When I was a kid, my job in the kitchen was to help season and tenderize the meats that would go into our family’s stir-fries, stews, and curries.

I would sprinkle pieces of chicken, pork, and beef with salt, white pepper, and sugar. Yes, you read that right, we always seasoned our meats with just a bit of sugar.

My grandmother explained that the sugar wouldn’t make the meat taste sweet but rather create balance and enhance the effect of the salt.

This idea of creating flavor ‘balance’ is an incredibly important cooking concept, and it’s especially evident in Asian food. I think this is why just about everyone enjoys Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese, or Japanese cooking.

Every dish is so dynamic in flavor. A Thai curry has sweetness from coconut milk and sugar, savoriness from fish sauce, spicy and earthy notes from herbs in the curry paste, and sour from the finish of lime juice. All these different flavors combine to achieve a delicious balance on our taste buds.

Luckily, you don’t need to go to culinary school to learn and practice this concept of flavor balance, because we’re going to cover a lot of this info in this download!
First, let’s review the basic flavors. Up until 2002, scientists recognized 4 ‘official’ tastes:

1 Salty  2 Sweet  3 Sour  4 Bitter

However, in 2002 umami was crowned the fifth flavor.

Umami simply means yummy in Japanese, and it’s hard to describe what the flavor of umami tastes like. For simplicity sake, we are lumping it with salty in this lesson because they share a lot of the same flavor attributes. If you are offended by this, you probably should be attending culinary school because your taste buds are far more refined than ours are.

For the purpose of this flavor lesson, we’re also including spice as our fifth flavor because we love a little heat.

Because so many of us learn graphically, we created a ‘Flavor Star’ to show you how these five flavors work to balance or enhance each other.

If a flavor balances another flavor, it means it counteracts or offsets that flavor to achieve an even more harmonious taste.

For example, spice balances sweet and sweet balances spice. It’s why Mexican hot chocolate is finished with a pinch of cayenne pepper - the spice works with the sweet to produce a more dynamic flavor.

Or if you have a dish that’s too spicy, you can also balance the heat with something sweet. So if you ever over-spice a curry or sauce, just add a bit of your preferred sweetener (or use one of our ideas below in the sweet section), to neutralize the heat.

Flavors can also enhance each other. If you look at the ‘Flavor Star’, you see that salty enhances sweet. This is why there are sea salt caramels or sea salt chocolate chip cookies. That light addition of saltiness actually amplifies the sweetness of those caramels and cookies.

If you keep this flavor star handy, you can learn how to create more dynamic flavors, rescue dishes that have been overly flavored, and also how to amplify certain flavors.
Salty and Umami / Savory
Balances bitterness / Enhances sweetness

As mentioned before, we’re lumping salty and umami together because they share a lot of the same characteristics.

If you ever end up with a bland dish, the likely issue is that it’s just under-seasoned (i.e., lacking salt or umami-ness). Any Top Chef viewer knows that an under-seasoned dish is the most common mistake made by the show’s contestants, who are all professional chefs. Clearly under-seasoning is not just a rookie mistake, so don’t ever feel bad about a bland dish - just know how to fix it!

Below we’ve come up with a bunch of different ideas on how you can fix an under-seasoned dish. Clearly salt is the obvious option but there are a lot of other condiments and ingredients that can add savory depth to your meal.

IF YOU NEED TO ADD SALT / UMAMI

- Kosher Salt
- Sea Salt
- Anchovies/anchovy paste
- Hard cheeses like parmesan
- Soy sauce
- Fish sauce
- Seaweed
- Miso
- Pickled vegetables

FOOD INGREDIENTS THAT ARE SALTY / UMAMI

- Mushrooms
- Tomatoes
- Bacon and other cured meats
SOME IDEAS

- Add a splash of soy sauce, fish sauce, or miso to broth or stock
- Saute veggies with a little bit of anchovy paste
- Simmer soup with the rind of parmesan cheese

Some foods also naturally have an umami flavor. If you refer back to our ‘Flavor Star,’ you know to use something sweet or sour to enhance this umami flavor.

Sweet
Balances sourness, bitterness, spice / Enhances saltiness

Sweetness is not just for desserts. According to our ‘Flavor Star,’ sweetness balances sour, bitter, and spice, so if you have dishes or ingredients that have any of these flavor profiles, add a bit of sweetness to create something even more interesting.

IF YOU NEED TO ADD SWEET

- Sugar
- Stevia
- Maple syrup
- Honey
- Jam
- Molasses
- Balsamic vinegar
- Apple cider vinegar
- BBQ sauce
- Ketchup

FOOD INGREDIENTS THAT ARE SWEET

- Carrots
- Sweet potatoes
- Corn
- Sugar snap peas
- Peas
- Fennel
- Most fruit
- Butternut/ kabocha squashes
- Parsnips
- Beets
- Most fruit
SOME IDEAS

- Add some honey, maple syrup, or jam to an acidic vinaigrette to neutralize the sourness of the vinegar
- Toss roasted brussels sprouts, which are bitter, with some sweet BBQ sauce
- Add some sugar to an overly-spiced curry or soup

For the ingredients that are naturally sweet, you can enhance their sweetness with something salty or umami flavored, like tossing roasted carrots and sweet potatoes with some miso paste.

Sour

Balances spice, sweetness, bitterness / Enhances saltiness

We tend to finish most of our dishes with a bit of sour - usually lemon juice or even a splash of vinegar. This is because sour (or acid) enhances saltiness, brightening up the seasoning of the entire dish. Below are a variety of ways to add a bit of sour to a dish.

IF YOU NEED TO ADD SOUR

- Lemon juice
- Lime juice
- Orange juice
- Vinegars like sherry, red, rice, balsamic, apple cider
- Tomato paste
- Yogurt
- Sour cream
- Pickled vegetables

FOOD INGREDIENTS THAT ARE SOUR

- Tomatoes
- Some fruit, like kiwi, star fruit, and some berries

Sour also balances spice, sweetness, and bitterness. This is why a dollop of yogurt is perfect for a spicy curry or stew. It helps to counteract that heat, creating a new balance of flavors. It’s also why sweet and sour chicken is such a popular Chinese dish. They combine to produce a delicious new taste.
IF YOU NEED TO ADD BITTER

Coffee  Cocoa / cacao  Grapefruit Juice  Beer

FOOD INGREDIENTS THAT ARE BITTER

Kale  Okra  Bitter melon  Radicchio

Even though you rarely add bitter to dishes, there are lots of ingredients that are naturally bitter, namely our green vegetables. To make it a bit easier to enjoy these bitter veggies, you can add some sweet, salty, or even sour.

SOME IDEAS

- For a perfect combo, use a vinaigrette that’s a bit sweet, salty, and sour to accompany a salad with endive, spinach, radicchio, or kale.
- Help your kids gobble down their broccoli by roasting them with a bit of brown sugar and / or balsamic vinegar.
- Dip okra into yogurt for a deliciously healthy treat.
Spicy
Balances sweetness

Even though the ‘Flavor Star’ spice balances sweetness, we’re going to go a bit off the diagram here. Honestly if you like a bit of spice in your food, just add spice. Below we’ve got a few ideas beyond hot sauce for how add a some kick to your meals.

IF YOU NEED TO ADD SPICE

- Hot sauces
- Wasabi
- Horseradish
- Dijon Mustard
- Harissa
- Jalapeños
- Habañeros
- Chipotles

FOOD INGREDIENTS THAT ARE SPICY

- Arugula
- Radishes (when raw)
- Watercress

SOME IDEAS

- Use aromatic chilies, like jalapeños and chipotles early on in soups and stews so they have plenty of time to build flavor.

- Hot sauces are for more than just tacos. They can be added to anything to add a little kick - soups, grains, dressings, and even roasted veggies.

- Add a kick to your sandwich spread or dipping sauce by mixing some hot sauce, wasabi, horseradish, or harissa into some mayo or ketchup.

With the guidance of our flavor star and ingredient suggestions, go and embark on your flavor adventure!