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Train Yourself to be a Better Cook

By Daniel Gritzer

It's obvious when a dish is missing something—the question is how to figure out what that something is.

F&W's Daniel Gritzer asks Aki Kamoza and H. Alexander Talbot, of the food-science blog ideasinfood.com, for exercises to help sharpen your tasting skills and become a more confident, intuitive cook.



Train Yourself to be a Better Cook
Art © Julia Rothman.

3 Tasting Exercises

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Illustration © Julia Rothman.

Salt

Why is salt important to flavor?

“Salt is the most essential seasoning—without it, everything you cook will taste flat,” says Kamoza. “Even if we eliminate all other seasonings, it’s possible to make a delicious meal seasoning with salt alone.”

5 Principles of Salting

1. There's a fine line between the perfect amount of salt and too much, but don't be afraid to risk over-salting—that's the only way to learn where the line is.
2. Some salts taste saltier than others. This is true of different types (kosher, sea, table), and even different brands. For consistency, pick an all-purpose salt (kosher) and a finishing salt (Maldon), and stick with them.
3. To increase your chances of hitting the seasoning sweet spot, add salt in small increments while tasting along the way, not all at once.
4. When reducing liquids, add salt only after the liquid is reduced to avoid over-concentrating it.
5. A dish that tastes perfectly seasoned today will often taste under-seasoned tomorrow. This is because foods absorb salt as they sit, so taste and adjust as necessary.

Workout: Applying Salt

Seasoning food isn't just a question of how much salt to add, but also how to apply it. In this exercise, we salt three pork chops three different ways, then cook and taste them to see how each method affects the meat's texture, flavor and juiciness.

Exercise Setup

- Three 2-inch-thick, bone-in pork chops (about 1 1/2 pounds each)
- Fine sea salt
- Water
- Plastic wrap

Time Needed: 24 Hours

Pork Chop One: Soak in a Saltwater Brine

In a container, dissolve 1 teaspoon of salt in 3 cups of cool water. Add the pork chop, cover and refrigerate for 24 hours. Drain and pat dry before cooking.

Lesson: The meat absorbs the salty brine, seasoning it throughout and making it extra plump and juicy.

Pork Chop Two: Rub with Salt and Air-Dry in Fridge

Rub 1/2 teaspoon of salt all over the pork chop. Stand the chop on a small plate and refrigerate, uncovered, for 24 hours.

Lesson: Seasoning in advance gives the salt time to penetrate to the center of the chop; air-drying the chop concentrates its porky flavor.

Pork Chop Three: Season Just Before Cooking

Wrap the pork chop in plastic and keep refrigerated. Just before cooking, rub 1/2 teaspoon of salt all over the chop.

Lesson: A nice crust forms on the meat's surface, but it's unseasoned in the center. A sprinkle of salt on the center of each slice will balance it out.



Illustration © Julia Rothman.

Acid

How do you brighten flavor?

If a dish has enough salt and still tastes flat, it's often because it needs a mouthwatering burst of acidity—think of a squeeze of lemon on a piece of fish, or vinegary pickles on a sandwich. If a dish is too acidic, the way to achieve balance is to add fat or sugar to mute the sourness.

Acid Lessons

Acid Thesaurus

The following words all describe acidity in food: sour, tangy, vinegary, bright, sharp.

Two ways to add acid to food:

1. *Add lemon or lime juice.* It will add a clean, fresh flavor; citrus is especially good with other fruits, fish and raw or cooked vegetables.
2. *Add vinegar.* There are so many different options, and each has its own character, from the sweet-sour taste of balsamic to the crisp, fruity taste of white wine vinegar and the aged, oaky notes of red wine vinegar.

When to add acid to food:

1. Many savory foods benefit from the bright touch of acid: Try adding a little red wine vinegar to a beef stew, lemon juice to mayonnaise and minced pickled onions to a bean salad.
2. Sweets can also taste better with a little bit of acid: Squeeze lemon juice into a fruit puree or fruit salad to make its flavor pop, or fold a tangy bit of sour cream into whipped cream as a topping for chocolate cake.

Workout: Balancing Acid

If you want to learn about acid, teach your tongue by making a vinaigrette. Start by mixing equal parts acid and oil. Next, add more oil one tablespoon at a time, tasting along the way until it tastes well balanced. If you add too much oil, adding more acid will balance it out again.

Exercise Setup

- Lemons
- Fine sea salt
- Extra-virgin olive oil
- Sugar

Tip: Sugar can also soften acidic flavors, as in a sweet-and-sour sauce. To see how, make an overly sour vinaigrette, then whisk in sugar a pinch at a time until the vinaigrette tastes less harsh, but not sweet.

Step One Lemon and Salt

In a bowl, combine 1 tablespoon of lemon juice with a pinch of salt, whisking to dissolve the salt.

Taste The juice should taste overly salty; that will decrease as you add oil.

Step Two Add Oil

Whisk in 1 tablespoon of olive oil.

Taste The lemon should taste more balanced, but still too acidic.

Step Three Whisk and Taste

Now whisk in more olive oil, 1 tablespoon at a time, to balance the vinaigrette, tasting along the way.

Taste The finished vinaigrette should neither be too sour nor too flabby.



Illustration © Julia Rothman.

Personality

How do you make food more interesting?

Once a dish is seasoned with salt and has just the right acidity level, the next step is to give it some character, such as a fresh accent from herbs or the warmth of spices.

15 Ways to Add a Tasty Spin to Your Food

1. **Warm Spices:** cinnamon, nutmeg, mace, cardamom
2. **Hot Spices:** cayenne pepper, red pepper flakes, black pepper
3. **Smoky Flavors:** pimentón, diced bacon, smoked salt, chipotles
4. **Pickled Flavors:** minced cornichons, diced pickled onions, kimchi
5. **Briny Flavors:** capers, bottarga, olives
6. **Sweet Flavors:** molasses, maple syrup, honey
7. **Floral Flavors:** rose water, lavender, saffron
8. **Fresh Green Flavors:** parsley, tarragon, mint, basil
9. **Woody Green Flavors:** sage, rosemary, thyme
10. **Pungent Flavors:** garlic, scallion, horseradish, mustard
11. **Spicy Flavors:** fresh chiles, Sriracha, Tabasco
12. **Savory Flavors:** grated cheeses, nutritional yeast, soy sauce
13. **Zesty Flavors:** citrus zest, ginger, yuzu kosho
14. **Nutty Flavors:** pecans, pistachios, walnuts, sesame
15. **Funky Flavors:** anchovies, fish sauce, blue cheese, miso

Workout: Adding Flavor

Sautéed mushrooms have a savory, earthy flavor but are otherwise relatively neutral. Here, we divide the sautéed mushrooms into bowls and then flavor each one with either fresh herbs, lemon zest or crème fraîche, observing how each enhances the flavor of the mushrooms.

Exercise Setup

- 2 1/4 pounds sliced cremini mushrooms, sautéed in butter and seasoned with salt
- Minced fresh herbs (parsley, chives, tarragon)
- Lemon zest
- Crème fraîche

Bowl One: 2 Tsp. Fresh Herbs

Effect: Lightens the mushrooms with a vibrant, green taste.

Bowl Two: Zest of 1/4 Lemon

Effect: Adds an unexpected, bright, fruity zing.

Bowl Three: 1 1/2 Tbsp Crème Fraîche

Effect: Adds a rich, creamy glaze with a subtle tang.

Video: Cooking Tips from Superstar Chefs

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I did the exercise for applying salt and was very surprised by the results., so much so I did a post about it on my blog.

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