

Cook Food

A MANUALFESTO FOR
EASY, HEALTHY, LOCAL EATING



Lisa Jervis

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Praise for *Cook Food*
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Overwhelmed by all the politics on your plate? Paralyzed by guilt every time you shop for food? In this delectable guide, Lisa Jarvis shows not just how easy it can be to eat with your conscience and with the planet, but also how cheap, how swift, and how delightful it is to feel at home in the kitchen. —Raj Patel, author of *Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World Food System*

With a heavy emphasis on local and unprocessed eating, *Cook Food* will help you overcome your hesitations about going veg or passing on the vegan bologna. A great resource for those stepping into the kitchen for the first time and vegetarians who want to go the distance to make this a healthier planet. —Siue Moffat, author of *Lickin' the Beaters: Low Fat Vegan Desserts*

Want an opportunity to make the world better several times a day? Learn to feed yourself using the rational, witty, simple, and ethical guidelines in Lisa Jarvis's manual, *Cook Food*. It's the Dennis Kucinich of cookbooks: petite, political, powerful, with a profound lack of b.s. Read it and eat. —Jennifer Baumgardner, coauthor of *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* and author of *Look Both Ways: Bisexual Politics*.

Cook Food is equal parts inspiration, call to arms, cooking school, and guide to making everything more yummy. It also demonstrates, powerfully, how to marry important ideals about food with the realities of day-to-day living. —Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, author of *Surprised By God: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Religion*

Finally! A thoroughly smart and useful book on the topic of food and social justice that fat people (and people of all sizes) can enjoy. Lisa offers so very many good, convincing reasons to make a smaller footprint that it's clear we can discard as unnecessary all of those arguments made on the backs of fat people. Thank you, Lisa, for a delicious, truly cruelty-free book! —Marilyn Wann, author of *FAT!SO?—Because You Don't Have to Apologize for Your Size!*

Lisa Jarvis's head, heart, and taste buds are all so exactly in the right place, and reading *Cook Food* is like having her in your kitchen with you. This book feels like a strong, sane, healthy, funny friend, chatting with you while you cook and saying "try a pinch of that." It may well prove to be just the kind of companionship people need in order to make that step toward really changing the way they shop, cook, eat, and think about food. —Thisbe Nissen, author of *The Ex-Boyfriend Cookbook* and *Osprey Island*

With good humor and a level head, this little treatise strips the elitism and the nutrition-fascism out of fresh, honest, vegetable-centric food, and offers robust, immensely usable recipes to teach and inspire both the whole-foods newbie and the experienced cook. —Hanne Blank, author of *Virgin: The Untouched History* and *Unruly Appetites*

Lisa Jarvis has convinced me that I can be a great cook. We can't come close to being perfect when it comes to preserving the planet or our health, but this persuasive, friendly, and usable book gives us the impetus to be the best we can. We can't change the world overnight, but we can change our eating habits. —Amy Richards, author of *Opting In: Having A Child Without Losing Yourself* and cofounder of Third Wave Foundation.

Cook Food is an informative, accessible, and downright fun guide to cooking healthily, locally, and responsibly. In addition to the many tasty recipes, Lisa Jarvis demystifies the kitchen experience by

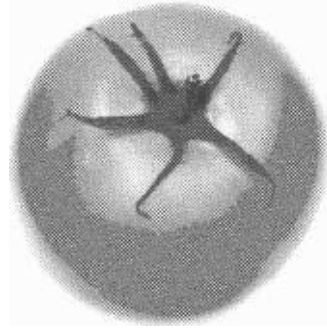
explaining basic cooking tools and techniques, and encouraging improvisation. A must-have for progressive-minded foodies everywhere! —Julia Serano, author of *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*

Sure, I appreciate a cookbook with a social conscience. Plus, on a very practical level, *Cook Food* is just useful to have around. But, hands down, I most value this book for its sense of flavor. Lisa Jarvis serves up simple yet sophisticated taste combinations with a global flare that make it easy—and even fun—to do the right thing with one's diet. —Paula Kamen, author of *Feminist Fatale* and *Finding Iri Chang*

Cook Food

**a manualfesto for
easy, healthy, local eating**

Lisa Jervis



Cook Food: A Manualfesto for Easy, Healthy, Local Eating
By Lisa Jervis

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to my mother

.....

who taught me how to be at home in the kitchen

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what's this book all about?

(a.k.a., introduction)

IN A NUTSHELL , THIS BOOK IS AN ATTEMPT TO MAKE LIFE easier for people who want to cook and eat healthy homemade food without spending a ton of time and money. But that's not all it is.

It could also be described as an attempt to provide some basic tools for people who want to be healthier and lighten the footprint of the way they eat by emphasizing whole foods (meaning unprocessed things, not the union-busting grocery chain), local ingredients, and cooking without animal products.

It could be seen as a call to action against our wasteful, unjust, destructive, unhealthy, industrialized, corporate-dominated food system (with recipes).

It could just be a vegan-friendly* cookbook. Or a quick-cooking cookbook. Or an improvisational cookbook. Or a farmers market cookbook.

Or an overly complicated way to get my friends to stop asking me to tell them how I made the dinner we're eating.

To synthesize all those things, this book is a short, quirky education in simple cooking; healthy, light-footprint eating; and the politics of food.

It is also, and I can't stress this enough, totally flexible. All the recipes are approximate (except the two for baked goods, 'cause though the flavors in there are substitutable, the proportions of flour, oil etc. are not). If you're not crazy about any ingredient or flavor, use less of it than I call for (or eliminate it altogether). If you love it, use more. If you like an ingredient or flavor that I don't call for and you think it would be good in whatever is it you're making, throw it on in there. If there's a vegetable listed that you don't have in the house, but you do have something else, make a swap. Experiment, try new things, make the recipes your own. Cooking is about principles and techniques, not rigid ingredients and directions. Trust your instincts. If you've done any amount of cooking before—or even if you haven't, because, no matter what, you've doubtless done plenty of eating—you already have a sense of what'll be good. Something as simple as your knowledge of what you like to eat, combined with the simple tools in this book (see “Tips and Techniques,” [page 39](#)) will guide you to a good meal with any ingredients and flavors you like.

So what does that mean, “healthy, light-footprint eating”?

The concept of a light footprint is one I stole from other sustainability conversations because I think most accurately describes what I'm aiming for with my food choices, which can't be adequately or accurately described with words like “vegan” or “vegetarian.” Basically, I'm trying to be as healthy as I can and minimize my negative impact on the environment and on other beings. So I try to choose foods that are locally produced, minimally packaged, minimally processed, and organic whenever possible. I avoid sweets and junk food (most of the time—I'm only human, after all). I source my animal products very carefully. It's a lot easier to say “I'm a healthy, light-footprint eater” than it is to say “Well, I try to avoid white flour, refined sugar, and hydrogenated things; I buy a huge percentage

of my food at the farmers market; and although I'm not vegetarian or vegan I stay away from animal products unless I know where they came from and under what conditions the animals lived." Because I buy almost all my fruits and vegetables at the farmers market, I'm always eating in season, and everything else (grains, tofu, nuts, spices, beans, etc.) comes from a local independent grocery store with a great bulk section.

As to why I wanted to write a whole (short) book about it—well, obviously it's about a lot more than just what I choose to eat for dinner. Food politics have become a pretty hot topic over the last few years, what with writers like Eric Schlosser, Michael Pollan, Marion Nestle, Raj Patel, and many others exploring and explaining the effects of industrialized food on individuals, communities, and the natural world—not to mention news events like salmonella-tainted spinach and tomatoes, melamine-tainted milk and eggs, meat recalls, and popcorn-factory workers getting lung disease from artificial-butter fumes. So it's likely you know this already, but just in case you don't: The average bite of food travels 1,500 miles from where it's grown to where it is eaten. Monoculture crops and centralized food distribution vastly increase the likelihood of outbreaks of foodborne illnesses (as Michael Pollan put it in the October 15, 2006, issue of the *New York Times Magazine*, the fact that a single facility can produce so much bagged spinach means that "we're washing the whole nation's salad in one big sink"). U.S. farm subsidies benefit massive corporate farmers using huge amounts of chemical inputs on their monoculture crops—much of which will be processed into animal feed, high-fructose corn syrup, and other products of dubious value—at the expense of small farmers growing food that can be eaten, by people, without further ado. These subsidies enable the packaged food that fills the middle of the supermarket and derives its nutrition, if it has any at all, from vitamins added back in after they've been stripped out in processing. Too many low-income neighborhoods have no supermarkets at all, leaving residents without access to fresh produce, period, let alone any that's local or organic. Farmworkers often labor under dangerous conditions for very little pay. With only a few hard-to-find exceptions, animals are raised for food on factory farms under hideous conditions. In short, the current U.S. food system—which, through globalization and other related forces, reverberates worldwide—has been designed and built by agribusiness to maximize profits. People who eat food and live with the consequences of this system, not to mention the animals that are used for food by those of us who choose to eat meat, eggs, and dairy products, lose big. Not to be too hippy-dippy about it, but when you widen the lens even further to include ecosystem health, it really means that every single living being on the planet is affected.

Translating all this information into decisions about what to eat is extra-complicated, because environmental concerns, labor issues, animal welfare, what's best for your own health, what you can afford, and what you can get at your neighborhood market don't always line up neatly. When I'm faced with a food choice, whether I'm at the store, at the farmers market, or at a restaurant, the issues I care about often conflict with each other. Some choices are relatively obvious. Superficial affordability is the only positive thing about a fast-food burger with a slice of cardboard tomato on a white flour bun that's loaded with dough conditioners and probably high-fructose corn syrup to boot: It's a low-quality food produced with lots of pesticides, hormones, and antibiotics under terrible working conditions for both humans and animals, plus food additives aplenty. And it tastes kinda gross. But affordability can be damn powerful—even if it's dependent on masking the true cost of food production by exploiting workers and damaging the environment.

What about fake meats made from soy and wheat? There's no question they're better from the simplest animal-welfare perspective, but they're highly processed and usually heavily packaged, so

they aren't that healthy for me and aren't as much better for the environment as I might hope. (The waste in packaging and the industrial processing—plus the probable sourcing of ingredients produced by huge monoculture agribusiness farms—mean that being lower on the food chain doesn't mean as much as it should.) They're unknown but probably better on the labor front, if only because slaughterhouses are one of the most dangerous places in the world to work, period.

And what about tofu and tempeh? Some folks believe that the estrogens in soy contribute to elevated cancer risk; the health benefits of soy touted by food and nutraceutical companies are certainly overblown. Then there's the deforestation, displacement of rural populations, pesticide use, genetic modification, and other ugliness involved in soy farming. But I eat both tofu and tempeh regularly and without worry, and I continue to recommend them. Here's why: They're very whole and unprocessed compared to the soy in packaged foods, so if you're avoiding those, you can eat other soy without overloading your body with it. More important, the yield of the multinational, monoculture-based soy production industry that's wreaking such global havoc goes almost entirely to animal feed, food additives, and biofuels. The consumption of tofu and tempeh is miniscule compared to that, so I strongly believe that if I'm swapping animal protein out of my diet for relatively unprocessed soy, I'm doing all right.

Humanely produced organic cheese and eggs from the farmers market seem pretty great all around but am I letting myself be lulled into overconsumption of animal products by the bucolic pictures of grazing goats and pecking chickens posted at the booths? Meat carries the same questions, but more seriously, because, duh, it involves an actual death. Is indulging my cravings okay just because I can make chili from ground meat that came from one cow, and the guy selling it to me can tell me exactly where and how the cow lived and what it ate? What if I believe those cravings involve not taste or whim but a serious nutritional need? And if that's true, what should I do when a nutritional need hits at a time when I can't budget for organic, pasture-raised meat?

To top it all off, I know that my easy access to good grocery stores and affordable farmers markets is a luxury that most people just don't have, and that what I define as affordable is far from universal. By focusing so much on my individual choices, am I neglecting—or even obscuring—the key issues of food access?

All these questions mean I could—and sometimes do, unfortunately—spend a lot of time with my mental wheels spinning. Oy.

In the end, we can all only do the best we can. Which actually means a lot.

Wait, back up a minute. How do you define “healthy”?

To me, the less processed something is, the more healthy it is. But other than that—which basically entails cooking a lot, avoiding most snack foods that come in boxes or bags, and carefully reading the label of anything I'm thinking about buying—I don't worry too much about my nutritional needs. I think it's not only a waste of time but seriously bad for your mental health to worry about incorporating a checklist of micronutrients into your diet based on the latest medical studies or food-industry health claims. (See Michael Pollan's article about this phenomenon, dubbed “nutritionism,” in the January 28, 2007, issue of the *New York Times Magazine*; it's available online and it's also an excerpt from his stellar book *In Defense of Food*.) If you cook for yourself with fresh ingredients and you don't eat the same thing every day, you're damn likely to keep your nutritional bases covered. That's healthy.

I also don't worry about fat and salt, two delicious and useful substances that have been unfairly demonized by certain sectors of the food and nutrition establishment. They make your food taste good and you shouldn't be afraid of them.** Be skeptical of all those medical warnings against salt and fat. In my opinion, a lot of health issues that have been blamed on salt and fat in general are actually caused by processed foods that contain very specific kinds of fat (cough, hydrogenated oils, cough) and happen to be salty.

Okay, but what do you mean by “processed”?

Good question. There are actually two very different ways the term “processing” can be understood when it comes to food. The first meaning is totally benign; it just refers to anything that must be done to food in order to make it ready to eat. In its simplest form, this means things like removing inedible plant parts like husks, shells, hulls, and peels; chopping; and cooking. In that sense, you process food yourself every time you make a meal. Some forms of necessary and nondestructive processing are a little more complicated: canning and preserving, making cheese and yogurt, grinding grains into flour, etc. You probably don't choose to do these things at home, but you could if you wanted to (and see “Further Resources,” [page 117](#), for more information on that).

The second meaning, the one I'm talking about when I'm talking about avoiding processed food, is the kind of processing that transforms a raw ingredient into something else entirely, either by removing some edible part of it, chemically treating it, or isolating one element of it and tossing everything else (or turning the other elements into some other food additive). This ranges from the relatively uncomplicated but still nutritionally bankrupt removal of bran and germ that yields white flour to the intense industrial processes that make high-fructose corn syrup, hydrogenated oils, lecithin, and things listed on ingredient labels as “natural flavors,” which are anything but.

It's pretty easy to tell the difference between good processed food and bad processed food. Benign processed food generally has few ingredients (a can of tomatoes has tomatoes, salt, and sometimes one other preservative item), which are all pronounceable and generally recognizable as food (unlike, say, disodium guanylate or yellow 6 lake). You can make it at home in your own kitchen if you have enough time, energy, and knowledge (and yes, if you wanted to crush soybeans at home, you could make both tofu and tempeh).

Then there are some things that are somewhere in the middle: cornstarch, soy sauce, many oils, etc.—these are really useful in the kitchen and I feel good about them, even though they aren't actually whole foods. They're not *that* processed, and, as you might have guessed, I come down on the side of ease a lot of the time. Once cooking and eating guidelines meant to make your life better become overly restrictive, they start to do the opposite of what they should. Which leads naturally to what I expect might be your next question.

Realistically, is it really possible to eat local, unprocessed, animal-free food all the time?

All the time? Like, every part of every meal? No. Like I said before, we can all only do the best we can. One-hundred-percent local diets aren't realistic for anyone (no one should try to cook without spices!), and even mostly local diets are inaccessible for many; no one should run the risk of scurvy in the wintertime if they don't have a huge freezer and/or countless free hours in the late summer to spend canning. Time, energy, money, climate, individual nutritional needs, and how much you like to cook and think about food all affect what you can do. The point is to fit a healthy, humane, and—don't

forget—pleasurable eating style comfortably into your life.

Sounds like a lot of trouble.

Well, yeah, sometimes it is. But I think it's worth it. My personal story of why goes a little something like this:

Several years ago, in line with the larger culture's emerging critique of processed food and industrial agriculture, I was cutting down my sugar consumption and learning more about the evils of things like hydrogenation, shipping vegetables around the globe, food additives, and factory farming. At the same time, I had a new coworker who was superhardcore in her commitment to veganism and whole foods. We started talking endlessly about the politics and ethics of food choices (and the connections between those politics and seemingly unrelated social justice movements), the health benefits of unrefined food, what looked best at the farmers market, and tasty cooking ideas.

Then another friend issued a challenge: We would do the veganish whole-foods-only thing for a month, cooking and eating together and keeping each other on track, and he would never eat fast food again, ever. So for one month I ate no white flour, no refined sugar, almost nothing packaged at all. My life filled up with lots of brown rice, beans, roasted vegetables, and tofu stir-fries. I couldn't go entirely, strictly vegan, even for only a month, but the only non-vegan thing I ate was yogurt. (I knew I couldn't live like that forever, but I knew I could hack it for four weeks.) Every Sunday my friend would come over, along with a few others, and we would each cook something healthy and share the results to eat throughout the week.

The potluck afternoons were great fun, but even better was how I felt mentally and physically. I had more energy in general and more stamina throughout the workday. No sugar meant no sugar crashes and fewer headaches. I was usually fully satisfied by my meals rather than casting about afterwards for something to make me feel truly done eating. My mood also improved, though I don't know whether it was related to the diet change itself or my newly higher energy levels. As hard as it was to give up the sourdough from my favorite local bakery and the Cheez-Its and Twizzlers I would eat in front of the TV or at the movies, I knew I could never go back to my old ways. Just not getting that midafternoon need-to-put-my-head-down-on-my-desk-and-nap feeling was enough to keep me focused on putting good things into my body. Sure, the sweet tooth was—and still is—a real issue, but I discovered that the less sugar I ate, the less I wanted it. My palate really changed; things that I used to love started to taste way too sweet and/or chemical-filled. Plus, I was living more in line with my political values, which always feels good.

I don't want to make it sound like I'm this paragon of brown-rice-eating self-righteous ethical-food perfectionism. I'm not. I indulge my junk food cravings when I really want to, and I end up eating cheese of unknown provenance much more often than I'd like to admit, especially when I'm eating out. I go through periods of meat cravings, and I heed them because I think they have nutritional significance. But, like I said, I do the best I can.

I'm on a tight budget. Can I really do this?

Yes. While fresh fruits and vegetables can seem expensive, when you think about how many servings of high-quality nutrition you can get out of an onion, a bunch of kale, a sweet potato, two cans of beans, a can of tomatoes, some spices, and some rice, you're doing pretty well on the budget front. A breakfast of steel-cut oats with a small handful of dried fruit, some nuts, and some olive oil costs

about the same as a bowl of processed cereal with milk. Processed foods may be cheap per calorie, but they're expensive per unit of nutrition. And when you buy fresh food, you're paying only for food, not for packaging and marketing. It's still hard to beat fast-food "value" prices, I know, but making food yourself, especially when it means you can have leftovers to eat for lunch the next day, really is cost-effective.

Sure, some kinds of produce—cherries, blueberries, artichokes, and asparagus spring to mind—are always spendy. But greens (kale, collards, spinach, chard), potatoes (sweet and regular), broccoli and cauliflower, carrots, beets, green beans, and squash (both summer and winter) are widely available and generally affordable. Plus, fruits and veggies are always cheaper when they're in season than when they're not, so buying what's growing near you right now can save you money.

Organic food does cost more, and though I think it's well worth it—it's safer for workers, better for soil and water, healthier for eaters, and usually just plain tastes better—sometimes it's just not possible to spend extra. You can pick and choose what you spring for and what you don't: The so-called dirty dozen, the stuff that's most important to buy organic because the conventional versions are most contaminated, includes nectarines, peaches, pears, celery, apples, cherries, strawberries, grapes, spinach, potatoes, bell peppers, and raspberries. (Google "dirty dozen vegetables" if you want to know more.)

Meat, dairy, and eggs, if you choose to eat them, are definitely going to be much more expensive in their organic/sustainable/humane versions. This is *not* the place to skimp. Animal products are seriously contaminated by any antibiotics and pesticides used in their production, their environmental effects are horrendous, and the animal-treatment issues are pretty obvious. I don't like to get directive and everyone's nutritional needs are different, but, if at all possible, it's so much better to lighten your budgetary load by eating more beans, soy, and nuts than it is to buy cheap meat.

Sounds like you're kinda spoiled by living in the foodcentric and year-round-growing-season-tastic Bay Area, and in a neighborhood that's well-served by grocery stores and farmers markets to boot. What about those of us without that kind of access?

Guilty as charged. First of all, see "Further Resources," [page 117](#), for more information about finding food sources, getting involved in organizing to improve community access to fresh food, and growing your own food.

Second, again, you can do the best you can. Even if you live in a climate where the ground is frozen half the year, you can still eat seasonally, skipping tomatoes and strawberries in January and going with apples and root veggies instead, which keep for a long time and, even if they have to be trucked in from somewhere else, are probably coming from closer than, say, Chile. (Of course, there's the whole canning thing. Preserving food at home is not for everyone, but it's a great strategy for extending the availability of local produce, and it can also be pretty fun. I've got information about that in "Further Resources," too.)

So what now?

Read over the parts of the book that interest you. For those totally new to the kitchen, I've included some tips on stocking the pantry and what equipment you need; I've also laid out some methods

and principles that should be useful for both new and experienced cooks. Or you can skip any more reading, pick a recipe, and make yourself some dinner.

* I emphasize cooking without animal products—there's nothing in this book that isn't vegan as the recipe is written, with no substituting necessary—but sometimes I do suggest possible cheese or egg additions to a dish. And I believe in using only vegan ingredients when they are totally equivalent to their non-vegan counterparts (e.g., olive oil is just as good if not better for sautéing the base of your bean stew as butter is), or easily substitutable (so many baked goods don't actually need eggs or butter to work). But a carefully sourced and thoughtfully chosen cheese to adorn your meal is irreplaceable and can be a beautiful thing.

** If you have a specific health condition that is related to fat or salt, then of course pay attention to that. For instance, if you have salt-sensitive high blood pressure, then yeah, you have to eat a low-salt diet.

[what you need in your cabinets](#) [and on your pot rack](#)

I LOVE KITCHEN EQUIPMENT TO AN EMBARRASSING degree, whether we're talkin' pots and pans, gadgets, or countertop appliances. But I'm also all about thriftiness, and I realize that not everyone can or wants to spend hir hard-earned paycheck on 10-piece cookware sets or graters meant for one ingredient only. So I'm putting them into categories by necessity—and keep in mind that thrift shops can be kitchenware treasure troves. There are only two areas where quality is *really* important. The first is with pots and pans. Look for heavy bottoms, no warping (if you're buying used), no nonstick surface (it's been discovered that nonstick surfaces can off-gas toxic fumes into your food at high temperatures), and materials other than plain aluminum, which can too-easily leach harmful metal into your food (however, aluminum that has gone through a process called anodization is stable and great to cook with, so anodized aluminum cookware gets a thumbs-up from me). The second is knives. Skip the thrift store, ask for advice at the kitchenware store, and test the feel of different knives in your hand. For everything else, what you can find at Goodwill or on sale at whatever housewares store suits you is going to be just fine. If any of these items are unfamiliar or confusing to you, a Google image search should clarify things better than any description I could give. Also, you should know that this is a quirky list that suits how I cook. I use my microplane zester weekly but haven't touched my box grater in more than a year, so I consider the latter much less important. You'll doubtless need to make your own adjustments.

You can't really cook anything without these things:

- One good chef's knife (this can mean spending at least \$60, but if you can swing it, you'll be glad you did)
- At least two good cutting boards (plastic, wood, or bamboo, your choice); you need two because no matter how good you are at scrubbing, the smell of garlic and onions will never quite come out—and you want to have one board that never touches them, so when you make fruit salad, you can make sure it has no garlic flavor
 - A saucepan, a stockpot, or a sauté pan
 - A baking sheet or low-sided roasting pan (see [page 76](#) for more about this)
 - A wooden spoon
 - A heat-proof spatula
 - A big mixing bowl
 - A set of measuring cups and spoons
 - A can opener
 - A kitchen timer if your oven doesn't have one (though if you have a cell phone, you're probably carrying a timer in your pocket, so you can use that)
 - A colander

Either you'll find it pretty frustrating, you'll be limited in what you can cook, or your food won't turn out as well if you don't also have:

- A saucepan, a stockpot, *and* a sauté pan
- A skillet or a griddle pan
- A paring knife or other knife smaller than a chef's knife
- A couple more wooden spoons
- At least one rubber spatula
- A ladle
- A microplane for zesting citrus
- A high-sided baking pan (such as a 9×9×4 pan used for the brownies on page 109)
- A few more mixing bowls of different sizes

These are also good to have around if you think you'll use them, and they're generally pretty reasonably priced (except the griddle pan, but if you're like me you'll use it all the time):

- A skillet *and* a griddle pan (mine is square and has a rim that's barely raised; I don't think I would use it as much if it were shaped differently or had higher sides)
- A steamer basket (you can always steam things in a shallow pool of water right in the pan, but these are under \$10 new and practically given away in thrift stores)
- A box grater
- A citrus reamer
- A porcelain ginger grater (unless you hate ginger, duh)
- A stick blender (great for soups, smoothies, and whatnot, and so easy to clean)
- Spring-loaded tongs
- A pastry brush (for brushing the tops of things with oil)
- An oven thermometer (unless you don't plan to bake or roast; see the discussion of roasting, [page 76](#))

If you plan to bake, you also need:

- Parchment paper (I also like silicone baking mats, but they're pricey and only worth it if you're going to use them all the time)
- A cooling rack or two
- Two or three more cookie sheets
- Muffin tins and/or a loaf pan or two
- A hand mixer
- A kitchen scale (worth the money if you're going to bake a lot, since most good baking recipes give quantities of flour and other dry ingredients in weight rather than volume, since it's more

accurate; if you're only going to bake a little, skip it)

These are pricey, but seriously worth it:

- A rice cooker with a permanently attached hinged lid that clicks closed (you can get a cheaper one with a lift-off lid, but it won't cook your grains evenly without burning them or keep them warm without drying them out); I use mine at least once a day. You can make any kind of grain in them, not just rice, and if you also get one with a porridge setting, you can make oatmeal and experiment with oatmeal-like breakfasts using other grains (see "Nonrecipe Recipes," [page 113](#)). There are two major benefits of rice cookers over sticking a saucepan on a burner: The first is that you don't have to watch it, adjust the heat, or worry about when it's done; the appliance does all that for you, clicking over automatically from "cooking" to "keep warm." The second is the "keep warm" setting itself—you can make breakfast the night before, or make part of your dinner in the morning before you go to work—or you can just have a steady supply of hot grains on hand. Rice cookers come in sizes ranging from four cups (ideal if you cook mostly for yourself only) to 12 (great if you feed six or more people at once on a regular basis). You'll probably need to spend between \$100 and \$125 for a new good one (the crappy lift-off lid ones can be as cheap as \$30), but friends (and Craigslist) can be a great source of deals on stuff like this.

- A food processor; the only recipes in this book that use one are the sauces, so it may seem odd that I'm recommending one. But I am, 'cause I really believe in how useful they are. It's an investment of about a hundred bucks, and once you have it, you'll find yourself using it for all sorts of things you never thought about before.

I don't recommend:

- A garlic press (it's almost as easy and way better to chop, plus those suckers are hell to clean)
- A wok, unless your burners get really hot and you're serious about Chinese cooking
- A microwave oven (they cost a lot, take up space, and don't do anything that you can't do another way)
- A blender other than a stick blender (food processors are more versatile, plus they're generally more effective for any task your stick blender can't handle)

[what you need in your pantry, refrigerator, and spice rack](#)

ONE OF THE KEYS TO BEING ABLE TO COOK UP A TASTY MEAL quickly is having the necessary ingredients in the house already. Here are my suggestions for stocking your kitchen. Though my lists are also useful for making things that aren't addressed in this book, I'm assuming that you're going to be cooking the recipes in here. So, especially when it comes to herbs and spices, I've made an attempt to be exhaustive; you should of course be stocking anything that you like and/or think you'll use. And as with everything else, if you don't like the flavor of any item, just ignore my advice to buy it. Buy organic if and when you can, and always look for expeller-pressed and/or cold-pressed oils (other extraction processes involve chemical solvents, yuck). The key to an affordable pantry is finding a place to buy spices in bulk—it can be the difference between paying \$4 or 50¢ for a couple ounces of cumin.

You need these in your pantry or fridge, and they last forever:

- Assorted dried or canned beans * (such as black, kidney, pinto, garbanzo, cannellini; if you're using canned, look for low-salt versions so you can control your own seasoning)
- Brown rice
- Canned diced tomatoes** (look for low-salt versions so you can control your own seasoning; also avoid ones with added basil or other flavors for the same reason)
- Canola or grapeseed oil*** (it's always good to have a neutral oil on hand for things where olive has too strong a flavor)
- Cornstarch (for thickening stews and curries)
- Dijon mustard
- Olive oil
- Polenta
- Soy sauce
- Steel cut oats (if you like oatmeal)
- Toasted sesame oil
- Tomato paste (look for this packaged in a tube; if you buy it in a can, it will go bad way before you can use it all up)

These are really great to have around if you think you'll use them, and they last forever:

- Barley (for when you get sick of eating your bean stews and fried tofu with rice)
- Boxed silken tofu **** (good as a component of egg substitute in baking and to puree into sauce)
- Boxed vegetable broth (I like the boxes better than cans; good for stronger flavor in soups and

stews, though you can also always use water)

- Chipotles in adobo sauce (for extra easiness, puree a can of these in the food processor, stick the results in well-sealed container in the fridge, and use spoonfuls as needed)
- Dried fruit for snacking and putting in oatmeal
- French green lentils (a.k.a. du Puy lentils or *lentilles du Puy*)
- Millet (also for when you get sick of eating your bean stews and tofu with rice; plus, try it for breakfast the way you would eat oatmeal)
- Nuts (whatever kind you like) for snacking and putting in breakfast porridges
- Nutritional yeast (for Debbie's Tempeh, page 69, and for adding a savory non-cheese cheesiness to anything you want)
- Peanut oil (Debbie insists that this is the secret to her tempeh, and it's also good for Asian-style stir-fries, but canola or grapeseed oil can be used instead)
- Quinoa (see what I said about millet, above)
- Sriracha (a Vietnamese condiment made from garlic and chiles; it's a nice little addition to things if you like spicy)
- untoasted (a.k.a. light) sesame oil (good to have for the tofu recipe on page 64, but the deal here is the same as with peanut oil)
- Walnut oil (good for baking and, if you want some nuttiness in there, salad dressings)
- Whole wheat pasta (I may be unusual in not cooking much pasta; this may belong on your must-have list)

If you intend to bake, keep on hand:

- Applesauce (see the egg substitute point in "Tips and Techniques," [page 39](#))
- Baking powder (aluminum-free)
- Baking soda
- Brown rice syrup and/or agave syrup
- Dried fruit, nuts, chocolate chips, and the like to put in your cookies
- Good cocoa powder and bittersweet chocolate
- Rolled oats if you like oatmeal cookies
- Sucanat (an unrefined sugar, the name comes from "sugar cane natural") or evaporated cane juice (you can use regular granulated and/or brown sugar, of course, but it's just not as good, both for flavor and health)
- Vanilla extract
- Whole wheat flour

You need to have these in your spice rack:

- Cayenne pepper (if you like to make anything spicy)
- Chili powder (a combo of chiles, cumin, oregano, garlic, and other spices, depending on the brand)

- Curry powder (each brand is different and some are hotter than others, so just find one you like)
- Dried rosemary (this is one of the few herbs that's just as good dried as it is fresh)
- Ground cinnamon (for baked goods and also oatmeal; some people like to put it in savory stuff like the chili- or Indian-style beans 'n' greens, so play around with that if it appeals to you)
- Ground coriander
- Ground cumin
- Kosher, sea, or mineral salt; I recommend avoiding regular table salt because it has added iodine and anti-clumping agents. But I also don't recommend spending real money on salt. There are a lot of fancy, spendy salts on the market, and though there are some textural differences that change the taste when you sprinkle them on top of food after it's done, for cooking they're pretty much all the same, so it doesn't really matter. However, the size of the crystals determines how much salt fits in your measuring spoon. All of the recipes in this book give salt quantities for the average kosher or small sea salt texture. Kosher salt is widely and cheaply available at any supermarket, while nonfancy sea salt is available for under \$2 a pound at any store with a good bulk section. If all you've got is regular table salt, reduce the amount in all of my recipes by one-third.
- Paprika (comes in hot and sweet varieties; I like hot but if you aren't so into spicy food, get the sweet)
- Red pepper flakes (again, if you like to cook things spicy)
- Turmeric
- Whole black peppercorns in a grinder (don't bother with pre-ground pepper; it tastes like dirt, literally)

You should think about having these in your spice rack:

- Cardamom pods
- Dried herbs such as oregano, thyme, dill, and bay leaves (these are very much fine in dried form and it may not be worth it to get them fresh, especially if you only need a little at a time)
- Fenugreek
- Garlic and onion powders (okay, these are kinda gross for most uses, but they're great in the tempeh recipe on page 69 and sprinkled on popcorn; you also may find other uses)
- Ground cardamom (sweeter than the whole pods; good for oatmeal and baked goods)
- Mustard seeds
- Powdered chiles in different varieties (this is not the same as chili powder; these are actually dried ground peppers, and if you run across them in your supermarket it's fun to experiment with them in my beans 'n' greens recipes or other bean stews)
- Whole cumin seeds

A FURTHER NOTE ON YOUR SPICE RACK : While fresh herbs are awesome and in most cases better than their dried counterparts, they're pricey and can be hard to find. Most generally available herbs are fine in their dried forms. The exceptions, in my opinion, are parsley, basil, and chives; you're better off using something else or skipping them altogether if you can't get those fresh. Also, powdered ginger is worse than useless unless you're baking something sweet where ginger is only a small element, like pumpkin pie. For a savory dish calling for dried ginger, just use fresh in a smaller

quantity, and if you're looking at a gingerbread recipe that calls for powdered ginger, find a new recipe.

You need to have these at all times even though they will (eventually) go bad if you don't use them:

- Garlic
- Onions

You should try to have these around as much as possible even though they will (eventually) go bad if you don't use them:

- Ginger
- Lemons and/or limes
- Potatoes
- Sweet potatoes

You need to buy these frequently in small amounts because they go bad:

- Fresh fruit
- Fresh vegetables
- Tempeh and water-packed (not boxed) tofu

A NOTE ON STORAGE AND PERISHABILITY : When I say that something lasts forever, what I really mean is that it will generally last at least as long as it takes you to use it if you cook regularly (except canned beans and tomatoes—they really do last forever). Oils will eventually go rancid (and nut oils will do so faster than others), but if you store them away from strong heat and direct sunlight and you buy them in quantities appropriate to how often you use them, you'll be fine. Grains (and dried beans) can get kinda old and overly dry; you just may need some extra water and/or time to cook them. Spices and dried herbs do lose their flavor over time, but I'm not one of those people who insists that you have to replace everything in your spice rack every six months—that's just not practical. As with everything else, use your judgment.

* Dried beans are cheaper than canned beans and, since they're available in bulk and go through less processing (you're essentially processing them yourself when you soak and cook them), they also have a lighter footprint. And, depending on where you're shopping, you can often find more variety—including interesting and unusual heirlooms—when you're in the market for dried beans. So dried beans are freakin' great. But I have to be honest, I hardly ever cook with them, which is why my recipes call for cans. The extra step of presoaking and the much longer cooking time means that you really need to plan ahead, and that's just not realistic for me most of the time—and I'm thinkin' it's not that realistic for you, either, since you're reading this book on healthy convenience cooking. So basically all means go for dried beans if you can fit them into your schedule. But don't let avoidance of cans stop you from eating the tasty, healthy, affordable, animal-free staple that is beans.

** Tomatoes are the only vegetable I recommend buying in cans. There are a few reasons for this:

They're necessary to get the best flavor from certain dishes; the canned version works well in those dishes, sometimes even better than fresh; and those dishes are often most appealing in winter, when fresh tomatoes are out of season anyway. (That doesn't mean they're not available—tomatoes are probably the most common and affordable out-of-season produce item. But winter supermarket tomatoes are vile and flavorless. You're better off putting cotton balls in your stew. Just say no.)

[***](#) Canola oil does have some potential problems. First of all, all non-organic canola available in North America is pretty much guaranteed to be genetically modified, and even the organic stuff may be contaminated with GM material. In the face of that, I used to think organic canola oil was a decent compromise, but I've also recently learned that one aspect of the extraction process hydrogenates a significant proportion of canola oil, leading to the presence of dreaded trans fats. So now I'm not so sure. Grapeseed oil—generally made from the seeds of wine grapes—doesn't share those particular problems, but it can be pricier; it's also really hard to find as an organic product (which makes sense when you think about how little wine is organic). But I am leaning toward thinking it's a better choice even if it's conventionally grown. However, I'm not entirely sure, and, furthermore, I haven't used grapeseed oil as extensively as I have canola, so I'm still listing canola in all my recipes.

[****](#) Yes, soy is kinda controversial both health- and environmental footprint- wise. I still eat tofu and tempeh and recommend them; see my (brief) discussion of this in the introduction for more information.

tips and techniques

(a.k.a., why are you telling me to do it that way?)

SINCE I'M ENCOURAGING YOU TO EXPERIMENT AND USE the recipes in this book as templates, I want to explain a few things about how food works. Understanding a few basic techniques, quirky food facts, and applied-food-science concepts will equip you with more improvisational cooking skills and help you make sure your experiments go well.

- There are **three basic ways to cook vegetables**: sautéing, steaming, and blanching. (Okay, there are five, but roasting is fully covered on page 76 and boiling is really not a good idea for any veggie except corn, because you lose more flavor in the water and risk overcooking; one of the other methods is always better.) Each one is very simple. There's more info about sautéing in the recipes themselves but here's the quick version: Heat some oil in a skillet or sauté pan over high heat (you might need to adjust to medium), toss veggies in, and stir occasionally until things are cooked. If it's burning or going too slow, you can cover the pan, and the water in your veggies will turn to steam, which will help the cooking process along. (I also recommend adding some garlic whenever you sauté vegetables.) To steam vegetables, put them in a steamer basket, set the basket in a saucepan or sauté pan (anywhere it fits) over a small amount of water (an inch or so usually does it), cover with a tight-fitting lid, and turn the heat on high. It can take as little as three minutes and as much as 10 or 20 depending on the vegetable and the size of the pieces. Just taste as you go. Blanching is actually a form of boiling, but it's more of a quick dunk in the water instead of full-on, stay-in-there-for-half-an-hour kind of thing. Blanching usually takes about half the time of steaming; delicate items like snow peas are usually done in a minute or less. It's easy to overcook things in boiling water, so keep a close eye and err on the side of pulling things out too early. (Also see the point about carryover cooking, below.)

- **Sautéing an onion—and/or some garlic, shallots, scallions, or leeks—is usually your first step to anything.** These vegetables, all members of the allium family, provide a great flavor base for so many dishes. Some alliums are milder than others (chives and leeks compared to garlic and onions, for example); some work well together (garlic with anything) and some just duplicate each other and so can be seen as interchangeable in a pinch or good candidates for swapping out in an experiment (say, leeks and scallions or shallots and red onions). Garlic cooks faster than other alliums, at least partly because you want to mince it more finely than anything else; it also tends to get bitter when it burns, so keep a close eye on it. If you're using more than one allium, always add the garlic last.

- **Sautéing spices in oil increases their flavor** (this is sometimes referred to as “blooming”). You'll notice that most of the recipes involve adding spices early on, when they can be sautéed in oil (usually along with an allium), and that's why. This works because it's volatile oils in the spices that give them their flavor. Thus, the most effective way to extract their flavor is also with oil, and heating brings out the flavor compounds further. It doesn't matter how much you understand or care about the process, though—the bottom line is that blooming in oil is important for actually getting the flavor from the spice into your food. Don't be tempted to skip this, even if it adds an extra step. And if you find that something you've made is underspiced, bloom whatever you're going to add in a small skillet before plopping it into the dish.

■ **Don't skimp on oil and salt.** These two items have been unfairly demonized in U.S. food culture. Fat conveys flavor in your mouth and salt heightens it (i.e., it makes foods taste more like themselves), so if you don't use enough of either, your food just won't taste as good. Period, full stop. Of course, tastes vary about how much of either is too much or not enough, so you'll find the right balance for you through trial and error. But if you find yourself thinking, "All the flavors are here, but it's just not quite *enough*," consider the possibility that you have undersalted or not used enough oil.

■ **Salt early** and taste for adjustments along the way. I find that salting only later on means the salt doesn't really penetrate the food well and you don't get as much flavor out of it. This is why I call for salting at the allium-sautéing stage. It seems to spread flavor throughout the dish. To avoid oversalting, be on the scant side at first and add a bit more with each new ingredient. That way you can taste along the way and see how you're doing. And of course each eater can always salt his own portion at the table to top it off, but, like I said, I think salt sprinkled on top of food does less good.

■ **Browning = flavor.** Browning happens when the sugars in your food get oxidized (with meat it's proteins, and called a Maillard reaction, but that's a different story); in addition to the pretty color, sugar oxidation releases chemical compounds that have the yummy, nutty, toasty-goodness flavors that make food taste good. So you want your food to get a little browned, especially onions and other alliums at the beginning of the sautéing process, tofu slabs on the griddle, and veggies in the roasting pan.

■ **Deglazing** is the process by which tasty browned bits and accompanying flavor compounds get incorporated into your food while avoiding burning. You deglaze a pan by adding a little bit of liquid (water, broth, and wine all work well) when your food (in these recipes, usually alliums and spices) is dry and threatening to burn. The liquid will prevent burning and loosen the browned bits from the bottom of the pan. By the time you've stirred thoroughly and scraped the bottom of the pan with your spatula or wooden spoon, the liquid will be pretty much evaporated. You can then continue cooking the alliums and spices on their own if that's what you need to do. You can repeat this process as many times as you need to; each one means more flavor.

■ The acids in tomatoes slow the cooking of onions, so you should **always wait until onions are fully cooked before adding any tomato products** such as tomato paste, crushed tomatoes, or fresh tomatoes.

■ Speaking of which, **tomato paste is great for building richness of flavor**, so you may want to consider putting it in soups, stews, stir-fries, and the like even when you aren't planning for them to be particularly tomato-ey.

■ **Dried herbs behave like spices** in that they benefit from long cooking and being sautéed in oil, but **fresh herbs lose their flavor with long cooking**, so you should add them toward the end of cooking time.

■ **Pressing your tofu** is an extra step that's well worth it. Tofu has a lot of water in it, and getting that water out will a) make it easier for other flavors to get absorbed into the tofu and b) make your final dish not-watery. Pressing tofu is also incredibly simple. Take your block o' bean curd, slice it into slabs (half an inch to an inch thick is usually right), lay the slabs out on a clean dish towel (folded in half if it's big enough), cover with another clean dish towel, put a cookie sheet or large flat-bottomed pan on top, and put some heavy items on top of that. Cans of food or a full teakettle usually work well; just make sure everything's well balanced so it doesn't all fall over. Wait at least 20 minutes (this is often just the amount of time you need to prep your marinade or other food) or as long

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