

Zest!

By Laurie Tema-Lyn

Ten Tasty Tips to Creating Healthy Meals in a Snap!

Young cooks, new cooks, experienced cooks, tired cooks...lend me your spoons, bring an open mind and I'll share some of my "secrets" with you. If your basic approach to meal preparation is pulling something from the freezer and putting it in the microwave, or if you follow recipes slavishly, no wonder cooking has become a boring or anxiety filled process!

Follow these tips and see if you find yourself feeling more liberated in the kitchen, and eating better quality food.

1. Cook first with your imagination...

if we can conjure up the image of a dish we can probably create it...or at least something close. Consider what a set of ingredients might look like together, what the aroma would be like, the sound (yes, sound...crunchy, chewy, slurpy?), and of course the taste.

I find that when we start with the imagination we discover a universe of ingredients to put together and play with, and end up saving preparation time!

2. Heighten your awareness of the foods and the tastes that really delight you,

those dishes you've enjoyed away from home, in a restaurant, in a foreign land, at the home of a friend. Taste something you don't recognize? Inquire. Find out what the primary ingredient is, where it comes from, how it's prepared. The next time you're in your local supermarket look for the ingredient and try preparing a dish with it. (Don't over-stress yourself and make this a "company" meal the first time you try it.)

Here's a little exercise to get your cooking imagination muscles working...can you imagine?...

- The sound of an onion being chopped
- The aroma of an espresso coffee being brewed
- The colors of a salad with fresh spinach greens, purple beets, blood oranges and red bell peppers
- The taste of a juicy pear with a drizzle of honey and cinnamon
- The feel of biting into a crisp, cold, carrot
- The crisp carrot being transformed into a velvety smooth, ginger infused soup

What was easy to imagine? Anything surprising? What was pleasing? What was challenging?

3. Treasure the *experience* of creating a meal.

I believe the process can be fun, enjoyable, meditative, not drudgery. Even if you only have 15 or 20 minutes to prepare supper, you can make it into a delightful experience and not a humdrum one. How? Put on some music. Or be very quiet, listen to your ingredients and get into the "Zen" of chopping vegetables. Or challenge yourself to do something different. For example, use an "unexpected" ingredient in a salad. The other day, my husband, the self-proclaimed "Kitchen Wimp" invented a delicious salad, which came from a creative misunderstanding. He thought he was making a cold cucumber salad, of thinly sliced cukes surprisingly sprinkled with lemon and cinnamon. He actually was using a small zucchini squash. The result was wonderful.



The author (center) in a cooking class in Tuscany

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4. Use recipes for guidelines or ideas... give yourself permission to play and to experiment.

I've discovered that the key to being more creative in the kitchen is really the same as being more creative in anything we do in life. We have to give ourselves permission to play, to take risks, and perhaps to miss the goal. What's the worst that can happen? You'll throw the food out and order pizza. (But chances are that really won't happen.) Even if the meal comes out less than you expected, less delicious than imagined, you can learn something from the experience. Applaud your "mistakes" and you'll encourage your continued creativity. Guaranteed you'll become a better cook.

5. Set the table for company even if you're eating alone, and enjoy the pleasure of dining.

A simple salad can be glorious when it is artfully arranged on a pretty plate with a nice placemat and linen napkin. It will taste better than the same salad on a paper plate! We eat with our eyes as well as our mouths and presentation has a big impact on how we enjoy a meal. Counting calories? Serve your meal on a small plate, rather than placing a smaller portion on a large dinner plate, and you'll probably be satisfied with less food, for the eyes will tell the stomach you've had a full plate of food.

6. Cook once and serve twice.

I really hate to eat "left-overs", but most weeks I know there will be days when I'll be pressed for time. That's when I prepare a dish that lends itself to a simple twist or addition for a second or even third serving. For example, make a simple, hearty tomato soup with spinach and orzo on "Day 1." Next day, add some cooked shrimp or cut up chicken and it will be more special than a "left-over". If there's still a little left for "Day 3" put a spoonful on a piece of crusty bread, for your version of bruschetta, or ladle it over some steamed vegetables for a change of taste.

7. Change your shopping strategy to minimize the prepared, over-processed foods, but keep versatile, foundation ingredients on hand.

Having a well-stocked pantry is something I learned from my grandmother who could whip up the most amazing meals for a crowd on a moment's notice. For me this translates to having these 12 essentials on hand so I always have the basics for a delicious meal.

- ★ Good olive oil (extra virgin, first cold pressed)
- ★ Balsamic vinegar and seasoned rice vinegar
- ★ Cans of quality whole tomatoes, (big bonus points if you have some fresh, garden tomatoes)
- ★ Onions & garlic (the real stuff)
- ★ Cans of beans: black beans, chick peas, your favorites
- ★ Frozen uncooked shrimp or chicken breasts
- ★ Peppers: sweet bell peppers and hot peppers like chili or jalapeno peppers...or the hot stuff in powdered or dried form



Exquisite, peppery tasting first cold pressed olive oil.



- ★ Fresh herbs (like rosemary, basil, oregano) or dried herbs and spices that aren't out of date (many people don't realize that herbs & spices have a shelf life!)
- ★ A versatile cheese you love (my favorites are parmesan, feta, mozzarella, cheddar and gouda)
- ★ A fresh green or vegetable (like spinach, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, squash)
- ★ A fresh fruit (like blueberries, blood oranges, pears, limes, granny smith apples)
- ★ A versatile grain or pasta (like brown rice, quinoa, couscous or orzo)

8. Bring in the high taste impact ingredients.

When it comes to “healthier” cooking, use ingredients that give high taste impact and/or aroma instead of lots of fat and calories. That's why fresh herbs and aromatic spices are so valuable. When you use fat, use what's best for your heart, like olive oil. A quick recipe idea: use freshly ground pepper, a dash of chili powder and a dash of cinnamon to perk up a grilled or steamed vegetable rather than adding lots of salt or butter.

9. Use a light touch for health and better taste.

More often than not, “less is more”. Of course we want to make sure that food is safely cooked—fish that flakes and chicken that's white, not pink. (You can tell that food is cooked by looking, tasting, timing, or using a thermometer.) But some people overcook food, resulting in soggy vegetables or flat tasting foods. Try a lighter hand. And you can lighten up on the calories too. For example, steam, poach or broil many foods with just a little olive oil and the natural juices from vegetables and fruits. If you need more liquid, add a little water, vegetable broth or low fat chicken broth instead of other calorie-dense ingredients.

10. Look for inspiration in unexpected places!

It's not as hard as it sounds. A few suggestions:

- ★ Play with contrasts: you can make refreshingly delicious tastes by bringing together opposites—like sweet and sour or hot and sweet ingredients. For example, make a zesty salsa out of tomatoes, hot peppers, garlic and sweet mango.
- ★ Add drama with different textures: combine chopped almonds as a topping for a creamy, pureed soup.
- ★ “Paint” the plate with vibrant colored ingredients: white sea bass dressed with black beans and red peppers, for example.
- ★ A cool mnemonic device used in brainstorming and quite applicable here is SCAMPER, which stands for Substitute, Combine, Adapt, Modify/ Minify, Put to other uses, Eliminate, Rearrange or Reverse.
- ★ Go out in the world and let yourself be inspired by unexpected things, from nature, from art, from music, from areas seemingly unrelated to food.
- ★ And of course, as suggested earlier in this article, make note of the pleasing tastes that you experience in foods away from home and try to recreate them.

Now you're cooking!





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