



The No-Recipe Guide
to Plant-Based Eating®

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Chapter 3

Utensils and Equipment

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Utensils and Equipment

Kitchen equipment

Do you know how to cook? Have lots of equipment? Then skip this chapter.

If not, or you are curious, the suggestions that follow highlight tools that are especially useful for plant-based meal preparation and why.



Basic utensils

Strainers and colanders

Grains and veggies, cooked or raw, require rinsing and/or draining in a strainer and the more sizes of strainers you have, the more convenient meal prep is. Plastic strainers are inexpensive and easy to store, but melt when used for straining hot food or holding over a steaming pot. Hard plastic colanders are good for washing fruit, but can also melt when used incorrectly. Metal strainers and colanders, which I recommend, hold their shape and protect against melting. Unfortunately, they require a lot of storage space.

Timers

Cooking is risky when you forget that there's a pot on the stove. To guard against that, use multiple timers even if you are only cooking one thing. Many timers, unfortunately, have weak alarms and worse, only short alarm periods. Stove and microwave timers are especially poor and crank timers are not particularly accurate or loud. Address this problem by using several digital timers, especially if you roam around while cooking. Your cell phone's timer app, for example, might be the best of the group.

Heavy rubber gloves & water-repellant hot pads

Steaming, boiling, and microwaving food not only makes containers hot, but the path of escaping hot vapors can scald palms, wrists, and arms. To protect yourself from steam and spills, wear heavy rubber gloves when handling containers in addition to using water-repellant hot pads. **Warning:** Never pick up something hot with a wet hot pad or towel as heat transfers through the wet area instantly.

Pots

A lot of plant-based cooking produces steam. If you need to buy new pots, consider purchasing at least three, same-sized pots, rather than a graduated set. I find a 3-quart size the most convenient for a family of four.

Glass tops are also a must, preferably with straining capabilities! If you don't want to replace old pots, glass tops are sold to fit most common pot sizes.

To get rid of minerals on any pot surface, bring to a boil a 50/50 white vinegar and water mix. Simmer for 15 minutes, cool, rinse, wipe clean, and towel-dry.

Microwave popcorn popper

Popcorn is a particularly welcome snack on the plant-based diet. Unfortunately, many air-and-microwave popcorn poppers can burn you when you touch its sides or lift a lid. Silicone microwave poppers not only can burn you, they can lose their form while you handle them. Worse, many of these popcorn poppers require cooling time before you can make another batch.

To increase convenience and greatly decrease the possibility of harm, I exclusively recommend the **Presto PowerPopper**, which you can buy online, or at many kitchen supply stores. It makes a delicious bowl of popcorn in around 2 minutes!

This device can be used multiple times without long waits in between use. Its disposable "Power Cup Microwave Concentrators" effectively manage heat control and they can be reused numerous times. Replacements come in packets of 8, 24, and 48.

The **Presto PowerPopper** fits in all but the smallest microwaves. Make sure that yours has a cavity that is at least 6-inches tall by 10-inches wide.

Prep Tip: Do you like lightly salted popcorn without needing butter? When you lightly spray water on your popcorn, the salt sticks. I season my popcorn in this way with cayenne pepper, and many other people use brewer's yeast.

Parchment paper

I use parchment paper extensively for microwave cooking as well as for baking in temperatures of 350-degrees or under, such as for cake-pan linings. It can also be used to wrap burritos and sandwiches for immediate eating or warming in a microwave or standard oven. Wrap individual items before sticking them into a plastic bag for freezer storage, too. The parchment keeps things from sticking together.

Parchment paper comes in rolls, sheets, round dish (or *cake pan*) sizes, round-perforated for steaming, and muffin pan liners. I use rolls that are available in most grocery stores. The round styles, which you might have to buy online, are extremely convenient to place on a dish when using the dish in a microwave. Use parchment paper to wrap food, control heat, and reduce sticking for everything except soup.



Microwave dishes and covers

The problem with using a microwave is that dishes or bowls can become deceptively hot, plus most foods cooked in them need a cover to prevent drying. Unfortunately, if you become distracted when removing a dish from a microwave, you can get hit with a burst of steam when you remove the cover.

The best microwave covers are vented and reduce the chance of collecting steam droplets on their inner surface. They should be rigid (not *floppy silicone*), so if you do mishandle them, hot water won't drip down on your skin.

Dishes of all types can become exceptionally hot when placed directly on top of a microwave floor, and this high heat can dry out food during the cooking process. To avoid that, place a rippled silicone mat or hot pad under the dish so there is air flow between the dish and the microwave's floor.

Instant food thermometer

An instant food thermometer will save you from overcooking food in a microwave, leading to possible mouth burns. The same is true for cooking soup or sauce on a range-top. Aim for an "inside" food temperature of 135-140 degrees or less. If you are worried about killing bacteria, however, cook to an inside temperature of 160 degrees.

Microwaving generates a lot of steam and can cook unevenly, with the edges of food cold, while the center is hot, or the center is hot, but the edges are dried out. Consider extra covering on the edges of the food you cook to keep them moist.

Paper towels

Cleaning up after preparing most plant-based meals is relatively easy when you reduce or eliminate oil or fat, meat bacteria, and dairy products from your cooking. Many times, a quick wipe with a damp towel on your counter or cooking utensil is all you need.

I also use damp paper towels to cover fresh or frozen burritos in a microwave or standard oven. This keeps the tortilla delicately moist.

Stove-top steamer insert

I recommend using a digital steamer appliance for your vegetable steaming needs, but if you are short of space or budget, you can use steamer inserts. They open and shut like petals, fit into most pots, and have legs long enough to keep them from sinking into the inch of water below needed to generate steam.

I recommend stainless-steel inserts. Silicone-covered aluminum steamers look nice, but are clumsy. Silicone-only steamer inserts do not retain their shape when hot and their unpredictable floppy behavior can cause burns.

A problem with stove-top steamers is that if you become distracted, the water being used to steam can boil away, which is the main reason I stress the use of timers.

Mandolin slicer and mesh glove

Prior to starting my plant-based diet, I used a mandolin to slice my vegetables almost exclusively. After starting, I reverted to slicing and chopping veggies by hand. Why? Because cleaning a knife is easier and faster than cleaning any device.

If, however, you have special slicing and chopping needs in mind, and you want to use a mandolin, buy a “mesh, cut-proof butcher’s glove,” also called a “butcher’s glove,” to go with it. The butcher’s glove will protect your fingertips from accidentally getting cut off while slicing. You might find them at a kitchen supply store, otherwise, shop online.

Nut chopper and nut crusher

I *crush* walnuts by placing them in a plastic bag, after which I press a large spoon or rolling pin on it.

If you have more extensive crushing needs, a hand crank-or-press chopper might be convenient, but I’ve found the plastic bag method to be the most efficient for small jobs.

Large, handpress juicers

If you prefer orange or grapefruit juice “fresh squeezed,” a heavy-duty hand press, such as those made by Tramontina, is easy to use, clean up, and more efficient than a small, motorized juicer of any type.

Veggie peelers

Veggie peelers come in a variety of forms and those with thicker handles and long protruding peeling blades are more efficient than those with short, perpendicular blades. The choice, however, is yours.

Automatic or hand-crank apple and potato peelers might make your life easier if you process a lot of those foods. If needed, choose a heavy-duty model, make sure its motor is powerful. Inexpensive “As Seen On TV” models might not be strong enough for frequent needs.

Plastic cutting boards

Plastic cutting boards save your knife blades from becoming dull and are easy to clean by hand or in a dishwasher. They do not need the same level of sterilization as boards used for meat and dairy preparation where bacteria-killing is crucial.

Motorized blenders, immersion blenders, and juicers

Blenders chop food into fine pieces that release juice, while juicers squeeze juice out of food, leaving solid material to throw away.

Juicers are large, heavy appliances which might be appropriate for users with sufficient storage space. Their finished product separates the juice from the pulp and skin.

Blenders are also big appliances. They pulverize food and can produce juice through the addition of water or other liquids. Their finished product contains small food particles which can be fine enough to drink.

I exclusively use a handy immersion blender (also called a *stick blender*) for all my juicing and blending needs. While it does make excellent smoothies, I particularly like it because I can blend soup while it cooks on my range top.



Buying Tip: If you use an immersion blender, also acquire an “*immersion blender beaker.*” The beaker’s high sides make an immersion blender easier to use because food is unlikely to slosh over the top. Some new immersion blender sets include an immersion beaker, but if you need one, search Amazon.com for an “*immersion blender beaker,*” or a “*one-quart beaker.*”

Potato ricer and Foley food strainer

A potato ricer is exceptionally handy to use if you want to eliminate peeling potatoes before boiling. Simply place the cooked potatoes into the ricer, squeeze, and watch the lump-free mashed potatoes stream out, separated from the skin.

A Foley Food Strainer (or “Mill”) is also handy if you make large quantities of potatoes, tomato juice, apple sauce, or other foods that require mashing and straining. It, too, separates pulp from skin.

Not for Mashing Beans: I experimented with a Foley Food Strainer to mash beans to the consistency found in commercial hummus. To do this, you need to add a lot of water to the beans and while it did mash the beans and separate the skins, it did not produce the consistency I wanted. Instead, I continue to use a round, hand masher.

Hand bean and potato masher

I use a round-base, hand masher for beans, potatoes, and other mash-able foods. Wire-head mashers are OK for potatoes, but the tines are too wide for use with beans.

Spray or squeeze bottles

Use inexpensive squeeze bottles (sometimes called “condiment bottles”) for sauce, condiment, and dressing portion control.

Glass spray bottles are especially valuable when cooking because they can be sanitized after use. I use mine to spritz air-popped popcorn, so it holds salt or other seasoning as well as for delicate liquid measurement when making Royal Icing for cookies.

Wooden spoons

You might think you need one or more wooden spoons for stirring, and while that might be true, what you really need them for is to keep your pot filled with boiling water and perhaps rice, noodles, or potatoes from boiling over. To stop boil-overs, place the wooden spoon over the pot. It breaks the surface tension that occurs when starchy foods thicken water and pops the resulting bubbles that cause boil-over problems. Make sure, of course, that the flame under the pot does not lick up its sides and burn the spoon.

Cooking appliances

Digital appliances

Computer-controlled (*digital*) appliances are preferable to older types controlled by dials or switches, because they are capable of automatically changing states from hot to warm to off by sensing the appliance's environment as well as through timing.

Cooking on a range is easy, but if you become distracted during the cooking process, you risk boiling liquid dry, scorching food, filling the home with smoke, or even burning it down. In this day of cell phone addiction and online games or conversations like you might have on Facebook, your use of digital appliances helps keep you safe, or, at least, counteracts distraction.

Digital steamer

Cooking plants requires steaming or boiling. While I used a steam insert in my pots to accomplish this, after becoming distracted a few times, I now exclusively use a digital steamer, with the reasonably priced Hamilton Beach Digital Steamer being the one I recommend.

The biggest benefit to using a digital steamer is that most have small footprints, steamer trays are large enough to simultaneously cook several types of veggies, and you never worry about it running dry as the steamer automatically turns off when it senses that condition.

Digital ricer

Like other digital appliances, a digital ricer has controls that will turn itself off even when the cook forgets that he or she is using it. Given that a ricer's main purpose is to heat water in which to soak grain, many of these pots can be used to make oatmeal, porridge (a hot cereal made from grain), beans, steamed vegetables, and even soup.

I stopped using my digital ricer in favor of stove-top rice cooking, which I detail in Chapter 4. Without digital controls, however, I use timers to prod me if I forget what I'm doing. If you prefer thoughtless cooking, you will like a digital ricer.

No matter what you cook on a hot surface, whatever food rests unstirred on the bottom of a pot can burn, with rice in a digital ricer being no different. Very commonly rice “crusts” (*lightly burns*) on the bottom of a ricer, turning a golden brown. This side effect results in a delicacy enjoyed by many people. To eat, serve the fluffy, top layer of rice, then scrape up the crispy bottom and serve it to those who enjoy it soaked in butter or gravy.

The crust left in a ricer is called “socarrat,” in Spanish, “nurungii” in Korea, “xoon” in Senegalese, “tah dig” in Farsi, “bibimbop” in Korea, and “con con” by the Dominicans and is the base of many classical dishes. My husband, however, calls it “avoidable.”

Digital microwave

A microwave is useful for warming up previously made grains, cooking frozen foods, and preparing tortillas. With a little care, it has very good steaming qualities, but steaming is faster on a stovetop or dedicated digital steamer.

Modern microwaves are equipped with digital controls, so if you are buying your first one, ignore those with dials or switches.

I recommend wearing heavy rubber gloves when microwaving food. They protect your skin from touching hot surfaces as well as prevent exposure to explosive puffs of hot steam when handling covered dishes and bowls.

Storage containers

Almost all major grocery stores package prepared vegetables in clear plastic containers, rather than bags. These containers make it very easy for consumers and grocers to judge the freshness of products and reduce spoilage. Consider using the same type of container for home use.

I prefer clear plastic, reusable deli containers with lids because they are light weight, stack easily, seal securely, and reveal their contents. Glass containers with lids, such as made by OXO and Pyrex, are also good, but are harder to store and are relatively heavy.

I have not yet found clear plastic deli containers in a kitchen store, so purchased mine online. Search for these containers using the phrase “rectangular clear plastic deli containers with lids” on Amazon.com. Make sure you don’t get the “clam shell” variety as they are difficult to store, or containers with colored lids because you cannot easily see their contents.

Service pieces

Yes, you can serve your plant-based meals on standard plates, but bowls come in very handy:

Mixing or Prep Bowls: Always use bowls significantly larger than your ingredients, whether fresh cut veggies or cooked. This seemingly obvious tip will save you clean-up time associated with spillage.

Soup or Salad Bowls: We use numerous soup bowls for soup, steamed veggies, fresh salads, and more. If you run out of bowls that match your dinnerware, buy clear glass bowls. They match everything.

Small Condiment Bowls: To spice up veggie dishes, serve dressings or sauces on the side, with horseradish mustard being one of my favorites for dipping. Condiments are more attractively served on the table in small bowls than in product bottles. And, like I said before, small, clear glass condiment bowls match everything.

What's Next?

Chapter 1 contains an introduction to the whole-food, plant-based eating style.

Chapter 2 re-introduces you to grocery shopping for whole-food, plant-based eaters.

Chapter 3 recommends kitchen tools most suitable for preparing whole-food, plant-based meals.

Chapter 4 shows you how to prepare foods for your whole-food, plant-based diet.

Chapter 5 discusses eating at home or *on the go* by yourself or with family and friends.

Chapter 6 examines diet and easy exercise considerations

Chapter 7 provides cookbook, website, and other recommendations



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Karen Little is a retired technical writer who specialized in creating corporate training materials and programs in Milwaukee, WI, and New York City, plus books and articles on travel, art, and computer programming. She was the founder of LetsKickScoot.com, which was turned over to a new publisher in 2017. Many of her articles remain on that site.

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