

BASICS

WITH BABISH





BASICS WITH BABISH ANDREW REA

Recipes for Screwing Up, Trying Again,
and Hitting It Out of the Park

WITH SUSAN CHOUNG AND KENDALL BEACH

Photography by Evan Sung



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Food Styling by Spencer W. Richards
Kitchen Production by Kendall Beach
Kitchen Production by Nicolas Borbolla



A man with tattoos on his left arm and a watch is preparing pizza on a wooden table. He is wearing a black t-shirt. The table is covered with flour, tomato sauce, and fresh basil. A bottle of olive oil and a pair of glasses are also on the table. The background is a brick wall.

TO MY DAD. YOU TAUGHT
ME HOW TO SEE THE
WORLD DIFFERENTLY,
TELL STORIES
COMPASSIONATELY, AND
CAPTURE MOMENTS
HUMBLY—WITH OR
WITHOUT A CAMERA.

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FOREWORD

Ok, I'm going to be brutally honest, and it may piss off some of you die-hard Babish fans. When I first met Babish in the early days of *The Chef Show*, I had absolutely no idea who the hell he was.

Shoot, I didn't even know his name was Andrew till recently. I remember Jon Favreau telling me about this guy that has a YouTube channel and re-creates recipes found in films, and all I could think of was, man, this can't be good. But Jon is the man, and I always trust his instincts, so I opened my mind. (There are two reasons for my ignorance that have nothing to do with Andrew. First, I don't pay that much attention to YouTube. Second, the whole world of overnight Internet chefs is something I thought was an illusion. A mirage. And when I pinched/punched myself and realized it was real, I accepted it with love and grace, but kept one eye open like a half-sleeping watchdog watching over a craft that takes a lifetime to learn.)

And I am so glad I stayed open-minded and didn't fall into my old, guarded, protective, curmudgeon ways, because the world of Babish sparked a movement that has now brought so many new faces and inquisitive souls into the food world through vlogging, pop-ups, #asmr cooking, content creation, *mukbanging*, and you—the *Binging with Babish* faithful. It cracked open an insular world and made cooking more diverse than it's ever been.

Thank you, Andrew. It's all because of Babish.

But beyond the cultural impact and the chain of events that followed, all of this would have been flawed from the get-go if the cooking was never any good or if it was all just a con for the fame. Which leads me back to the first day I met Andrew; cameras in our faces, getting ready to make French Onion Soup and Chocolate Lava Cake. This wasn't a farce. I immediately noticed how nervous he was, how precise he was, and how much he cared. These are the Three Musketeers of doing anything great, and especially cooking great: be nervous, be detailed, and care with all your heart.

We made some delicious food that day. Although it looked like I was teaching, I was actually the one learning from him. Since then, I've been following along on his journey and am now at a point where I truly believe he might be a better cook than I. Maybe I'll read this book and learn the basics again, and just maybe I, too, can become an Internet chef sensation when I grow up!

Congrats, Andrew. I jest and bust your balls because that's what friends do, but I am so proud of you and am honored to be your friend for life and a part of this wonderful Babish universe.

—Roy Choi





INTRODUCTION



MISTAKES PERMEATE EVERYTHING I DO.

That might sound like self-deprecation to some, but over the past seven years of making cooking videos, I've been saying it with a growing degree of pride.

When making my first cooking show, *Binging with Babish*, I started showing my mistakes early on. My debut blunder is in the second-ever episode, wherein I try to peel garlic using an old trick I had heard of: placing the cloves in a lidded container, shaking it violently, and watching them emerge naked, freed from their papery prisons. Upon opening my container, however, I was disappointed to discover that just like me, they were still covered in skin. So I shrugged my shoulders, poured myself a whiskey, and began peeling the garlic manually. When the time came to edit the episode, instead of being annoyed with my ineptitude, I was charmed. I thought viewers might get a snort out of my experience, so I threw it in as a joke—and unbeknownst to me, the heart of the show had begun to beat.

Mistakes had always been pivotal in my managing to learn anything, and now I realized that the audience could learn along with me as I failed, perhaps even saving themselves from future failures along the way. Some episodes, like recreating the dalgona from *Squid Game*, became almost entirely about my mistakes, becoming a supercut of my half dozen attempts and the lessons learned from each. After many years, I even learned that my garlic peeling trick didn't work because of the rigidity of my container, which should ideally be metal. See, you're learning from my mistakes already!



Basics with Babish itself was almost a mistake that never saw the light of day. My first steps venturing outside the comfort of pop-culture-cookery were taken warily, as I wasn't sure if I had anything original to add to YouTube's pantheon of culinary instruction. I also had grander aspirations: higher production value, multiple camera angles, a stylized introduction with a theme song. Not knowing where else to turn, I haphazardly hired a production company through a friend of a friend, and plopped down \$5,000 for a (deeply-discounted) week's worth of shooting. A four-person crew arrived at my Harlem apartment on a rainy Monday morning, and right away, I knew we were screwed. After dragging mountains of Pelican cases up four flights of stairs in the pouring rain, they

incredulously surveyed my tiny kitchen: It was hardly suited for cooking, much less producing a cooking show. Despite our already rocky relationship and immediately apparent lack of chemistry, I shook off my jitters and got down to business, starting with my strong suit: steak. I reverse seared a mammoth bone-in ribeye, cooking it to a(n almost) perfect medium-rare, slicing it into steakhouse slabs, and presenting it with fried rosemary and garlic. I offered it up to the crew, which they sort of politely declined, so I ate damn near the whole thing myself on camera. It wasn't until they hurriedly ordered lunch that I saw the newest crack in our already fractured menagerie: most of them were vegan, and the director in particular was militantly so. Over a bowl of stir-fried seitan, he outlined his moral outrage at the consumption of all animal products, the smell of seared beef still heavy in the air, and me picking ribeye out of my teeth. When they finished lunch and I started getting ready to film the next episode (a whole roast chicken with its spine violently ripped out), the cramped kitchen grew hotter and hotter, as our tiny air conditioner's little heart had given out. Between the ARRI lights the crew had furnished and my crappy oven pissing heat into the air, the place must've gotten up to 95°F before we wrapped for the day. I crawled into bed, had myself a little cry, and tried to find comfort in having to do it only four more days before giving up forever. When Friday finally came and went, I joyously texted my girlfriend at the time, who responded immediately by saying, "Great job, proud of you—we need to talk." You see, she had been waiting until after I had completed this torturous marathon to break up with me. Which was considerate of her.

So, needless to say, I had to start from scratch. Within a month, I had hooked up with my management outfit in Nashville, who sent a crew to help *Basics* be realized. They would end up becoming some of my closest friends, one of whom is now my full-time employee, and we made a show together we could be proud of; but I was still terrified to release it. I was certain that I was a novelty, something people could background watch while ironing their clothes or

browsing Reddit, good for the occasional sharp nose exhale elicited from a clumsily executed dad joke. By putting out purely instructional videos, not only was I eschewing the pop culture reference crutch, I was purporting to be a learned person in my field. A teacher. An authority figure. Someone who, when the urge strikes you to finally invest in a stand mixer and try your hand at homemade pasta, you entrust with your time and effort to steer you in the right direction. All things that, I'll be the first to loudly admit, I am not. I am not a trained chef, I have never attended culinary school, and the one time I worked in an honest-to-god restaurant, I cut my finger so badly on my first day that I was promptly bandaged up and fired. The first few episodes of *Basics* are primarily about knife skills. Do you have buyer's remorse yet?

Well, don't print out your return label or bust out that gift receipt just yet. I started writing this book, indeed this very introduction, when I saw a collocation of *Basics* thumbnails on YouTube. It was the *Pizza* episode, published all the way back in 2018, juxtaposed against a more recent *Pizza Dough* episode. The former (**FIG. 1**) was a misshapen, pallid, triangular flatbread of orangey sauce and browned cheese, somehow simultaneously both over- and under-cooked, and dotted with wrinkled bits of burnt basil. The latter (**FIG. 2**) was the picture of pizza perfection: a wafer-thin, chewy-crisp disk, delicately

scattered with buffalo mozzarella and San Marzano tomatoes, crowned with an aureole of uniform, airy crust dappled with char marks. I saw tangible, tastable evidence of what I had learned from dozens and dozens of missteps: be they burnt bottoms or crackerlike crumbs, every public and private stumble had paid off. Even plunging a knife into my finger during the lunch rush back in 2009 eventually yielded fruit—you can bet your ass that I now practice good finger discipline when chopping onions—and now, I feel ready to pass that mistake-derived skillset on to you. I'm not a terribly confident person; I'm fast to admit when I've messed up and shy away from anyone singing my praises. But I will look you in the eye, hold both your hands in mine, and whisper to you unflinchingly as our noses nearly touch: I know how to make really, really fucking good pizza. And I can show you how. Follow me.

Okay, that got intense. Like I said, I get very uncomfortable accepting the fact that I might be good at something, so the least I can do is make you uncomfortable, too. Now that we've got that out of the way, we can get cooking—or learning to cook. Whether it's your first day or your last (yeesh), it is about making mistakes, not being afraid of making mistakes, and learning from those mistakes. So let's start screwing up together—you can let go of my hands now. Okay, you can keep one.



FIG. 1



FIG. 2



LET'S GET DOWN TO BASICS

Wow, you're reading all the supplemental material instead of just the recipes? You got moxie, kid, I'll give you that. Let's talk a little bit about how best to use this book—that's right, this book, basically an instruction manual, comes with its own instruction manual!

Basics with Babish was originally intended to be a linear, serialized cookery course, best watched beginning to end. We quickly realized, however, that we were making content for YouTube, where people want a la carte answers to very specific questions, and *never* watch anything in order. We quickly pivoted to start making episodes about singular dishes, intended to be a resource for anyone looking to make something specific. This book, however, seeks to capture the original spirit of the series by presenting recipes in a specific order: not necessarily easiest to hardest, but there's a good chance a recipe on page 300 will draw from knowledge dropped on page 15. I haven't done the page counts yet, but you know what I mean.

One of my favorite reviews of the *Binging with Babish* cookbook described it as one of the few, if any, cookbooks that tells you in the headnote if a particular recipe is any good or not. I admit, I've never seen it anywhere before. I'm an innovator, okay? So, too, with this cookbook, shall I create something wholly unique (if not a little odd). Every recipe is accompanied by three things: first, a charming and pithy headnote describing my experience making the particular dish. Second, a list of ways in which I have personally screwed up said dish myself, so you can avoid my pitfalls. Third, every recipe will be accompanied with troubleshooting, a listing of the problems you could potentially have with the recipe

and recommended solutions. Not gonna lie, I was pretty proud of myself when I thought of this one—I mean how many times do you wish you could ask the recipe's author why your thing didn't turn out right? Now you can! Sort of.



Do's and Don'ts

Taking on cooking as a hobby or vocation can be a daunting thing: endless, seemingly trivial measurements and directions, very sharp things, very hot things, and the long life stories of bloggers that accompany almost every recipe. Your friends' or family's very nourishment became dependent on you the moment you volunteered to try making dinner tonight, and their grimacing smiles through half-chewed bites (or an emergency pizza order) await you if you fail. Instructions quickly become a triage scenario, deciding which steps can be skipped as sauces congeal, salads wilt, and this steak just won't seem to cook through—wait is something burning?

If the above sentences gave you agita, don't worry: just like any skill worth having, cooking is a matter of practicing with—and slowly gaining knowledge of—your food and how it behaves. There are many (many) pitfalls I wish I had avoided when I was just getting started in the kitchen, so a fitting way to kick off this book felt like a list of Do's and Don'ts. I couldn't think of a B-word to name it. Babish's Bullet Points? Blunders with Babish? Maybe the first "Don't" should be "Don't make a cooking show that requires letter-specific alliteration." Anyway.

These Do's and Don'ts are primarily aimed at newcomers to the kitchen, but even if you know your way around the galley, I think there's information to be gleaned here. If you're super-advanced, I'm not sure why you bought my book, but thank you—hopefully these will at least give you a chuckle.

DON'T bite off more than you can chew, so to speak. Lots of us want to wow our friends, family, or significant other with a technically-impressive dish—it's both a show of skill and a demonstration of how much we value their trusting us with making a meal. For my very first-ever dinner party, I tried to make a ten-course tasting menu for a dozen coworkers. As pans piled up on the stove and my sweat soaked through my shirt, ten courses quickly

turned into fiveish, most of which were eaten more out of politeness than anything else. If, instead, I had furnished them with a properly-cooked roast, an imaginative side dish, and a bright/peppery salad, they would've left much more impressed (not to mention full). Clearly I've been thinking about this for years. Leonardo da Vinci once said, "simplicity is the ultimate sophistication"—and that guy knew his way around good food—he was Italian, after all.

DO practice mise en place. Mise en place is the fancy-sounding phrase to describe the simple-sounding act of getting your shit in order before you start doing anything. Chopping onions, measuring spices, weighing flour, and bringing eggs to room temperature—these steps not only make your life easier, they exponentially increase your odds of success in the kitchen. How do you know what to prep? The answer lies in the recipe ingredients: they'll typically be listed as something like "1 large onion, finely minced." "1 tablespoon freshly ground pepper." "16 hot dogs, puréed until smooth." Anything that needs to be broken down, measured, divided, or mixed: do all of it before you even look at the recipe directions. Your everything will thank you for it.

DON'T be afraid to make mistakes. This one is a doozy: beyond being one of the core tenants of my show, it's maybe the most important life lesson I've learned, and it's something I'm still learning every day. I don't know about you, but I get pretty down on myself when I mess up. Especially in cooking, when you have measurable evidence of your failure laid out in front of you; the sum total of hours or even days of your life, seemingly squandered and irretrievable. With time (especially as you get older), however, you can start recognizing mistakes as the learning experiences they are—but only if you actively work to learn something from them. If your first collapsed soufflé made you give up cooking forever, then sure, that soufflé will haunt you for the rest of your days. If, however, you do a little poking around: realize that soufflés are *supposed* to collapse a bit, maybe make sure your egg whites are stiff but not over-whipped, next time you could end up with a jiggling tower of



eggy perfection. Suddenly, you might look back on that “failure” as an important, formative experience. It’s taken me years to become even halfway decent in the kitchen, and I have only my mistakes to thank for it. Maybe them and J. Kenji Lopez-Alt.

DO try new things in the kitchen. I always recommend that newcomers work to master their favorite dishes first, but the only way you’re going to grow as a cook (and indeed as a person) is to push yourself out of your comfort zone. Are you scared of baking bread? Time to bake some bread then, numbnuts. Oh, your first loaf came out pale on the outside and gummy on the inside? Tough shit, try again. Okay, sorry too harsh. My point is that you’re never going to get halfway decent at something without at least trying and failing first. None of us want to waste time, effort, or ingredients, so I understand your trepidation. But just read and reread the recipe, watch a video about it (maybe one of mine?), learn what you can about what you’re trying to do—it might mean the difference between ending up with something in the trash bin vs. something at least edible.

DON’T cut hot peppers without gloves. I know you think you can handle spicy food, but after going to the bathroom, you will discover that your genitals cannot.

DO invest in high-quality essential tools (if you’re able). Knives, cutting boards, a 12-inch skillet, a Dutch oven: a kitchen could be handsomely furnished for a few hundred dollars and be capable of making the vast majority of dishes in this book. You’ll save time, you’ll be more relaxed, you’ll cook more often, you’ll get better faster, your spouse will fall back in love with you, you’ll get a higher-paying/more fulfilling job, and (depending on your preference) your facial hair will grow thicker or finally disappear altogether. Maybe not all of those, but at least the first few. It might seem like a lot now, but if you’ve got the scratch, spend it on tools that you love (and will love you back).

DO follow recipes to the letter (if you’re just starting out). We’ve all seen them in recipe reviews: “This turned out awful! I didn’t have any eggs or flour, so I used applesauce and sorghum flakes, and my oven wasn’t working, so I baked it by placing it in my car on a hot day. Didn’t look anything like the photos—0 stars, don’t waste your time!!” I once read a negative review of one of my recipes: the fellow in question didn’t have any red wine for a beef braise, so they used red wine *vinegar*—if you are familiar with these two ingredients, you may be aware that they are decidedly not interchangeable. Generally speaking, all the ingredients and instructions in a given recipe are there for a reason, and omitting, skipping, or replacing any of them could potentially ruin the dish. A good rule of thumb is: if you don’t know what something is or why it’s in the dish, don’t omit or substitute it. Once you learn its function, however . . .

DON’T follow recipes to the letter (once you’ve mastered the Basics™©). I realize that this directly contradicts the above, but after years of cooking, you’re going to start to notice stuff in recipes you don’t like, and you’re going to know what you can do differently without destroying the resultant dish. For example, let’s say you come across a pancake recipe and the ingredients all sound tasty, but when the time comes to put them together, the recipe calls for you to beat the batter thoroughly with a hand mixer until completely smooth. You may suddenly feel a twinge of nostalgia, recalling those rainy Sundays when pops would whip up a steaming stack of flapjacks, and he’d insist that a lumpy batter is more than just okay, it’s desirable. Then maybe you’ll remember any given pancake episode of mine, when I repeatedly and proudly exclaim that your father was right! Over-mixing pancake batter can result in gluten development, which makes pancakes turn out thin and tough. Just like anyone you might admire, famous chefs are human beings trying to figure shit out, same as you. Even veritable demigods like Gordon Ramsay can put out the occasional epic misfire (just search for his ultimate grilled

cheese; and Josh Scherer's impassioned breakdown of everything wrong with it). With practice and knowledge, you'll start "seeing the matrix" in terms of how and why food behaves the way it does, and only with that familiarity comes the ability to play jazz with recipes. Hell, that's kind of the main point of this whole book!

DO know when to use a scale. I know this seems like an unnecessarily fussy pain in the ass, but especially when baking, using a scale can be essential to getting consistent and replicable results. Anyone that's ever advocated for scale usage will be quick to tell you a halting fact: a cup of flour can vary in accuracy by as much as 20 percent in either direction, which in something as sensitive as bread or cake, could be disastrous. But that being said, there is a time and a place for these qualifiers of quantity. First off, unless you have a remarkably accurate scale, I tend to avoid measuring salt or other small-amount ingredients by weight. Kitchen scales tend to be relatively accurate, but not precise—that is, many won't accurately register the difference between 5 and 10 grams of salt. Try adding salt to a bowl in 1-gram increments and you'll see what I'm talking about. Oh, you've got way better things to do with your time? I understand. Anyway, how do you know when to use a scale? At least in this book, if an ingredient is specified first by weight, well, there's your answer! Out there in the rest of the world? A good rule of thumb is to ask yourself: "Can I accurately add the same amount of [ingredient] as the recipe specifies, and does it matter if I do?" For example, a stew might call for thickening its sauce with 3 tablespoons of flour. Unless you really pile as much as is physically possible on each tablespoon, the potential variance isn't going to ruin your end product, and you can measure by volume. On the other hand, if you're making a bread dough with a specific hydration percentage, and a strange man brandishing a deadly weapon is threatening you with grievous bodily harm should your focaccia not turn out light and airy enough—well, a scale might just save your life.





Kitchen Glossary

The following is a sort of glossary of cooking terms, items, and ideas. The intention is to define, break down, and hopefully clarify a host of concepts that tend to confuse kitchen newcomers. Like with the majority of this book, if you're more advanced, there's still, hopefully, information to be gleaned here. Hell, if I get just one of you to try using kosher salt, I've done my job.

BOILING POINTS: As you may have read in the news or the bible, water reaches an excitable state around 212°F or 100°C, at which point it begins to dance wildly and vomit steam into the air as though the drugs just kicked in. This state of matter, transitioning from a liquid to gas, is referred to as a “boil.” In practice, however, boiling is slightly less scientific, and a wealth of subtleties emerge that yield varied results in cooking. *Poaching*, for example, typically refers to the ghostly state of water around 180°F (82°C), when it meanders spookily about the pot without yet producing any bubbles. A *Bare Simmer* refers to a slightly more lively cooking environment, tiny bubbles beginning to form on the bottom of the pot and, if they be so bold, occasionally breaking the surface, between 180 to 190°F (82 to 88°C). A *Simmer* is, for all intents and purposes, a particularly gentle boil, wherein the water is being agitated visibly and of its own volition, approaching but not exceeding 205°F. A *Boil*, or perhaps more accurate, a *Rolling Boil*, is achieved at 212°F, where the water is just so excited to get out in the open air, it can no longer be contained by your pasta pot's lid, and your stove's flames sputter and flare as it foams over and makes a very-difficult-to-clean mess of your cooktop. Especially when the subtleties lie in mere single digits of degrees, it can seem trivial or unnecessary to heed the specific type of boil outlined in a recipe, but failing to do so can very quickly (or slowly) ruin a dish. Short ribs, for example, become meltingly tender when braised gently at a *Bare Simmer*, but when subjected to something more like a *Rolling Boil*, will more quickly

contract muscle fibers, squeezing out all the delicious fat and connective tissue, rendering your dinner more useful as a dog's chew toy.

COOKWARE (CARBON-STEEL): You might be most familiar with it in its wok form, but carbon steel is an indispensable tool in restaurants and home kitchens alike. Think of it as Cast Iron Lite: it's quite literally lighter and it can't retain or distribute heat as well, but it also relies on a well-maintained seasoning to stay nonstick, and is excellent for high-heat applications. Because most of us are unfamiliar with it/intimidated by it, it remains in relative home chef obscurity, but deserves a spot on your pot rack. Seeing an egg skate around on a rink of blue steel you've lovingly seasoned yourself is not unlike seeing your child take their first steps. I imagine.

COOKWARE (CAST-IRON): This one's a doozy for most newcomers. To the uninitiated, buying cast iron reads like adopting a new pet: you need to care for it, love it, maintain it, give it frequent rubdowns with oil, house-train it, give it daily heartworm medication. But in reality, apart from having to occasionally reseason it, about the most inconvenient thing about cast iron is that you can't run it through the dishwasher. If you use it frequently, use high heat, give it a coat of oil once in a while, and don't let food or water sit in it, you'll be made in the shade. Go ahead and wash it with soap, give it a mighty scrub—it might need a little oil and heat afterward to bolster its seasoning, but it's not going to self-destruct or anything. “Seasoning” is the highly-prized jet-black polymerized cooking fats built up from years of high-temperature cooking and the very act of “seasoning” itself: the most popular method is to give the whole pan a rubdown with neutral oil (vegetable, canola, grapeseed), and place it in a 450°F oven for 1 to 2 hours, until blackened. This, however, can lead to smoke alarms and frantic pizza peel fanning, so I prefer to leave it roasting on a hot grill for an hour or so, where I can push the heat farther and bake on a thicker, harder seasoning. Store dry and unstacked, reseason it once in a while, and read it *The Cricket in Times Square* by George Selden—that's its favorite. The advantages to cast

iron are many: It retains and distributes heat evenly, which is important when you're doing something like searing a steak. It practically has nonstick qualities when properly seasoned, and nothing looks quite so lovely as sunny-side-up eggs in a cast-iron pan. Over a roaring campfire. A horse by your side. Your only companion in this undiscovered wilderness. That's the secret to owning and using cast-iron cookware: act like someone who does.

COOKWARE (NONSTICK): While its use is widespread and its utility undeniable, nonstick cookware is a controversial tool. It's known to release toxic fumes when overheated, and is sometimes manufactured with a potentially cancer-causing chemical compound, PFOA. Will nonstick kill or even harm you? The answer is no, probably not . . . but maybe. Probably not though. For most people, that's good enough—but it's understandable to have reservations. After all, an overheated pan emits a toxin that can give you flu-like symptoms—to me, that's scary, even if I certainly won't die from it. So while when it comes to eggs, nonstick cookware is nothing short of an angel sent to earth in cookware form, there are drawbacks worth avoiding. Some best practices include never heating the pan past its manufacturer's recommended temperature, and most important, never using sharp or metallic tools on its surface. A scratched-up nonstick pan is literally leaching chemical scraps into your food—it might not kill you, but I mean come on, that can't be *good* for you.

COOKWARE (STAINLESS STEEL): This is the mainstay of most kitchens, and probably the most versatile medium for the making of food. It's definitely intimidating to start, primarily from the associated fear of food becoming glued to its gleaming industrial-chic surface. What's usually happening here is the pores of the metal, contracting as they get hotter, gripping your food like a hundred million terrifying little metal mouths, indicating that your pan was not hot enough when added. The secret to working with “sticky” cookware is the same secret behind why restaurant food tastes so good: fat and heat. Generally speaking, a little extra oil or butter

and a slightly hotter flame is the magic combo that will demystify stainless steel cookware for you. Conversely, sometimes you want things to stick. No matter how much you lube up the pan, your steak will likely glue itself to the bottom when you drop it in. But as it develops an even, golden-brown crust, it will lift off the bottom of the pan like a beefy miracle, and flavorful fond will be left behind in the jaws of the little monster below. On the other hand, unless they're positively swimming in fat, eggs tend to be troublemakers in this arena.

EMULSION: This might be the most important and, at least in my experience, most unsung hero in the kitchen. Much in the same way *Fermentation* is the unsung hero behind many of the oldest and greatest flavors known to man, so too is emulsion for its textures. The first place you're going to hear about it is its vital role in sauces: the process of *Emulsifying* together things like butter and pasta cooking water, oil and vinegar, duck fat and stock. What you're really doing is suspending one substance in the other, so that instead of a layer of fat floating on a layer of water, you're creating billions of little droplets of fat suspended in water (or vice-versa). Milk, dressings, sauces, meringues, cake batter, cheese, butter, gravy, ice cream—they're all emulsions, and they all owe their texture to this microscopic process. Substances that aid in the permanency of these emulsions are called *Emulsifiers*—the most common you'll see on packaged foods is *Lecithin*. But you're using lecithin yourself whenever you make hollandaise—egg yolks are packed with it, making them natural emulsifiers and ubiquitous in rich sauces. It's a very sciency subject, making it one of my weak suits—but the more I understand it, the better I am at creating rewarding textures and complex flavors.

FAT: Fat refers to, well, fat. Any substance with a high (or pure) fat content, put to use in the cooking or enrichment of food. That means basically all the things in life that are as delicious as they are essentially poisonous for you: butter, olive oil, vegetable oil, duck fat, bacon fat, straight-up lard. But fat isn't just for flavor; it's also an essential lubricant

to prevent foods from sticking during the act of cooking, and other double entendres. It also plays an essential role in the browning of food (aka the Maillard Reaction, more to come on this), facilitating the flavorful caramelization of the food's exterior. Everything in life comes down to balance, and in some recipes (like pasta sauce), adding butter is just as bad for you as it is entirely optional. But it's good.

FROZEN FOODS: Many foods suffer from freezing, but some are offered distinct advantages by being introduced to this very very chilly process. Frozen produce is widely considered more nutritious, as it was frozen closer to having been picked, preserving it at the peak of its freshness. Frozen peas are typically even better-tasting than fresh ones, as fresh peas deteriorate quickly on their way to the grocery store. Frozen shrimp, in most grocery store contexts, are a much better option than the stuff packed in snow next to the fresh salmon. Most grocery store “fresh” shrimp were shipped frozen and thawed before being put on display! So unless you live on the bayou and are grabbing shrimp by the handful straight out of the nets, you're likely getting a better product from the freezer aisle. On the other hand, many other foods don't take so kindly to the freezing process: most aged cheeses, for example, will not survive a stint in the icebox. A cooked steak, while not made inedible, will be a sorry sight after having been brought back to room temperature—conversely, a raw steak takes to the freezer quite well, so long as it's defrosted gently and properly!

GRILLS: This is not a book about grilling, but grills are used when available. I've tried to keep this book within the confines of the home kitchen, but let's face it, if you have the space and ability to grill, you really ought to. Gas and charcoal grills operate entirely differently when it comes to the most important part of cooking: heat control. Charcoal grills, like any fire, thrive off oxygen—so opening the vents and cracking the lid will feed the coals and help to generate white-hot conditions for searing and charring. Gas grills, whose heat output is constant no matter the position of the lid, actually gets hotter when fully closed down,



behaving more like a gas oven than a grill. Charcoal is undoubtedly the best for flavor, imbuing the subjects of its radiant glow with smoke and wood-fired naturalism. Gas, while not flavorful in and of itself, both creates a flavorful cooking environment and offers unparalleled control and convenience. More convenient still, and inexpensive though they may be, electric grills are not grills at all, but ridged surfaces that get hot, not unlike a ridged frying pan. Useful as they can occasionally be, it isn't the shape of grill marks that give grilled food its pleasurable flavor, it's the radiant heat and smoke generated by suspending your food directly over a heat source, fat being allowed to drip down onto it, and little whispers of smoke dancing back up in retort. Some of that smoky flavor ends up on your food, and bang boom, stuff cooked outside tastes better than cooked inside.

HEAT (CONVECTION): Sometimes mistakenly referred to as an “air fryer,” a convection oven is an oven whose insides are windy. In other words, a fan circulates the hot air so that some foods can enjoy a more even, slightly more intense cooking

environment. As such, recipes are typically adapted by reducing oven temperatures by 25°F when using convection heat, as the circulating air can cause things to brown (and potentially burn) more quickly. Some foods fail fantastically in convection ovens—cakes, for example—whose rise is inhibited when its crust forms more quickly in the circulated heat. Conversely, browning the skin on a turkey has never been more easily or beautifully accomplished than that emerging from a convection oven, the whooshing air both drying out and crisping every inch of exposed bird. So if you have the luxury of a fan built into your hotbox, think about what your food is trying to accomplish during its time in the oven, and if convection might be the right choice for its goals.

HEAT (INDIRECT): Most applicable to grilling, indirect heat is the act of using heat, however indirectly. Sorry that was stupid, but it really is as simple as it sounds: Blast the heat on one side of your grill by pushing coals or maxing out burners, place the food on the “cool” side of the grill, and cook it with ambient heat not unlike a common home oven. When grilling foods to a desired temperature, this indirect zone becomes especially important, acting as a buffer zone where foods can escape the violence of direct heat and gently approach their desired doneness. You might’ve already utilized indirect heat without even knowing it: Ever finished the hot dogs before the burgers, but you want to keep them warm till their flat beefy counterparts are done? You turn off (or turn down) the burners on half the grill, keep the dogs toasty, and continue flaming the poor burgers till they’re well-done enough for your in-laws to feel safe consuming.

HEAT (STOVETOP): Be it medium or medium-high, here is where many dishes go awry. An example instruction might say, “Cook over medium heat for 2 to 5 minutes, until soft,” which contains a glaring potential issue: your stovetop. No, there’s nothing wrong with your stovetop, I’m sorry for even inferring that; the problem lies in the wildly inconsistent power of stoves the world over. Your author may have test-driven this recipe on a two-burner electric coil hotplate or on a La Cornue Château French Top,

and either way, their timing and temperatures won’t translate very well to your stove. Like *Time* (entry follows), this is a direction that relies heavily on your intuition and paying attention to the way your food’s behaving: Are the onions barely making any noise, and do they move sluggishly around the pan? Well then crank the heat up to medium-high, those onions need more firepower! Are they sizzling loudly and darkening rapidly? Well then cool your literal jets, you’re annihilating your aromatics! Moral of the story? This is a term you should take with a grain of salt (heh), and rely on your eyes/ears/nose to guide your hand as you spin the knobs of fire.

HERBS (DRIED VS. FRESH): There are very few examples of dried herbs that function any better, or even nearly as well, as their freshly-harvested brethren. Most herbs take on an off-flavor when they’ve been dried or freeze-dried, and if your finished dish is a chorus of beautiful voices, it’s the one singing slightly off-key. Not saying that will ruin it, but in the vast majority of circumstances, fresh herbs simply taste better than dried. Especially dried basil, have you ever smelled dried basil? It smells like fish food. There are, of course, several notable exceptions: dried bay leaves perform just as beautifully as their fresh counterparts. Dried oregano, especially on pizza, can even taste a great deal better than the fresh stuff. Sometimes, dried herbs can be more easily incorporated into a recipe (e.g.: ground rosemary in a barbecue spice rub). I know fresh herbs are an annoying proposition: they’re far more expensive, have a very limited shelf life, and you generally end up having to buy an entire bouquet of the stuff for the 1 tablespoon in your recipe. But if you can spare the extra scratch, they could end up making a demonstrable difference in your dinner.

MAILLARD REACTION: This, for the most part, is the chemical process that occurs when you use heat to brown food. It’s amino acids being rearranged or whatever, I won’t bore you with the chemistry. No guys, seriously, I understand the chemistry, I do, I’m just worried you won’t, and that’s the only reason



I'm not writing about it right now. All you need to know is that it's responsible for some of the most delicious words in the English language, including but not limited to: brown, sear, crust, toast, crisp, fry, sauté, crunch, roast, caramel, caramelize, and so many more. It's also one of the reasons that the food in restaurants tastes so good: between the mammoth burners, weathered pans, and robust ventilation systems, restaurant kitchens are unafraid to apply heat liberally to maximize flavor and texture. Make every effort to embrace this chemical reaction whenever possible and appropriate.

OILS: If you're anything like me, when you're starting out cooking, you subconsciously categorize extra-virgin olive oil as "better" than any other oil, for either cooking or consuming (most likely because it's expensive). Just like salt, however, there's a time and a place for every style of oil, one that's mostly determined by its smoke point, or the point at which the oil begins to, well, smoke. While searing things in EVOO might sound more gourmet, even bringing it close to its smoke point can turn things acrid and bitter. High smoke-point oils, like peanut or grapeseed, are ideal for those high-heat applications, as their flavors will not deteriorate until they hit much higher temperatures. Save the extra-virgin stuff for finishing and dipping, and for the higher heat applications, stick to the light olive oil. Olive oil carries with it another little-known bugaboo: it quickly spoils. Your average consumer olive oil takes on putrid smells and rancid flavors that you don't want to end up in your pasta and should be removed from duty within a year of purchase. I know that ten-gallon bucket of olive oil at Costco is tempting from a value standpoint, but unless you really think you're going to go through it by New Year's, maybe stick to one bottle at a time. Rancidity can be slowed by keeping your oil in a dark-colored bottle, away from sunlight, heat, and bad influences at school.

PASTA (DRIED VS FRESH): Far too many people, consciously or otherwise, think that fresh pasta is universally "better" than dried, when in fact they both play very different roles. Fresh cooks extremely

quickly (usually 90 seconds or less), has a rougher texture for grabbing on to sauces, and not to mention a richer, eggier flavor. For extraordinarily thick sauces, mac and cheese, baked casseroles, or recipes where the pasta is beaten and pressed within an inch of its life, dried is often the far-better solution. Be sure to look for dried pasta cut with bronze dies—not only does it sound fancier, it results in a rougher texture on the pasta's exterior, releasing more starch into the cooking water and creating a surface ideal for saucin'. Take great care not to overcook fresh pasta, and when making it (see recipe on page 116), don't be afraid to positively drown it in semolina or flour to prevent sticking.

PEPPER (FRESHLY GROUND): Jim Gaffigan has a great, characteristically incredulous bit about fresh-ground pepper where he confronts a hypothetical waiter as a pepper snob: "Hey, wait a minute! This isn't fresh pepper—I grew up on a pepper farm." But just like most freshly ground spices, peppercorns have a brighter, spicier, more floral quality to them when they've been freshly ground. Do me a favor—pour some pre-ground pepper into a bowl, then crack some fresh into another bowl. Give each a big ol' sniff, and once you've finished panic-sneezing, try and tell me that the freshly ground stuff didn't smell better. That bigger, brighter smell and flavor are going to translate directly into your dish. It might seem like a small thing, but paying attention to all the little details of a recipe has a cumulative effect, often producing a noticeably better outcome.

REDUCTION: This is exactly what it sounds like; bringing a liquid of some kind to a boil, allowing some of it to evaporate, and *reducing* its physical volume, the space that it takes up in . . . space. Hell, if you boil water and half of it disappears, you technically made a reduction. Despite that, reduction once found itself at the very epicenter of food snobbery, sometimes even used to parody chefs as they explained the seventh course of their tasting menu tableside to uninterested diners. Luckily, with the advent of foams and molecular gastronomy, reduction has returned to the shelf of old reliables where it belongs—it just

comes down to what you're reducing, and for whom you're reducing it. Balsamic reductions, while they might funk up your kitchen for an hour, make for a finishing glaze that looks as striking as it tastes. Red wine reductions, while they might sound sexy, produce a bitter potion capable of burning a hole through a steak like termite.

ROUX: A method for the beautiful and selfless act of thickening, a roux is little more than a cooked paste of flour and butter. Notoriously easy to make grainy or lumpy, it must be whisked constantly while slowly adding splashes of the liquid to be thickened, allowing it to incorporate fully into the paste before adding more. When this procedure is executed with whole milk, what you end up with is a *Bechamel*, one of the five French "mother sauces." Far and away the easiest of the quintet, it's also the fastest way to make friends by using it to replace ricotta in a lasagna (see page 336), where it becomes a river of richness woven throughout the sauce and cheese. I'm getting off topic; there are four categorizations of roux, referring to its color—white, blonde, brown, and dark brown. The latter offers an almost insane savory flavor, maybe most famously in gumbo, while the former hardly makes its presence known, save for a thick, buttery texture.

SALT: The most omnipresent of all ingredients (probably?), it's also a source of a great deal of confusion. There are a great number of salts, from pink Himalayan to black lava, but there are really only three you need to know about: table, kosher, and finishing. You need to know the difference because not only do they all serve different purposes, they are not directly interchangeable—and that's not me just being a snooty chef—you'll see what I mean. Table (iodized) salt is what you generally see pouring from the metal spout of a cylindrical cardboard container: the ultra-fine grained salt with nearly the same consistency as sugar. This salt is usually for inconspicuously sprinkling on under-seasoned dishes at the dinner table, but it's also ideal for baking, as it's typically the salt being used (unless otherwise specified) when baking recipes are being

written. Kosher salt is a larger-grained, somewhat flaky, pinchable salt, one that's gained God status on my show. It's the salt choice of most cooks for a few reasons: first, it's less salty. Not because it contains less salt flavor, but because it's made of large and irregular crystals, which don't allow you to pack as much salt into the same space. In other words, a teaspoon of table salt contains more actual salt than a teaspoon of kosher salt. As such, it's more forgiving—its pinchable form factor also allows you to season your food by hand, which gives you a much better sense of how much you're adding. As you learn how food behaves and how much salt makes sense for a given amount of food, this felt connection becomes increasingly important. Finishing salt is a very large, flaky, thin and crunchy salt, used almost exclusively in an effort to live up to its name: finishing stuff. It's the last thing to go on a dish to add visual flair, crunch, and, well, saltiness. It's also much more expensive than regular or kosher salt, so I can't think of any earthly reason why you'd use it for anything else.

SAUTÉ PAN: This is usually referring to the higher-walled variety of wide, shallow pans—and if that's the case, then we're talking about my very favorite kind of pan. Specifically a 12-inch, high-walled, stainless





steel sauté pan (sometimes mistakenly called a Dutch oven, or without a handle, a brazier). This pan offers the very widest array of utility in the kitchen, perhaps my most oft-used tool outside of a knife. An ideal environment for boiling, braising, deep-frying, even cooking spaghetti, there's a great deal more to do in a sauté pan than simply sauté.

SOUS VIDE: This term, being French, both sounds and is actually fancy. Translating literally to “under vacuum,” it refers to the vacuum-sealing and cooking of food in a precision-controlled water bath. Once a prohibitively expensive piece of equipment confined to Michelin-starred kitchens and Zagat-rated laboratories, immersion circulators are now affordably priced to make a fine Christmas present for a cousin or coworker you're pretty close with. It's a bit of a fussy process, but it allows for the easification and ensurance (both words used incorrectly) of consistent and quality results in food, particularly proteins. For example, a steak can be placed in a 130°F water bath and held there for anywhere from 30 minutes to 4 hours, cooked to a perfect medium rare and never exceeded. Once it emerges from the vac bag like an alien placenta, it can be patted dry and seared up crisp on the outside, perfect edge-to-edge medium-rare on the inside. Foods normally braised, like short ribs or pork belly, can achieve otherworldly textures both tender and toothsome. Some stuff can even be pasteurized, like eggs, to keep them functionally raw but entirely safe to eat. There are those that will try and convince you that it's the next microwave, but its many components and time-consuming, planning-oriented methodology keep it primarily in the wheelhouse of enthusiasts and hobbyists. But hey, that's you—I mean, you're reading the glossary of a cookbook. Nerd.

SPICES: Some spices tend to have a pretty universal quality to them—buying organic cumin generally won't net you a better end result—but grinding it yourself most certainly will. Much like how pepper tastes, smells, and dare I say looks better when you grind it yourself, so, too, will the vast majority of spices. When ground and bottled, spices quickly lose their complexity and potency, so by the time

you shake that chili powder into your . . . chili, its flavor has been whittled down to a stale, single-dimensional shadow of its former self. Freshly ground (and for bonus points, toasted) spices generally just have a bigger, brighter, more floral and more pleasing flavor—and you can have them today for little more than the cost of your time and a cheap coffee grinder dedicated to spice grinding—don't use it for coffee, unless you want your morning brew to taste like tikka masala.

STOCK/BROTH: More of a pain-in-the-ass than most cooks would like to admit, a homemade stock also has the greatest potential to take a dish from good to great. How can I convince you to spend 4 to 24 hours making boiled meat juice? Well, I've got a dare for you: take a big ol' swig of store-bought chicken stock. Too gross? Bring some to a boil and take a big whiff. There are few things so objectively disgusting and yet so widely used as boxed stock, and when you consider what an elemental role it plays in most dishes, it starts to make sense why the foodies in your life swear fealty to the homemade stuff. Yes, it is time consuming, but it can also be meditative. Do you enjoy reading, watching TV, or playing the odd video game? These are all perfect pastimes during which a bubbling cauldron of stock can become a background task, made in large batches that can be frozen for up to six months. You can even concentrate the stock, boiling it down to half or quarter of its original volume, ready to be diluted and put to glorious work in your favorite soup or stew at a moment's notice.

STOVETOPS TYPES: Gas is, far and away, the preferred cooktop for exactly 100 percent of all recipes from all of time and space. A strong case can be made for induction, but nothing quite beats the “feel” of gas—it's like listening to your favorite album on vinyl. It's got personality. Unfortunately, we can't all be so lucky, and many of us are stuck with electric ranges. Don't worry, you can still make great food with electric burners, but the rules are decidedly different. The most important factor to account for is the slow speed at which your burner heats up and cools off. If a recipe calls for sautéing something for

five minutes and then removing from the heat, that's exactly what you gotta do: you can't just turn off the burner, because that coily bastard stays plenty hot long after you've cut off the juice. Likewise, let's say you're sautéing something, and things are getting a little too lively: your onions are browning very quickly, oil is smoking, things are sputtering. If you turn down the heat on a gas or induction range, that adjustment is very quickly translated into the metal of the pan. An electric range changes gears very slowly, however, so your food will continue receiving too much heat for many minutes after the knob's been turned. It becomes a sort of delicate dance, moving pots on and off of burners to compensate for slowly heating or cooling coils, but it's very doable with a little practice and a lot of understanding of food/cookware behavior.

TIME: Is just, like, a construct, man. One that's very problematic to cook by. Very few recipes might require exact cook times, but thanks to about 45 fucktillion potential variables, relying on cooking times is a "recipe for disaster." Sorry, I had to, and you know it. Especially for meat, you might as well throw cook times out the window altogether—take a beef roast for example. The size and shape of the meat, its core temperature when first put in the oven, your oven's (actual) temperature, whether Mercury is in retrograde; these are just some of the

potential pitfalls of following a suggested roast time. We authors do our best and give a range of time ("cook for 2 to 5 minutes," "sun-dry for 3 to 15 weeks"), and usually offer a sensory indication of a step's completion ("bake until set but slightly jiggly," "stab lobster repeatedly until no longer alive"). The latter are the ones you really want to pay attention to: they're the best and most reliable instructions for how to tell if any given step is complete. Cook times can definitely still be good guidelines—I always start checking a food for doneness/readiness just shy of the suggested cook time, and stay as observant as possible after that.

WINDOWPANE TEST: This test, clearly named in the 1950s (who says "windowpane"?), is the gold standard by which you can measure your dough's readiness to become bread. Here's how you do it: grab a golf ball-size piece of dough, and flatten it out between your palms. Then, gently coax the dough in the center of the disc as thin as you can possibly get it before it breaks. Generally speaking, if you can make it translucent when held up to the light, you are officially a baker and can legally practice bakery in most states. Moreover, it means that you've developed enough gluten in the dough so that it can stretch fantastically thin, which means your resultant loaf will have the strong network to support cavernous crumbs under crackling crusts.



Your Spice Rack and You

One of the most requested episodes of *Basics* has been a spice rack breakdown—what are the essential spices, what herbs taste better fresh, what spices should be used for which dishes? Like most aspects of the cooking arena, there are general rules of thumb, and room for experimentation. The following is an attempt to break down what you can expect from your spices, and more important, what they can expect from you. It's mostly just about being present, ya know?

You'll have to forgive some of my descriptors, because let's face it, it's hard to describe what elemental flavors taste like. For example, describe to me what a cherry tastes like. It tastes bright? Fruity? Tart? I dunno dude, it tastes like a cherry. The best way to find out what it tastes like is to taste it! Lick your finger and dip it into the mysterious powder, carefully whiff at its curious aromas, imagine the weathered hands of the spice farmer that harvested it. One way I like to really experience and isolate what flavor a particular spice is going to bring to a dish: take a bite of something unseasoned and very flavor neutral, like cooked oatmeal or plain yogurt, then add a sprinkle of the spice or herb in question and take another bite. Is this pleasant, tasty, or even that fun? No, not really—but if you're curious about just what the hell paprika is actually doing when you add it to your paella, it's a way to shush the rest of the orchestra so you can hear what the flutes sound like on their own.

Generally speaking, almost all herbs are better fresh, almost all whole dried chiles are better than chili powder, and almost all spices are better ground from whole seeds or pods. One of the notable exceptions to the rule is a sort of "nostalgia factor." Were you raised on packets of dried ranch, like me? Dried dill is probably going to create a more familiar, enjoyable sense memory for you in certain dishes. Has your local pizza shop always kept shakers of dried oregano

and granulated garlic next to the napkin dispenser and the half-scale Italian chef stereotype statue? Then you're probably going to derive more pleasure from them than you would the bracing, overpowering flavor of freshly chopped garlic and oregano. It's kind of like knowing when to use "their, they're, or there"—yes there are established rules (recipes) that outline when to use each, but after you've written (cooked) long enough, one just feels (tastes) right when you see (eat) it. See what I did there?

ALLSPICE: Despite its deceiving name, allspice doesn't work in everything. I know, that's what I thought when I first saw it, too. It shows up in apple pie spice along with nutmeg, cinnamon, cloves, and ginger, because it shares many of their characteristics: peppery, warm, earthy, and pungent. Its unique flavor (going to have a hard time not using that phrase repeatedly in this section) also dominates Caribbean, European, and Middle Eastern stews, cures, and sausages. Grind it yourself whenever possible.

BASIL: Dried basil is one of those dried herbs I can confidently say unanimously sucks. It smells, tastes, and looks worse than its fresh brethren—about the only time you want to use it is when it needs to be dry, like in a spice rub. Other than that, always stick to the fresh stuff when you can.

BAY LEAVES: Fresh bay leaves are cool when you can find them, but dried bay leaves perform just fine in your favorite slow 'n' low. Their slightly minty, almost bitter flavor supposedly lightens up otherwise heavy soups and stews. I can't personally attest to that, but have a very hard time finding any slowly-cooked, savory dish that doesn't benefit from its presence.

CAYENNE: This spice is a reliable source for pure heat and a dash of color. It's one of the few spice rack mainstays that's actually high in capsaicin, the chemical compound that makes you sweat profusely and start coughing uncontrollably on a first date when you order a vindaloo to split. It does bring a subtle flavor, can be used in virtually anything, and a



tiny pinch of it can augment and enhance the existing flavors, particularly in fat-rich dishes like mac and cheese or hollandaise.

CHILI POWDER: Here's where we get into tricky territory. Chili powder is an undeniably essential spice, but the garden variety ones you find at the supermarket are going to be pretty bland and flat. Is it perfect for taco seasoning? Absolutely. Are you going to win any blue ribbons in the chili cook-off with it? Absolutely not. If the flavor of your dish relies heavily on chili powder (see *Chili*, page duh), you're way better off grinding or pureeing your own dried chiles. A mix of fruity/bright (Aleppo, cascabel, habanero), smoky/earthy (pasilla, ancho, chipotle), and sweet (mulato, guajillo, ají) chiles will kick the ever-loving shit out of any dried chili powder, and that's a Babish Guarantee™.

CINNAMON: There are a few types of widely available cinnamons: cassia and Ceylon are the most prevalent. Ceylon is generally considered the "real" cinnamon, and is known for its sweeter and more subtle properties compared to the strong, spicy cassia variety. Fresh-ground can be nice, but it's more difficult to grind than most spices and still just fine preground. Cinnamon sticks are best for either decoration or stews/brines, so they can impart their delicate flavor and be easily fished out later on.

CLOVES: One of the most deceptively powerful spices in your spice rack, cloves have a flowery, medicinal, pungent flavor that can overpower your entire dish if not used responsibly. The vast majority of recipes call for "one whole clove" or "1/16 teaspoon ground cloves, to taste" for a reason—my dad once accidentally mistook cloves for chili powder in his favorite pot roast, and the result was so awful that here I am writing about it in my cookbook more than two decades later. Tread lightly.

CUMIN: Reminiscent of pepper, flowers, and just a whiff of BO, many of your favorite recipes would not be possible without cumin: Mexican, Middle-Eastern, BBQ, Indian, and more lean heavily on this seed's unique and ubiquitous flavor. It's also one of the spices that most greatly benefits from being toasted and freshly ground, so be sure to pick it up whole and process it yourself after tossing it around in a dry, hot pan for a quick minute!

CURRY POWDER: The apple pie spice of the savory world (what?), curry powder is generally a blend of coriander, fenugreek, turmeric, pepper, bay leaf, clove, nutmeg, ginger, cayenne, ginger, cumin, and sometimes more. Would I use it to make an authentic chicken tikka masala? No—but for a quick jolt of flavor to an otherwise-boring chicken salad or roasted sweet potatoes, it's hard to do much better.



DILLWEED: I'm not sure why dried dill is referred to as "dillweed" and fresh dill is just "dill," and it seemed unimportant enough not to research before writing this. Ah, what the hell I'll google it—hang on—ah, okay they're synonyms. Their flavors, however, are not synonymous—like most dried herbs, dried dill (weed) is muted, flat, and a bit stale. I'm also something of a dill fiend, especially when it comes to chicken noodle soup, so you'll rarely find me reaching for a jar of the dry stuff.

GROUND GINGER: Here's a great example of a spice that is demonstrably worse than its fresh counterpart but still offers great utility. Dried ginger can be easily added to most baked goods, and unlike the fresh stuff, doesn't diminish in flavor when cooked. Should you use it in cocktails, soups, or stir-fry? Most assuredly not. Should you use it in apple pie, gingersnaps, barbecue rubs, and dips? Giddyup!

NUTMEG: Preground nutmeg cannot be compared to its origin: a playful, zesty little seed, the fractal pattern of its interior shivering into a thousand nutty snowflakes as it's whittled through a rasp, the air newly perfumed with its secrets, a ticker tape parade of flavor delicately falling and forming the snow caps on mountains of whipped cream or mashed potatoes. Yes, I have a passion for freshly grated nutmeg, and once you give it a try, so, too, shall you.

MACE: Annoyingly more difficult to find here in the States, mace is a sister plant to *nutmeg* (which by now you know I'm obsessed with), and it can stand in as a subtler, gentler, and frankly tastier alternative to cloves. You know what? Never mind—cloves are an alternative to mace, if anything.

ONION POWDER: This is an effective way to sneak onion flavor into dishes without having actual chunks of onion in the damn thing. Particularly useful in marinades and spice blends, it's even useful in dishes already featuring fresh onion if you want to amp it up a bit. Also available: minced dried onion, which I'd only really recommend using in everything-bagel seasoning.

OREGANO: My chief example when demonstrating the rare instances in which dried herbs outperform fresh, dried oregano has an almost entirely different flavor from the currently alive variety. While the latter is bracing and grassy, dried oregano is subtle and peppery. If you put the fresh stuff on pizza, it's all you'd taste—if you put the dried stuff on pizza, that's amore.

PAPRIKA: Here in the States, paprika is about as bland, universal, and inoffensive a spice as ever there was, often being added for its striking color more than anything else. Spanish, Hungarian, hot, and smoked paprikas are some of the many varieties that will bring their own unique flavor to a dish—smoked paprika in particular being an effective way to bring barbecue flavors indoors.

PARSLEY: About as useful as a second appendix, dried parsley is devoid of any scent, flavor, texture, or purpose for being. As cynical a scam as ever was perpetuated on an unwitting populace, dried parsley still finds its way into nearly every one of our pantries. There's no use fighting it; that bottle of flavorless flakes is an omnipresence, and we are powerless against its ubiquity. Sprinkle some into your pasta once, look at it incredulously after your first bite, and let it turn to dust in your cabinet for the rest of time. From the earth we came, and to the earth we shall return.



PEPPERCORNS: There are subtle differences between the many different colors of peppercorn, but generally speaking, you can't go wrong with the good ol' fashioned black peppercorn (*piper nigrum*). Freshly ground, it's head and shoulders above anything you ever got out of a shaker, and when served with something simple (like eggs), can mean the difference between goodness and greatness.

RED PEPPER FLAKES: Like cayenne but a bit bigger—both in physical size and personality—red pepper flakes bring a lighter, fruitier heat to virtually any recipe. Their flavor is especially pronounced when roasted or fried, which is why they're often added to the pan along with garlic, so they can catch a glimpse of that desirable dry heat before they're quenched by a glug of wine or a swig of stock.

ROSEMARY: Yet another example of an herb whose most desirable traits are staled and oddified in the drying process. With a flatter, more cardboard-y taste than the bright, piney bushels from whence it came, you are almost always better off using fresh rosemary. You might grind up the dry stuff to coat a prime rib of beef, but there is the "nostalgia factor," particularly via the prime rib served at the Friday night fancy restaurant in your hometown.

SAFFRON: Okay this one's a bit tricky—a lovely spice to be sure, but extremely expensive and oft counterfeited. If you're trying to whip up an authentic paella, make sure to look for threads that slightly bulge at one end, are mostly a deep red, and turn tepid water a rich golden-yellow after 30 minutes to 1 hour. It should also be upsettingly expensive.

SAGE: While another example of a weaker, flatter version of its former self, dried sage's flavor doesn't suffer *too too* badly from the drying process. Good for using in a pinch or a spice rub, or in a pinch of spice rub.

STAR ANISE: An absolute must-have for a variety of savory braises, unique confections, and coyzing cocktails, this seed pod imparts a sweet, soft, almost licoricelike flavor. And this is coming from a guy that straight-up hates licorice.

TARRAGON: Same deal hotshot, go for the bright green bundle in the produce section over the grayish-green stuff in the bottle. Dried tarragon has a more artificial, medicinal flavor than its grassy-looking fresh origins, which furnishes a sweet, almost star anise-like flavor.

THYME: For like the umpteenth time, here's an herb you generally want to use fresh. The dried stuff tastes stale, the fresh stuff works in damn near anything, it probably lasts longer than any fresh herb in the fridge, and its low moisture content means you can process it into a relatively fine powder straight off the twig. It's a botanical miracle.

VANILLA: I know vanilla isn't a spice, but it is frequently both sold and stored next to the spices, so here it is. About the only thing to avoid here is imitation vanilla—sure, it costs \$0.50 less, but you'll end up paying dividends . . . in flavor. Did that make sense? Pure vanilla extract delivers a strong, natural vanilla flavor; vanilla paste yields a subtler, sweeter flavor; and whole pods furnish both those delightful little specks and a far more subtle, complex flavor. Try to add vanilla off-heat whenever possible, as too much heat can diminish its potency, just like alcohol or a computer.



CHAPTER ONE

BREAD

Bread is everything you've heard—a mighty challenge, a rewarding experience, a cornerstone of civilization—and when you're a hobbyist, a tremendous amount of work, sometimes, with questionable payoff. It's every bit as difficult to master as you've imagined, and every prick like me that says, "Naw, dawg, it's easy!" has only figured that out after, you guessed it, baking hundreds of loaves of bread. But that's why you're here, right? To learn from someone who knows their shit? Well, someone who knows their shit well enough, so they're going to try and clearly, but breezily, explain what to do without drowning you in bread history and bread theory? Sound good? Here we go, into the no-stupid-questions zone!

WHAT IS BREAD? Seriously? It's bread. You've seen bread. Sorry, I said no stupid questions—bread is, in its most basic form, a combination of flour and water, most often leavened by yeast and baked until set. This makes the nutrients in flour digestible, which is what makes it such an important part of our history as human beings: It represents our ability to use tools, most notably heat, to sustain ourselves. Kinda romantic, when you think about it.

WHY IS BREAD? I'm not entirely sure what you mean by that, but I suppose the "why" of bread is to make something nutritious and edible out of things that aren't. Michael Pollan famously popularized the fun fact I recite at every dinner party I've ever been to: If you tried to survive off flour, water, and yeast separately, you wouldn't last a month. Combine them together and heat them, however, and you could survive indefinitely. Yes, that is a fun fact, that's why I say it. There is indeed something elemental about taking these raw ingredients and transforming them into something nutritious, even delicious.

WHO IS BREAD? Okay now you're just being silly.

WHAT BREAD SHOULD I START WITH? Back on track. I think the best place to start with bread is enriched bread, which refers to the addition of sugar, dairy, and/or fat to the dough (or all three). These breads are generally characterized by thin, yielding crusts and soft, pillowy interiors: sandwich bread, challah, dinner rolls, brioche, burger buns, even croissants are technically enriched. At first, this may seem counterintuitive: Doesn't more ingredients mean more complexity? In fact, the added complexity is what makes enriched bread more forgiving: the dough is easier to manage and shape, the proofing is more forgiving, the baking easier to interpret.

SOURDOUGH? That's not really a question but I know what you're getting at—sourdough is the "original" bread, made from naturally-occurring yeast present on the flour, on your hands, in the air, everywhere. This yeast is allowed to grow, or "culture," by adding water to flour and making a paste where these tasty li'l fungi can thrive. It has a distinct and slightly tangy taste (hence the name), yields a sandy-colored dough, and bakes up with a delightfully soft/chewy interior and deeply browned, sometimes even

charred exterior. People get uncomfortably invested in sourdough for a reason: every starter has a story. There are starters in San Francisco that are over one hundred years old, passed down and tended to by generations. I cultivated my first starter when I locked myself in a cabin in Vermont, trying to shake off all the sadness and booze left in the wake of a bad breakup. Too much information? I told you, people get intense about sourdough.

HOW DO I KNOW IF I'VE KNEADED MY BREAD

ENOUGH? It is very, very, very difficult to over-knead bread, especially when you're just starting out. I've been baking it for years and still break a mighty sweat trying to get my dough to pass the windowpane test. You could potentially over-knead using a stand mixer, but again, you'd have to really overdo it. So my advice to newcomers, generally, is to just go apeshit on your bread when you're kneading it. Unless you've been doing forearm workouts religiously for the past few years, I guarantee you're not done kneading until you feel like you're going to die from failure of the *flexor digitorum profundus*. That's your forearm.

WHAT'S THE WINDOWPANE TEST? This is in the Kitchen Glossary (page 23), which I fully understand you not having read, being a glossary and all; so here it is in a nutshell. The windowpane test is a rule-of-thumb for most breads to determine whether or not you've developed enough gluten, the complex network of proteins formed in bread that gives it its structure and texture. Grab a piece of your dough, and trying to coax it into a sort of square, stretch it as thin as you can. If your gluten is properly developed, you should be able to stretch it into a paper-thin membrane that light clearly passes through. If it starts to tear before you can get it to that point, I know it's frustrating, but keep kneading!

I MADE A TERRIBLE LOAF OF BREAD. SURELY I DON'T HAVE THE GENETIC MARKERS NECESSARY TO BE A BAKER, AND I SHOULD SKIP RIGHT TO THE PASTAS BECAUSE THAT SOUNDS EASIER? Woah, you're chatty all of the sudden. Look I'm not going to lie to you—chances are, your first loaf is gonna suck. It's going to be sunken, tight, pallid, crumbly, dry, or doughy, or somehow all these at once—and you're going to be discouraged. Now you're going to expect me to quote Aaliyah (“dust yourself off and try again”), but I'm not. By all means, feel your feelings—allow yourself to be upset about trying something and failing—we all feel this way from time to time, and it's not something to be ashamed of or push away from. Life is a series of ever-evolving, steadily increasing challenges that vary and intensify in difficulty and complexity, and like dying for the first time in *Dark Souls*, you discover that there's actually joy to be found in the dogged pursuit. As burnished bubbles begin to blister and pillowy, chewy interiors open wide with yawning chasms of crumb, synapses fire and reward centers are activated; and that first slice, slathered with salty butter, crackling between your teeth as it offers up its yeasty prize, is your reward. It's a reward worth pursuing.

ROSEMARY FOCACCIA

Focaccia: the one you always make sure you get a piece of when the server comes around with the bread basket. The one you don't mean to fill up on before the appetizers even arrive—but you do. Light and crisp on the outside, sometimes speckled with fresh herbs and salt flakes, with a moist, chewy crumb stretched out inside. This is the bread that needs no butter, needs no jam, needs no oil—partially because the bottom is half-soaked and crunchy from having been lightly fried in olive oil. Clearly, I have a thing for focaccia, but it's also an excellent beginner bread. It's super-high hydration, so it can be a bit unwieldy and sticky, but it also illustrates how dough can be extremely wet but workable. Despite being one of the wettest doughs, it should be shiny, bouncy, and feel sort of . . . alive. That is, until you bake it dead.

How I've Screwed This Up

You're going to find that most of my follies and foibles in bread—and in life—revolve around impatience and inconsistency. Does it *really* need to prove that long? Do I *really* need to measure by weight instead of cups? Should it *really* be this wet? Do I *really* need to knead it this long? "It's probably been long enough," "cups are close enough," "I should add some flour"—these are the death rattles of loaves the world over, and I've killed my fair share.

Troubleshooting

MY DOUGH DIDN'T RISE DURING PROOFING. Your kitchen may be cold (less than 75°F), or your yeast may be dead. Double your proofing time, and if it still ain't puffing, you might be dealing with dead bugs. Add a teaspoon of your yeast to a cup of tepid (about 110°F) water and see if it gets all foamy—if not, toss it and get some new yeast!

MY FOCACCIA DIDN'T RISE IN THE OVEN. Sounds like a cold oven to me—get a cheap oven thermometer and make sure it's reaching the target temp.

MY CRUST CAME OUT FLAT/DIDN'T BROWN WELL. Once again, sounds like your oven is running cold. The combination of the sprayed water and hot Dutch oven should produce a positively crackling crust. Lack of bubbles/color could point to the loaf not cold-fermenting long enough.

MY CRUMB IS TIGHT/TENDER. This is a sign of either under-developed gluten or under-hydrated bread. Try giving it a couple more rounds of lift/folds, and make sure you're hitting the precise hydration ratio outlined in the recipe—the dough should be soft and slack.

MY FOCACCIA STUCK TO THE PAN. Not enough oil.

MY FOCACCIA IS OILY. Too much oil.





MAKES ONE 18-BY-13-INCH FOCACCIA

850 grams bread flour

680 milliliters water, at room temperature

2¼ teaspoons active dry yeast

2 tablespoons kosher salt

Light olive oil, for greasing

2 fresh rosemary sprigs, leaves removed

Flaky sea salt, as needed

In a stand mixer fitted with the dough hook attachment, combine the flour, water, yeast, and kosher salt. Mix on medium speed until the dough is fully combined, about 5 minutes.

Generously oil a large bowl with olive oil, add your dough, cover, and let sit for about 2 hours at room temperature.

Using a rubber spatula, scrape the dough stuck to the bowl and fold in toward the center.

Generously coat an 18-by-13-inch rimmed baking sheet with olive oil.

Coat the bottom of the dough with olive oil and transfer the dough to the prepared baking sheet. Using your hands, fold the dough onto itself a few times then spread the dough to the edges of the baking sheet. If the dough keeps springing back to the center, add more olive oil to the dough, cover with plastic wrap, and let it rest for 15 minutes. You may have to do it a few times, but the dough will eventually spread across the entire baking sheet.

Once the baking sheet is filled out, drizzle the dough with more olive oil, and then cover it with plastic wrap and let ferment overnight in the fridge, about 12 hours. If any bubbles form, just poke them with a knife, and using oiled fingers, pull the dough just off the edges of the baking sheet.

Coat the top of the dough with more olive oil, cover it with plastic wrap, and let sit at room temperature for about 1 hour. Uncover and dimple the dough with your fingers. Press the dough into the corners of the baking sheet then cover with plastic wrap and rest if necessary.

Meanwhile, preheat the oven to 450°F.

Drizzle the dough one last time with olive oil and sprinkle with the rosemary leaves and flaky sea salt. Bake until the focaccia is crisp at the edges and golden brown all over, about 30 minutes.

Transfer the focaccia to a wire rack for to cool, about 1½ hours.

Store any leftover focaccia in an airtight container at room temperature for up to 3 days, or in the refrigerator for up to 7 days.

