

Introduction

Dinner can be a quick-ish thing kind of thrown together or it can be well thought out and planned.

You can spend hours or days planning and making stocks and breads or you can buy the stock in cartons from the store. Most store bakeries have suitable breads if you can't bake or don't want to bake.

People have busy lives with a lot of things going on. Sometimes we can't always include time to make everything from scratch.

Purists might balk at convenience, but if the difference is dinner or no dinner then the path is clear: convenience.

Food quality has come a long way because consumer preferences and expectations have come a long way. Grocery stores have a variety of products for a variety of price points. Pick the one that works for your budget.

Peter Reinhart, the baking book author and instructor at Johnson & Wales University has a thought about baking which is any bread made with love is appreciated. He says it more gracefully than I retold it, but I am certain that same applies to cooking. Food made out of love for friends and family is always good.

As a young cook, my biggest frustration was recipes in the "Conde Naste" magazine explaining this amazing dish needed this one rare ingredient picked only by two people every other Thursday in February on a remote island off of Cyprus and then had to be shipped overnight and on ice.

Well, okay, that's a stretch, but I use it to make a point. You don't need the rare exotic ingredient to make good food.

The close approximation to the "Conde Naste" ingredient is the proclamation to buy the best you can. Well, that's a lot of pressure. Kobe beef is one of the best but I can't get it easily or reasonably. Even if I could get it, the price is too much. What is available in your stores is what to use.

My take on all this is to fret not about unattainable ingredients. The produce stand in your town or the grocery store is perfect. From that selection, pick what appeals to you. If you know someone who grows anything you can use, make a deal.

My other point is don't let a list on a piece of paper stop you from cooking. Substitute as you wish or as you need. With at least 2 exceptions.

Butter and salt. Unsalted butter is preferred since you don't know how much salt is in that butter.

Salt is now a big deal in my house. For my whole life, it was not. In Detroit, everyone used the blue box with the girl and the umbrella.
Yeah, that one.

Now I use a variety of salts. One is pink, one is grey and one is white but smells of the ocean and is clumpy.

I wrote a blog post about salt. There's a lot of good information there about why we need salt and why we need better than commercial white salt.

The key point is that free-flowing white salt, kosher or iodized or plain, are stripped of very necessary micronutrients which can be challenging to obtain elsewhere. Better salt for better health. I know, sounds loony. But, it's true.

A note about soups

Some of the soups end up as pureed soups. There's an elegance to that but it is another step. I've made an indication on those recipes where it is just as easy to cut the veggies a bit more uniform and serve the soup as a chunky soup. That's how grandma did it. If it was good enough for her, it is good enough for us.

How to use this book

The idea that instructions are part of a book of instructions is at least curious.

Cooking isn't just one skill used at a time. It's a variety of skills coming together to make the braise or soup or roasted chicken.

When you cook the dishes, you'll start to notice I don't tell you how long to cook something in the pot. I have no way of knowing. But I do know that when you start to smell the garlic or herbs, something is happening in the pot that requires your attention and action.

As you cook you'll start to notice you pay attention to the smells.

Also, pay attention to the sounds.

Cooking is, of course, a taste thing, but also a smell thing and a hear thing. The diced veggies in placed into the hot fat in a pan will sizzle at a high pitch. As the water comes out of them the pitch will lower. That water is causing the pan to cool a bit and that's cooling pan can be heard in the lower pitch. When the pitch gets higher,

the pan needs you. The ingredients may be moving into burn from brown and before that burn happens, something has to happen. Water in the form of the next ingredients or take it off the heat for a few seconds or both.

Building the skills useful for cooking takes time but also attention.

Each recipe that has ingredients sautéed in the pan is written for you to learn those smells and sounds and learn what your taste preferences are. That takes repetition but it's worth doing.

Learning to cook includes learning to adjust how the recipe reads to what you prefer to eat. Some ingredients don't have a size to be cut. Cabbage, in one case, cauliflower in another. You decide.

How do you know what size you want? Consider the eating. Are the pieces going to fit on a spoon well or be hard to eat? Large pieces of a thing will make that flavor the dominant flavor so smaller sizes will bring a better flavor balance. Sometimes you want that and sometimes you don't.

Cooking for comfort

On my podcast and in my blog posts I complain a bit that some cookbooks are little more than a list of recipes and the barest of directions for a procedure. Certainly, that dish might be done well, but that's almost in spite of the instruction.

Everyone looks for guidance when a new recipe is used, even professional cooks. Cooks young with experience often looked for guidance. Both restaurant cooks and culinary students were seeking more than just a cursory explanation of the how. One of my chef/instructors quipped, correctly but not helpfully, that you cook the roast till it's done. The right question is, of course, how do I know?

Everyone wants to succeed at the task at hand. Well-written procedures that allow that success to happen are also tools for learning the skills for that dish.

A braise is a braise is a braise, mostly. Once you've mastered the basics and learn to understand what happens and why you can then apply your own tweaks to that dish making it, in fact, your own creation.

The breakdown

In addition to the table of contents, I've made some groupings of categories for easy searching. Braises and stews and steamed dishes are broken out as well as vegan or obvious vegan possible. Since I do not eat a vegan lifestyle, my segregation is based on the basics of no meat or animal product and no honey. Distinctions greater than that are not accounted for.

The skills

Cooking isn't hard exactly, but learning a lexicon and then performing that procedure with the challenge of heat and sharp things can make the task seem much more difficult.

Braising includes searing. Stewing does too. That skill is a bit of a fight with heat and grease and time and temperature usually all at the same moment. Learning to balance them takes practice and repetition. Reading about it is fine, but the skill is learned in cooking. Knowledge is knowing don't burn the food. Skill is knowing how far to push it before that happens.

Flavor building starts with a good sear but also from learning when to add which ingredients for the most flavor extraction. As you cook these recipes you'll read recipes that mention an order of operations. That's the learning and the lesson on cooking. Frankly, throwing a bunch of stuff in a pot and cooking it might make dinner, but learning when to add which items makes a meal.

Just as people with skills have made their own style-basketball players or painters or silversmiths-cooks do too. You will make and craft your own style as your skills grow, your understanding of the ingredients increases and your preferences are identified.

Skills are acquired with practice and experience. To facilitate that nearly all times for cooking have been omitted. That's not to play a trick on you but to say that the wide variety of ovens and sizes of ingredients make knowing how long any one thing should cook in your house cannot be known by me.

For similar reasons, I've omitted the photographs from these recipes. Yes, they are great to look but they can also be a barrier to success. They are the bar against which our own accomplishments are judged. I do it too. Find your own picture and set your own bar.

Not all time is the same

Cooking from scratch with unprocessed ingredients takes time. Even the most skilled cooks require minutes to prepare the ingredients and get ready to cook. Not everyone has that kind of time. Between cooking anything at home or McDonald's, cooking at home is best.

Sometimes frozen ingredients and canned soups or stocks need to be utilized.

When I worked for Jack Shoop, CMC, we borrowed a phrase from the Marines: *Improvise, overcome, adapt*. Any cook pressed for time was encouraged to improvise, overcome, adapt. More than a few parents with jobs and kids face a time crunch that will not allow full from-scratch cooking. I invite you to find a way to cook using the ingredients of convenience as you see them necessary. Prepackaged fresh, frozen or canned can be vital to getting food on the table with a minimum of frustration and delay. I've been known to use prepackaged ravioli and packaged stocks. I can make them, but can't always do so in the time allotted.

Remember that feeding our families is both physical nourishing but can be spiritual nourishing as well.

A feast for the senses

Cooking is the application of heat to food to coagulate the proteins. That's accurate and boring.

Cooking uses all 5 senses. Touch and sight are pretty plain.

Hearing is important when searing food, for the sound of the sizzle tells you what's going on in the pan. A lightly smoking pan will produce a good sear and a high pitch. As the meat cooks, water comes out and the pitch drops a bit. More meat in the pan takes away the heat which lowers the pitch but also allows more water to come out lowering both the pitch and the heat. As the meat cooks the heat returns and the pitch increases. This is when burn can start.

The process of learning cooking is learning to hear what's happening and then knowing what to do. A pan that is too hot needs at least a small bit of oil added but also something to lower the temperature. The first fastest way is moving the pan off the burner. This is necessary for electric stoves, which lack the immediate response of gas burners.

Smell is the true guide indicating when the next ingredients are to be added. How long to cook the garlic? I have no idea the minutes. But, when you smell the aroma, it's time to act.

Mise en Place (Everything in its place)

Before you start cooking, have everything ready.

What is everything? The obvious items, pans and stove and ingredients already cut and ready to be added to the pan. Frozen ingredients either thawed or in the bag on the counter ready.

The best way to make sure you have everything is run down the recipe, point to each item. Oil, check; meat, check; salt, check and so on.

Being ready does make the cooking process faster and easier, but it can also prevent burn. Think about a pan of ingredients browning nicely and getting an excellent foundation of flavor. It's time to add the next ingredient and it is wrapped tight in plastic. The moments taken to open the package can turn a great flavor foundation into burned trash.

Everything ready means ready to use, open, unsealed, chopped, measured and at the stove or within arms reach.

The fine line

Caramel turns to burn pretty quickly. But, the preferences of caramel and the tolerances for deeper flavors from deeper caramelization is individual. I prefer a bold caramel for a deep flavor and higher contrasts of flavors.

Flavor is one of the memorable traits of a good meal. Being organized, mise en place, and daring to wait a second longer for a good flavor foundation are the two biggest reasons chef's dishes taste better.

You can do this.

Happy cooking.

This is the introduction to *Cooking For Comfort*. To order the book or read about the cookbook, enter culinarylibertarian.com/cookingforcomfort into your browser.