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Tipping the Balance for Kitchen Scales

By FARHAD MANJOO

CONSIDER the Parmesan problem: Imagine that you're making lasagna with a recipe that calls for topping it with "a cup of grated [cheese](#)."

This was a straightforward instruction when the box grater was the only way to shred cheese. In the last few years, though, more cooks have bought [Microplanes](#), which can turn a small chunk of Parmesan into mountains of billowy ribbons of cheese. And there lies the difficulty: the heavier shavings of a box grater can fill a cup with twice as much cheese as a Microplane's fluffy snow.

J. Kenji Lopez-Alt, the managing editor of the blog [Serious Eats](#), once asked 10 people to measure a cup of all-purpose flour into a bowl. When the cooks were done, Mr. Lopez-Alt weighed each bowl. "Depending on how strong you are or your scooping method, I found that a 'cup of flour' could be anywhere from 4 to 6 ounces," he said. That's a significant difference: one cook might be making a cake with one-and-a-half times as much flour as another.

Professional chefs have long argued that there is nothing simple about a simple cup of flour. Nor is there anything foolproof in that cup of grated cheese, a half-cup of diced carrots or a tablespoon of butter. When you fill a measuring cup or spoon with any ingredient, the amount you get depends on a number of factors: how small you've sliced it, how tightly you've packed it in, how carefully you've scooped and whether you manage to get all of it out of the spoon. (Consider the mess of getting all the honey out of a tablespoon measure.)

But when you weigh the same ingredients on a scale, none of these factors comes into play. Four ounces of flour (or cheese, carrots, honey or anything else) are 4 ounces, no matter who's measuring, or how.

Over the last few years digital kitchen scales have become cheap and widely available. I've tried several and even the cheapest — the [Ozeri Pro](#), about \$20 — was easy to use and thoroughly accurate. Other models were just as terrific: The [Soehnle](#) digital kitchen scale,

about \$23, and the [Oxo Good Grips](#) model, \$50, were slightly snappier to look at than the Ozeri Pro, but all three were equally adept at their primary function.

Yet the scale has failed to become a must-have tool in American kitchens. *Cooks Illustrated* magazine said scales were in the kitchens of only a third of its readers, and they're a fairly committed group of cooks.

There's a simple reason for this: The scale doesn't show up in most published recipes. American cookbooks, other than baking books, and magazines and newspapers generally specify only cup and spoon measurements for ingredients. A few, like *Cooks Illustrated*, offer weights for baking recipes, but not for savory cooking. (The Times Dining section recently began using weight measurements with baking recipes.)

This creates a chicken-and-egg problem for the kitchen scale. Cooks don't own scales because recipes don't call for one, and recipes don't call for one because cooks don't own one.

Consider this a plea on behalf of the kitchen scale. It's time for recipe publishers to recognize this humble gadget for the amazing tool that it is. If more recipes began specifying weight measurements, more cooks would buy a scale. And they would instantly recognize it as one of the most useful gadgets in their kitchens.

Cooks who have ditched cups and spoons for a scale can be rhapsodic on the subject; many describe getting a kitchen scale as an epiphany on the order of sharpening knives that haven't had an edge in years, or buying a new set of eyeglasses. Not only does a scale provide the most accurate measure, but also, as you get used to it, you'll notice it begin to change how you move about the kitchen.

With a scale, you can get your ingredients together more quickly, and with less clean-up. Recipes that call for weights are also easier to halve, double or otherwise adapt. And the scale is handy for many other tasks.

"The greatest feat the kitchen scale accomplishes is that it turns almost any recipe into a one-bowl recipe," said Deb Perelman, who writes the blog [Smitten Kitchen](#). "You're not hunting for six cups and six spoons to make a cake."

Instead, you place a bowl on the scale, then pour the flour straight from the bag until you get to the desired weight. Most kitchen scales let you bring the readout back to zero after each ingredient. Do that, then pour your next ingredient — and so on. With a scale you can

get away with using nothing more than a bowl and one spoon.

Ms. Perelman and other cooks who've taken to using scales say that over time, they begin to pick up the weight-volume conversions of common ingredients whose weight barely varies. This lets you use a scale even for recipes that don't specify weights. If you know that a cup of sugar is 225 grams, why bother reaching for the cup?

[Dave Arnold](#), director of culinary technology at the French Culinary Institute, recommends that you make a chart with the standard equivalences, and tack it up next to the scale. The conversions sometimes require some math, but there's a payoff if you can brave it.

"If you start cooking that way, it makes your life so much easier," Mr. Arnold said. "You'll do everything just so much faster."

But the scale is handy even if you're not converting recipes. For instance, it makes getting the right portion size for dinner a breeze. When I'm preparing [pasta](#) for two, I lay the box of linguine on the scale, and then pull out 4 ounces for each person.

Mr. Lopez-Alt does a similar thing making hamburger patties, and Ms. Perelman uses the scale for portioning batter evenly between two layers of a cake, and making a batch of dinner rolls that are each the same size.

The scale also ensures repeatability. I once calibrated exactly the amount of beans that I need to make coffee the way I like. Now, every morning, I place my can of beans on the scale, and then scoop out 28 grams — allowing me to repeat the same pot every day.

Michael Chu, who runs the Web site [Cooking for Engineers](#), uses a scale for making iced tea. "A slight difference in how much sugar you add to your tea changes the flavor dramatically," he said. "So I figured out just how much sugar I like, and now that's how much goes in."

I've also found that it's simpler to weigh liquid ingredients rather than to use a liquid measuring cup. A fluid ounce of water weighs roughly one dry ounce, which means that a cup of water will register 8 ounces on your scale.

Recently I needed 7 1/2 cups of water for polenta. If I were using a two-cup Pyrex measure, I'd need to fill it three times, and then almost fill it one more time, which is obviously a lot of effort. Instead, I simply placed the pot on the scale, then ran the faucet until the scale registered 60 ounces.

But these are all ancillary benefits. A few new cookbooks offer recipes that specify weights

for every ingredient, and it's when you cook from those that you notice the true brilliance of using a scale.

The other day I made the delicious macaroni and cheese from “[Ideas in Food](#),” the new cookbook by the husband-and-wife chefs H. Alexander Talbot and Aki Kamoza. The recipe included shredded cheese, butter and several other ingredients that would have been a mess to measure with cups and spoons.

With the scale, I made the entire casserole with just a grater, one knife, one spoon, one bowl and a baking dish.

Cookbook publishers of America: every recipe can be this friendly.