

COMPLETELY PERFECT



120 Essential Recipes for Every Cook

Felicity Cloake

The best of the *Guardian's* 'How to Make the Perfect' columns



**'A gift for anyone who is learning
to cook' Diana Henry, *Sunday Telegraph***

Completely Perfect

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About the Author

Felicity Cloake is the award-winning author of the *Guardian's* long-running 'How to Make the Perfect' series and the *New Statesman's* food column. In 2016 she was named the Fortnum & Mason Cookery Writer of the Year. She is the author of four cookery books, *Perfect*, *Perfect Host*, *Perfect Too* and the André Simon-shortlisted *The A–Z of Eating*.

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Perfect

Perfect Host

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Introduction

*P*erfect is a bold claim for anything, let alone something as personal as food – taste is gloriously individual, and frankly, all the more wonderful for it. To call a recipe perfect, let alone eight years’ and two books’ worth of them, feels like the height of hubris; unless the raw ingredients happen to be the collected wisdom of the world’s finest cooks.

Let me take you back to the chilly winter of 2010, when I began writing a new column for the *Guardian* website, pitting Delia Smith and Gordon Ramsay against Heston Blumenthal and his mentor Harold McGee on the best way to prep mushrooms, trying out Michelin-star mash and making cheap jokes about pricks with forks during a hard-hitting investigation into sausage cookery. It soon became clear that mining the experts for tips was fertile ground: who better to tell you how to make chilli con carne than the good folks of the International Chili Society, or to deliver a primer on tarte au citron than the Roux brothers themselves?

Though, after almost a decade of cooking up dozens of recipes every month, I’d class myself as a fairly competent home cook, the perfection within these pages has very little to do with me; it comes from the hundreds of chefs, cooks, food writers and helpful *Guardian* readers who have contributed to the feast that follows. These are the ‘perfect recipes’ that I’ve found the most useful over the years – the Saturday lunch soups and Sunday night dals, the roast chickens

shared with friends and the chocolate cakes baked in celebration (and even scaled up for a couple of weddings too).

The premise of the column is to test out as many different versions of a particular dish as possible, in order to establish, once and for all, what really works. It's surprising how often seemingly trustworthy sources disagree over the vital details – whether to blind bake pastry, or put cream in carbonara – which can be confusing, and often downright enraging when all you want is dinner. You may not have time to try out six different ways of making meatballs, or meringues, but I do, and believe me, after eight years, I'm pretty damn critical.

Thankfully, after making a particular dish six or seven times, you get a good idea of where the potential for disaster lies, so I can promise you that every recipe in these pages works: I'd stake my best knife on them. Where something seems like more a matter of personal preference than culinary life and death – which vegetables to put in a minestrone, or whether cheese has any place in a gratin dauphinoise, for example – I've tried to flag this up so you can make your own choice according to taste.

These dishes aren't cutting-edge food (you'll search in vain for spherified kimchi juice or daikon dust) but they deliver. Few things in life are more certain than the fact that, when sous vide machines have gone the way of the melon baller, and spiralizers are two for a quid at car boot sales, we'll all still be enjoying crumble and custard.

A FEW TIPS

I have to admit, without wanting to do myself out of a single ounce of respect, that there's no great magic to cookery: as long as you've

got that rare thing, a reliable recipe, and follow it fairly faithfully (a little more or less oil, or a generous hand with the chilli, is unlikely to kill a dish), very little can go wrong.

You can, however, make life easier for yourself in the kitchen: those happy souls who seem to find it all a breeze are usually just organized.

1. Check you've got all the ingredients, and equipment, before starting. I cannot stress this enough – thinking vaguely that you've seen some ground almonds in the cupboard somewhere is not good enough if you're considering embarking upon macarons. (That said, confident cooks can usually find a decent substitute for most things; it's all a matter of practice.)
2. Read the recipe carefully all the way through before starting, too: just in case, while the stew's simmering on the hob, you should be making dumplings, rather than reading the paper.
3. Get all the ingredients out, measured in the correct quantities if possible, and put them close by where you'll be working. The art of *mise en place*, or 'putting in place', before embarking on a recipe, is practised in professional kitchens for good reason; it's all too easy for the garlic to burn while you're ferreting around for the bay leaves or tinned tomatoes.
4. Taste early and often (where practical), and always, always before serving something up (unless it's a cake or a tart where a sneaky sliver is going to be obvious). Remember that seasoning can alter during the cooking process, so what tastes right when you add it might seem bland on the plate. Keep a load of teaspoons handy by the hob for this purpose. (Or use your fingers, it's what they do in many professional kitchens. Sorry.)



5. Most disasters can be salvaged by a bit of lateral thinking. With sweet dishes, as long as it's cooked, there's very little that can't be turned into a delicious dessert by mixing it with ice cream or crème fraîche. Savoury – well, a generous sprinkle of herbs or grated Parmesan, or a jaunty fried egg garnish will hide a multitude of sins. And if all else fails, check out the quick fixes on page xxvi.

LAYOUT AND EQUIPMENT

You really need very little to be a decent cook: an oven or a hob (although some people swear by microwaves for melting butter, steaming vegetables and so on, they're really not essential; I don't own one), and a few basics, so it's better to spend money on good-quality items like knives, pans, et cetera, rather than buying a lot of stuff you'll use once in a blue moon.

Think practically: I'm not one of those food writers who gets sniffy about garlic presses (I use mine regularly), but if you've got a knife, you don't need one. The same, strictly speaking, goes for a colander: a large sieve will do the job just as well.

Always go for sturdy-looking cookware, the duller the better, rather than flashy celebrity-chef endorsed ranges – professional catering suppliers are an excellent place to start, because their stuff is designed to work, and work hard, rather than looking pretty on a shelf. Rarely cheap, it is usually good value.

If you're building up a kitchen from scratch (lucky you!), here are the basics that'll come in useful; you can acquire everything else as you go along.

- **BASIC** Heavy-duty chef's knife and sharpener: sharp knives will not only make your life easier, but are actually safer because they're less likely to slip into your tender flesh



Also Useful Smaller paring knife, kitchen scissors, bread knife, cleaver (a recent discovery on my part, but already indispensable for stuff like pumpkins and squashes, as well as for jointing meat), knife roll or block (keeping them in drawers is both dangerous and counterproductive, because they'll blunt)

- **BASIC** Wooden chopping board (kinder on knives), and scourer to clean



Also Useful More chopping boards, so you can keep onions away from strawberries. A couple of smart ones (i.e. not pock-marked by use, or charred by carelessness) are handy for serving stuff like cheese and bread on

- **BASIC** Silicone spatula: a great multi-tasker, will stir, flip and scrape out the pan or bowl



Also Useful Wooden spoon, fish slice, tongs (my favourite), slotted spoon, ladle, palette knife, metal skewer for testing doneness



- **BASIC** Grater (preferably a super-sharp Microplane or similar box grater with multiple sides for zesting citrus, finely grating Parmesan, etc.), vegetable peeler



Also Useful Mandoline for thinly slicing vegetables for dauphinoise, salads and the like, apple corer



- BASIC Balloon whisk

Also Useful Hand-held electric beaters, stand mixer, pan whisk

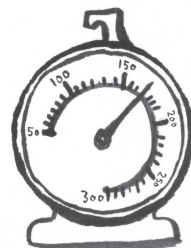


- BASIC Pestle and mortar and potato masher

Also Useful Stick blender, food processor

- BASIC Large, heavy-based frying pan, with lid

Also Useful Griddle pan, omelette pan (small frying pan), wok



- BASIC Heavy-based small, medium and large saucepans, with lids

Also Useful Stockpot for cooking stocks, jams, and stuff in quantity



- BASIC Ovenproof casserole dish, roasting tin

Also Useful Cast-iron dishes to go from hob to oven, baking dishes smart enough to go straight on to the table (Falcon Enamelware is sturdy and good value for money)



- BASIC Baking tray

Also Useful Grill pan, cake tins (a 23cm round springform tin, plus two 20cm sandwich tins, would be a good start), muffin and fairy cake tins, tart tin, loaf tin, cooling rack



- **BASIC** Scales, preferably electronic, measuring jug, reliable timer (your phone will do)

Also Useful Measuring spoons, food thermometer, oven thermometer, ruler

- **BASIC** Fine sieve

Also Useful Colander, coarse sieve, steamer

- **BASIC** Large mixing bowl (Pyrex, stainless steel or ceramic rather than plastic, which tends to scratch), smaller heatproof bowl to fit over a saucepan and act as a bain-marie

Also Useful More bowls of various sizes! One is never enough

- **BASIC** Tin opener, corkscrew, pastry brush, greaseproof paper

Also Useful Baking beans (you can use dry rice or pulses otherwise), rolling pin (a clean, empty wine bottle is an acceptable substitute at a pinch), biscuit cutters, clingfilm and foil, freezer bags

- **BASIC** Dark-coloured apron (unless you want to wash it every day), kitchen roll for blotting fried food and mopping up spills, thick tea towels to do everything from drying your hands to getting hot things out of the oven (hang a clean one from your apron when you start cooking, so it's always handy)

Also Useful Sturdy oven gloves and more tea towels (like the bowls, they're endlessly useful)

A word on non-stick

For some people, non-stick technology is the enemy: although it's safe when used properly, if over-heated, that magic coating emits what Bee Wilson describes in her fascinating history of culinary technology, *Consider the Fork*, as 'several gaseous by-products', which can be harmful if ingested. Also, because food doesn't stick if your pan is working efficiently, you miss out on the lovely little crusty brown bits which make things like fry-ups so tasty.

You can achieve a non-stick effect without chemicals by seasoning a cast-iron pan, but it takes dedication: wash the pan in hot soapy water, then rub it with fat or oil, and heat it very gently for several hours. Eventually it will develop a coating as slick as the newest Teflon number, which every meal cooked in it thereafter will add to. Don't scour it, and avoid anything too acidic, and you won't even need to re-season it as often as you ought to replace a non-stick pan.

That said, I still own non-stick cookware too. It's useful for scrambled eggs and the like, and I'm a short-termist.



GETTING THE MOST FROM YOUR OVEN

Beyond occasionally sweeping out the crumbs from the bottom, most of us pay very little attention to this workhorse of the kitchen, but a little meditation on how limited cooks were before the advent of the domestic oven should set you straight. Anyone can turn an oven on, but to get the best from yours, you need to get to know it.

For a start, is it conventional or fan-assisted? In other words, does it

have a great big fan in it? My oven does, but if yours doesn't, then you should use the higher temperatures indicated in the recipes that follow (though, to be honest, after a spell in a professional kitchen recently, I realized that unless you're baking, the oven temperature makes surprisingly little difference, save for time: when food looks done and feels done, it generally is).

Unless you want to spend your evening staring through the glass to check whether your cake is cooked, however, invest in an oven thermometer: many ovens run either hotter or colder than their temperature gauge suggests, so this will help you adjust the timing accordingly. Make sure too that you can actually see into the oven: opening the door unnecessarily will cool it down so the food takes longer to cook. If you have to peep in, do so quickly.

As even the most basic qualifications in science should have informed you, heat rises, so it makes sense that the higher you place food in the oven, the quicker it will cook. Most food cooks best in the middle, but if, for example, you're preparing a roast, it's better to put potatoes above the joint so they brown, while the meat cooks more gently beneath. Decide how to arrange the shelves before you switch the oven on: fiddling around with hot metal is the kind of fraught activity you don't need when you're trying to enjoy yourself in the kitchen.

Most ovens have a grill as well – I prefer a griddle pan, but if you do use it, remember that grilling has a tendency to dry food out. Baste it well with oil before cooking (and don't put it too close to the element: grill fires are scary).

USING THE FRIDGE AND FREEZER

Again, not appliances that really require an instruction manual, but still, ones that can benefit from a few pointers.

Don't overfill your fridge if possible: it interferes with the ventilation, so it won't work efficiently – and cool things to room temperature before chilling to avoid bringing the temperature up inside.

Conduct regular audits to remind yourself what needs using up and ensure nothing's mouldering at the back, and wipe the whole thing out with hot soapy water once every couple of months. (Ensuring that you cover everything well should help keep it clean in the interim, as well as preventing that Thai shrimp paste from tainting the gooseberry fool.)

The door will be slightly warmer than other parts, so if you're chilling wine fast, put it in the main body of the fridge. Ditto the salad drawers, which have a lower humidity, and so are also ideal for storing hard cheese if it's too warm to leave it out somewhere dry and cool, like a garage.



Always get meat out of the fridge a good half hour or so before you want to use it, to take the fridge chill off it so it cooks more evenly – the same goes for things like cheeses and many dairy products, whose flavour comes alive as they warm up.

If you've got anything more than a tiny freezer drawer, make the most of it: as well as storing stuff like frozen peas (double bagged, to prevent escapees), you can use it to thriftily squirrel away breadcrumbs from that old loaf that's too stale to eat, excess stock,

leftover portions of lasagne, emergency rations like prawns, berries, mince and so on, ready for a rainy day when you can't face a trip to the shops. (NB: Never refreeze something that's already been frozen and defrosted.)

Wrap food well (if you can run to it, a vacuum-packing machine, available online, is an amazing boon for this) so it doesn't dry out, and label it clearly with a description of what's inside and the date, so you can eat up older things first. I find it useful to divide stuff like packs of bacon or loaves of bread up – that way you can just defrost what you need for breakfast.

Lastly, defrost raw food in the fridge, on a plate, overnight; pre-cooked food can be reheated from frozen if necessary, though I think you often get better results if you have time to defrost that first too.

FOODS YOU NEED

These are the ingredients you'll find it prudent to keep close to hand – not only because you'll probably find yourself reaching for them a lot, but because, with them in the house, you're never far away from a decent meal. Try to build up as well stocked a larder as possible, so you're good for a pretty long bout of flu, a flurry of unexpected guests or, indeed, an unexpected siege.

Storage-wise, remember to keep everything clearly labelled; buying spices in big bags from the 'foreign foods' section of the supermarket, or the appropriate grocers, has its benefits in terms of price, but it's easy to decant them into jars and then forget what they are, and ditto, tubs of different



flours have the tendency to look pretty similar. (From bitter experience I'd advise storing anything that might be vulnerable to rodent attack in sturdy containers – you'd be surprised at the eclectic tastes of the common house mouse.)

On the subject of spices, deep drawers are ideal, so you can see at a glance what you've got, but in the absence of such luxuries, I keep mine in boxes, vaguely ordered by sweet, Oriental, etc.: so much easier to slide these off the shelf than it is to ferret around in a forest of jars in a dark cupboard. (If you're the kind of person who alphabetizes their record collection or library, then spices are another worthy candidate; I've tried, but I'm inherently too messy to sustain the order for more than a few weeks.)

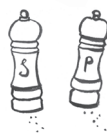
Indeed, if your kitchen layout allows it, organize all your ingredients into broad categories: baking stuff in one cupboard, condiments in another, basics (oil, salt, pepper, garlic, etc.) within easy reach of the hob and so on. Eliminating time wasted searching for risotto rice or soy sauce will speed up the cooking process considerably.

Pantry

- *Plain flour, cornflour, baking powder, bicarbonate of soda, dried yeast, vanilla essence*
- *Caster sugar, soft brown sugar, golden syrup, honey*
- *Cocoa powder and plain chocolate*
- *English mustard powder, Dijon and wholegrain mustards, horseradish sauce*



- *Red and white wine vinegar, cider vinegar, rice vinegar, balsamic vinegar*
- *Decent chicken, vegetable and beef stocks (liquid concentrates and organic stock cubes are more to my taste than those oversalted jelly pots)*
- *Soy sauce, Thai fish sauce, Tabasco, chilli oil*
- *Olive oil, extra virgin olive oil and a neutral oil such as vegetable or groundnut*
- *Anchovies, capers, olives, Marmite, Worcestershire sauce*
- *Tomato purée, good-quality tinned tomatoes, tomato ketchup*
- *Black pepper, sea salt (both fine and flaked), chilli flakes, bay leaves*
- *Basmati, risotto and pudding rice*
- *Long and shaped pasta*
- *Couscous, rice or egg noodles*
- *Dried or tinned chickpeas, lentils and split peas*
- *Dried fruit – raisins, currants, mixed peel, fancy jar of fruit in alcohol or syrup for emergencies*
- *Nuts – flaked almonds, pine nuts, peanut butter*
- *Breadcrumbs, preferably panko*
- *Pickle and chutney, to taste*



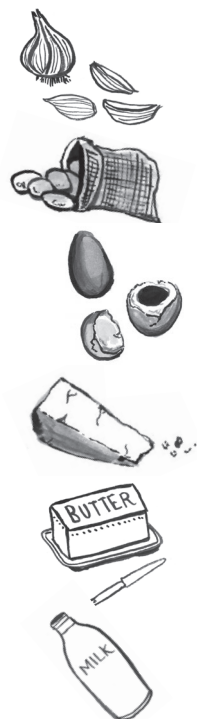
- Onions, garlic, potatoes
- Eggs

Freezer

- Peas and whole leaf spinach
- Berries
- Puff and shortcrust pastry
- Vanilla or plain ice cream

Fridge

- Parmesan cheese (or vegetarian alternative)
- Butter
- Milk



HELP!

sos!

My melting chocolate has become a thick, grainy mass!

Chocolate 'seizes' when it comes into contact with water (steam from the bain-marie is usually the culprit). Strangely, however, adding liquid in larger amounts, such as hot cream or hot water, should rescue the situation, leaving you with a tasty chocolate sauce if nothing else.

My pastry won't roll out!

If your pastry is sticky and hard to roll, it may well be too warm, or too wet. Wrap it in clingfilm and chill for 20 minutes, then try again on a floured surface. If it seems dry and cracked when rolled out after chilling, then it may well be too cold. Gather it together into a ball and knead to warm it up slightly.

My cream won't whip!

Place the mixing bowl, cream and whisk in the fridge for 15 minutes to chill – it's easier to whip cold.

My egg whites won't form stiff peaks!

I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but either there's some yolk in there, or your bowl or whisk were dirty. In either case, unfortunately you'll have to start again with thoroughly scrubbed and dried equipment and meticulously separated eggs.

My mayonnaise has curdled!

Pour it into a food processor, or use a hand mixer to whiz it and see if it comes back together. If that doesn't work, start afresh with a new egg yolk mixed with 1 tablespoon of water, and very gradually whisk the broken mayonnaise into it.

My flour-thickened gravy/sauce is lumpy!

If it's already thick enough to use, simply strain it through a fine sieve. If not, mix 1 teaspoon of warm butter with 2 teaspoons of flour, then beat this into the hot sauce. Simmer for a couple of minutes until thickened, then strain before serving.

My gravy is bitter!

Sounds like those lovely browned bits on the bottom of the roasting

tin may in fact have been burnt. You can try to rescue the situation by stirring in something sweet, like port, or redcurrant jelly, or brown sugar, but you may still have to throw it away and reach for the Bisto.

My sauce is too salty!

People suggest adding potatoes or rice to soak up the salt, but in fact, the best thing to do is to dilute the sauce with water, wine, cream or any other non-salted liquid (stock is usually not a good idea) and then thicken it again with a roux or cornflour.

Dinner gone wrong?

Don't panic if things don't quite go to plan: a carefully stocked pantry has always got your back. To whip up a quick spaghetti aglio e olio, cook 100g of spaghetti per person in well-salted water until al dente, and meanwhile fry a finely chopped clove of garlic and a generous pinch of chilli flakes per person in 4 tablespoons of olive oil. Toss the drained pasta in the oil with a little of its cooking water, scatter with some chopped parsley if you happen to have it, and ta-da, dinner. Also nice with other pantry stalwarts like olives, anchovies, breadcrumbs, lemon zest, capers, sun-dried tomatoes, Parmesan and so on.

For pudding, keep good ice cream in the freezer, and a jar of fruit in booze on the shelf. They last for ages, and the two just need a scattering of chopped nuts to turn them into a sundae. And everyone loves sundaes.



Breakfast

*L*et's face it, most breakfasts in life will be nothing to write home about – a quick bowl of muesli, an apple on the train, a sad little yoghurt at our desk – if it really is the most important meal of the day, then frankly we're in trouble.

All the more reason, then, to make the most of the ones you can do justice to: the leisurely weekend brunches, the holiday feasts – the day you're snowed in and 'working from home'. Make a pot of tea, rather than the usual tannic mug, stick the radio on, and indulge yourself with a steaming bowl of creamy porridge, a stack of pancakes, or one too many blueberry muffins.

Indeed, such a breakfast is eminently achievable before work, and well worth getting up ten minutes earlier for; after all, even so-called instant oats actually take 3 minutes to cook, plus 5 wiping them off the inside of the microwave.

A canny cook always thinks ahead: if you devote a Sunday to making your own marmalade, then you'll always have the ingredients of a good day in the cupboard, ready for those mornings that need a little extra help. Happy is the man who gets up to find a stash of homemade granola in the cupboard.

Lastly, any breakfast is made better by freshly squeezed orange juice (of the kind you squeeze out of oranges yourself, rather than the stuff from Florida sold in bottles under that name), good tea or coffee, and a newspaper. Conversation, however, is entirely optional.

Perfect Boiled Eggs

Boiled eggs aren't just for plonking under sweetly knitted cosies and serving with soldiers – though, paired with the brown bread on page 305, they're hard to beat. They're also the ultimate neatly packaged picnic food, and, soft-boiled and broken over a pile of steamed asparagus or sprouting broccoli spears, they elevate simplicity to an art form.

You'd think the clue to cooking them was in the name, but think again. Canadian foodie Susan Sampson claims, in her otherwise very useful book *12,167 Kitchen and Cooking Secrets*, that boiling is the worst thing you can do to an egg – instead, after bringing the water to the barest simmer, she likes to steep them off the heat. After peeling three hard-boiled eggs in succession that quickly reveal themselves to be all but raw, I crossly conclude that Susan must have kept one particular secret to herself.



She's right about not boiling them, though; Rose Prince, food writer and author of *The New English Kitchen*, starts her hard-boiled eggs off in cold water, on the basis that prolonged exposure to heat makes the whites rubbery, and after experimenting, I'm inclined to agree – soft-boiled seem to be fine dropped gently straight into a pan of boiling water (use a slotted spoon to avoid cracking them), but leave them in there too long and the whites become distinctly tough. Len Deighton, author of a wildly successful series of 'cookstrip' cartoons, as well as *The Ipcress File* and much other espionage literature, helpfully points out in *French Cooking for Men* that the Gallic word *frémir*, or shiver, perfectly describes the correct way to cook eggs.

Putting eggs into cold rather than hot water also makes them less likely to crack – and it’s important not to overcrowd the pan for this reason, so they don’t bump into each other during cooking. Once they’re done, take the eggs straight out of the pan and run them under cold water for a couple of minutes; this will arrest the cooking process and allow you to peel them more quickly. To begin peeling the shell, rap the wide end sharply on a hard surface – rolling them on the counter may be satisfying, but you’re more likely to end up picking splinters of shell out of the white.

Soft-boiled (just firm white, liquid yolk): Lower the eggs into boiling water, turn the heat down, and cook for 4 minutes

Medium-boiled (firm white, half-liquid yolk): Lower the egg into boiling water, then turn the heat down and simmer for 7 minutes

Hard-boiled (firm white, firm, sliceable yolk): Put the egg into cold water and bring to the boil, then turn the heat down and simmer for 7½ minutes



How to judge the freshness of an egg

Drop it gently into a bowl of cold water. If it sinks, it’s very fresh, if it hovers on one end, then it’s older but still edible, and if it floats, chuck it very gently in the bin – it’s likely to be rotten. Interestingly, although fresher eggs make more stable meringues, and are easier to poach, as the protein networks that hold them together are stronger, very fresh eggs are a nightmare to peel, so don’t use them for hard-boiling.

TIP

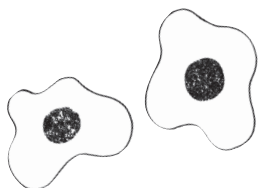
How to separate eggs

You don't need a special gadget to separate eggs — in fact, the best tool is right in front of you. Break the egg into your outstretched hand and allow the white to run through your fingers, while the yolk stays snugly on top. If you need to whip up the whites, however, use the eggshell instead, as your skin will give off grease that may prevent them forming a proper foam — toss the yolk from one half shell to the other, while allowing the white to fall into a bowl below.



Perfect Fried Eggs

*I*t's the star attraction of one of our most famous national dishes, yet fried eggs are still massacred by the great British caff on a daily basis – as a quick flick through Russell M. Davies' masterwork, *Egg Bacon Chips & Beans* (a survey of British caffs through the medium of his favourite order), indicates. A good fried egg is not as simple as it sounds. The whites must be firm and flavourful, yet still creamy, while the yolk should be just set, ready to spill at the merest caress of a knife. If there are people who savour the brittle lace of an overcooked white, this can only be through long and miserable habit.



Setting the white without spoiling the yolk is a precarious science, however. The notoriously perfectionist French chef Bernard Loiseau, who, haunted by the fear of losing his third Michelin star, took his own life in 2003, solved the

problem by cooking them separately, in saucers of butter set in a pan of simmering water, and then sliding the cooked yolk back on to the white to serve. All well and good, monsieur, but it's pretty fiddly, and almost impossible to do in quantity. Also, it is *definitely* cheating.

A friend scornfully suggests I'm making too much of the issue: have I never heard of basting the white with hot fat during cooking? Not only is this process labour-intensive, causing me to burn the toast, but it doesn't really work: however hard I try, I'm still left with a ring of pale jelly around the carefully unsplashed yolk. The online food forum *chowhound.com* (hours of fun) suggests

filling the pan with just enough fat to cover the white, but, of course, as well as effectively deep-frying most of the egg, this overcooks the bottom of the yolk.

The solution is much simpler – in this method, adopted from the great Lyonnais chef Fernand Point, the egg is fried, ever so gently, in warm butter. After playing around with timings for a bit, I hit upon the idea of covering it while it cooks, so it simultaneously steams and fries, which, if I say so myself, is pure genius, and absolutely foolproof. Point suggests drizzling the butter over the cooked egg before serving, but he was immensely fat and died before the age of sixty, so you might want to skip that part. The fresher the egg, by the way, the better the white will hold together in the pan.

Serves 1

1 large free-range egg
A generous knob of butter
Salt and pepper



1. Crack your egg into a saucer, and heat the butter in a heavy-based frying pan over a low heat. Have ready a saucepan lid – ideally one that is slightly too small for the pan, so you can wedge it inside, just above the egg.
2. When the butter has melted fully, swirl the pan to coat, then slide in the egg; it should not sizzle as it hits the fat. Cover with a lid and leave for 2½ minutes, then check on it every 30 seconds – when it's done to your liking, lift it out with a slotted spoon, season gently, and serve.

Perfect Poached Eggs

*P*oached eggs are the aristocrat of the breakfast table – a subtler pleasure than your workaday fried numbers, more luxurious than a safe soft-boiled egg, they're notoriously temperamental, making them a high-days and holidays treat for many. Crack their secret, however, and you can eat them every morning if you so desire.



Despite experimenting with the heat-and-leave methods favoured by Margaret Costa, the post-war cookery writer who deserves to be just as well known as her contemporary Elizabeth David, and Delia Smith, I reckon you can't make a proper poached egg without a vortex. After cracking numerous eggs into barely simmering water and allowing them to gently steep there until cooked, I remain convinced that a whirlpool is necessary if you're to end up with a well-shaped egg, rather than something that looks like it's come out of the pick and mix. It's the pressure of the water that pushes the egg in on itself; put it into still water and it will spread out as flat as a pancake.

Mark the words of Ramsay protégé Marcus Wareing, who learnt to poach eggs at the feet of the breakfast chef at the Savoy, and whisk your pan of boiling water vigorously, pause for a second, then gently slide the egg into the centre, turn down the heat and leave for 3 minutes. (Breaking it into a small jug or bowl makes this a lot easier – you don't want to be fiddling around with bits of shell at this crucial point in proceedings.) As chef and restaurateur Mark Hix

points out, the deeper the vessel, the more teardrop-shaped the result, so use a saucepan rather than a frying pan. In an ideal world you'd only ever be called upon to poach spanking fresh eggs, but in reality, adding a drop of vinegar to the white helps to keep the egg together without imparting the overpoweringly acidic flavour that often results from tipping a capful into the water.

If I'm poaching a few eggs simultaneously, *Telegraph* food writer Rose Prince's clingfilm trick is unbelievably useful: crack the egg into a ramekin lined with lightly greased clingfilm, twist together the ends to seal, then lift the package out (it should resemble a goldfish at the fair) and dunk it into simmering water. The eggs don't have the perfect beauty of those cooked by the method below, but it does make life easier if they aren't absolutely fresh.

Poached eggs are a key ingredient in eggs Benedict (see page 273 for the hollandaise recipe), but they're also delicious on salads, with corned beef hash and smoked fish, and in soupy Japanese ramen dishes.

Serves 1

- 1 large fresh free-range egg**
- 1 drop of malt or white wine vinegar**



1. Half fill a medium saucepan with water and bring to the boil. Meanwhile, crack the egg into a small sieve, set over a bowl, and allow the runniest parts of the white to fall through before tipping into a small jug or bowl and adding a drop of vinegar.

2. Stir the boiling water vigorously with a balloon whisk until you have a whirlpool, then immediately slip the egg into the centre, lowering the jug a couple of centimetres into the water.
3. Turn the heat down low and cook for 3 minutes – use a timer to prevent overcooking.
4. Drain the egg on kitchen paper, and serve immediately. If you're poaching it in advance, drop it straight into a bowl of iced water instead, or it will carry on cooking; to reheat, simply warm the egg through in a pan of gently simmering water.



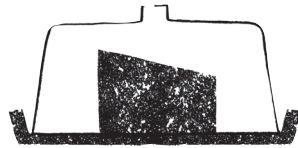
How to store eggs

Eggs should be stored at a constant temperature – it's not necessary to keep them refrigerated, except in midsummer, but they will keep longer in the cold. Bear in mind that eggshells are extremely porous, and will absorb the smell of anything you keep them near – this is useful if you happen to come into a truffle, but less so if you store them near some fish or strong cheese, so keep them in their box. Eggs should always be stored with the pointy end downwards; this keeps the air pocket at the top, which slows down the ageing process.

Perfect Scrambled Eggs

Nothing brings on a bad mood quicker than bad scrambled eggs. Equally, not much beats the lazy, luxurious pleasure of well-cooked ones, but unless you breakfast regularly in smart hotels, they're something best left to slow weekend mornings at home – scrambled eggs can't be hurried, although making them in a bain-marie, in the traditional French fashion, isn't worth the extra washing up, or the forty-five minutes you'll never get back.

Neither can they be bullied – don't whisk the eggs together as the godfather of modern French cookery, the great Escoffier, did before adding them to a hot pan, and don't add cream to the mixture in imitation of



Australian celebrity chef Bill Granger's famous scrambled eggs: overworking eggs makes them tough, and too much dairy masks their rich flavour. Instead, take a leaf out of Gordon Ramsay's book and crack the eggs straight into a cold pan, saving on washing up and making life easier for yourself in the process.

Gordon hasn't quite hit the egg jackpot, though; unless you like to start the day with an eggy purée, I'd avoid his way of furiously stirring them into submission – adopt Bill's more laid-back approach, and you'll end up with large, creamy curds which have a much more interesting texture – and look a damn sight more appetizing too. I don't think Ramsay's right that adding salt during

cooking will ruin the texture either; it's essential for flavour. Sprinkle it on at the table, and you'll need a lot more to get the same effect.

The eggs will carry on cooking in their own heat after leaving the pan, so it's important to add some cold fat at the end to arrest this process, or you'll be sitting down to overdone eggs for all your pains. A knob of butter, as suggested by Delia, is good for everyday eggs, but if you're feeling luxurious, a dollop of Gordon's crème fraîche finishes them off perfectly, adding a deliciously subtle tanginess to proceedings – all you need is a slice of toasted sourdough and a few chives for the perfect Saturday morning breakfast.

Scrambled eggs aren't diet food – a poached version, as advocated by one *New York Times* writer, whisked together and decanted into simmering water, may be free from butter, crème fraîche and the like, but rubbery, watery and with a distinct whiff of space food about them, they certainly hide their virtues under a bushel. No, great scrambled eggs require a generous hand with the dairy and single-minded devotion to stirring and watching – leave them alone for a second, and they'll overcook. Get someone else to make the coffee.

Serves 1

2 large free-range eggs
A knob of butter
A pinch of salt
1 teaspoon crème fraîche



1. Break the eggs into a small, heavy-based frying pan or saucepan and add the butter and salt. Place over a medium-high heat, and stir the eggs together with a wooden spoon.
2. Once well combined, leave the eggs for 10 seconds, then stir again. If they're setting too quickly, take them off the heat to stir and then replace. Repeat until they begin to set, then stir continuously until they're nearly as cooked as you like them; always take them off the heat before they're done.
3. Whip the pan off the heat, stir in the crème fraîche, and serve immediately.



Good things to mix into scrambled eggs, from around the world, in no particular order

Britain: Wild garlic; chopped steamed asparagus; ham and spring onions; crumbled black pudding; flaked smoked mackerel or hot smoked salmon; crab and chives; steamed and squeezed spinach with Lancashire cheese

Spain: Cooked and sliced chorizo and green Padrón peppers, anchovies

Italy: Tomato, basil and Parmesan, nduja

Turkey: Onions, peppers, tomatoes and chillies with mint and crumbled feta (*menemen*)

Mexico: Onion, tomato, coriander and green chillies (*huevos a la Mexicana*)

India: Onion, garlic, chillies, fresh ginger, tomato and coriander (*akoori*)

China: Spring onions, soy sauce and prawns

Perfect Omelettes

There is something magical about a good omelette – the way a couple of eggs and a pinch of salt can, in less than a minute, achieve such greatness. Light yet rich in flavour, swift but satisfying, the omelette is the ultimate frugal supper. As with all very simple things, the omelette has attracted a certain mystique amongst those convinced that there must be more to it than meets the eye. In the titular essay from the collected short works of Elizabeth David, *An Omelette and a Glass of Wine*, the famously ferocious ‘awful genius’ of post-war food writing, who introduced a whole generation to the joys of continental cookery, tells of a certain Madame Poulard, celebrated throughout France for her omelettes.

The gourmands of France slavered over her light and fluffy creations, and indulged themselves with endless speculation as to her secret – water, foie gras, a special breed of hen, all were held responsible for these works of genius. Finally, David writes, someone saw fit to ask Madame herself for her recipe. ‘I break some good eggs in a bowl, I beat them well, I put a good piece of butter in the pan. I throw the eggs into it and I shake it constantly. I am happy, monsieur, if this recipe pleases you.’



Before we start, let's clarify that the omelette of which I speak here is a classical French-style one, a rich cigar of fluffy deliciousness,

rather than a dense yellow half-moon oozing cheese and ham. You can guess how to make those yourself, there's not much skill involved. This sort, however, aspires to delicacy, and height – and that's more difficult to achieve.

The classic French culinary encyclopedia *Larousse Gastronomique* adds milk to its recipe, and Darina Allen at Ballymaloe Cookery School suggests a couple of tablespoons of water, both ingredients which make the omelette fluffier, but which, in my opinion, dilute its rich eggy flavour. Really, you just need eggs (at room temperature or they'll take too long to set) and butter – not only does it impart flavour, but, unlike oil, butter helpfully foams when the pan is hot enough to add the eggs (that pan, by the way, should be heavy, and tailored to the size of your omelette – 23cm is ideal for one person. Le Creuset make a perfect cast-iron example which is well worth the investment if you eat them a lot). *Larousse* also helpfully suggests that, for a really spectacular omelette, you should whisk your yolks and whites separately, and fold them together before serving – but although the result is impressive, it lacks the deep flavour of a real omelette. Style over substance.

Purists such as Julia Child insist that stirring your omelette with a spatula will ruin the texture, but she must have had wrists of steel to flip her pan so dextrously – if Michel Roux Jr, Marcus Wareing and Ballymaloe Cookery School all allow it, then it's good enough for me.

For a great omelette, you need three things: good ingredients (and plenty of them, in the case of the butter), the right-sized pan, and fearlessly quick wits. Time is of the essence – it should be on a plate within a minute.

Serves 1

2 large free-range eggs

Salt and pepper

The filling of your choice (optional, but

Parmesan, Gruyère, tomatoes, fresh herbs,

shredded ham and smoked fish are all

favourites of mine)

A generous knob of butter (about a tablespoon)



1. Whisk together the eggs until just mixed, then season. Lay out any fillings you are using by the hob.
2. Heat a 23cm pan over a medium-high flame, add the butter and swirl to coat. When the foam begins to die down, pour in the eggs. They should sizzle.
3. Shake the pan to distribute the eggs evenly, then leave for 20 seconds, until they begin to bubble. Add any filling.
4. Using a spatula or fork, draw in the sides of the eggs to the centre while shaking the pan to redistribute the liquid to the edges. The omelette is done when still slightly runny in the middle.
5. Take off the heat, and fold two edges into the middle. Shake the pan so they roll together, then tilt it and turn your omelette on to a warm plate (you can tidy it up before serving if you like). Season and eat immediately!



Egg guide

Although hens are the go-to egg producers in this country, they don't have a monopoly on the business. Here, from the smallest to the most mighty, are the different kinds you might come across:

Quail's eggs: Laid by the most diminutive of game birds, these prettily speckled eggs are about the size of a large stuffed olive, and have a higher proportion of yolk to white than a hen's egg. You can fry them and use them as a rather comical-looking garnish, but I like to soft boil them and serve with celery salt as a nibble. Simmer for 3 minutes, cool in iced water, then peel – or better still, get people to peel their own; they can be fiddly little things.

Gull's eggs: These have a very short season from mid-April to mid-May and, as they must be collected from wild birds, tend to be expensive – you're more likely to find them on a restaurant menu than at the supermarket. They have a rich, slightly mineral flavour, and can be treated in much the same way as a quail's egg.

Duck eggs: Slightly larger than hen's eggs, and higher in fat, they have a rich creamy flavour, and produce fluffier results when used in baking. Lovely soft-boiled too.

Goose eggs: Twice as large as a duck egg, these share their rich flavour and dense, translucent whites, which can turn rubbery at high heats. Better

scrambled or soft-boiled than fried. Generally only available in spring and summer.

Ostrich eggs: If you come across one of these, bear in mind that it's the equivalent of 24 hen's eggs — and that you will need to boil it for an hour, and cut into the shell with a hacksaw, by which point the novelty will probably have worn off. You can, of course, also pierce a hole in the bottom, empty out the bottom to scramble, and decorate the shell instead.

Perfect Pancakes

*I*t's such a shame we only make pancakes once a year in this country – they seem to have been a bit of a favourite in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and no wonder; surviving recipes are laden with egg yolks, cream and sweet wine. These days we tend to favour more austere recipes to use up our eggs before the Lenten fast – although Australian food writer Jill Dupleix makes a brave stab at tradition with her rich, rum-soaked numbers. I prefer a plainer pancake, though – all the better to anoint with lemon juice and scatter with crunchy sugar.

While Jill and *Telegraph* writer Xanthe Clay beef up their batter with melted butter, *Good Food* magazine adds a dash of oil to the mix – the butter is nicer, but I think you can achieve the same effect by cooking them in a buttered pan instead. I do take a tip from the two ladies and use an extra yolk, however, which lends the pancakes a depth of flavour without that slight toughness that egg white imparts. Allowing the batter to stand for 30 minutes, as Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall suggests, gives the starch a chance to soak up water, and helps get rid of any air bubbles, both of which improve their texture.



Although *Good Food* and Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall counsel cooking the pancakes over a moderate heat, I prefer to follow

Professor Peter Barham, physicist and adviser to Heston Blumenthal, in getting the pan really hot, because I like mine thin and crisp – you can turn it down before cooking if you prefer a softer finish. Spread the batter as thin as possible for delicately lacy edges – and treat the first pancake as an experiment; it usually goes wrong, which is an excellent excuse to treat it as a cook's perk.

These are also good wrapped around a creamy seafood filling, stuffed with spinach and ricotta and gratinated – or slathered with chopped banana and chocolate sauce. Versatile, eh?

Makes about 8

125g plain flour

A pinch of salt

1 large free-range egg,

plus 1 large egg yolk

225ml whole or semi-skimmed milk

30g butter, softened



1. Sift the flour into a large mixing bowl and add a pinch of salt. Make a well in the centre, and pour the egg and the yolk into it. Mix the milk with 2 tablespoons of cold water and pour a little in with the egg.
2. Use a balloon whisk to whisk the flour into the liquid ingredients, drawing it gradually into the middle until you have a smooth paste the consistency of double cream. Whisk the rest of the milk in until the batter has more of the consistency of single cream. Cover and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes.
3. Heat the butter in a crêpe pan or a 20cm non-stick frying pan