



# HOW TO WINGIT IN THE KITCHEN

WITH THE RIGHT TOOLS AND A LITTLE KNOW-HOW,  
IT'S EASY TO GO FROM A RELIGIOUS RECIPE FOLLOWER  
TO AN ADVENTUROUS HOME COOK.



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Kitchen tools provided by Birmingham Bake & Cook Company



## YOU'VE GRADUATED FROM SEMI-HOMEMADE COOKING TO JULIA CHILD.

You've assembled a three-course meal for a dinner party. Maybe you've even baked your own bread from scratch. Well, now it's time to cook without a net. We're here to teach you how to wing it in the kitchen.

The ability to create an original dish without slavishly following a recipe is what sets good cooks apart from great ones. It's also a time-saver: No need for last-minute trips to the store for that missing ingredient when you're whipping something up from what you have on hand.

Confidence is the key to recipe-less cooking, says Laura Zapalowski. The Birmingham native helped create recipes for Emeril Lagasse's television shows and worked in the *Southern Living* test kitchens before she and her husband bought beloved restaurant Homewood Gourmet from Franklin Biggs last year.

"Nervous cooks are their own worst enemy," Zapalowski says. "There's a way to fix almost anything if you mess it up." Too salty or spicy? Add some potato or more liquid. Broken hollandaise or mayonnaise? Whisk in a cold egg yolk. Soup too thin? Run part of it through the blender.

This isn't to say that you should never open a cookbook again. Winging it means substituting an ingredient you like better (or just have in the fridge) for what the recipe calls for—and not worrying about it. Zapalowski says that one of her secrets to creating her own dishes is comparing two or three similar recipes and combining the best parts of each.

So here's our best advice to become a better improviser. Read on for lists of tools and ingredients you should have on hand, as well as three easy-to-remember formulas you can adapt easily to your own taste.

## TOOLS TO WING IT

The right equipment goes a long way to cooking tasty food. Here are some suggestions to add to your cabinets.

**Thermometer:** Zapalowski uses an infrared thermometer to check doneness of meats, oil temperatures for frying and even oven temps to ensure proper baked goods.

**Wok:** Besides being a necessity for a great stir-fry (see page 95), a large, capacious wok is useful for steaming and deep-frying as well. It's even possible to smoke small items in one.

**Microplane grater:** Much sharper than other graters, this tool is good for nutmeg, cinnamon, hard cheeses, citrus zest and plenty more.

**Blender:** Whether a tabletop model or a stick blender, one of these is essential for silky soups and sauces, breakfast smoothies and crushed ice for cocktails.

**Chef's knife:** It should be sharp and non-serrated. If you can't slice a tomato without squashing, it's time to get a new one (or have yours sharpened).



## COOK FROM YOUR PANTRY

Having one color on a painter's palette makes for boring artwork. It's the same way with flavors. Make sure you have some of these taste boosters in your kitchen.

**Herb plants:** Basil, thyme, rosemary and other herbs are great, but store-bought bags of them don't last long, and dried just isn't quite the same. A small herb garden on the windowsill or in the yard gives you access to however much you need of the fresh stuff whenever you need it.

**Oils:** You need a cheap, refined oil like soybean, vegetable, canola or olive (just plain olive, not extra-virgin) for most everyday uses. A high-smoke-point oil like peanut or safflower is good for frying. Flavorful, unrefined oils like extra-virgin olive, walnut or hazelnut are a must for tasty salad dressings. If you like Asian flavors, pick up a bottle of toasty dark sesame oil as well.

**Lemons and limes:** These fruits add an acidic brightness to dishes that vinegar or bottled juice can't match. And their zest is an oft-overlooked ingredient that can go into all sorts of dishes.

**Condiments:** "I have a lot of pickles, relishes and mustards in my fridge," Zapalowski says. "They're not very expensive and they're gonna last a while." A fiery chile paste like sambal oelek or sriracha is another good choice, as is an assortment of jams and jellies.

**Must-haves:** Oil (extra-virgin olive, dark sesame or a nut oil like hazelnut); acid (any kind of vinegar, or lemon or lime juice); salt

### Optional add-ins:

Sweetener (sugar, honey, maple syrup, molasses, jelly, etc.); emulsifier (mustard powder or egg yolk; this makes for a thicker dressing); dried or finely chopped fresh herbs; finely chopped garlic or shallot; anchovy paste; freshly ground black pepper

**Notes:** A trained chef will tell you that a vinaigrette is a 3:1 ratio of oil to vinegar. If you find that a little too

rich, try 2:1 or even 1:1 for a tangier salad topper. For a side salad, count on roughly 1 tablespoon of dressing per serving (2 for a main-course salad).

**How to make it:** Add the vinegar and a pinch of salt to a small bowl. Whisk in any add-ins you want until fully combined. Slowly drizzle in the oil while whisking. (You can also use a blender to mix everything together.)

## ALL-PURPOSE VINAIGRETTE

The simplest version of this salad dressing has three ingredients, but you can make it as complex as you like. This is so easy to make, we hope you'll never buy the bottled stuff again.





## GREENS PIE

This really tasty dish proves that you can even wing it for baked goods. The easy pie crust can be flavored with whatever herbs or spices you like, you can use any kind of cheese you have on hand and all types of greens—from kale to collards—work here. (Heck, you could even substitute broccoli or green beans or any vegetable you like—you just have to sauté them a little longer.)

**Crust:** 6 oz. flour (all-purpose, whole-wheat or a combination); 1 to 3 tsp. dried herbs or spices (smoked paprika is excellent, but use whatever you like); ½ tsp. salt; 4 oz. (1 stick) cold butter, cut into small chunks; 2 oz. ice water

**Filling:** 1 oz. bacon, pancetta, smoked sausage or other cured meat, cut into small pieces (optional); 1 medium onion, chopped; 2 garlic cloves, minced; 1 bunch greens, thick ribs removed, chopped; 3 eggs; ½ cup shredded cheese (any variety or combination of varieties); ½ tsp. salt

**How to make it:** Stir together the flour, herbs or spices and salt in a medium bowl. Cut in the butter using your fingers or a pastry cutter until the mixture has a sandy consistency and no butter pieces are larger than a pea. Add the ice water and stir until the dough comes together. Form the dough into a disc, wrap in plastic wrap, and refrigerate at least 15 minutes or up to 3 days.

Preheat oven to 400°. Heat a medium pan over medium heat. Add the cured meat, if using, and cook until crisp. (If not using meat, add about a teaspoon of oil to the pan.) Add the onion and cook until translucent, then add the garlic and cook for 30 seconds. Add the greens and cook until completely wilted. Remove from the heat and let stand for 3 to 5 minutes to cool slightly. Beat the eggs in a medium bowl and stir in the cheese, salt and greens mixture.

On a floured surface, roll the chilled dough into a circle about 2 inches wider than a 10-inch pie or tart pan (it should be about ¼-inch thick). Fit the dough into the pan and trim the edges. Pour the egg mixture into the pan and bake until the filling is cooked through and the crust begins to brown, about 30 to 40 minutes. Let cool for 5 minutes before slicing.

## STIR-FRY FOR FOUR

The key to this quick-cooking meal is having everything ready to go before you start cooking. The actual stir-frying part goes very quickly, so finish all the chopping and mixing first.

**Sauce:** Something salty/savory (soy sauce, fish sauce, black bean paste, etc.); something sweet (brown sugar, honey, mirin, etc.); something sour (rice vinegar, lime juice, tamarind paste, etc.); something spicy (sriracha, five-spice powder, chile oil, etc.); 1 tbsp. cornstarch, dissolved in 1 tbsp. water (optional, for a thicker sauce)

**Meat & Vegetables:** Oil (vegetable or dark sesame); ½ to 1 lb. protein of some kind, cut into roughly ½-inch cubes (chicken, beef, pork, shrimp, tofu, etc.); 2 lb. assorted vegetables that you like, chopped into roughly same-sized pieces (onion, bell pepper, carrot, broccoli, cauliflower, eggplant, summer squash, green beans, even canned veggies like bamboo shoots or water chestnuts); 2 to 4 garlic cloves, finely chopped (optional); ½-inch piece fresh ginger, finely chopped (optional)

**How to make it:** Stir together all the sauce

ingredients in a measuring cup, adjusting until it tastes good. You want ⅓ to ½ cup of ingredients total. Add enough water to make ¾ cup, stir and set aside.

Heat a wok or large skillet over high heat until very hot. Add a splash of oil and the protein, and cook, stirring constantly, until just cooked through (cook tofu until it starts to brown). Remove to a plate or bowl and season with salt and pepper.

Add any root or slower-cooking vegetables (onion, carrot, bell pepper, broccoli, cauliflower) to the pan, and cook, stirring constantly, until they begin to soften, 2 to 3 minutes. Add any remaining vegetables and garlic and ginger if using, and cook, stirring constantly, until everything is fully cooked, 3 to 5 minutes more.

Reduce the heat to low and pour in the sauce mixture and protein. Stir until everything is well-coated with sauce. (If you added cornstarch, the sauce will become thick and glossy.) Serve over cooked rice or Asian-style noodles. ●

