

Cooking Essentials

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Prior to weight loss surgery, my main method of cooking was usually breading and frying. Fried chicken, fried pork chops, fried fish. It didn't stop there either. I would bread and fry vegetables as well. Fried eggplant, fried cauliflower and of course, the ever popular, French fries.

When contemplating surgery, I knew my cooking skills would have to improve. I didn't know where to start so I concentrated on the immediate dietary changes that I needed to make and put my culinary skills on the back burner. I felt I would be able to get by for the first several months eating things like eggs, chili and tuna salad. But after about six months, those delicacies became monotonous and I was forced to venture into unknown territory.

What I learned, I taught myself. I invested in a subscription to "Cooking Light" magazine, I watched a lot of "The Food Network" and I spent time at Barnes and Noble's browsing the culinary section for what appealed to me. Not all cookbooks are user friendly. You have to find what will work for you. I experimented with many recipes from a variety of chefs and found that my favorites were Tyler Florence and Alton Brown. I invested in several of their publications and they have not disappointed me. We also love the outdoor barbecue. Another purchase I made was "Mastering the Grill: The Owners Manual to Outdoor Grilling." This book covers everything you need to know about the art of outdoor cooking.

I by no means proclaim to be a Top Chef. In earlier days, my meals were met with reviews such as, "It's too dry; it's too greasy; or it's too bland. In fact, my toughest and worst critic has always been my son. He would actually opt to eat at his grandmother's over consuming something I had prepared. Recently, when comparing my talents to other family members, I nearly fell over when I heard him say, "There is no comparison, Mom. You have become a good cook." That compliment I hold very dear to my heart.

You do not have to take expensive classes or buy outrageously priced tools or ingredients. You should, however, become familiar with the things that you like. Here is a list of several items I found essential to have when I started my culinary journey.



1. **Knives.** Knives should feel good in your hand and should have some heft to them. They should have forged blades that go through to the handle. They should be sharp. Dull knives cause injuries so make sure you have a sharpener as well. Avoid sets. They usually have knives you will never use. The best to have on hand, an 8"cook's knife, a paring knife, a serrated or bread knife and a long, thin slicer for carving your ham or turkey.
2. **Thermometers.** You will need two types—an oven thermometer and a meat thermometer. Not all ovens are created equal. An oven thermometer will monitor the exact temperature inside the oven. Oven dials can be off as much as 25 to 50 degrees. This can cause great cooking discrepancies. When buying a meat thermometer, purchase one that contains a meat temperature guide. Use your meat thermometer for measuring the internal heat of meat and poultry by inserting the spiked end into the thickest part of the meat without touching bone or resting in fat. Remove your protein from the heat source 5 to 10 degrees less than what is called for. Place it on a plate and tent with foil. You should always rest your protein for 8 to 10 minutes prior to cutting. This forces the juices back into the muscle fibers causing it to remain succulent. Once I started using thermometers, my meat stopped being dry.
3. **Cutting boards.** Cutting boards come in many sizes and are made of different materials. Wooden boards cause less dulling of your knives. I prefer the bamboo type. I would recommend one large board for cutting meats and a smaller one for dicing and chopping.
4. **Measuring cups and spoons.** Have two sets of each on hand—one for measuring dry ingredients and one for measuring liquids.
5. **Skillets.** Cast iron pans conduct heat very well. They sear beautifully and go from stove top to oven. Cast iron pans require tender, loving care as well. If you obtain one, be sure to care for it properly. Nonstick skillets are also great cooking vessels and clean-up is usually a breeze. I suggest a 10-inch skillet. It has great versatility.
6. **Grill pan.** This is great for winter months when grills are packed away in sheds. I like the deep, nonstick type. The higher sides cause less spattering during high heat preparation. And the grill marked food reminds me of summer.
7. **Dutch Oven.** This heavy duty cooking pot is great for healthful recipes and one-pot meals. It, too, goes from stovetop to oven. They distribute heat evenly all the way around and have a practically non-stick surface which



means you can brown with less fat. Consider a cast iron one with colorful enamel finish.

8. **Spray bottle.** Pick a fancy one or go to the hardware store for a plastic one. Fill with your favorite oils. This is an awesome way to add a small amount of oil to the pan or food without bathing it in extra fat.
9. **Garlic press, wire whisk and silicone spatula.** These are three “gadgets” that I use almost daily.
10. **Fresh herbs.** This may frighten some of you, but don't let it. Start with one or two that you may be familiar with and venture from there. I always have parsley, chives, thyme and basil on hand. Start an herb garden in some colorful pots in the spring. Not only will the aromatic plant flavor your meals, the vibrant containers can add to your patio décor.

Lemons, limes, garlic and a good olive oil are also always on hand in my kitchen. These are great ingredients to liven up veggies and meats. They also make great vinaigrettes in lieu of the fat-laden, store-bought versions.

I use to dread cooking. Now I find it fun. I will experiment and try different things. It's become an adventure. Will I someday be hosting my own segment of “Terri's Temptations” on The Food Network? Probably not, but I do know that my toughest critic thinks that I'm a good cook and, to me, that is priceless.