1. **Mise en Place (Everything in its place):** Have all your ingredients prepped, measured, and ready to go. This includes chopping vegetables, portioning meat, and gathering your herbs and spices.
2. **Sear the Meat (Optional but Recommended for Flavour):** While not strictly necessary for *all* poaching, searing the meat before poaching adds depth of flavour. Heat oil in a heavy-bottomed pot and sear the meat on all sides until browned. Remove the meat from the pot.
3. **Sauté the Aromatics:** In the same pot, sauté a mirepoix (onions, carrots, and celery) until softened and slightly browned. You can also add other aromatics like garlic, shallots, or leeks.
4. **Add Flavour Boosters:** Add tomato paste to the pot and cook for a minute or two to deepen the flavour. You can also add a dusting of flour (roux) at this point to help thicken the sauce later.

5. **Return the Meat and Add Liquid:** Return the seared meat to the pot. Add enough liquid to cover the meat completely. This can be stock, wine, or a combination of both.
6. **Simmer:** Bring the liquid to a simmer (small bubbles gently rising to the surface).
7. **Reduce the heat:** to low and cover the pot.
8. **Add Herbs and Spices:** Add herbs like bay leaves, thyme, or a bouquet garni to the poaching liquid for added flavour.
9. **Cook Low and Slow:** Cook the meat at a very low simmer until it is fork-tender. This could take several hours, depending on the size and cut of meat.
10. **Remove the Meat:** Once the meat is cooked, carefully remove it from the pot and keep it warm.
11. **Make the Sauce (Optional):** You can either use the poaching liquid as is or strain it and reduce it to create a richer sauce. Adjust the seasoning as needed.

Poaching Delicate Items (Fish and Eggs):

- **Fish:** Poach fish fillets in a flavourful court bouillon (fish stock) at a very low simmer. They cook quickly, so keep a close eye on them.
- **Eggs:** For poached eggs, use fresh eggs. Add a tablespoon of vinegar to the poaching water to help the egg whites coagulate. Simmer the water gently and crack the eggs into individual ramekins before gently sliding them into the water.

Evaluating Quality:

A perfectly poached dish should have:

- **Flavour:** Rich and flavourful, with the flavours of the poaching liquid infused into the food.
- **Appearance:** Tender and moist, with a pleasing color. The sauce should complement the main ingredient.
- **Texture:** Fork-tender and juicy, not dry or tough.