Chapter 3  Planning for Cooking

What, and how, to prepare before you cook.

*Mise En Place* (pronounced “meez on plas”): Is a French culinary term meaning, everything in its place, and a place for everything. This is one of the most important concepts for successful cooking. Spend some time and thought planning ahead will save you time, ensuring better results. This philosophy of organization doesn’t just apply to prepping the ingredients before cooking. It extends to the physical environment and equipment, for a *safe, efficient, and enjoyable cooking experience*.

3.1 Planning for Preparing Tasty, Healthy, Affordable Meals

1. **Allocate time to cook meals:** Plan 30-90 minutes to prepare and cook a fresh meal for your family.

   • Including your family members in the preparation allows time for everyone to wind down a little and gather together before the meal.

   • Involving children will give them an opportunity to take ownership in the meal planning.

2. **Eat with the Seasons:**

   • **Cook Seasonal Foods:** Follow the availability of *seasonal foods* when choosing recipes. The fruits and vegetables that are in season are more *readily available, cost less, and are of the best quality*.

   • **Know your markets:** Be familiar with the seasonal produce that is carried by the farmers market or supermarkets closest to your work place or home.
3. Make plans for using leftovers:

- **Leftovers are great for lunch** (within 3-4 days) to take to school or work in a microwavable container.

- **Incorporate leftovers into another recipe** - leftover soups can be used as the liquid base for a stew by adding more ingredients; sautéed vegetables can be turned into a stir-fry with additional meat or other mixed vegetables (just cook all the new and fresh ingredients first, then add the leftover pre-cooked vegetables in the end to heat it up); leftover spaghetti sauce can be bulked up with more vegetables and ground meat, use a different pasta, and it becomes another dish, or use it in a baked casserole or lasagna.

- **Plan a “Leftover Night”:** Think of an evening when you might be too busy to cook. That’s the evening when you pull out all your leftovers from the fridge, line them up on the kitchen counter for a “smorgasbord” buffet dinner. This is a great way to use up all your leftovers and make room in your refrigerator.

3.2 **Stocking the pantry** – Stock your pantry/cabinet with ingredients that are the most versatile and can be used for more than one recipe or style (Western and Eastern) of cooking. Take advantage of sales and coupons when purchasing essential ingredients.

- **Common seasonings and spices:** ground black pepper, sea salt or kosher salt, chili powder, red pepper flakes, cumin, curry powder, cayenne pepper, five spice or all spice, cinnamon, ground ginger

- **Liquid seasonings:** low-sodium soy sauce (Kikkoman, Yamasa, and Lee Kum Kee Light* soy sauces are the most versatile and flavorful), oyster sauce or “vegetarian stir-fry sauce” (which tastes like oyster sauce), a Mexican or South Western style chili sauce, Asian chili sauce (sambal oelek or garlic chili sauce), apple cider vinegar, rice wine vinegar, mirin (Japanese sweet rice wine-based seasoning).

(*The term “light” soy sauce here refers to the type of Chinese soy sauce that is light in texture, but saltier than “dark” Chinese soy sauce which is thicker and sweeter.)
• **Most useful dried herbs:** basil, thyme, rosemary, oregano, Herbes de Provence (a blend of Mediterranean herbs, including thyme, marjoram, rosemary, savory, basil, fennel, sage), garlic powder or granulated garlic, bay leaf etc.

• **Oils:** olive oil, toasted sesame oil, a neutral flavored oil (a must for the kitchen) e.g., canola oil, vegetable oil, corn oil, or safflower oil.

• **Healthy canned goods** (i.e., canned foods that are low in sodium, no added salt, or no added sugar): canned tuna, canned chicken, tomato puree or crushed tomato (best for making a quick Italian sauce), stewed or diced tomatoes, beans (black beans, Cannellini or white kidney beans, Great Northern, red kidney beans, garbanzo beans, etc.) Rinse the beans in water to remove some of the salt.

• **Whole grain and starch products:** pasta (spaghetti, linguine, bowtie, fusilli, elbow, penne, rotelle, rotini), short or long grain white rice, brown rice, mixed or multi-grain rice, all-purpose flour, whole wheat flour, cornstarch.

• **Stocks and broths:** Low sodium chicken, beef and vegetable broths/stocks

• **Wine for cooking:** A special note on wine for cooking – most “cooking” wines are of low quality. **A wine that taste good is a good wine for cooking.** There are some wines sold in the big-box stores at around $6-$9 that are fine for cooking. (See Chapter 8. “Cooking Methods” on how to use wine to create flavors and remove oil in the cooking process.)

  o Wines bring acid and a slightly fruity flavor to a sauce or dish.
  o Wine serves as a tenderizer for meat.
  o **White wine** – dry wines such as Sauvignon Blanc or Chablis are very versatile. Riesling offers a sweet note.
  o **Red wine** – use a light to medium bodied wine such as a pinot noir or merlot, as the cooking process can concentrate the wine’s flavors. A wine that is tannic can make the sauce bitter.
  o Sherry (cost about $7) and sake (Japanese rice wine) work well in Asian style dishes.
3.3 Kitchen Equipment for Healthy Cooking

This section addresses the essential kitchen tools and equipment for healthy cooking. So it is not an exhaustive list to outfit the whole kitchen. It will get you started. You can expand your arsenal of tools as your repertoire grows.

1. Knives:

- An 8 inch chef knife, and a 4 inch paring knife. Chef knives generally come in either stainless steel alloys or carbon steel. Stainless steel blades are popular because they require less maintenance, but they are harder to sharpen. Carbon blades are easier to sharpen, but because the steel is relatively softer and it can stain and rust more easily.

- For cooking with children, a plastic “lettuce” or “salad” knife (it is the size of a chef knife, with a serrated cutting edge). The regular disposable plastic picnic knife works best for young children (early elementary grades) with smaller hands.

- A knife sharpening stone (a water stone or a diamond stone that requires water) with two levels of grit (coarseness) – coarse and fine. A sharp knife is a safer knife; it will be less likely to slip. Also, if you do cut yourself, the wound from a sharp knife will heal faster than that from a dull knife which creates a jagged wound.

- A honing steel: That sword like instrument with a handle, guard, and ribbed steel rod made of magnetic material. It aligns the edge of the knife to keep it sharp. The steel does not sharpen the knife. It only maintains the edge. Every time after you sharpen your knife, and every time before you use a knife, hone it with a steel.
2. Cutting Boards:

- One to two large boards (17- to 20-inches wide) will give you more working surface.

- A small cutting board for small items.

- Polyethylene plastic (PE or “Poly” board) is the safest material as it is non-porous and non-absorbent. It also allows for cleaning with very hot water and stronger anti-bacterial cleansers such as a bleach and water mixture.

- Have two cutting boards of different colors, one for protein and meat products, and one for fruits and vegetables, to lessen the risk of cross-contamination. This would be the best option for schools and programs for children.

3. Pots and Pans:

- Pots: A 2-quart and a 4-quart saucepan/pot, an 8-quart stock/soup pot or enameled pot is good for braising, stewing, and slow cooking.

- Pans: A 10 to 12-inch sauté pan, and a smaller pan will give you the greatest range of uses. Steel coated aluminum or anodized aluminum are the preferred materials as they are more responsive to heat.

- A non-stick pan is handy, but not the most essential. In fact, it has limited usage as it cannot be heated to a high temperature that will caramelize the ingredients quickly and adequately – especially for cooking vegetables. However, it is helpful for certain recipes using eggs, fillets of meat or fish.
4. Food Prep Equipment (Most essential for your *mise en place*):

- **Mixing bowls**: a set with 3 – 5 sizes

- **Measuring cups and spoons**

- **Portion cups** and **small containers** of various sizes for cut food: for cooking with children, melamine (hard plastic) bowls are the easiest to manage. Recycled (and thoroughly cleaned) plastic yogurt and other food containers would work well. For anyone learning to cook, having an adequate number of containers to organize the ingredients and line them up in the order they need to go into the pan is a great way to visually prepare for cooking. Disposable luau trays (½ lb. or 1 lb. sizes) are useful.

- Plastic containers with #2, #4, and #5 (food grade) are safe to reuse. Plastic containers with #1, #3, #6, and #7 are meant for one time use. Washing these containers can potentially leak out toxic chemicals into food and hence these containers should not be reused for food.

- Equipment for stirring and scooping

  - **Tongs**: the extension of the chef’s arm and hand. Professional chefs swear by their tongs. They are multi-purpose and great for moving and turning food while cooking

  - **Spatulas** – long and short, preferably heat resistant so they can also be used to stir hot food during cooking. Silicone or wooden spatulas are preferable and can be used on any cooking surface including non-stick. A straight spatula is also called a “scraper”, and a spatula with an off-set handle for hot food is also called a “turner”.

  - **Long spoons** – solid, perforated and slotted, wooden or metal

  - **Skimmer or Strainer** – for lifting food from a pot of hot liquid (for poaching, soup). The Asian style “spider” strainer/skimmer with stainless steel netting and bamboo handles are cheap and effective.
5. Electrical Kitchen Equipment:

- Rice Cooker

- Electric griddle (for cooking with children) – it is a relatively safe device for teaching children to cook as it is transportable, does not use open fire, is easily washable, and inexpensive. You can sauté vegetables or meat, make a quesadilla or grilled sandwich, etc. However, it does draw a lot of electricity – for cooking programs in schools or youth organizations, check to see if the electrical wiring in the room can support more than one electric griddle. (So you won’t blow the fuse!)

- Food processor or electric chopper

- Blender

- A 5-quart electric mixer (for baking)

4. Packaging and storage supplies

- For storing unused ingredients, sauces: Food grade plastic containers, plastic wraps, seal-lock bags.

- For packing leftovers for lunch the next day: Tempered glass containers with air- and water-tight sealing lids or microwavable containers.
3.4 Food safety and sanitation supplies

- Dish washing liquid.

- Scrubber – an abrasive scrubber, and a non-abrasive scrubber for non-stick pans and equipment surface.

- For cooking with children – sealable containers for collecting food waste (also for recycling organic waste).

- Disposable plastic or rubber gloves: for cooking in a public setting where the food is served to, or shared with, a large number of people.

- Kitchen towels – preferably two different colors, white or lighter color for use with surfaces and equipment that come into contact with food (cutting boards, knives, spatulas, etc.) and a darker color for all other kitchen surfaces (counter or table top, the stove, etc.)

- Paper towel – for quickly mopping up spills, pat-drying meat and fish products before cooking. Place a wet paper towel underneath the cutting board to prevent it from sliding on smooth countertops – an essential safety measure.

- First aid kit. Accidents happen.