

FEARLESS  FRESH
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NINJA CHECKLIST

FOR KITCHEN SUCCESS



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YOU KNOW HOW THE STORY GOES. You're cooking dinner for your SO and you think it's coming along pretty well. You pull the pan out of the oven, excitedly set the food on a plate, and lay it before him with a glowing sense of pride. He takes a bite, then pauses. He slowly swallows and stares at the plate. He looks up and asks, "What's it supposed to be?"



Or how about this scenario: You've got four friends coming to dinner, but things aren't going according to plan. Maybe your roast just set off the smoke alarm, or perhaps your veggies have congealed into a greasy green mass in the middle of the pan. Your collar is soaked with some combination of sweat and tears. Right then, the doorbell rings.

Sister, I've got your back. There's an easy way to avoid kitchen disasters like dried out chicken breasts, gluey mashed potatoes, and sauces that look like the BP Oil Spill. With these 10 easy steps, you be halfway down your path to becoming a total kitchen ninja!

1. Read the whole recipe ahead of time, preferably a few days ahead.

This may seem simple, but do you have any idea how few people actually read the recipe first? This is the #1 step towards cooking and baking success. You need to read the recipe from top to bottom, well in advance, to make sure that you: A) have everything you need to complete the dish, and B) know how to complete the steps. This one problem alone would easily solve half of the cooking flops people share with me. Which leads me to #2.

2. Make sure you've got all the ingredients.

Even stupid things like salt and sugar. I've been cooking for decades, literally, and I still screw this one up. I can't tell you how many times I've assumed I have something super common like sugar, or eggs, or olive oil, then wound up elbow-deep in a recipe only to find only an empty bag or jar that once contained whatever deal-breaker ingredient I needed next. There's a great word used to describe this situation, but it's not suitable for print here.



Please, I'm begging you to remember one lesson I've learned the hard way a hundred times: *Always make sure you've laid eyes on every single ingredient you need before starting your recipe.*

3. Do not substitute any ingredients or leave out any steps.

As a professional recipe developer, it's a major buzzkill when someone emails me to say one of my recipes didn't work. And, there are fewer facepalms so disheartening as when I troubleshoot and find this person has used applesauce instead of eggs, halved the amount of fat called for, or spontaneously decided that one of the steps was unnecessary. I'm all for experimenting with technique and substituting ingredients due to dietary needs, but you have to understand that a recipe is a scientific formula. If you change something crucial, there's a very good chance you will end up with a different result than what the recipe developer intended. *Do not make changes to a recipe unless you're willing to accept that you're heading into the great unknown. If you're ok with that, go for it.*



4. Check any terms you don't understand or skills you don't have.

This is the second reason you need to read the recipe ahead of time. If a step tells you to caramelize the onions, do you know how to do that? If you're asked to cut the butter into the flour, how do you go about it? What if you need to make a slurry? These are all really important parts of a recipe, and if you don't know what to do, your dish is seriously doomed. Reading the recipe ahead of time gives you a heads up that there's something you need to learn, which gives you the opportunity to ask someone or hop on YouTube to find a video tutorial. (Hint: see #10 below for a great way to get these questions answered!)

5. Make sure you've got all the equipment you need.



Another reason recipes fail is due to missing equipment that's essential to getting the job done. Do you need an extra-large pot? A loaf pan? A double boiler? A huge bowl full of ice cubes? If you're missing something important, you have to know ahead of time. This will allow you to borrow

or buy what you need. In some cases you may be able to find a substitute, but in other situations you'll need the genuine article lest you end up with a huge mess on your hands. (Just try making a gallon of potato-leek soup without a big pot in the house. Go ahead, I'll wait.)

6. **Mise en place: Do your measuring and chopping before you start cooking.**

This is so so SO important. Pronounced *meez-on-plaws*, this fancy French term literally means "putting in place." It's what they call it when you prep all of your ingredients before you start cooking. In other words, make sure you measure, chop, sift, melt, chill, or whip, anything on your ingredients list **before** starting on step 1. Why the big fuss? Because your recipe won't wait while you get your act together, that's why. Here's a scenario: You're cooking some beef, and it tells you to add the onion and garlic.



What, you don't have them chopped yet? That's cool. . .your beef with just burn while you take the time to get it done. You could try to be clever by turning off the heat, but then you've not only let your meat get greasy and rubbery, but you've also added another five minutes onto your cooking time. As an added bonus, your onion won't caramelize when it hits the pan. You've just lost 20 favor points right there. Fail.

7. **Do not, under any circumstances, walk away from your dish while it's cooking.**

Things can go from zero to mega-fail in less than 30 seconds. Unless you've got an inordinate amount of time before your next step—which means 20 minutes or more—your butt had better stay right next to your stove, making sure you're paying attention to your food. If you do have to walk away, for the love of all that is holy, set a freaking timer so you'll remember to come back. I can't tell you how many cooking failure stories start with, "I just had to check my email really fast." You think I'm kidding? Ask your local fire department.




8. Taste your dish along the way as you cook.

It's incredibly important to taste your food as you cook. This lets you know if something needs fixing before it's too late. Consider it a PRO TIP—professional chefs carry extra spoons around in their pocket for this very purpose. Tasting along the way reveals all sorts of problems, such as telling you if the dish is missing something or the texture needs adjusting. Trust me, you'll know right away if something's gone awry. True story: In culinary school, we made a huge pot of chicken soup for a party. Sadly, no one tasted it before serving it to the guests. If someone had been smart enough to taste it, they would have quickly realized that we forgot to add salt. Gross. And sad, too, because no one wanted to eat it. NOTE: *Do not taste raw meat and eggs, of course!*

9. Cook within your means.

I'm a big fan of stretching your wings and taking a risk, but there's a certain degree of stumbling to be expected when you try something new. If you're trying out a new technique or more difficult recipe, awesome! But it's important to realize that your first attempt might not end in success, due to the fact that you're learning. Which is totally fine! Just be wary of attempting your first souffle when you have a dinner party of 8 showing up in half an hour. When it comes to dinner parties or any other dining situation here you have something at stake, stick with what you know. Save experiments for nights when it's just you and your dog. (Unless kitchen mishaps are part of your party shtick, in which case, by all means.)



10. Find a person who will answer your cooking questions, and try to ask them the day before!

You've read the recipe ahead of time, right? So where do you go to get help with strange, vaguely menacing terms such as sweat the onions and spatchcock the chicken? Good cooking advice is hard to come by, but there's one place where you can get all your questions answered by yours truly (and a team of other chefs and experienced home cooks who love to chat about food all day).

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