



The No-Recipe Guide  
to Plant-Based Eating®

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# Chapter 4

## Basic Cooking Concepts

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# Basic Cooking Concepts

## How to Cook Veggies, Grains, and Beans

### Plan your meals and snacks

**Directions:** Combine any edible plant-based food with any other edible plant-based food for a meal or snack. Plant-based foods include vegetables, whole grains, beans, legumes, fruit, nuts, and seeds and no pre-planning is required to make many fast and easy dishes.

When I started my own whole-food, plant-based diet, I found meal planning difficult because up until then, meat was at the center of most of my meals, with plants essentially the garnish. Then I read Dr. John McDougal's "*The Starch Solution*," and learned this meal composition formula:

Use starchy plants to make up 50-to-70% of your meal or snack, then add any combination of non-starchy vegetables, fruits, and nuts for the remainder.

Build your meals around high-starch, non-refined foods in much the same way as you used to build your meals around meat. If you are a moderately active person, the amount to eat at a main meal might be 70% starch, and for smaller meals, 50%, and snacks, 25-to-35%. Your food cravings should stop if you eat plant-based foods at least four times a day, avoiding candy, bakery, and salty snacks. (This topic is discussed further in Chapter 5, *Eating*.)

Served hot, warm, cold, sweet, salty or spicy, the following starchy foods, when balanced with non-starchy vegetables, will keep you satisfied:

- Grains: Brown rice, oatmeal, other non-refined grains and seeds
- White potatoes, sweet potatoes, and yams
- Sweet peas, fresh corn, carrots, beets, plus more
- Beans and legumes (mashed or whole)
- Whole-grain breads, biscuits, chips, and noodles
- Winter squashes, such as acorn, butternut, buttercup, hubbard, and pumpkin.

Starchy foods usually need cooking. Once cooked, however, they can be eaten hot, warm, or cold right next to cooked-or-cold non-starchy foods.



## Fundamental cooking methods

The easiest ways of cooking plant-based meals in a typical Western-style kitchen is through steaming, boiling, and roasting:

- **Steaming:** Food is cooked in constantly evaporating wet heat, starting at 212°F.
- **Boiling:** Food is submerged in 100° to 212°F water ranging from simmer to full boil. Water (fluids) in pressure cookers goes up to 250°F.
- **Roasting or baking:** Food is cooked in dry heat at whatever temperature the cooking appliance can achieve. The temperatures of 350° to 400°F are common baking temperatures in conventional ovens.

There are hundreds of cooking methods, many of which are specific to meat and dairy preparation. Plant-based eaters, for example, would never use *Engastration*, where the remains of one animal is cooked after being stuffed into another animal, or *En vessie*, where meat is stuffed into a pig bladder. For more a laundry-list of cooking methods, consult Wikipedia.org's [List of Cooking Techniques](#).

## Timers

In addition to a steamer, large pots, and sided-roasting pans, the most important kitchen appliance you need is a timer, especially when it is easy to lose track of watching foods heat up while absent-mindedly consulting your smart phone, tablet, or computer. An “I’ll get to it in a second” can take a half hour or more and result in burnt food, a ruined pan, and a house full of smoke.

**Directions:** Only turn your timer *off* when you are in the act of responding to your cooking needs. If you do want to respond in “*just a second*,” reset your timer. Failure to do this can cause your food to go up in smoke.

The best timers are loud and count-up after they ring. In that way, you’ll know how long you ignored its call. I use several. One in the kitchen and others in whatever room I am in while waiting for the next step in whatever it is I am making.

The best appliances are digital with sensors that lower heat after a specified time or shut heat off. The best digital controllers turn the appliance off when conditions, like running out of water, occur.

## Shortcuts – using packaged products

Ideally, every lunch, dinner, and snack would be prepared by someone else who is devoted to shopping for groceries, loves cleaning and chopping fresh vegetables, and doesn’t mind spending hours in the kitchen cooking, baking, and washing dishes.

Practically, this person does not exist and if he or she does, you are probably not him or her.

Grocery stores are filled with packaged plant-based products designed to save you time and reduce waste. These include whole-grain breads and noodles, frozen and canned veggies, frozen meals, canned beans, mashed beans, soups, sauces, dressings, seasonings, and condiments.

**Tip:** Your objective is to reduce or eliminate meat and dairy products as well as other personally selected items. To achieve that, read labels! There are many packaged and prepared foods available that will meet your criteria.

Use your best judgement. Consider extending a packaged food by adding non-salted or non-sweetened items to it. This changes ingredient ratios, resulting in something agreeable to eat without going nuts making the dish perfectly from scratch. Good extenders are canned tomatoes, non-seasoned beans (whole or pre-mashed), a variety of non-salted vegetable broths, and balsamic vinegar.

## Seasonings and flavorings

Add seasonings and flavorings to your food to change or improve its taste. Salt and pepper are seasonings, as are herbs, spices, and combinations thereof. You do not need a recipe to use seasonings, however, *recipes provide ideas on how seasonings can be used!*

All grocery stores sell seasonings, with ethnic specialty shops being especially interesting. If you are unfamiliar with seasonings, educate yourself as to thousands available by visiting online shops such as:

- [The Great American Spice Company](#)
- [Spices, Inc](#)
- [Savory Spice](#)
- [Penzeys](#)

To learn how a seasoning, such as “*basil*,” can be used, search the web with phrases like “uses of *basil*” or “recipes with *basil*” to quickly become an expert.

Food enhancers include condiments, sauces, soups, broths, vinegars, and salad dressings. Reach for one or more of these to combine with your plant-based food. Examples:

- Add brown rice or whole wheat noodles to canned soup.
- Extend canned soup by adding tomatoes (fresh or canned-diced), plus other ingredients.
- Use oil-free salad dressings over baked or mashed potatoes, beans, or rice. If you don’t mind a little oil in your dressing, but find too much of it in regular dressings, decant most of the oil from the offending dressing, then add vinegar to the mix. The resulting taste will be similar to the original without the oily burden.
- Add a range of veggies (peppers, onions, celery, etc.) to brown rice during the cooking process. Serve the results with a tomato sauce, thick broth, or soup over the top.
- Perk up mashed beans with hot sauces, peppers, spices, mustards, or vinegar.
- Top off many plant-based foods with balsamic vinegar or lemon juice. Or become a vinegar expert. There are many vinegar varieties available or you can make a delicious infusion yourself, as this Prevention Magazine article by Karen Solomon entitled [How to Make Your Own Flavored Oils and Vinegars](#) demonstrates.

- Create your own spaghetti sauce by adding veggies, such as mushrooms, onions, peppers, and beets to a commercial sauce, and even consider adding non-traditional seasonings. Cups of oil or shredded cheese are not necessary.

Creating designer combinations is easy, especially considering that plant-based foods can be combined in hundreds of ways without any specific direction. Consider Mark Bittman's achievement in his article, [101 Simple Salads for the Season](#), published by the [New York Times](#). Be inspired!

## Steaming veggies

### *Dedicated digital steamer*

**Directions:** To steam veggies in any *dedicated steamer appliance*, cut the veggies to relatively the same thickness (generally an inch or less). Place the veggies in a steamer basket, set its timer, turn it on, and within 5 to 10 minutes, your veggies are done.

The time it takes for veggies to cook is directly related to the food's thickness, not the food itself. Small and/or thin veggies get done in minutes. The only thing you need to do is fill the digital steamer with water and turn it on.

**Tip:** Handle the steamer's trays with rubber gloves, rather than a cloth hot pad, to keep your hands and arms safe.

I regard a digital steamer the best appliance for use in cooking plant-based foods. I favor steamers with multiple, clear baskets made specifically for steaming. I do not recommend multi-use appliances, like ricers, roasters, or slow cookers as they are not as efficient.

I recommend the under-\$50 *Hamilton Beach Digital 5.5 Quart Food Steamer* which can simultaneously cook several types of vegetables. Food can easily be added or removed throughout the steaming process, and there are no rules to follow. Rarely will you over-cook your veggies, but if you do forget it is on, it automatically turns off if it runs out of water.



## Stove top steamer baskets

**Directions:** To steam veggies in a steamer basket, fill the pot in which the basket will sit to 1-inch of water, set the basket in the pot, place evenly-cut veggies on the basket, cover the pot, then turn on the heat to bring the water to a boil.

Set your timer for 3- to 5-minutes, watching the pot to make sure its water does not evaporate. If the water runs low, simply refill it.

The time it takes to fully cook hard veggies, like potatoes or beans, is directly related to the thickness of the food. In other words, a ½-inch square potato and a 5-inch long, ½-inch wide carrot will cook in the same time. Softer foods cook faster.

**Warning:** If you forget what you are doing, it is very easy to boil water away and burn your pan. Always use one or more timers when using a stove-top steamer and check often to make sure it does not run out of water.

**Tip:** Depending on how you place your veggies in a basket, that basket can tip. The same is true when you remove the basket from the pot. Always wear rubber gloves when handling a hot steamer basket.

The three types of steamer baskets are stainless steel, silicone coated stainless steel, (both which feature folding leaves that enable them to fit into various sized pots), and silicone-only, which bends but does not fold.

I recommend the stainless-steel basket as it fits into more pots (even some covered frying pans) and is sturdier than the silicone-only variety.



Silicone-covered stainless steel



Silicone basket

## Microwaving veggies

**Directions:** Microwaving is a steaming process, with every microwave brand and every food type requiring different temperatures and times. If you do prefer microwaving, use a dedicated microwave steamer, rather than make-do with your kitchen dishes.

**Tip:** Always wear rubber gloves when handling hot, microwaved dishes as well as standard hot pads. You probably know this from experience, so I'm just reminding you that it is very easy to over-heat your food.

No matter what your microwave's directions might say, set your timer for short periods, checking often to avoid over-cooking.



## Baking veggies

**Directions for cut-up veggies:** Cut your veggies (or fruit!) into equal sizes, with their narrowest width determining their cooking time. Place on a heavy baking pan with sides, then slide it into an oven heated to 375° or 400°F. Using a food-quality glass spray bottle, mist one or two squeezes of water into your oven (not directly over the veggies). Every 10 minutes or so, stir the veggies slightly so they do not adhere or burn to the bottom of the pan. They are done when you can easily cut through them with a dull knife or fork.

**Directions for potatoes and many large veggies:** Wash the veggies and poke holes in their skin to let steam escape. Place in a heated 400° to 450°F oven. Every 15 minutes spray with water to crisp up their skins. Cooking time will usually take between 1- and 1.5-hours.

**Tip:** It is not necessary to oil or salt your veggies. Periodically misting baked potatoes in a very hot oven produces a crisp skin.

Unlike with meat, the purpose of heating your veggies is to make them edible rather than free them of bacteria, so it is not necessary to measure their internal temperatures. Baked potatoes are considered done at around 200°F but the ultimate test is whether they are squeezable, or you can easily cut them with a dull knife.

Cut into small chunks, most veggies spread on a pan in a single layer cook within 20 minutes to a half hour. Large veggies, like whole potatoes, can take one to two hours, depending on size and oven temperature.



## Boiling

### About boiling

With an abundance of available clean water and fuel, cooking in water or liquid (*boiling*) is the easiest way to fully cook grains, beans, vegetables, and pasta. Bubbles formed by boiling indicate that evaporation is taking place, so when you use this method, check that your pot does not become dry.

Boiling temperatures are as follows:

- **Simmer:** 180° to 190°F, which is slightly under water's full boiling temperature. Tiny bubbles appear at the bottom of the pot promoting evaporation.
- **High simmer:** Between 190°F and boiling. As the water reaches 190°F or higher, bubbles start climbing to the surface. If you cannot control your heat (often the case on a gas stove), turn it off if you require simmering. As the bubbles recede, turn it back on to low. A heat defuser helps spread the heat over the bottom of a pan but does **not** reduce heat lower than your range's lowest setting.
- **Boil:** A water temperature of 212°F in a non-pressurized (*open*) pot marks boiling. Do not cover a full pot of boiling water as the escaping steam will push the cover off and will burn your hand if you reach for the cover without thinking. Water reaches a temperature of 250°F in a pressure cooker.



**Tip:** Experienced cooks understand boiling stages by observing bubble characteristics. If you need help determining the stages, **check the temperature by using an instant food thermometer.** Wear rubber gloves to protect your skin when checking.

Problems with boiling include cooking your food too long, evaporating water from the pot leaving it dry, and burning food on the bottom of a pot, whether water is there or not. Here is how to address these concerns:

- **Timing:** Cooking time for anything depends on the thickness (*width*), size, and similarity of the items being boiled. Always use timers to alert you. Do not guess! Stop cooking and drain your food when it reaches doneness gaged by taste and tenderness. *Failure to time your food leads to over-cooking, mushy food, and loss of nutrients.* Steaming is easier.
- **Evaporation:** Using a timer, check uncovered boiling water every 7 to 10 minutes. Add water to the pot as needed. Water evaporates quickly when a pot is open. If covered, cook on simmer.
- **Burning Food:** Stir your food during the boiling period. This is especially important as food absorbs water and gets heavier in the process causing it to lay on the bottom of a pan like a blanket, providing a large surface area that collects too much heat.

**Tip:** Always fill a pot with water no higher than 3-inches from the top edge. If you boil food, like noodles, in an open pot, place a wooden spoon across the pot's edge to keep bubbles and liquids from overflowing. Why? Food releases starch in the water which make bubble surfaces thicker and stronger (*surface tension*). When the bubbles hit the spoon, the spoon breaks that surface tension, so the bubbles don't stack up. Keep an eye on your pot, however, with or without use of a wooden spoon, and if you do use the spoon, make sure it is not close to direct heat or flame.

There are electric “boiling pots” that control heat and reduce the amount of time you need to watch the cooking process. These include the inexpensive *Proctor Silex 32 Ounce Hot Pot* and the *TONZE DGD22-22EG Healthy Smart 3 Ceramic Pot – 2 quarts*, priced at over \$100. To find other options, search online for “*electric boiling pots*” or “*electric kettles*.”

## *Boiling brown rice*

Common directions for rice of all types call for a precise measurement of water to rice, such as 2-cups water to 1-cup rice. The assumption is that you will monitor the cooking process so closely that you will stop it the minute the rice soaks up all the water. Wait too long, or have overly high heat, and the rice burns to the bottom of the pan.

Burnt or crisp rice can be found in the best of automatic rice cookers as well as on a carefully monitored stovetop. This crust is a delicacy in all rice-eating communities, although not popular in a Western-style diet. According to the article, “[The Crunchy Rice at the Bottom of the Pot, How Different Cultures Cook and Eat It](#),” published in BonAppetit.com:

The Spanish know it as *socarrat*, Koreans as *nurungji*, Senegalese as *xoon*, the Dominicans as *con con*, the Chinese as *bo zai fan*, the Indonesian as *intip*, the Vietnamese as *co 'm chay*, and Thais as *khao taen*.

Owning an expensive automatic ricer does not guarantee your rice will be fluffy at the bottom of the pot. If you want to avoid crisp rice and cook your rice more predictably than the average appliance, use the *unmeasured stove-top method*. Otherwise, get used to eating the crisp rice if your appliance generates it.

The whole-food, plant-based diet recommends eating cooked brown rice. If you are new to brown rice, you might be aware of having eaten *sticky* rice and would like brown rice to be prepared similarly. Unfortunately, sticky rice (formally known as *glutinous rice*) is a specific type of high starch rice prized for its sticky characteristics. Strangely, despite its name, there is no gluten in “glutinous rice,” although it can appear as white, black, or purple. Do not confuse it with brown rice or standard white rice!

### MAKING BROWN RICE QUICKLY – UNMEASURED STOVE-TOP METHOD

#### Utensils:

- A very large pot, at least 5-quarts for a family of 4, or up to 12-quarts for larger groups. The smallest pot that can be used for 1.25 cups of rice is 3-quarts, but you must closely monitor it.
- A metal mesh strainer



**Directions:** Fill a pot with water (or broth) that is 3-inches from the top edge or less and bring to a boil. Rinse rice in a strainer, then dump it into the boiling water. (There should be at least 4 or more cups of water to 1 cup of rice.) **Boil for exactly 30 minutes, uncovered, checking during the process.** If, after adding the rice, the water line in the pot raises to over 3-inches from the edge, remove water until it drops below that level.

At 30 minutes, remove the pot from the burner and drain the cooked rice in a strainer. Return the rice to the hot, empty pot. Cover and let the rice sit for about 10 minutes.

**Tip:** Add anything you'd like to the boiling water, such as chopped onions, green peppers, corn, seasonings, etc., or leave it plain. I do not add salt or oil.

The picture below shows rice boiling in an open pot. In this case, chopped onions and celery were added to the rice. The foam you see on the top is called *scum*. Remove it with a spoon.



**Warning:** The volume of the rice can triple, so use a big pot. Use a 5-quart kettle for 1.5-cups of rice. A 3-quart kettle is marginally large enough for 1.25-cups.

To find out more about this method, go to [Saveur.com](http://Saveur.com) to read “[Perfect Brown Rice](#).” You will also find instructions there on how to cook other grains.

### MAKING BROWN RICE WITH AN ELECTRIC RICER

Follow your electric ricer’s directions. Cooking brown rice in a ricer takes longer than by using the stovetop method and you run the possibility that the bottom layer of rice will become crusty. You will, however, not have to keep track of cooking as your ricer will turn itself off automatically. You can also set more advanced digital ricers to turn on later in the day and keep rice warm after it stops cooking.

### *Boiling grains*

Boiling grains is like boiling pasta. Exact ratios of water-to-food are not required, although when boiling anything on a stovetop, you must check water levels during the boiling process due to evaporation.

Unless you use an electric appliance (such as a ricer that also cooks grains and beans), using exact water-to-grain or bean ratios can leave you with a burnt pan if that pan is not periodically stirred and closely monitored.

Boil your grains in an enormous amount of water. A loose rule is to use at least 5- to 6-times more water than grain and make sure that the water does not reach closer to 3-inches of the pot’s edge.

**Tip:** Grain starches found in boiling water coat bubbles, making a tough skin called *surface tension*. As bubbles with this strong skin rise to the top of a pot, they climb on top of each other, causing boil-overs. You can guard against boil-overs by making sure there is adequate distance between the top of the water and the pot’s edge. Placing a wooden spoon over the top of the pot also helps as the spoon breaks bubble surface tension before the bubbles climb over the side. Make sure, of course, that the spoon is not directly in a flame or too close to the heat.

Small grains, like rice, oats, and quinoa, do not require pre-soaking. Hard grains, like wheat berries and spelt, do. Consult the chart provided in the article, [Cooking Whole Grains](#), published by the Whole Grains Council ([wholeGrainsCouncil.org](http://wholeGrainsCouncil.org)) to learn what grains can be cooked and eaten in 60- or fewer minutes.

**Directions:** Use a 5- to 12-quart pot depending on quantity. A 3-quart pot can be used for 1.25 cups of grain or less, but a bigger one is better. Making sure that the water is at or lower than 3-inches from the pot’s rim, bring to a full boil. Rinse the grain, then turn it into the boiling water. Reduce the temperature of the water to a simmer, (you may have to take the pot completely off the heat for a while to accomplish this), cover, and let sit for the grain’s recommended amount of time. When done, drain the grains in a sieve, throwing out the excess water. Consider returning the grain to the now-dry cooking pot and let sit covered for 10-minutes or so more.

**Tip:** The excess water can be quite tasty. Save it for making a sauce or broth. Other veggies and seasonings can be added to the water during the cooking process making the final product more flavorful. It is not necessary, however, to add salt or oil.

## Boiling veggies

**Directions:** Fill a pot one-third (or less) with veggies, and enough water to cover the veggies by 2-inches (2 finger knuckles). Heat to a boil, then reduce the heat to simmer and cover. You might have to remove the pot from the flame to lower the temperature. Check after 3 minutes for doneness. Many veggies are done in under 5 minutes.

**Tip:** Like with steaming, the speed at which your food is done is related to the thickness of the food you are cooking.

The process of boiling veggies is easy but can be destructive to your food when the water is too hot, the veggies are left to cook for too long, or you forget they are on the stove.



I recommend cooking veggies in a dedicated digital steamer instead of boiling. Digital steamers almost always cook veggies perfectly and you never have to worry about disaster. Perfection, of course, is linked to timing.

## Boiling beans

The easiest way to prepare beans is to buy them ready-made in cans. Prices for these luxury items are low!

For rock-bottom pricing that can make a significant difference in your food budget, prepare your own beans from scratch. As a bonus, home-made beans produce a delicious broth that you can add to many dishes, soups and sauces.

Like noodles, beans are boiled, and no specific amount of water is required beyond “more than enough.” When done, the excess water is drained or saved. Small lentils can be prepared in under an hour, while larger beans might take two hours to perhaps 12 hours, if you include preparatory soaking.

There are many online articles on basic bean preparation that are informative, yet quick to read. Realize that beans are usually combined with other things (seasonings, broths, veggies, etc.) and can be mashed just like potatoes, so once your beans are done, be creative as to how you use them.

I recommend the following articles:

- [Epicurious's Myth-Busting Guide to Cooking Beans](#): This is an exceptionally well-researched article complete with photos on what prepared beans look like via various cooking methods. [Epicurious.com](#)
- [How to Cook Beans – a guide by Melissa Clark](#): This article covers how beans are cooked, plus information on individual beans and how to use seasonings. [NYTimes.com](#)
- [How to Cook Beans on the Stove by Emma Christensen](#): This article shows you how to prepare beans on the stove and includes a video and slide-show. Instructions could not be easier! [theKitchen.com](#)

## 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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Ultimately, the information found in these files will be published as a book, price yet to be determined.

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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](http://LetsKickScoot.com), which was turned over to a new publisher in 2017. Many of her articles remain on that site.

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