THE NEW BOSTON COOKING SCHOOL

How to Read a Recipe

NOTES

Recipes should be precise blueprints, specifying particular sizes, shapes, quantities, and cooking times. Sometimes, however, recipes are rough sketches that leave the cook to fill in the blanks, which can be a source of frustration. Here are some tips to take the guesswork out of cooking.

Always read a recipe from start to finish before you begin cooking. By familiarizing yourself with the recipe before you begin to cook, you will avoid any surprises along the way and will be able to use your time more efficiently. Also, make sure you understand how long something will take to prepare so that dinner is ready at the right time.

Ingredient lists often include instructions for ingredient prep. Many recipes do not include ingredient prep in their instructions, but rather hide it in the ingredient list. For example, when you read "3 scallions, sliced" or "1 tablespoon minced ginger," you need to add slicing scallions and mincing ginger to your prep work. The recipes from your New Boston Cooking School class will list whole ingredients and will include prepping them in the instructions, but most recipes do not do this.

It matters when you measure an ingredient. In an ingredient list, "1 cup walnuts, chopped" is not the same thing as "1 cup chopped walnuts." In the first example, the cook should measure and then chop the walnuts. In the second example, the cook should chop and then measure. Because the volume of ingredients is different when chopped, this really matters. One cup of unchopped walnuts weighs 3.4 ounces, while 1 cup of chopped walnuts weighs 4.2 ounces—that's 20 percent more nuts. Apply this principle to other ingredients (such as "sifted flour" versus "flour, sifted") and you can see how this makes a significant difference in the outcome of a recipe.

Get familiar with food prep terminology: Learn the terms below so you know what is expected when they're used in recipes:

Mince: ⅛-inch pieces or smaller
Chopped fine: ⅛- to ¼-inch pieces
Chopped medium: ¼- to ½-inch pieces
Chopped coarse: ½- to ¾-inch pieces
Cut into chunks: ¾-inch pieces or larger
Sliced: cut into flat, thin pieces (The thickness of the slices will depend on the recipe.)
Diced: cut into uniform cubes (The size of the dice will depend on the recipe.)
Cut lengthwise: cut with the length of the food, or from end to end
Cut crosswise or widthwise: cut across the food, perpendicular to its length

Equipment lists are hidden in the recipe instructions. Make sure to read your recipes carefully and gather the necessary equipment before you begin cooking. You don't want to be searching for a colander as your pasta overcooks.

Look for hands-off time. In many recipes, you may do a little work and then . . . nothing while meat marinates, pork shoulder braises, or soup simmers. These are great opportunities to make a side dish, help your child with homework, check email, or relax for 15 minutes. Just remember to set a timer so you can return to the recipe at the right time.

Make leftovers to save time throughout the week. Many regular home cooks turn one meal into many by making extra food to eat later in the week. For example, making a double portion of rice means you can have rice with your chicken tonight and chicken fried rice tomorrow. Similarly, if you're mincing a shallot for vinaigrette, you might as well mince two and make extra vinaigrette to use any time in the next three days. Just make sure you store the leftovers properly and use them within the next several days. (Leftover cooked meat should be eaten within three days.)