

Simply Scratch: 120 Wholesome Homemade Recipes Made Easy

By Laurie McNamara

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Eventually, she'd had enough and vowed to remake her kitchen into a from-scratch kitchen. Now, five years later, McNamara has helped hundreds of thousands of home cooks prepare from-scratch meals with whole-food ingredients through her blog, *Simply Scratch*.

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Simply Scratch will be the must-have bible to cooking beyond the box and can. Featuring a down-to-earth approach and family recipes that use everyday ingredients, *Simply Scratch* proves cooking from scratch can be affordable, simple, fun, and—of course—absolutely delicious.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Laurie McNamara started her blog, *Simply Scratch*, in February 2010. Four years later, *Simply Scratch* logs more than 300,000 unique visits every month and has been featured on *Good Morning America*, in *Woman's World*, and on Jamie Oliver's blog, and the audience continues to grow. McNamara is also a recipe developer, taster, and food photographer; she partners with companies such as Simply Organic, Fair Trade USA, STAR Fine Foods, and The Pampered Chef to develop recipes, special blog posts, and hosted giveaways through *Simply Scratch*. McNamara is a member of the BlogHer network and is an active participant in the larger food blogging community. Before *Simply Scratch*, McNamara worked for years as an emergency unit care coordinator in her local hospital's emergency room.

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Acknowledgments

Introduction

It all started thirtysomething years ago. I grew up in Ortonville, Michigan, a small rural town in the northern part of Oakland County. Imagine your left hand is the state of Michigan; if you were to hold it up in front of you, Ortonville would be an inch over from where the crook of your thumb and first finger meet. Ortonville was (and still is) primarily made up of dirt roads, farms, and a quaint little downtown with that small-community feel. When I was a girl, there were no major shopping malls or fast-food chains, not unless you count the A&W drive-in and the Frosty Boy where we'd get ice cream after T-ball games. The lone family restaurant in town had the absolute *best* breadsticks and kiddy cocktails ever. Next to that, there was a small grocery store. Ortonville, Michigan—it was a small town.

My parents packed up and moved from the city so they could build a beautiful two-story home on a two-acre lot. It was the perfect place to raise a family; there was plenty of space for us kids to run wild, the horses had a small pasture to roam, and we grew a beautiful garden. Our property was complete with a horse corral and a tack room, which held the hay, feed, bridles, and essential grooming gear. The tack room floor was scattered with hay, and my sisters and I spent many afternoons playing there. These days, I can't breathe in the smell of hay and not think of that place and the countless hours I spent playing in it as a young girl.

Growing up on a farm meant my family had access to the freshest foods and produce. This was one of the many perks of living where I did. Rather than buying eggs at the local market, we had only to stroll out to the chicken coop to collect fresh ones. It's easy, if not tempting, however, to think that collecting fresh eggs from chickens is a leisurely activity—movies would have you believe that all you need to do is lift up the roof of a chicken coop and take a freshly laid egg straight from a plump hen's nest. Actually, it's quite the opposite: my family kept a rooster, and we had a deeply rooted fear of him and tried to dodge his attacks

while we collected eggs. He'd come after you in a heartbeat. Thankfully, I was too young to collect the chicken eggs; my oldest two sisters had the unlucky responsibility of handling that job. I remember a particular time when they escaped from his clutches, bleeding. I never envied them this chore. That said, I've never tasted better eggs in my life.

One of the greatest treasures from my childhood was our family garden. I spent many summer days wandering through the rows of vegetables, fruits, and flowers. I recall my parents planting rows of corn, russet potatoes, green beans, peas, carrots, and tomatoes, but my absolute favorite parts of the garden were the strawberry patch and raspberry bush. When I was a kid, you'd find me outside at all times riding my bike, catching frogs, and snatching a berry or three (or five) while on my way to our rickety metal swing set. Every once in a while—if we were lucky—my parents would allow my sisters and me to pull a carrot straight from the soil to eat fresh. We'd rinse it off with the garden hose and plop down on the deck steps to eat our prize. Of my many wonderful memories, these moments are among my favorites.

When I was indoors, I was keenly aware of all the smells coming from our kitchen. My mom's cooking was magical, to say the least—she knew how to make three unbelievably delicious meals a day for a large family, sourcing most of the ingredients straight from our backyard or nearby co-op.

I loved coming home after a day at school to discover we were having baked chicken for dinner that night. I could smell it just moments before entering the house: the wafting scent of spices and baking chicken would linger outside our front door. It was a comforting smell. Some of my earliest food-obsessed memories start at my mother's counter. I'd pull up the rusty brown step stool to watch her hands while she kneaded pizza dough, frosted a cake, or stirred a pot of sloppy joe sauce. I can still remember the feeling of the nonslip, sandpaperlike grit under my bare feet while I "helped" my mom in the kitchen. Even today, her pizza remains one of my favorite dishes: just like when I was growing up, she makes it with a deep golden crust and the perfect smattering of toppings and cheese. She always wore her deep blue and goldenrod-trimmed floral apron, which she recently passed down to me, and never failed to turn out the perfect pizza.

If we were lucky, a homemade dessert would find its way onto the table at the end of a meal. (My fingers were permanently crossed for her Mississippi Mud Pie—you can find the recipe here.) The irony of it all, however, is that I was such a picky eater—I was the child who hated cooked vegetables; spices always felt too strong on my tongue; baked potatoes induced gag reflexes in my throat (I'd even hide whole bites of it in my milk glass and just eat the pats of butter instead); and tomatoes, which in my young mind were sour tasting, would always remain around the edge of my salad bowl. If my mom wasn't home to cook a meal, that would put my dad on dinner duty. And boy, did I put him through the wringer (I knew better than to give my mom a hard time), whining about how I didn't want whatever it was he was making for dinner that night, begging him to just make me a peanut butter and jelly sandwich instead—because, truthfully, I could have eaten those every single day. I still could, actually. . . .

As I grew older, I became less picky. Trying new foods like cheesecake for the first time were big moments for me. I'd always been too stubborn to try it because, as a kid, I couldn't begin to comprehend what kind of cake could possibly taste good with *cheese* in it. (I could kick myself for the years I wasted refusing to try it!) I've requested cheesecake for every birthday or gathering since that first fateful bite. Guacamole was another one: it was green; therefore, for a long time I thought it was gross. But once I dragged a crisp, salty chip through it and took a bite, I was sold—now my family eats guacamole or avocado dip at least twice a week (even my husband loves it, and he was a guacamole hater until he met me).

So, as my palate and I both matured, my desire to cook and explore my family's cooking traditions grew, too. I fell in love with the feel of chopping vegetables, the sound of sauce simmering, and the sense of triumph as I'd pull a homemade cake out of the oven. I'd be doubly happy (or impressed with myself!) if the

cake was delicious and moist. In high school, at age fourteen, I met Pat, my future husband. Like me, he is one of the pickiest eaters I've ever known. He's pickier than I ever was, if that's even possible. To this day, if a recipe gets a thumbs-up review from him, I know it's a hit and I not-so-secretly jump for joy.

In my early twenties, I found I'd lost sight of my roots when it came to food. I was a young wife and mother working a full-time job and raising two little girls. I wanted to provide my family with substantial meals, reminiscent of the ones my mother would prepare when I was growing up. I did my best to achieve this, despite how difficult it was to regularly cook three fresh meals a day. Like most American families, I relied on boxed meal substitute, canned soups, processed foods, boxed baking mixes—the list goes on and on. It was only a short time ago that I had a bit of a revelation, though. One day, while I was reaching into my pantry for a box of brownie mix, a simple life-changing thought dawned on me: *This is not how my mom used to do it.* It was a visceral moment. I felt disappointed that I was not cooking healthier meals, that I was letting my girls eat hyperprocessed foods as frequently as, if not more often than, fresh fruits and vegetables. I remember asking myself right then, *When did it become the norm that brownies come from a box?* Then more questions reverberated through my head as I looked at my pantry: *How is it that canned soup is the only way to make a dish creamy and luscious? And does spaghetti sauce have to come from a jar, or is there another way?* My mother used to grind her own wheat into flour in our pantry, and there I was making brownies from a mix.

Then an idea flooded through me: I knew right then and there that I needed to find a way to make these things, everything, from scratch, just as my mother had. I made a pact with myself to do this, and while I knew I didn't have all day to prepare our meals—heck, I was a mom and I worked a full-time job—I was determined to find a way to eliminate as many boxed, canned, and prepackaged mixes and ingredients from my kitchen as possible. I was going to reinvent the term “from scratch” and make my kitchen into one just like my family had when I was growing up.

As the years rolled on, I attempted all kinds of recipes, including ones for household basics such as breads, barbecue sauce, mayonnaise, and ketchup. I adapted some of my mother's treasured classic recipes for my own kitchen, and I dreamed up new ones to share with my girls. I took inspiration from cookbooks and restaurants or from meals with friends and family for new dishes or techniques I'd never tried before. I wrote all my successful recipes down in a red composition notebook, and my collection grew rapidly over time. My goal was to develop strategies to maintain a purely from-scratch kitchen, so that our family could eat affordably, conveniently, and more healthfully. Slowly but surely, I successfully removed all hyperprocessed foods from my kitchen. In early 2010, I started my blog, *Simply Scratch*, to chronicle my from-scratch adventure and share it with friends and family. I quickly realized that people were shocked (impressed?) not only that I was attempting to cook exclusively from scratch, but that I was succeeding. I wanted to show them just how easy a whole-food, from-scratch lifestyle was, and the result has been incredible. *Simply Scratch* has walked thousands of home cooks—moms and dads, novice and experienced home chefs, and foodies—step-by-step through my favorite from-scratch recipes. With hundreds of recipes in my archive, my blog has become a go-to resource for home cooks as they plan their meals throughout the week. My blog is my creative outlet, my passion. It humbles me to be connected with readers around the world who write to share their success at making their first recipe from scratch or from those looking for healthier alternatives to avoid additives in prepackaged or canned ingredients. With the success of my blog, I was able to quit my full-time job to blog exclusively, and I've never looked back. It's a dream come true to be writing this book and to share with you the recipes I hold near and dear.

I've always believed food forms the bonds that make our memories and family connections. It's very important to me that we all sit down for dinner every night and that Sundays are our family breakfast day. My favorite thing in the world is having my girls help me cook in the kitchen just like I used to help my mom. I find inspiration in everything around me, from seasonal fruits, vegetables, and the herbs that grow in

my garden, to dishes I've had at restaurants that I simply *have* to make at home because they were so delicious. Basically, I like to cook the meals that I like to eat (who doesn't, right?), and this book is a reflection of that.

In the beginning of this cookbook you will find recipes for simple pantry basics such as mayo, ketchup, starches, and sauces, items that we all typically buy every week. You'll have the option to make these from scratch and to use them throughout the recipes that follow. You can't go wrong with any of these DIY basics. They're simple, approachable, and without a doubt delicious. To those who fear cooking from scratch is too challenging, I promise you that once you nail down the basics and properly stock your pantry, you'll soon realize that making homemade meals can become as second nature as breathing. Just take your first step. Soon you'll be high-fiving yourself after a darn good 100 percent from-scratch meal!

Since that fateful day with the brownie mix, it has always been my goal to use fresh, healthy ingredients and to cook from scratch. I hope you enjoy the many scrumptious recipes in this book, as they are tried and true, from my kitchen to yours.

—LAURIE

CHAPTER ONE

Basics

The Scratch Pantry

My pantry wasn't always a *scratch pantry*. If we were to teleport back in time to just six years ago and land smack-dab in the center of my old kitchen, my cooking—and my life—would be in stark contrast to what it is today. First, it would literally be a different kitchen, since we moved a few years ago. But you'd also see clearly that I seriously lacked confidence as a home cook.

My old, white-veneered, plywood pantry cabinet was a very well-loved and well-used treasure from Target, but it also was a mess. It was stuffed, in no order, with cans of cream-of-whatever soup, jars of premade pasta sauce, baking supplies, not to mention several opened bags of chocolate chips crammed into ziplock baggies (to satisfy my occasional craving for a spoonful of peanut butter topped with chocolate chips). There was also a basket filled with jarred herbs, spices and spice blends, boxes of macaroni and cheese, eight different kinds of cereal, and usually a box of brownie mix. Okay, so maybe two boxes, *plus* a tub of frosting. I cringe. My husband once used the term “food hoarder” to describe me, and while I try not to say this *too* often, he was completely right.

Today, I would proudly show you my pantry and cupboards: they're tidy and organized, and over the years they've been transformed into well-stocked shelves with crucial from-scratch cooking necessities. No canned soups, boxed mixes, or jars of sauce. (I've even got a shelf dedicated to lots of different vinegars. Some habits are hard to break, and buying infused vinegars is a weakness of mine. . . .)

But it took a while to get from point A to point B. When I decided to start cooking exclusively from scratch, I faced a frustratingly simple (but terrifying) question: *Where do I even begin?* I vividly remember looking around at my kitchen while trying to decide what to do first. *Should I toss the Cheez-Its and frostings and cake mixes, and empty every square inch of my cupboard? Or should I just eat everything in sight so I'm not wasting all that money by throwing everything in the trash? Do I need to go to Bed Bath & Beyond and purchase every pot, pan, and kitchen tool known to man?* It seemed pretty daunting, even overwhelming, and

I was suddenly regretting never having a wedding shower. . . .

Right down to my cooking tools, I literally had to start from scratch.

But here's the best advice I learned to keep in mind as you get started: you don't have to make the transition all at once, but once you make the decision, begin making changes at your very next trip to the grocery store. Why wait? Transforming your kitchen to a from-scratch kitchen can be as easy as setting a goal to make one from-scratch recipe per week; just buy the ingredients (and any special tool you'll need) and from there you can slowly work your way up to more recipes. In the process, you'll build your scratch pantry and stock of kitchen tools, and gain the confidence to cook the basics and then the more complex recipes. Oh, and your skills at dicing and chopping will vastly improve. Going slowly is crucial to not getting overwhelmed and quitting. Trust me—it's that simple.

Pantry and Fridge Essentials

Once you are on your way, having a properly stocked kitchen is essential to making cooking from scratch a joy and a breeze (and not a frustrating endeavor). Below is a list of staple ingredients I always keep on hand in my scratch pantry. I'm not too picky: I don't buy the fanciest, most expensive brands (unless it's absolutely necessary). The bottom line is I do my best with what I can find and afford—you don't need organic this or certified that to cook from scratch. As long as you have a properly stocked pantry with the basic ingredients, you can pretty much make just about anything from scratch!

FLOURS

At one point in my life I had seven—count 'em—*seven* bags of flour in my cupboard. I kept unbleached all-purpose flour, whole wheat flour, whole wheat white flour, bread flour, self-rising flour, buckwheat flour, and cake flour. Yikes. (Looking back, I shudder.) I have since narrowed it down a smidge to three: unbleached, whole wheat, and buckwheat flour. If I ever need a different one, I'll just pick it up at the store when a recipe calls for it.

A note on storing flour: Once you open a bag of flour, the shelf life decreases, so if you aren't using flour regularly, a great way to keep flour fresh is to pour it into a freezer-safe container and store it in your freezer. Avoid storing flour in its original packaging because the paper bag is porous. The flour can absorb flavors from the freezer, or even the smell of the bag itself. (Yes, I learned this lesson the hard way.) I use whole wheat and buckwheat flours less frequently, so you'd most definitely find those in my freezer to keep them fresh longer.

FATS, OILS, AND APPLESAUCE

I'm pretty darn particular about which fats and oils I use to cook in my kitchen. It's probably the only thing I would say I have strong feelings about (in fact, I have to try my best not to preach about it too much). It's an ongoing joke in our house that we may run out of bread, but we always, *always* have butter. Darn right.

BACON FAT

One of my favorite things to talk about is bacon fat. It's an extremely versatile fat to keep on hand. I use it to grease pans for baked goods, sauté vegetables, fry eggs; really, the options are endless. I have two jars (no joke) in my fridge. The "refined" jar is bacon fat that I pour from the pan through a mesh strainer into a glass jar. This is a great substitute for butter when you want to kick up the flavor, and I use strained bacon fat for greasing baking dishes, brushing on corn on the cob before I grill it—seriously, try it—and for many other uses. The "unstrained" jar is unstrained bacon fat that I use for frying eggs, sautéing vegetables (for sauces,

chilis, stews, etc.) or for popping popcorn. It's purely a personal preference to use unstrained or strained bacon fat in cooking—you can never go wrong using either.

BUTTER

I keep my fridge stocked with both salted and unsalted butter. I use salted butter for spreading on bread or toast, or a pat on my baked potato. Unsalted butter is better for cooking and baking because you have more control of the salt content in your dishes and baked goods. In both the sweet and savory recipes here in the book, I use unsalted butter (unless otherwise noted).

LARD

I primarily use lard for searing large pieces of meat before braising or roasting. I also use it in my rolled dumplings, and it adds great flavor when making Skillet Refried Black Beans. I probably use it the least of all the fats listed here, but with its long shelf life, I always have it on hand for whenever I need it.

OILS

As far as oils go, I strictly use olive oil, grape-seed, coconut, peanut, sunflower, safflower, and sesame oils. I love safflower, coconut, and grape-seed oils for roasting and pan-frying, and olive oil for making salad dressings. I also use coconut oil for cooking pancakes, French toast, and in baked goods. For stir-frying, I prefer to use sesame, sunflower, safflower, and peanut oils, since their smoking points are high (450°F or higher) and they can handle serious heat.

I'd like to shine a spotlight on grape-seed oil, if I may. It's a multitasking oil. It's great for making homemade mayo (here) and peanut butter (you can find that recipe on my website), for example. You can also substitute it in virtually any baking recipe that calls for oil. I truly love this stuff. If you're shopping on a budget, I'd recommend you buy grape-seed, safflower, and olive oils, if you had to pick just a few. You can easily get by with these.

I'm personally not a fan of vegetable or canola oils, which usually are highly processed and treated.

APPLESAUCE

I know what you're thinking: applesauce wouldn't typically be found in the oil section of your grocery store (or other cookbooks!) *but* it's a great healthy alternative to oil in baked goods. I buy all natural, unsweetened applesauce and swap oil for applesauce in equal measures in recipes. It has always made me cringe to pour a cup of oil into a batter, so applesauce is my favorite healthy way to cut back on oil in a recipe. I especially love it in my Olive Oil Zucchini Bread.

DRIED HERBS AND SPICES

If I were to open my spice drawer and count all the jars of herbs and spices, the total number would be a staggering eighty jars. (And yes, I did just go and count them.) I'm a crazy person when it comes to making my own spice mixes and seasoning blends (see here), so I keep many herbs and spices on hand to avoid buying packets in the grocery store. If kept in an airtight container in a cool, dark place, ground spices can last from six to twelve months before they start losing their potency, whole spices and dried green leafy herbs for one to two years, and seeds for roughly three to four years. I'm like a revolving door when it comes to spices, and I rarely have to toss out any expired jars . . . which saves me lots of money.

If I *had* to pick only a handful of spices that I use most often, though, it would be pretty tough. But my top

five would be basil, oregano, paprika, cumin, and red pepper flakes. Oh, and chili powder—both ancho and regular—and vanilla and cardamom. Oops, that's nine. Oh well. Having these spices on hand at all times will help keep your cooking versatile, fun, and delicious, and you'll be able to tackle virtually any recipe.

My favorite spice brand is Simply Organic. I love the quality and strong flavor of their spices and herbs. As an added bonus, the lids of their crystal-clear jars are labeled with the name of the spice or herb on top, which helps me locate the jar I need much more quickly. For larger quantities and/or harder to find spices, I go to Penzeys, where I can find spices and herbs like lavender, sumac, Aleppo pepper, and fancy kinds of black pepper, to name a few.

FRESH HERBS

In the summer months, I keep a raised garden off my front porch. I grow my own rosemary, thyme, chives, basil, and oregano. I cook with herbs from these plants all summer long, and it's a sad day when fall rolls into winter and I have to pack it in. During winter months, you'll always find fresh flat-leaf parsley and cilantro in my fridge—I buy these from the grocery store. They add a boost of freshness, a pop of color, and a distinct herbaceousness that finishes off a dish nicely. If I need any other fresh herbs, I pick them up at the grocery store on an as-needed basis.

SALT AND PEPPER

I keep several types of salt in my pantry, mainly kosher salt, table salt, and sea salt. Lots of people have asked me, *What is kosher salt and how is it different from table salt?* The simplest, nonscientific answer I have is that kosher salt grains are larger and flatter than table salt. You use less because of this size, and when it's sprinkled on a hunk of meat (along with its BFF, black pepper), it will form a *great* crust. I also personally think kosher salt has a more subtle taste than regular old table salt. It's great in salad dressings, for baking, margarita making (truth!), and seasoning vegetables while they sauté in a pan.

I especially love large flaked sea salt for finishing a dish or sprinkling on warm, freshly baked chocolate chip cookies. I also keep fine sea salt around for making my recipe for All-Purpose Seasoned Salt. Of course, I have pink Himalayan salt, smoked sea salt, and truffle salt—but those are just extra-fancy ones that you really don't need . . . they're just fun to buy. Sorry, Pat!

VINEGARS

I love buying vinegars like most girls like buying purses or shoes. It's a fact that I have a shelf dedicated to vinegars. I make salad dressing and marinades so often that I love to switch it up by using different vinegars like pear or cabernet vinegar. But as a rule I always have balsamic vinegar, white wine vinegar, regular distilled vinegar, apple cider vinegar, and red wine vinegar on hand at all times. When you are making salad dressings or marinades, you can use almost any vinegar—I fully encourage you to explore and have fun! Just keep the measurements the same, and go for it!

NUTS & SEEDS

These add flavor and much needed texture to things like salads, cookies, and poultry and fish when crusted with them. I keep almonds, pecans, walnuts, and pine nuts on hand all the time. Always—*always*—store any and all nuts in the fridge. They have delicate oils in them that can become rancid over time if they're not stored properly. Ever taste a walnut gone bad? Well, it's not good.

I also have sesame, poppy, pepitas, ground flax, and shelled sunflower seeds, and I keep them stored in separate airtight containers in a cool, dark place. One tasty way to enjoy seeds in dishes is to toast them. To

do this, heat them in a dry skillet over medium-low heat until fragrant.

CITRUS

Basically, I'm talking about lemons and limes here, and on occasion oranges. Citrus adds a touch of acidity to salad dressings, acts as a tenderizer in marinades, and can brighten up an overly rich or overly flat dish. I also love to use their zest in baked goods or to make my own citrus salt blends. A squeeze of lime over Broiled Chili-Lime-Crusted Tilapia is where it's at. I always keep a lemon or two in my fridge; they can last for a while and are extremely useful.

ONIONS & GARLIC

Onions and garlic are key ingredients for adding flavor when you cook from scratch. Nine times out of ten, a savory recipe will call for one, if not both of them. My grocery store carries a mixed bag of onions that I like to buy: it has a few yellow, white, and red onions, so this makes it easy to always have variety, and I don't end up with too much of any one kind.

I always keep fresh garlic on hand, too. I buy it from the bulk bin and try to stay away from the ones in the mesh sleeves. My experience is they sprout off easier and the cloves are always *so* tiny. Also, in my opinion jarred garlic does not taste the same as fresh garlic. As tempting as it is to buy the jarred variety to save yourself from having to mince—and more important, to keep your fingers from smelling like raw garlic—I strongly urge you to buy fresh, firm bulbs with tight skins and skip right on past the jar. You won't regret it.

Kitchen Tools & Equipment

Like most people, I slowly built my kitchen one tool and appliance at a time. It started in my early twenties when I received a blender as a baby shower gift so I could make my own baby food for my first daughter. Then, later on, my sister Julie bought me my very first *real* chef's knife and cutting board, and that helped grow my passion for cooking. I think—and I'm not sure *why*—most people might be upset to receive a kitchen tool or gadget as a gift from a spouse for their birthday or a holiday. I'm *so* not that person; I don't ask for anything else. Over the many years my husband and I have been together, Pat has bought me more treasured kitchen gifts than I can count, from my very first food processor to my Kitchen-Aid stand mixer. Here are some of my favorite tools. All of these will go a long way toward helping you keep a from-scratch kitchen with ease.

GARLIC PRESS

To say I am in love with my garlic press could possibly be a little embarrassing, but I *so* totally am. Not only does it get me out of having to mince, but it keeps my hands from smelling like garlic. I always use it, especially when I'm making a recipe that calls for finely minced garlic, or minced fresh ginger, even.

BOX GRATER

I'm so old-fashioned when it comes to my box grater. I use it for everything. Whether it's for grating zucchini, carrots, cheese, or even to finely grate onions, it's a tool I use almost daily. I've already had to replace several box graters because I dull them out. Bonus: Using this tool helps you work on toning your upper arms.

CHEF'S KNIFE

If your budget allows you to have only one knife—and one knife only—let it be a chef's knife. Paring, bread,

and Santoku knives are important and useful, but a chef's knife can be used for almost any task. When shopping, look for an 8-inch chef's knife made of stain-resistant carbon steel. As for a brand, we all would love to own a block of Shun knives, of course, but my last two sets have been Henckels and I absolutely adore them. They're affordable, the grips fit my hands perfectly, and they sharpen like a dream.

KITCHEN SCALE

The scale has proven to be another one of my useful kitchen gadgets. I use it for weighing dry ingredients for baked goods, as well as meat, cheeses, nuts—and pretty much anything else. I also find it handy for when I buy items like meat in bulk and want to break it down and package it by weight to store in the freezer.

CUTTING BOARDS

This may seem like a pretty obvious one, but I had to put cutting boards on the list. I love wood boards because they can easily convert into a nifty appetizer tray or bread and cheese server, which is particularly handy when you're entertaining. Maintenance is also easy enough: just rub food-grade mineral oil on them every six weeks. These inexpensive products are easy to find in most stores or online.

I use wood boards for everything except raw meat. For meat, I use a large plastic cutting board. It immediately goes in the dishwasher to sterilize after each use.

MESH STRAINERS OR SIFTERS

I have a set of nesting mesh strainers that I use for just about everything, since they are another multipurpose kitchen tool. You can use these for rinsing berries, herbs, lentils, and rice. I even strain the pulp out of my daughter's lemonade with one of these. Mesh strainers are also great for sifting dry ingredients when baking. Love them.

MEASURING SPOONS, CUPS, AND BOWLS

I sort of have a problem hoarding measuring devices (which is completely separate from my other obsession: hoarding serving bowls, foodie magazines, and vinegars!). In my opinion, you can't have too many measuring spoons or cups. There are so many times when I'm in the middle of cooking and I need to pause to rinse out a measuring cup that's already been used for another ingredient. It's just nice to have spares! I also don't like to take a teaspoon that has leftover vanilla extract in it (even after I give it a quick rinse) and stick it in the jar of cinnamon. As long as you have the space, you can never have *too* many measuring cups, spoons, or bowls.

Two sets of measuring cups and spoons will do the trick. (I have four sets of both measuring cups and spoons, which may be overdoing it a tad but has come in handy a time or two.) One set of measuring bowls or extra-large measuring cups is great for measuring large quantities of liquids, too, such as water for Homemade Broths. These are also great for mixing pancake or brownie batter.

FOOD PROCESSOR (REGULAR AND MINI)

I both hate and love my big, hunky, clunky, loud food processor. It's getting up there in years, and I may have to hold down the food chute for it to even work. If it wasn't for the fact that it makes preparing All-Purpose or Herbed Pie Crust (here and here) a cinch, or pureeing large batches of salsa a dream, then I would forgo it and stick with my mini food processor.

My mini food processor is perfect for whipping up small batches of salad dressings, making Homemade

Mayonnaise, chopping and blending herbs—there are millions of uses. I even use it to freshly grate Parmesan cheese for Spaghetti & Meatballs, and it makes my 5-Minute Avocado Spread as easy as can be. If you can't tell, I love it to pieces. It's a total *must-have* in the kitchen.

BLENDER

Since the demise of my thirteen-year-old Oster, I have purchased a high-powered Vitamix blender. It has made my smoothies ultra-smooth and soups more velvety than ever. If a Vitamix isn't in your budget, though, there are a ton of other brands that will do the job of pureeing, liquefying, and smoothing just fine. Be sure to buy a larger blender if you have the space so you can blend larger batches of soups, smoothies, and ingredients at once.

If you lack the space to house a blender, then an immersion blender is a great alternative for pureeing soups, applesauce, and even pesto!

STAND MIXER

While hand mixers are great for making Whipped Cream, Three Ways (here), I absolutely *love* my stand mixer. Not only does it handle my toughest cookie recipe like a champ, but it also shreds chicken and creams mashed potatoes like a dream. I can't imagine my life (or my kitchen) without this in it.

RICE COOKER

It's well documented on my website that I cannot make rice. I've tried it several times and it's either overcooked or way undercooked. The only way I can honestly say I make rice perfectly every time is with a rice cooker. Plus, it frees up the stovetop and will also keep the rice warm until the rest of the meal is ready to serve. Most rice cookers also have instructions on how to cook other grains like farro or quinoa. If you have the space, I highly recommend this life-saving appliance.

SKILLETS & SAUCEPANS

Obviously, you need pans to cook. I use mine pretty much every single day. My go-to pans are my set of All-Clad stainless steel that Pat bought me for our anniversary. I also rely on a set of Lodge cast-iron skillets in three different sizes. I love my small stainless 8-inch skillet for things like toasting nuts and spices, and my big 12-inch cast-iron skillet for searing off big hunks of meat.

DUTCH OVEN

I would like to thank Martha Stewart for turning me on to my first Dutch oven. I'm not exactly sure when it happened, but one day I was watching her intently wielding a large wooden spoon, sautéing onions with butter in her heavy, muted gray Dutch oven, and I knew at that moment that I needed to have one. I hit the lottery when I found a huge 5-quart red enameled cast-iron Dutch oven on clearance at Target. It isn't muted gray, but I love it all the same. Dutch ovens are great to use for big batches of chili, soup, or Beer-Braised Lamb Shanks.

ALUMINUM BAKING SHEETS

Whether it's baking cookies, roasting vegetables, or making garlic bread, a cook needs a set of sturdy metal baking sheets.

Tips for Easy, From-Scratch Cooking

Here's some advice for getting delicious from-scratch meals on the table quickly, and with your sanity intact!

REMEMBER YOUR MISE EN PLACE: This is just fancy talk for getting your ingredients prepped, measured, and organized before you even start cooking. It is a great time-saving practice: cooking will be less frustrating, and your cleanup will go by more quickly, too. Prep, prep, and do more prep so cooking can be a breeze.

CHECK EXPIRATION DATES: Checking the expiration or "use by" date on all ingredients is extremely important, but especially when it comes to baking. Expired baking powder and soda are the usual culprits for baked goods that turn out flat. These two ingredients do have a long shelf life, but if you don't bake a lot, the expiration date usually comes and goes before you realize it. Always keep an extra watchful eye on the expiration dates for yeast, baking soda, and baking powder.

ORGANIZE YOUR KITCHEN! I cannot express enough how it is extremely important to keep your cupboards, drawers, and pantry organized. While this is coming from the girl who never kept her room cleaned as a kid, a messy and disorganized kitchen is potentially dangerous, and keeping it clean should be taken seriously. Bonus: An organized kitchen will save you time as you cook and shop! Truly. You'll always know where to reach to find any ingredient, so you'll be able to quickly assess your fridge and pantry before each trip to the grocery store. Shopping lists will be a cinch. If your kitchen is organized, you'll never buy the same thing twice (and then have to find space for multiple packages again). Trust me on this; I was always notorious for buying an extra container of oatmeal or mayonnaise, because I couldn't see them hiding behind the mess in my pantry or fridge. You'll also save money if your kitchen is organized, simply because you'll never buy an ingredient you already have on hand.

PLAN YOUR MEALS IN ADVANCE: Another rule of thumb I follow is that I usually plan out a week of meals in advance. On a Sunday night, I will curl up with a pen and paper to draft a week's worth of meals. Once I have an idea of what I want to cook, I'll compile a list of all the ingredients I'll need. Next, I mosey on into my kitchen to catalog the ingredients I already have and what I might need to purchase on my next trip to the grocery store. Anything I need to buy is added to my list. This practice also helps me keep my pantry from getting low on any staple ingredient. By regularly and systematically checking in my pantry and fridge each week, I rarely, if ever, run out of a staple ingredient.

Simple Techniques

There are complicated recipes with a mile-long ingredients list, and then there are those recipes that aren't really a recipe at all. For example, hard-boiling eggs is simple enough, but some of us may need to google it just to remember how long they take to cook, right? (I've been there.)

Some of the "recipes" below are basics for everyday cooking; others are simple techniques that will take your from-scratch kitchen to new heights. You'll use them again and again in the recipes in this book, and they are fundamental for creating delicious from-scratch meals.

HARD-BOILED EGGS

I cannot tell you how many times I've hard-boiled eggs. All those Easters, all those salads . . . all those *eggs*! Every time I make them, I keep waiting to see the telltale olive green sign of an overcooked egg, and it just never happens. I'm sure there are a bunch of foolproof methods, but this is how I do it, and it works every time.

Place an even layer of eggs on the bottom of a pot. (Do not stack them or else they will end up cracking.) Fill the pot with cold water so it covers the eggs by an inch. Cover with a tight-fitting lid and bring to a boil.

Once the water is at a full boil, turn off the heat and set a timer for 12 minutes. Meanwhile, fill a bowl with ice and cold water. When the time is up, use tongs to remove the eggs and immediately submerge them in the ice bath to stop the cooking. Peel them and they are good to go!

BALSAMIC REDUCTION

I discovered reducing balsamic way too late in life. Then one time I mixed reduced balsamic with honey and drizzled it all over prosciutto-wrapped, Gorgonzola-stuffed dates. And then I ate the whole plate. The end.

Pour the desired amount of balsamic vinegar into a saucepan and grab a whisk. Bring the balsamic to a simmer over medium heat. Simmer until it has reduced by half. It will thicken as it cools and should have the consistency of molasses.

CORNSTARCH SLURRY (AKA THE *BEST* WAY TO THICKEN A SAUCE)

Sometimes a sauce can be too thin, and no amount of reducing will help it thicken. We've all been there. The best way to rectify this situation is by making a quick cornstarch slurry.

Combine 1 tablespoon cornstarch with 1 tablespoon cold water for every cup of liquid in the pan. (I just eyeball it.) Bring the sauce to a bubble, stir in the slurry, and cook for 2 to 3 minutes.

CHARRED PEPPERS

Charring peppers is a great method to inject a little smoky flavor into a recipe. Charred peppers make for great garnishes, too. It's also the easiest way to remove the skin from a pepper. I love to char jalapeños, red bell peppers, and poblanos.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Scott Ridgway:

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