How to Turn your Oven into an Oven Instead of a Shoe Closet; A Beginner’s Guide to Stocking a Healthy Pantry

By Teri Skinner

Old Mother Hubbard went to the cupboard, to give the poor dog a bone; when she came there, the cupboard was bare, and so the poor dog had none. As the classic English nursery rhyme recounts, how often is it that we head to the cupboard, with doors agape hoping the answer to what’s for dinner, will somehow magically appear? Even better, that Betty Crocker herself will leap from the shelf, wooden spoon ready at the hand. What’s that? A knock on the door, oh look, it is Emeril Lagasse here to take over your kitchen and prepare a culinary delight that will WOW even the most finicky of palates. Likely not the scenario that will transpire, as the phrase, “what’s for dinner?” continues to gnaw at your will, driving you deeper and deeper into despair.

You’re a smart, talented individual; you have accomplished three days’ worth of work in the 13 hours since you sleepily crawled out of your warm and cozy bed at 5 am. Yet, that cupboard taunts you, your confidence is diminished, and the thought of preparing even the simplest of dishes, has put you in a catatonic state. Fortunately, you spot a local pizza joint menu on the counter, draw yourself back to reality, and order a large meat lovers and a side salad to ease the guilt, call your husband and let him know he can pick up dinner at Amoroso’s in 15 minutes.

On Friday as you bring the rubbish to the curb, you notice that the majority of items in your trash receptacle are Lean Cuisine packages or to-go containers from the various fast food joints that are strategically located along your route home, continuing to enable the anxiety you feel for your own kitchen. You ponder to yourself, is there such thing as a fear of cooking? Is there an actual food preparation phobia? I wonder if they have support groups. Non-cooks anonymous, support group for young adults who never learned to use a stove, survivor of my high school culinary arts program which was cut? What you have come to realize is that the consumption of food outside the home is pulling on your purse strings, increasing your waistline, and making you feel lethargic.
Don’t feel as if you are alone; since the 1950’s the prevalence of fast food establishments has increased. The current estimate rests at 50,000 fast food chains across America, and more than 500,000 worldwide. ¹ According to the United States Department of Agriculture in 2012 a reported 43% of the American population is consuming their meals prepared away from home. ²

In this moment of self-actualization you realize that you must conquer the beast dwelling within your own home. The kitchen will no longer provide a sense of trepidation; the phrase “what’s to eat?” will no longer send you scrolling through your favorite take-out establishments on your iPhone contact list. The excuses, “I don’t have time,” or “I don’t know how to cook,” will no longer be part of your vocabulary. You will tame this beast, and before you know it you will be the master of your domain, concocting and manufacturing delightful healthy treats with ease.

Tackling Julia Child’s Beef Bourguignon may not be the best choice for beginning cooks. Master smaller tasks, which build on larger components and before you, know it you’ll be presenting dishes worthy of the phrase “Bon Appetit.” Take heart in the fact that Family and Consumer Science Programs (Note the new term referring to the home economics course of most high schools) have been in a sharp decline.³ Young adults are prepped for college or the work force, yet have been exposed to very few life skills. Preparing and cooking nutritious food is a knack that few young adults possess.

**Keys to Success**

Be realistic, as with any new skill, time, patience, and practice will lead to confidence and victory in your culinary undertakings. Very little equipment is required to put good food on the table. Quality in product should be considered over quantity. I include gadgets in this category as well. Purchase tools that are multi-purpose. Don’t clutter your kitchen with gadgets that serve one purpose. Really, the avocado scooper, and the watermelon knife are two of my favorite NON-ESSENTIAL waste of your hardearned money gadgets that find themselves on the shelves of home goods stores, then land themselves in the junk yard of never used kitchen utensils.
Choosing the Right Foods

Choose foods that are whole. Avoid highly processed foods, especially those with more than five ingredients. Shop the perimeter of your grocery store; this is where you will find the healthiest of ingredients to add to your pantry. Choose foods that you know you will cook with. Arm yourself with a roadmap. Select a cookbook that visually leads you through preparation to the dinner table.

Roll up your sleeves and jump in...

Be fearless, it’s just food. Start small, master one recipe, and then move to another. The more you practice, the more confident you will become. Before you know it, your repertoire of recipes will surely exceed the amount of shoes you could store in your oven.

These are my go to cooking tools.

**Essential Cooking Tools:**

- **Cook Book:** A go to reference to help with the basics. Steer away from books that have lengthy ingredient and preparation lists. Recommendation: Mark Bittman-How to Cook Everything
- **Knives:**
  - Chef Knife: A kitchen essential. Used for most of food preparation
  - Paring Knife: Use for peeling. Small cuts.
  - Fillet Knife: Cutting, meat, fish, poultry

Recommendations:

- **Chef Knife:** Global $80/Wusthof $130/J.A. Henckels $55
- **Fillet Knife:** Dexter-Russell $20 / Wusthof $60/ J.A. Henckels $45
- **Paring Knife:** Wusthof $25/ J.A. Henckels $30

- **Cutting Boards:** Designate cutting boards for specific uses. Avoid cross-contamination.
  - **Green:** Fruits and Vegetables
  - **Red:** Raw Meat
- **Yellow**: Raw Chicken
- **White**: Seafood

- **Zester/Micro-planer**: Use for adding citrus zest to food. Perfect for adding bold flavor without the calories. Can also use for grating hard cheeses
- **Pepper Mill**: An essential for a cook of any ability. The trick is finding a good product. My favorites: Unicorn by Tom David, Inc. $45/ Penzy’s Peppermill $45
- **Miscellaneous**: Silicone rubber spatulas, wooden cooking spoons, digital thermometer, mesh strainers, liquid measuring cups, solid measuring cups, measuring spoons, peeler, box grater.
- **Pots and Pans**:
  - **Stock Pot**: 5.5qt-8qt Versatile pot, good for pastas, soups, & stocks
  - **Sauce Pan**: 2qt Making smaller dishes
  - **Sauté Pan**: 8”-10” Perfect for stir fries, sautéing veggies,

**Stocking the Refrigerator and the Pantry**

- **The Fridge**:
  - **Non-Fat Greek Yogurt**: Substitute for sour cream. As a snack; mix with fresh or frozen berries & granola. (Add honey or maple syrup as natural sweetener) Perfect for smoothies.
  - **Eggs**: One of the most versatile ingredients you can have in your arsenal. Learn to manipulate this little powerhouse of nutrients.
  - **Vegetables**: Choose a variety of colors and in season veggies to enjoy their peak of flavor. Go to veggies:
    - **Onions, carrots, celery**: The Holy Trinity. So many great soups, sauces, main courses humbly begin with the flavors extracted from these vegetables. Always have them on hand.
- **Fruits**: Choose a variety of color. Choose in season for freshest flavor. Frozen in off-peak. Banana is great in smoothies. Apples and peanut butter are a great snack.

- **All-Natural Peanut Butter/Nut Butter**: Good source of protein and healthy fat. Use in savory and sweet dishes.

- **Lean Cuts of Protein**: Chicken, pork, and seafood. Lean cuts of beef. Use sparingly.

- **Avocados**: Purchase green and let ripen on counter, or in refrigerator. Healthy fat. Versatile. Great substitute for fat in baked goods.

- **Fresh Herbs**: The best in the spring and summer. Add brightness to the end of your cooking. My favorites, Basil, thyme, cilantro, parsley.

- **The Pantry**
  - **Oils**: Extra-Virgin Olive Oil, Coconut Oil, Canola Oil
  - **Vinegars**: Many choices. Different uses.
  - **Grains**: Build your variety of grains. Most cook very similar to pastas, and keep well in the refrigerator. My favorites; wheat berries, quinoa, bulgur, and faro.
  - **Oatmeal**: Easy to prepare, hearty, can use in a variety of recipes
  - **Beans/Legumes**: Good source of protein. Easy to prepare, versatile. My favorites; black beans, chickpeas, white beans.
  - **Whole Wheat Pastas**: Quick
  - **Lentils**: Great in salads, soups & my favorite with scrambled eggs.
  - **Honey/Real Maple Syrup**: Natural sweetener.
  - **Stock**: If you can’t make your own, purchase low sodium versions. Great for quick soups, and sauces.
  - **Canned Whole Tomatoes**: Hello what shall we make with you today? A versatile product from marinara, to taco sauce.
  - **Kosher Salt**: Why? Typically no additives. Large course crystals that I can feel when seasoning. I can manipulate salt content in cooking.
  - **Peppercorns**: Really no substitute for fresh cracked pepper.
- **Seasoning:** Gosh so many, how do I choose? The key word is to *choose*, spices can be pricy, and there really is no need to have 25 in your cabinet when 4-5 will suffice, until you are more confident in the flavors they impart. If there is a particular cuisine you like, then choose spices that replicate those tastes.
  - **Mexican:** Cumin, Oregano, Cilantro, Chili Powders
  - **Italian:** Oregano, Basil, Red Pepper Flakes
  - **Indian:** Curries, Turmeric, Ginger
  - **French:** Thyme, Chervil, Lavender

**References**


