



Savor the Flavor: Exploring Cooking Methods

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Making food that provides exciting and delicious flavors can seem like a difficult task. Many people believe it is necessary to have more ingredients to make a better or tastier meal. Some may even feel they can only get these types of meals by eating out. That is not true! Simple dishes can have robust flavor, and sometimes you do not even need a recipe. With a few tools from your flavor toolbox, like herbs, spices, flavored vinegars and oils, and an understanding of basic cooking methods, you can make a flavorful meal with a few ingredients.

Together, these things will make time in the kitchen more enjoyable. Your family and friends will surely appreciate the delicious food and your cooking creativity, without sacrificing a healthy meal.

First Steps to Building Flavor

Before you begin, it is important to realize that cooking to build flavors is different from baking, and it provides the opportunity to learn from experience. Flavor includes the entire experience of smell, texture, appearance, and taste.

There are five basic types of flavors that we recognize. These include sweet, salty, sour, bitter, and umami (a Japanese word meaning savory or taste). Understanding these flavors and learning how to combine them allow us to explore different methods for flavoring and cooking foods.

You can develop your flavor-boosting kitchen skills by learning to use basic flavoring techniques during food preparation and incorporating a variety of cooking methods. As you become more confident with these skills, you can experiment with the five different tastes to create exciting flavor combinations. Building a pizza can be a perfect example of this. By learning the flavors that you like, you can combine preparation and flavoring methods to make the perfect pizza creation! For example, you can use different methods like sautéing and grilling to prepare caramelized onions and grilled pineapple, and you might add cooked chicken that has been marinated in advance. With this example, you would experience sweet, salty, sour, and umami flavors. Developing these new skills can take your staple, everyday recipes to the next level.

Some foods go well with all flavors, so they are a great place to start when experimenting with new flavors and cooking methods. Start with vegetables that are lighter or



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white in color, such as potatoes, cauliflower, or summer squash. For example, potatoes can be prepared with several different cooking methods, like roasting or braising, and yield different textures and flavors from each, even though it is the same food. Fresh, local, and in-season produce is also easy to enhance, because it is versatile and has the best quality.

Add Flavor Before Cooking

There are several opportunities to add flavor before cooking, such as through brining or using marinades. Pickling is another method that can add flavor to food without cooking or heating.

Brining

Brining is the process of soaking meat in a solution of water and salt before cooking. This allows the meat to retain moisture during cooking, which results in a more juicy, tender, and flavorful final product. All that is required for a brine is salt, water, and time.

The ratio used for a traditional brine is one tablespoon of salt for each cup of water, or 3/4 cup of salt per gallon of

water. The amount of solution and length of time for brining varies depending on the type, cut, and size of meat. For example, a fish filet requires only 15 minutes, while a whole turkey takes 12 to 24 hours of brining to achieve the desired effects.

For food safety, use a glass, stainless steel, or food-grade plastic container that has a lid or seal. Meat should be fully submerged in the brine solution and refrigerated throughout the brining process. The brine solution should be discarded after use.

Marinating

A marinade is a liquid or sauce in which to soak foods during preparation to enhance umami flavor and prevent meats from drying out while cooking. Different from brine solutions, marinades include an acidic component to help tenderize meats, as well as other flavor-adding agents like oils and seasonings.

Examples of acidic ingredients include lemon juice, lime juice, apple cider vinegar, balsamic vinegar, and white wine vinegar. Types of oils commonly used are olive oil, canola oil, vegetable oil, and avocado oil. You should consider cooking method and temperature when deciding between various oils so you choose one with an appropriate smoke point. When cooking at very high temperatures, canola or vegetable oil is a better choice. Other common ingredients that add flavor in marinades include soy sauce, Worcestershire sauce, fish oil, and aromatics such as garlic, ginger, herbs, spices, citrus zest, and honey.

The length of time required for marinating depends on the type of protein. Fish should not marinate more than two hours because of the breakdown of protein. Other meats, such as pork and beef, can marinate overnight.

As with brining, use a glass, stainless steel, or food-grade plastic container with a lid or seal and keep food refrigerated while marinating. After marinating, discard any remaining marinade because of bacterial contamination from the raw meat. If you wish to use the marinade as a sauce for serving, reserve a portion of the prepared marinade before combining it with raw meat. Alternatively, boil the marinade for at least five minutes after the meat has marinated to kill pathogens.

Scoring is an additional technique used to increase surface area for flavor to infuse into raw meat, typically done with fatty or tough types of meat, such as duck or flank steak. To score, cut diagonally lengthwise 1/8 to 1/4 inch deep, spacing cuts approximately one inch apart. Turn the meat 90 degrees to create a crosshatch pattern.

Pickling

Pickling is a method for preserving food and extending the shelf life of produce through either a fermentation process or an acidic solution, using vinegar, spices, and seasonings to enhance flavor and texture. Pickling produces salty and sour

flavors. Cucumbers are not the only things we can pickle. Other vegetables to consider are carrots, peppers, okra, tomatoes, asparagus, and green beans, to name a few.

One method of pickling is quick pickling, also known as “refrigerator pickles,” using vinegar. It is done with fewer steps compared to the traditional canning method; however, this method requires refrigeration and the food must be consumed within a few weeks. For step-by-step instructions and recipes for pickling, see the publication *Home Canning Pickled and Fermented Foods (FCS3-582)*.

Adding flavor before the cooking process with brining, marinating, or pickling as a food preparation method requires planning. Each provides incredible flavor without much effort. Time does the work for you.



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Add Flavor During Cooking

While some cooking methods add no flavor, other methods can elevate the flavor and create a new experience. By choosing the right method and making a few easy additions, such as an oil and a couple of herbs and spices, you can easily add robust flavor and texture to foods. Try the suggestions in this publication to learn how to enhance flavors of food with different cooking methods.

Sautéing

Sautéing is a versatile and quick way to cook meats and vegetables. Tender cuts of meat that do not require a long cooking time are ideal to sauté, like chicken breasts, fish filets, and beef tenderloin. You can sauté almost all vegetables. Some popular choices include asparagus, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, mushrooms, bell peppers, green beans, and summer squash.

Technically, sautéing is a form of pan-frying, but you only use a small amount of fat, making it healthier than deep-frying. Pan-frying uses a small amount of fat to prevent food from sticking, to transfer heat, and to add flavor to the food. Sautéing can be done in a frying pan or skillet, sauté pan,

Food Type	Example	Temperature	Time
Soft vegetables	Zucchini, cut into half-inch rounds	375°F	25–30 minutes
Hard vegetables	Sweet potato wedges	400°F to 425°F	25–30 minutes
Small cut of meat	Pork chop, one-inch thick	400°F	15–20 minutes
Large cut of meat	Roast	250°F to 375°F	1.5–2 hours

Table 1. Roasting times and temperatures.

wok, or on a griddle. Sautéed food is usually cut into smaller pieces similar in size to allow for faster and more even cooking. The best temperatures for sautéing are medium to medium-high heat. Be careful that your temperature is not too hot, because the outside of the food will burn before the inside is cooked through.

To sauté food, heat a pan on the stovetop and add just enough fat, like butter or oil, to barely coat the bottom of the pan. The pan is heated and ready to cook when the oil spreads and has a shimmery appearance. Once the pan is heated, add food in a single, even layer that is not too crowded. Every so often, toss or stir the food to ensure even cooking until it develops color and reaches the desired doneness. The brownness the food develops adds deep flavor without being burnt.

The addition of sautéing to your cooking skill set allows you to quickly prepare flavorful meals with very little effort.

Roasting

If you are looking for an easy way to add flavor to your dishes that does not require constant supervision, then roasting is a great cooking option. Roasting uses dry, indirect heat, usually from an oven, to surround and cook the food. During roasting, a process called the Maillard reaction occurs. This reaction is what allows roasting to add flavor to foods by giving them a sweet, caramelized taste and a toasty brown color.

Some of the best foods to roast include beef, pork, fish, poultry, and vegetables. Sometimes, you may see roasting vegetables referred to as baking. See Table 1 for appropriate roasting temperatures and length of time required for various foods.

The middle rack is the ideal place to roast your food. Toss vegetables with oil or butter before placing them in the oven uncovered on a baking sheet, ensuring they are spread out to cook evenly. You should turn vegetables every 15 to 20 minutes during the roasting process to make sure they cook evenly. For meat, brush oil or butter on the outside of the meat and place uncovered in the oven. Times for roasting will vary depending on the size of the food. Roasted vegetables should be softened with good color. Roast meats in a roasting pan or baking dish, and make sure they reach the correct safe internal temperatures. Fish, beef, lamb, pork and

veal should reach 145 degrees Fahrenheit; poultry should reach 165 degrees Fahrenheit.

Roasting is a great way to add texture, color, and flavor all at one time.

Braising

If you are looking for another way to dial up the flavor with minimal effort, braising is a great skill to have in the kitchen. Braising uses a combination of cooking methods including searing and sautéing, resulting in restaurant-quality meals.

Braising uses both dry and moist cooking methods. Foods that typically benefit from braising include large, economical cuts of meat that need time to become tender. These meats are often cooked with hearty vegetables like carrots, celery, onion, and potatoes, which can also cook for longer periods.

Follow these steps for delicious meals using the braising cooking method:

- Season the meat that you have chosen to cook; try using a spice rub or a seasoning mix to add desired flavor.
- Heat a pan over medium-high heat, and brown the meat on all sides using a small amount of fat (oil or butter).
- Once the meat is seared on all sides, transfer the meat to a heavy-bottomed, deep pot such as a Dutch oven or slow cooker.
- Add vegetables to the pan that the meat was seared in and sauté them on medium-high heat until golden brown. You may need another teaspoon of oil or butter to keep the vegetables from sticking to the pan.

After sautéing your vegetables, deglaze the pot by slowly adding a braising liquid to the hot pot. You can use broth, wine, juices, or water as braising liquid. Make sure to scrape off the brown bits stuck to the bottom of the pan with a wooden spoon. This is where all the flavor lives!

Add your braising liquid of choice to the Dutch oven or slow cooker with the meat about halfway submerged. Cover the meat with the vegetables before cooking. Bring the liquid to a boil and immediately lower to a simmer. Finally, cover the pot and cook slowly at 350 degrees Fahrenheit in the oven or on the stovetop. The meat and vegetables should be

Cooking Method	Heat	Suggested Oil(s)	Uses and Applications	Example
<i>Sautéing</i>	Medium-high on stovetop	Olive, canola, vegetable, coconut	Sauté vegetables to add to recipes or foods to serve as an entrée.	Sauté peppers, onions, and mushrooms to add to an omelet or a chicken breast to serve for dinner.
<i>Roasting</i>	High (375°F or higher for most foods)	Canola, vegetable	Roast vegetables to serve as a side or meats to serve as an entrée.	Roast broccoli by tossing it in a little oil and seasoning it with a few herbs to add a more flavorful twist than traditional steaming.
<i>Braising</i>	Medium (325°F to 350°F)	Canola, vegetable (for searing meat before braising)	Braise meats to create tender and flavorful meals using cheaper cuts of meat.	Pan-sear a beef roast on all sides and cook it slowly in a Dutch oven, adding vegetable broth to increase moisture and tenderness.

Table 2. Common uses for cooking methods.

fork-tender when complete. This can take up to three hours or more, depending on the size of the cut of meat.

Braising is a great way to cook large pieces of meat that are lower in price because they are a tougher cut. Often you can find them on sale at the grocery store. It is an economical way to feed the whole family a flavorful meal.

Small Changes Make Big Differences

Making small changes to a recipe can make a big difference when it comes to flavor. Consider the colors, textures, and varieties of foods within a dish to make it visually appealing. Experimenting with various flavors, cooking methods, garnishes, and serving sauces provides more variety to everyday recipes. Involving the family in meal preparation can create adventurous eaters and encourage creativeness.

Have fun and enjoy the experimentation! Learning which flavors you favor will help you stock your pantry to prepare quick, delicious meals. You may find you enjoy foods you previously did not care for by exploring new cooking methods. Additionally, trying various methods might provide a new experience with foods you eat often. In no time, you will be a master at using the cooking tools you have in your toolbox to build flavorful and memorable meals.

Lemon Garlic Marinade Recipe for Chicken

Ingredients:

- 1/3 cup lemon juice (juice from two to three lemons)
- 1/2 cup canola or olive oil
- 1 tablespoon soy sauce
- 2 cloves of garlic (or 1 teaspoon garlic powder)
- 1/2 cup fresh oregano (or 2 tablespoons dried oregano)
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 teaspoon black pepper

Directions:

Mix all ingredients together. Place chicken cut of your choice in plastic bag and pour in marinade. Close the bag securely and marinate in refrigerator for at least 30 minutes, or allow to marinate overnight for enhanced flavor. Pour off marinade and discard. Grill or sauté chicken until the internal temperature reaches 165 degrees Fahrenheit.

Nutrition information is provided for one tablespoon, which is consistent with the FDA's guidelines for marinades: 65 calories, 7.3 g fat, and 0.3 g carbohydrates. Please note that the nutrition per serving will vary depending on the size of the meat, surface area, how long it marinates, and how much marinade is used.

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