Kitchen Tips

The everyday tips we rely on most. Print it and keep it in the kitchen; all of them, with links to recipes, are at steakandseafood.com/kitchen-tips.htm.

PREP AND KNIFE WORK

Zest citrus without the bitter pith. Rub the fruit over a rasp grater or the smallest holes of a box grater, turning it as you go so you take only the colored skin. The white pith underneath is bitter. Zest before you juice; it is much harder afterward.

Get more juice from lemons and limes. Roll the fruit firmly under your palm on the counter before cutting it, or warm it in the microwave for 10 seconds. Both loosen the juice inside. Squeeze over your other hand to catch the seeds.

Peel garlic in seconds. Lay a clove on the cutting board, set the flat of a chef's knife on it and press down hard with the heel of your hand. The skin cracks and slips right off. Rub your hands on a stainless steel spoon or sink under running water to lift the smell.

Steady your bowl and cutting board. Set a damp dish towel or paper towel under a mixing bowl or cutting board so it cannot slide. A slipping board is how most knife accidents happen.

Weigh with a kitchen scale. Weighing flour is far more accurate than scooping, which can pack in a quarter more than the recipe intends. Set the bowl on the scale and add each ingredient straight into it: fewer measuring cups to wash.

Soften butter quickly. Cut cold butter into small cubes; they soften in about 20 minutes on the counter instead of an hour. The microwave tends to melt the center before the outside softens.

FRYING, SEARING AND ROASTING

Dry the surface before you sear. Pat meat, fish and scallops completely dry with paper towels. A wet surface steams instead of browning, because it cannot get hotter than the boiling point of water until the water is gone.

Heat the pan, then the oil. Preheat the pan, add the oil, and add the food when the oil shimmers. Food that goes into a cold pan sticks and turns gray. Then leave it alone; meat releases from the pan by itself once the crust forms.

Do not crowd the pan or the sheet pan. Leave space between pieces. Crowding traps steam, drops the temperature and turns browning into steaming. Cook in batches, or use two pans.

Fry at the right temperature. Most frying happens between 350°F and 375°F. Too cool and food soaks up oil and turns greasy; too hot and it burns outside before it cooks inside. A clip-on frying thermometer takes out the guesswork. No thermometer? A 1-inch bread cube should turn golden in about 60 seconds at 350°F.

Salt meat ahead of time. Salting steaks, chops and roasts at least 40 minutes before cooking, or the night before, seasons them through and helps them brown. Salting only a few minutes ahead leaves the surface wet; if you are short on time, salt right before cooking instead.

Use a thermometer, not a guess. An instant-read thermometer is the only reliable way to know meat and poultry are done. Cutting into meat lets juices out, and the "juices run clear" test is not dependable for chicken.

SAUCES, STOCK AND SEASONING

Make a pan sauce from the browned bits. After searing, pour off most of the fat, add wine, broth or even water to the hot pan and scrape up the browned bits as it bubbles. That is deglazing, and those bits are concentrated flavor. Simmer to reduce, then swirl in a little butter off the heat.

Thicken quickly with a slurry or a roux. For a fast fix, whisk 1 tablespoon of cornstarch into 2 tablespoons of cold water and stir it into the simmering sauce; it thickens in a minute. For gravy with body, cook equal parts butter and flour into a roux before adding the liquid.

Rescue a dish that is too salty. Add more of the unsalted parts: more liquid, potatoes, rice or vegetables. A squeeze of lemon or a spoonful of cream can help balance it. The old trick of simmering a raw potato to soak up salt does not work; it only adds a little liquid. There is no way to take salt out, so salt gradually and taste as you go.

Brighten flat food with acid. If a soup, stew or sauce tastes dull, a little lemon juice or vinegar often helps more than more salt.

Use dried herbs at one third the amount. One teaspoon of dried herbs replaces 1 tablespoon of fresh. Add dried herbs early so they soften, and tender fresh herbs at the end.

VEGETABLES AND SALADS

Roast vegetables hot and spread out. Toss them in oil and salt, spread them in a single layer with space between, and roast at 425°F. Crowded vegetables steam and turn soft instead of browning.

Blanch briefly, then shock. To blanch, boil vegetables just 1 to 3 minutes, until bright and barely tender, then plunge them into ice water to stop the cooking. It keeps green beans and broccoli vivid for salads and make-ahead dishes.

Revive limp greens and herbs. Soak wilted lettuce, celery or herbs in ice water for 15 to 30 minutes and they crisp back up.

PASTA, RICE AND POTATOES

Cook pasta in plenty of well-salted water. Use a big pot of rapidly boiling water and salt it well; it is the only chance to season the pasta itself. Stir for the first minute or two so it does not clump. Oil in the water is not needed and keeps sauce from clinging.

Save a cup of pasta water. The starchy cooking water helps sauces cling and turn glossy. Scoop out a cup before draining, and toss the pasta and sauce together with a splash of it.

Let rice rest, covered, off the heat. Keep the lid on while it simmers, then let it stand covered for 10 minutes. The grains

finish steaming and firm up, so they separate instead of turning sticky. For extra flavor, cook it in broth instead of water.

COOKING WITH WINE

Cook with a wine you would drink. It does not need to be expensive, just good enough to sip. Avoid bottles labeled "cooking wine": they are heavily salted and taste harsh.

Add wine early, then let it reduce. Pour it in after browning the meat and let it bubble down before adding the other liquids. Wine added at the very end tastes sharp and raw.

BAKING

Keep pastry ingredients cold. Cold butter makes flaky pastry; warm butter melts into the flour and makes it tough. Chill the butter, use ice water, and chill the dough before rolling.

Test yeast before you bake. Stir it into warm water (about 110°F) with a pinch of sugar. If it is not foamy in 10 minutes, the yeast is dead or the water was too hot.

Test baking powder and baking soda. Baking powder should fizz right away in hot water; baking soda should fizz in vinegar. Weak fizz means flat cakes.

Leave muffin batter lumpy. Stir just until the flour disappears. Overmixed muffin batter bakes up tough, with long tunnels inside.

KITCHEN SAFETY

Thaw meat in the refrigerator. Thaw meat, poultry and seafood in the refrigerator, or sealed in cold water changed every 30 minutes. Do not leave meat out on the counter to thaw for hours; for thin cuts in a hurry, use the metal-pot method below.

Thaw thin cuts fast between two metal pots. Metal moves heat far faster than a plate or a countertop. Seal a thin steak, chop or fish fillet (about 1 inch thick or less) in a zip-top bag, lay it flat on the bottom of an upside-down aluminum or stainless steel pot, and set a second pot filled with cold tap water on top. The metal and the weight press heat in from both sides, and a thin cut thaws in roughly 20 to 40 minutes instead of hours. Cook it right away, and keep this trick for thin cuts: thick roasts and whole birds still belong in the refrigerator or a cold-water bath.

Never store garlic or herbs in oil at room temperature. Homemade garlic or herb oil can grow the bacteria that cause botulism. Refrigerate it and use it within 4 days, or freeze it.

Cool leftovers quickly. Refrigerate leftovers within 2 hours. Divide big batches of soup or chili into shallow containers so they cool fast.