

FLAVOUR NOTES

SERIES II

The Chef's Flavour System
A Weekly Journal from The Chef's Spice Chest

Understanding Flavour — The Way Chefs Build It
“Where Ingredients Become Flavour”

CHEFSNOTEBOOKS.com

Issue 01 — Alliums

The Structural Base of Flavour — Foundation
Flavour System Focus: Aromatics

In professional kitchens, flavour rarely begins with spectacle. It begins quietly, often in a pan, with the gentle transformation of alliums. Onion, garlic, shallot, leek — these are not headline ingredients, yet they form the structural base upon which much of classical and modern cooking is built.

Alliums are not simply aromatic additions; they define direction. The way they are cut, cooked, and combined determines whether a dish moves towards sweetness, depth, sharpness, or complexity. From the slow sweat of onions in a French base to the assertive punch of garlic in Mediterranean cooking, their role is both foundational and decisive.

Understanding alliums is therefore not about knowing their flavour individually, but about recognising how they behave within systems. This is where flavour construction begins — not at the finish, but at the point of origin.



Soft heat draws them low
Sweetness rises from restraint
Flavour finds its base

This Week's Focus

Alliums form one of the most important ingredient families in culinary practice. Their role is structural — they build the first layer of flavour, providing both aromatic depth and directional intent.

Alliums are a group of aromatic vegetables from the *Allium* genus, including onions, garlic, shallots, and leeks. In culinary practice, they are used not simply for their individual flavour, but for their ability to build depth, sweetness, and structure at the very beginning of a dish.

They sit at the beginning of flavour systems, often defining the identity of a dish before secondary ingredients are introduced. Whether gently sweated, deeply caramelised, or used raw, alliums influence not only taste but also mouthfeel, aroma, and perception of balance.

Their importance lies in versatility. The same ingredient can move from sharp and aggressive to soft and rounded depending on technique. This adaptability allows chefs to control the foundation of a dish with precision.

In essence, alliums are not a component — they are a starting point.





Flavour Lens

Profile

Sulphurous, aromatic, ranging from sharp and pungent to sweet and mellow depending on treatment.

Behaviour

Transforms significantly with heat. Raw alliums are assertive and volatile; gentle cooking softens and sweetens; prolonged cooking develops depth and complexity.

Balance Role

Acts as a base note, anchoring flavours and supporting both richness and acidity. Bridges the gap between primary ingredients and seasoning.

Key Pairings

Fats (butter, olive oil), proteins (meat, poultry, legumes), herbs (thyme, parsley), acids (vinegar, wine), and spices across global cuisines.





Kitchen Practice

In professional kitchens, alliums are rarely treated as an afterthought. Their preparation is deliberate and aligned with the intended outcome of the dish.

Sweating is the most common starting point — low heat, controlled fat, no colour. This develops sweetness without introducing bitterness, creating a clean base for sauces, soups, and stews. In contrast, caramelisation requires patience and higher heat, producing deeper, more complex notes suitable for robust dishes.



Timing is critical. Garlic added too early can burn and turn bitter; order of addition — onion first, garlic later, delicate alliums last — reflects both experience and control. Common mistakes include overcrowding the pan, insufficient heat control, and neglecting seasoning at the base stage.

Chefs approach alliums differently depending on cuisine and intent. French systems favour restraint and gradual development; Mediterranean cooking often embraces more assertive garlic use; Asian cuisines may combine rapid frying with aromatics to build intensity quickly.

Regardless of style, the principle remains consistent: the quality of the base determines the integrity of the dish.



A practical application of this week's flavour system

Five Onion Pasta

(Inspired by La Pergola, Rome)

A refined pasta dish built on the natural sweetness and depth of five onion varieties, slowly cooked and balanced with gentle chilli warmth and light tomato. Inspired by classical Italian fine-dining technique, this preparation focuses on patience, control, and clarity of flavour.

This dish has its roots in a memorable dinner at The Lanesborough, where I first encountered a remarkable onion-based pasta inspired by the refined cuisine of Heinz Beck of the 3 Michelin Star La Pergola, Rome.

At the time, my friend Paul Gayler was Executive Chef of the hotel. The dish was so striking in its depth and elegance that I asked if he could obtain the recipe for me.



What came back was not a recipe, but simply a list of ingredients. From that list, I developed the version you see here. It remains one of those dishes that perfectly captures the essence of refined Italian cooking—taking something as humble as onions and, through patience and technique, transforming them into something quietly exceptional. A later visit to the Rome Cavalieri only reinforced that impression.

Recipe link: <https://chefsnotebooks.com/appetisers/five-onion-pasta-inspired-by-heinz-beck-3-michelin/>



The Liquid Counterpoint

A dry white wine such as a Sauvignon Blanc works effectively alongside allium-based dishes. Its acidity cuts through the sweetness developed during cooking, while its freshness lifts the aromatic profile with a clean, herbaceous edge.



From the Kitchen

Garlic can be peeled quickly by placing cloves in a jar and shaking vigorously — the skins loosen and separate cleanly.

For regular use, a garlic and ginger paste can be blended and frozen in small cubes, allowing controlled, consistent flavour at speed.



Chef's Reflection

Most dishes are won or lost in the first five minutes. If the base is right, the rest becomes refinement — if not, no amount of correction will recover it.



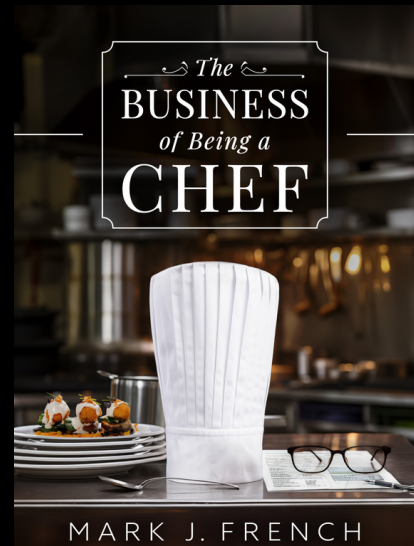
From the Library

A growing collection of flavour charts, reference guides, and past issues is available at [ChefsNotebooks.com](https://chefsnotebooks.com)

Further Reading & Resources

For a deeper understanding of flavour structure and kitchen systems, *The Business of Being a Chef* provides useful operational context alongside culinary insight.

<https://chefsnotebooks.com/books/>



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About the Author

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