

SUMMARY

SALT FAT ACID HEAT

MASTERING THE ELEMENTS
OF GOOD COOKING

SAMIN NOSRAT



Summary of “Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat: Mastering the Elements of Good Cooking” by Samin Nosrat

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Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat colors outside the lines of the traditional cookbook by asking you to challenge everything you know about cooking through a guide that's part culinary interrogation and part cookbook.

Introduction	5
Salt is More Important Than You Think	6
Pepper is Important Too!	8
Don't Forget the Fat!	9
Mastering Crispiness	11
Balance Your Acids	13
Know Your Acids	14
Heat is Critical for Cooking Protein	15
How to Make a Great Tomato Sauce	16
Final Summary	18



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Introduction

It's been said that anyone who can read can cook. And although that's technically true, this mentality eliminates the fun and stimulation of engaging with the cooking process. The same is true of rigidly following a recipe which, sadly, is how most people cook. And if you're now asking how else you're supposed to cook anything, then you need to keep reading! Because following a recipe is boring. It also requires you to put an unprecedented-- and sometimes even unearned-- level of trust in a cook you probably don't know. For example, why are you adding three pinches of salt? For no other reason than that he told you to.

Although there's definitely a reason why you should use a specific set of tools, ingredients, and procedures, following a recipe will never unlock those secrets for you, which means you'll stay in the dark for most of the cooking process. And as you attempt some more complicated recipes, those processes are likely to become more intimidating and more mysterious, depriving you of the pleasure, confidence, and creativity of preparing a truly masterful dish. That's why this book exists: to unlock those hidden mysteries of cooking and help you become involved in the process in a way you've never been before.

Salt is More Important Than You Think

We all know salt is vital for cooking and adds some amazing flavor, but did you know there's a right and wrong way to salt your food? And are you aware of the importance of salting your cooking water? Understanding the logic behind our use of salt can help you harness its power in your cooking and to help with this, we'll look at an example involving green beans. So, let's say you're really skimpy with the salt when you're boiling green beans. Maybe you even fail to add salt in your cooking water at all. Doing that would mean that the mineral level of your water is lower than the mineral level in your beans. And because your beans, even while cooking, are trying to achieve balance, the minerals from your beans will drain out into the water, leaving your green beans virtually tasteless.

However, by simply adding a good pinch of salt to your water, you can season your beans from the inside and keep the mineral balance in check. Doing this will also help to soften the beans, help them cook faster, and help them to hold onto their chlorophyll cells, enabling them to stay a nice, fresh green. Who knew a little bit of salt could do so much! However, we can't acknowledge the powerful benefits of salt without also keeping in mind the need for caution. Because different dishes require different amounts of salt for them to taste right, it's important that you never dump a load of salt into everything you cook without regard for the nuances of flavor. And when you're assessing how much salt a recipe requires, you'll also want to be aware of the appropriate salting methods.

One option is to salt by the palmful. This method is practiced exactly the way it sounds and simply involves adding large amounts of salt to your dish with little flicks of your wrist. Use this method when salting water to boil pasta and vegetables and be conscious of the fact that your goal should be to make the water taste almost like saltwater. However, if you're working with roasted vegetables or meat, you'll want to take an entirely different approach. In this case, you'll want to wag your wrist rather than flick it, and

you'll definitely use less salt. So, imagine that your hand is a salt shaker and slowly, gently wag your wrist back and forth to evenly salt the entire tray.

For the third method, however, you'll simply use a pinch of salt. This should be your practice with small appetizers such as hard-boiled eggs and in this case, you're literally going to pinch some salt between your fingers and sprinkle it lightly over your dish.

Pepper is Important Too!

Salt is universal because of its versatility. Unlike many other spices, it can be used in sweet dishes as well as savory ones. In fact, it's so flexible that it can even be used in tandem with sugar, complementing and enhancing a dish's sweetness. You can test this for yourself by baking cookies! Although you may have noticed that many cookie recipes call for salt, you can compare by splitting your cookie dough into two batches: one which uses salt and one that doesn't. When you do this, you'll notice that the cookies which contain salt have a variety of flavors you won't find in your unsalted cookies. Subtle nuances like nutty, buttery, or caramel flavors are enhanced through the use of salt and although we may not realize it, we'd actually like cookies a whole lot less if they didn't have salt! Again, however, remember that caution is key, so don't be too liberal with the salt in your cookie-making.

You should be even more cautious with salt's dear friend and partner, pepper. Although the two are always paired together, they do not function the same way. (Pepper, for example, would be a terrible substitute for salt in a cookie recipe!) Because pepper lacks the versatility of salt, it's often confined to specific types of cuisine or used more heavily in certain regions of the world. French and Italian dishes, for example, use pepper liberally, but you're unlikely to find it on the menu in a Moroccan or Middle Eastern dish.

Don't Forget the Fat!

Where would be without cooking fats? We've tried to imagine a world without butter, but frankly, we'd rather not. A world without olive oil is equally unappealing and that's because oils and fats are essential flavor enhancers. They work because when you cook with oil-based fats, they soak up the flavor of your dish's juices while it cooks. Then, when you bite into the food, that flavorful oil envelops your tongue in a bath of sensation. As such, it gives both your cooking and eating experiences an extra boost they might never otherwise enjoy!

That's also why you should always add aromatic cooking ingredients-- think cinnamon, vanilla, or anything else that has a really powerful smell-- directly into your cooking oil. Most recipes for sweet treats will direct you to add your sweetest and most flavorful ingredients right into your butter or eggs before mixing them with anything else and this is precisely because they're trying to maximize the power of cooking fats. So, by all means, take advantage of your fats and use them for their maximum potential, but in so doing, make sure you also get to know the range of fats at your disposal. Because all oils are not created equal, pay attention to your dish and especially to the region it comes from.

For example, high-quality olive oils are integral for many Mediterranean or Middle Eastern recipes. And because the specific type of oil you use matters, make a special effort to avoid careless substitutions which could compromise the flavor. But now you know that you definitely don't want to skimp on a low-quality olive oil, you might be wondering how to tell which ones are high-quality in the first place.

To assess this, there's only one real way to test: you simply have to taste it! You don't have to be an olive oil connoisseur either! Just think of it like a wine tasting and be aware of a few specific qualities to taste and smell for. A high-quality olive oil should, above all, smell fresh, pungent, and spicy. It should also have distinct notes of flavor that you definitely won't find in

your average Wal-Mart off-brand oil. (Trust me, you'll know the difference when you taste it). You'll also be able to tell that a waxy or overwhelmingly greasy oil is either low quality or spoiled.

Mastering Crispiness

Think about the types of food descriptions that inspire you to try something. You probably don't have to think too long or hard before realizing that "crispy" is pretty high on the list. That's because pretty much everybody loves crispy food, but most people don't know how you achieve that ideal crispiness we crave. And that's where cooking fat saves the day yet again. However, in the case of crafting crispiness, there's also an exact science behind the method.

The best way to summarize that science is to establish that in order to make your food appropriately crispy, you want to evaporate all water from its surface. So, to do that, your entire surface temperature needs to be greater than 212 degrees Fahrenheit. But because the surfaces of most pans aren't necessarily even, you'll need a secondary substance to run interference for you between the gaps. That's where your cooking oil comes in. Oil can safely reach temperatures of up to 348 degrees Fahrenheit and it will keep your food from sticking to the pan, not to mention its ability to turn your meat or vegetables that beautiful crispy golden-brown!

Now that you understand the science behind crispiness, here's how you put it into practice. First, get your pan and oil hot enough. You can do this by preheating the pan before you pour in the oil. Only once the oil begins to reach the right temperature should you then add your ingredients. The next step is to give your pan and oil enough space. That means only cooking one layer of food at a time instead of cramming multiple pans of fried chicken on top of each other for efficiency's sake. Doing so will reduce your oil's temperature and compromise the entire process, so just take it slow and stick to one pan.

And lastly, remember the Goldilocks rule: not too hot, not too cold, just a temperature that's just right. This is especially important when cooking any meats because if you get it too cold, you run the risk of your meat becoming either too soggy or overdone in places. If the oil is too hot, however, the

exact opposite will happen; the surface of your meat will burn and the interior will be undercooked and inedible. So, as a rule of thumb for knowing how to get it just right, remember that your oil should shimmer but not spit. And to know what that perfect shimmer looks like, you'll just have to practice!

Balance Your Acids

You might hear the term “mouthwatering” everywhere in food reviews, but it’s more than just fluffy hype! We crave foods that make our mouths literally produce more saliva in response to their flavor. That’s why we love acidic foods! But if we were to eat acids on their own without anything to balance them, it would be a very different story. That’s why it’s better to play to acid’s real strength: its ability to enhance the flavors of other foods.

Lemonade is a great example of acid at work. Because instead of simply mixing water with acidic lemon juice-- which would be sour and disgusting!-- we wisely mix the flavor of that lemon juice with some sugar, creating a delicious lemonade that balances both sour and sweet. So, when cooking with acid, remember that you can combine it with a variety of different flavors ranging from sweet to spicy to bitter, but you should also be aware of the chemical properties of acid. Because acid can physically harden the skins of ingredients like vegetables, be advised that cooking with acids will make some things take longer to cook. But that doesn’t have to be a problem; simply plan ahead and give your veggies a little extra time to cook.

However, if you’re cooking beans for a dish that will contain a vinegar or lemon juice-based sauce, remember that the acids in your sauce will harden your beans. You can prepare for this as well and just overcook the beans a little so they harden into the right texture when the acid hits them.

Know Your Acids

Now that you know how to balance acids with other flavors, the next step is distinguishing between “cooking acids” and “garnishing acids” and knowing which type to use first. These are the two basic types, functions, and stages of using acids, and you’ll need to start with cooking acids first. As you might have already guessed, cooking acids are the ingredients you use during the active cooking process. Examples of cooking acids include white wine, vinegar, or tomatoes. Although they are mild, they add a distinct component to your dish’s overall flavor, and they work by slowly infusing your meat or sauce with flavor over the course of the cooking process.

But once the cooking acids have worked their magic, you can turn your attention to some garnishing acids. Although these may not be necessary if your cooking acids have seasoned the dish as well as you’d hoped, garnishing acids can be great in a pinch when you need a little extra acidity. Lemon juice, for example, is a wonderful and aromatic garnishing acid, but that also means it’s highly volatile. Squeezing it too long before serving will cause all its flavor particles to disperse into the air, so to maximize flavor, make sure you squeeze just before you to serve.

Heat is Critical for Cooking Protein

Of course you know the importance of heating your oven to the right temperature in cooking, but you might not be familiar with its specific effect on foods that are rich in protein. To understand this concept, think of proteins as a ball of thread floating in water. If you heat the water, the threads will begin to loosen and drift apart, but if you allow the water to stay static and cold, your threads will clump together, choking out the water. This is what can happen if you overcook something like scrambled eggs. So, to identify the best method of cooking protein-rich foods, try this example.

Start by whisking four eggs together, adding a pinch of salt and an acid like lemon juice. Melt a little butter in a saucepan on very low heat and then add your eggs. Stir them continuously while they cook, and as you do so, add four tablespoons of butter that have been split into chunks. Continue this process until the eggs begin to fuse. When they do so, that's the moment you should take it off the stove. Although we most often leave our pan on the stove, continuing to stir after the eggs have fused, this is in fact unnecessary. By this point, you already have enough heat and this will linger in the pan, continuing to cook the eggs.

The key takeaway here is that you should think about heat not only while you're cooking but before you start cooking, as anticipating things like the continued heat of the pan can help you adjust your process for the better. Likewise, failure to account for the impact can derail your dish entirely. To remember the value of this, imagine if you literally took a chicken from the fridge and put it immediately in the oven without preheating or accounting for the gradual buildup of heat. This would mean that your chicken breast would already be overcooked by the time the legs even begin cooking and the end result would be a pretty much inedible chicken. So, be conscious of your temperatures at all times!

How to Make a Great Tomato Sauce

If your previous experience with tomato sauce primarily involves a can of Ragu from the grocery store, this hack will transform you until you're almost on par with an Italian chef. That's because crafting a great tomato sauce requires the perfect marriage of salt, fat, acid, and heat. And although it's a lot easier than you might think, the one trick is to get the details just right. So, using everything you've learned from this book so far, begin by preheating your saucepan to a medium-high heat and then add a thin layer of olive oil. Once your oil begins to sizzle, add two sliced onions and some salt.

Remembering that the heat in your pan will linger, lower the heat to medium and let your onions cook for about 15 minutes. Wait until they get just the slightest hint of golden brown and then slide them to the other side of the pot. Shifting your focus now to the middle of the pot, add some more oil and four cloves of sliced garlic. Let the garlic cloves sizzle for no longer than 20 seconds before you add four pounds of fresh sliced tomatoes. Begin crushing the tomatoes with a wooden spoon to let out some of their juices and then turn up the heat, bringing your sauce to a boil. Once your sauce starts boiling, bring it down to a nice, easy simmer and add some more salt along with herbs like basil.

This stage sounds like you're pretty much done, right? But if you're thinking there's nothing left to do now, think again! While you are in the home stretch, you're also in the danger zone as this is the point where your sauce might start burning. The solution to keeping your sauce safe is simple, though: keep stirring to avoid a sticky situation! Once your sauce has simmered for about 30 minutes, it's time to return to your fats. Add six ounces of olive oil into the sauce and let it simmer on medium for a few more minutes. And then you're finally done! Although that may sound like a lot of steps for a simple tomato sauce, Nosrat guarantees that the result will speak for itself, re-asserting that unparalleled deliciousness comes from

nothing more than the simple, skillful combination of salt, fat, acid, and heat.

Final Summary

The key takeaway is that cooking doesn't have to be complicated. Neither does it have to involve religious adherence to recipes. Instead, you simply need to understand how to skillfully manipulate salt, fat, acid, and heat to get the tasty results you want. By putting the right amount of salt in your cooking water, knowing the right cooking fats to use, and balancing acids wisely, you can revolutionize your entire cooking experience.



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