

# Chapter 1

## Saying Hello to Your Kitchen

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Cooking at uni – fun or fiendish?
  - ▶ Kitting out your kitchen
  - ▶ Storing and reheating food safely
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**T**here's no better time to start cooking than when you're at uni, surrounded by friends who are constantly up for having a laugh and grateful for anything edible you can rustle up for them.

This book has everything you need to make that happen. Don't worry if the extent of your culinary expertise is making a cheese sandwich or if you struggle peeling a banana; throw away any ideas you have of cooking and get ready to start looking forward to every mealtime.

Before you get stuck in to making fantastic food, you're going to need something to make it with. This chapter goes over everything you need to kit out your kitchen, from essential utensils to store-cupboard favourites.

Student kitchens aren't renowned for their cleanliness, so I also go over some basic kitchen hygiene. You want your food to be safe to eat and to avoid anything nasty developing in the fridge . . .

But enough with the scary talk. Read on for why you'll soon be consulting this book with a spatula in one hand and a saucepan in the other.

## Checking out the Benefits of Cooking at Uni

The benefits of cooking for yourself when you're at uni are seriously massive. Not enough students realise how a bit of time in the kitchen can do wonders for their health, bank accounts, relationships and, of course, appetites. Cooking at uni:

- ✔ **Saves you money.** A lot of money. Cashing out on ready meals or takeaways five nights a week soon adds up and rapidly depletes your student loan. With a bit of essential reading (that is, this book), you can eat very well and very cheaply while you're at uni. Instead of paying £4 or £5 for food each night (which could soon add up to £25 a week just on your evening meal), you can spend around the same amount of money but feed yourself three good meals a day, seven days a week. So while everyone else is squandering their money on fast food, you can be quietly saving for that new Playstation game, new dress or, of course, textbook on your reading list . . .
- ✔ **Keeps you healthy.** By cooking for yourself, you can see exactly what you're putting into your body. You know how much salt a meal has, or what vegetables are in there, plus you can choose what you eat. Getting into shape for the summer holidays is easy when you're cooking for yourself because you can decide what to eat and really feel and see the benefits of it.

Having the ability to cook healthy grub not only keeps your skin glowing and your body in shape, but it also means you're less likely to catch any germs and bugs that are going round campus. Which means you spend less time in bed feeling sorry for yourself and more time out at parties.

- ✔ **Increases your attractiveness.** Seriously! Okay, so a floral apron and Marigolds don't do it for everyone, but there's something about a girl or guy who can cook. Mmm. No, I mean you'll have no problems making friends when you're at uni if you're handy in the kitchen. The ability to effortlessly cook a delicious meal is something that a

lot of students will admire you for. The warm smell of a home-made lasagne cooking in the oven turns a hall of residence into a home, and you'll soon become a living legend and the centre of most social activities.

One of the best memories I have of uni is staying in on a night and cooking for my mates in the flat. Everyone would chip in some money and I'd go off and buy the ingredients and cook the meal, while they sorted out the beer and wine. In the evening, we'd all get together round the kitchen table, drink, listen to music and enjoy a fantastic home-cooked meal. These are just some of the great memories uni life can give you!

Check out the chapters in Part IV for loads of recipes perfect for a raucous night in.

- ✔ **Makes you part of the community.** Students come and go in towns and cities and put a lot of money into the local economy. But not many really become a part of the community. Cooking for yourself connects you a bit more to the shops and businesses around you. A trip to the local market or independent shop means you quickly get to know your butcher, fishmonger and grocer who can give you loads of culinary tips and advice. Your money can support the local farmers and food suppliers in the area. It's nice to feel a bit more rooted and know that you're doing your bit for the community.
- ✔ **Develops a great skill.** Now, I don't want to get all doom-mongering on you, but one thing you find when you finish uni is that life suddenly becomes a lot harder. All of a sudden you're in the real world with bills to pay, a job to get to every morning and less and less time to watch *Loose Women*.

You also find that your personal time becomes very precious. After spending all day at work, you have little time to learn how to cook – it either becomes something you look forward to, or something you dread. Cooking is like tying your shoelaces: it's something that everyone has to learn at some point in their lives (after all, you have to eat to live), so why not make the most of it and spend the time you have at uni creating food that makes every mealtime that bit more enjoyable. Okay, lecture over!

## Looking at What You Need

The good news is that you don't need to buy much to cook at uni, and you certainly don't need any expensive or fancy kitchen utensils. You can kit out your kitchen in one swift shop at a supermarket or hardware shop and still have change from a tenner.

Whatever you're cooking, having a selection of store cupboard ingredients is really handy. Always try to have a few basic ingredients in stock because you'll use them for a lot of your cooking. Again, it's all cheap stuff; nothing too fancy or expensive.

### Grabbing some essential utensils

You can get your hands on all sorts of kitchen utensils from your local hardware store or supermarket (the big, out-of-town, 24-hour places are the best ones to visit for non-food items). Don't bother buying any named brands or all-singing, all-dancing gadgets – the simple budget range is fine.



If you're not at uni yet, check what your future hall of residence provides in its kitchens. You may find that it already supplies most of these items.

Here's my top ten essential utensils list. Get these and you're sorted for cooking at uni:

- ✔ **Measuring jug.** The cheapest measuring jugs cost less than 50p, so don't worry about getting a silver-plated one signed by Ainsley Harriot; a cheap plastic jug is fine. You use this for measuring liquids (surprise, surprise) and for adding any stock or sauces to risottos, curries and soups.
- ✔ **Colander.** At number two in my culinary countdown is a colander, like a sturdy sieve for those not in the know. Again, a cheap plastic one is fine. You need a colander for draining potatoes, spaghetti and rice. Buy one with smaller, rather than larger draining holes (make sure strands of spaghetti won't fit through it) so you can use it for everything.

- ✔ **Potato masher.** A potato masher, with its flat grid-shaped end, is very satisfying to use after a frustrating day in the library. Take it out on boiled potatoes, swede, carrots – anything that you want mashed to a pulp.
- ✔ **Spatula.** You use a spatula to stir and break up food in the frying pan, and they cost about 20p. A simple wooden one will suit your purposes just fine.
- ✔ **Tin opener.** Nothing's more infuriating than getting half-way through a recipe and realising you have nothing to open your tin of baked beans. Tin openers are one of life's great inventions. Don't splash out on an electric one – go for a sturdy hand-operated tin opener (preferably with one of those little hooks for opening beer bottles too).
- ✔ **Frying pan.** You're starting to get into the important utensils now and the frying pan is in at number six. Great for frying, playing tennis and air guitar, get a fairly decent frying pan because this is one utensil you'll use all the time. Non-stick pans are good, but not essential.
- ✔ **Saucepan(s).** That little bracketed 's' means you're wise to get more than one saucepan because you quite often need to use more than one at a time. You can often buy saucepans in sets of two or three, in increasing sizes. The small ones are good for making sauces and cooking rice, while the bigger ones are good for soups and boiling potatoes. Buy at least two sizes.

You don't need to spend a lot on saucepans; a cheap set does the job. As long as they conduct heat well, they're suitable.

- ✔ **Ovenproof dish.** You need an ovenproof dish for lasagnes and cottage pies, two staple meals of student life. It's also a good dish to cook fish in, especially in the microwave (see Chapter 7 for the recipes).

A little rectangular Pyrex dish only costs a couple of quid and is sturdy enough to last you your time at uni, if not longer.

- ✔ **Chopping board(s).** Here's that plural 's' again. Get a decent wooden chopping board for all your bread and vegetables and a cheap plastic one for meat preparation. Having two chopping boards (one for raw meat and fish and one for vegetables and cooked meat) helps to keep



your kitchen safe and hygienic and stops the chance of raw meat coming into contact with ready-to-eat food, leading to salmonella (food poisoning).

You'll use the wooden chopping board all the time, so try to get something nice and chunky. A good one will last you for years, so think of it as an investment. If you want to get something a little smaller and lighter, that's fine, but it won't last as long.

You won't use the plastic board as much as the wooden one so save your pennies and buy a cheap one. If you buy a really cheap thin board, place a tea towel underneath to stop it slipping on the work surface.

- ✓ **A good knife.** A smooth-bladed and sharp knife is *the* most important tool in your kitchen because you use it every time you cook. *Fork* out money on a knife (groan) and a good sturdy sharp one will not only last longer and perform better, but also be safer for you to use because a blunt knife may slip off food and cut you.

Hardware shops and supermarkets are good places to buy knives, although independent cook shops have a wider selection. Look to spend between £15 and £30 on a knife; it's a lot of money, but trust me, it's an essential buy. Scare your parents and ask them for a good knife as a leaving-home gift.

If you can bear to part with any more money, get a decent serrated knife too for slicing bread and carving roasts. 'When will I ever need to carve a Sunday roast?' I hear you ask. Well, read Chapter 13, and you'll be dying to try one.

## *Getting your hands on extra gadgets*

The previous ten items can see you through your years of cooking at university and are a great start to kitting out your kitchen. However, if you've found yourself with a few quid left over and fancy pimpin' out your kitchen a little more, here are a few extra items that aren't essential, but are very useful and will impress your flatmates:



✔ **Blender.** I never had a jug-style blender while I was at uni, thinking that I'd never really use one. But now I have a blender, I use it every day, making fruit smoothies in the summer and toe-warming soups in the winter. A blender isn't essential, but is absolutely brilliant to have.

A hand blender (also called an immersion blender) is a cheaper alternative to an upright blender, but doesn't give you the same power and flexibility.

✔ **Scales.** Weighing scales are only really vital for baking when measurements need to be exact, but a cheap set of scales is still a useful item to have in your kitchen.

✔ **Cheese grater.** Another cheap utensil to buy, but one that's *grate* to have . . . I'll get my coat.

✔ **Casserole dish.** If you're a fan of casseroles (and let's face it, who isn't?), then casserole dishes are pretty important items in your life. A casserole dish is a large ovenproof dish with deep sides (and usually a lid) that allows you to make not only casseroles, but big fish pies, ratatouilles and anything that you cook in liquid. Some of the roasts in Chapter 13 benefit from being cooked in a casserole dish.

Casserole dishes aren't expensive. You can get a suitable one for around a fiver from a hardware store or large supermarket.

✔ **Large bowl.** You need a large bowl to be able to mix ingredients together, whether you're making a cake or an omelette. You can get a large bowl for less than a pound.

## Compiling a Store Cupboard Hit List

You have your utensils sorted; now you need some food to start cooking. Coming up is a list of the ingredients to keep handy in your cupboard. Not only are they the foundations for a lot of the meals in this book, but also even if you're at the end of your overdraft and your cupboards are pretty much empty, as long as you have these ingredients, you can make a meal – see the Cheat Sheet for the Quick Pasta and Tomato Sauce recipe.

- ✔ **Onions.** Used all the time in Italian cooking, so perfect for your spag bols, lasagnes and many other meals, try to keep a few onions in your cupboard at all times.

White onions are used more often than red in most cooking, and are more readily available and cheaper.

Red onions are slightly sweeter than white onions and are nice when cooked slowly, or finely chopped and eaten raw in salads or with tuna mayo.

- ✔ **Garlic.** Useful for general cooking and fending off sudden vampire attacks, garlic is cheap to buy and another good store cupboard essential.
- ✔ **Pasta.** Pasta is perfect fast food. Bung the pasta in boiling water for ten minutes and you're halfway to making a meal. You can find loads of different types of pasta from the tubular style penne to the action man bow tie-esque farfalle. I advise buying a packet of spaghetti and something simple like penne or conchigli. Great for filling you up when your pockets are empty, keep a bag of pasta in your cupboard at all times.
- ✔ **Rice.** Rice is a staple ingredient for many Eastern dishes and fills you up on the cheap. If you have nothing else in your cupboards, a bowl of rice keeps you from feeling hungry. Like pasta, you can find many different types of rice. Basmati is good for Thai food and curries, while long grain rice is perfect for a good chilli con carne. Keep a packet of long grain rice in the cupboard, whether you choose the healthier (but longer to cook) brown rice or white rice.
- ✔ **Tinned chopped tomatoes.** Mix with a bit of pasta and you have a very cheap meal. You use chopped tomatoes in many Italian dishes, and a tin in your store cupboard always comes in handy, even if it's just for something to put on toast.

For a cheaper alternative, buy plum tomatoes and chop them up yourself.
- ✔ **Mixed dried herbs.** Herbs are great to work with and add a massive amount of flavour to your dishes. If in doubt, buy a jar of mixed dried herbs. A quick sprinkle of these before the end of cooking adds more flavour to your dish.





✔ **Stock cubes.** Sprinkled into the frying pan or dissolved in boiling water, stock cubes are another important store cupboard essential. Like herbs, they really enhance the flavour of your cooking. Vegetable stock cubes are good for soups, and beef stock cubes are good for meaty gravies. You can buy chicken, lamb and pork stock cubes too, although the last two are harder to find.

✔ **Olive oil.** You'll use olive oil all the time in savoury dishes. You don't need to buy expensive olive oil; the supermarket own-brand is fine. Olive oil is healthier for you than vegetable oil.

Naughtily named extra virgin olive oil is a lot lighter than normal olive oil and doesn't hold up well in high temperatures, so use it for drizzling over salads. Get normal olive oil for cooking or light frying.

✔ **Salt and pepper.** The recipes in this book call for salt and pepper (or *seasoning* to be all culinary about it) all the time. After buying salt and pepper mills, buy bags of salt (the free-flowing pre-ground stuff is fine) that you can fill up the mills with. The salt will last you years; probably the length of your degree! You can buy peppercorns, ready to grind in your mill, in the herbs and spices aisle in the supermarket.



## *Spicing things up*

After you've been cooking for a while, you'll realise that herbs and particularly spices can make a real difference to the flavours in your cooking. In this section, I explain how you can use herbs and spices to their full effect.

Although fresh herbs aren't expensive, you may need to use a lot of them to get your money's worth. Dried herbs are a cost-effective alternative, but don't have the same flavour as fresh herbs. If you get serious about enjoying some herb action, you could always grow your own in a little pot by the windowsill. This is a very efficient and cheap way to use herbs in your cooking.



Spices tend to be dried or ground and are best bought from international food shops where shopkeepers can give you advice on what each spice is used for and the flavours they produce.

Tables 1-1 and 1-2 give a rough guide to the most popular herbs and spices and the flavours that they produce. Follow the recipes in this book to get used to using different herbs and spices.

<i>Herb</i>	<i>Flavour</i>	<i>Uses</i>
Basil	Light and fresh	Italian dishes like spaghetti bolognaise and lasagne
Oregano	Woody	Pizzas and pasta sauces
Parsley	Very light and refreshing	Fish
Coriander	Light and peppery	Indian and Thai curries and Middle Eastern dishes
Rosemary	Woody and clean	Lamb and pork
Thyme	Warm and pungent	Chicken and lamb

<i>Spice</i>	<i>Flavour</i>	<i>Uses</i>
Cinnamon	Sweet and aromatic	Middle Eastern dishes
Turmeric	Strong and musty	Curries and other Indian dishes
Cumin	Sweet and aniseed	Curries, Middle Eastern dishes and some fish
Garam masala	A mixture of sweet smells and flavours, a bit like curry powder	Curries and some fish dishes
Saffron	Slightly bitter (smells like hay in a good way!)	Paellas and Middle Eastern dishes

## Brushing up on Kitchen Hygiene

Student kitchens are never the cleanest of places, with most items more at home under a microscope than in a fridge. So it's extra important to get to grips with kitchen hygiene to avoid any nasty tummy bugs spreading along with the smell of rancid yogurt.

### Stocking your fridge

Your fridge is where you keep roughly a third of all the food you buy, and as it's where you store fresh produce, it's ultra important to know where things should go.



If you need to store the contents from an open tin, empty the contents into a bowl and cover with cling film before refrigerating. Don't keep tins in the fridge because the food may start to taste like metal. Not good.

### Meat

Store raw meat at the *bottom* of your fridge, on the lowest shelf. If you have a meat tray, keep raw meat in that, or keep it wrapped in a bag on a plate. This stops any blood or juices from dripping onto the bottom of the fridge and contaminating any cooked meat.

Keep cooked meat away from raw meat, on the shelf above.



Salmonella (the most common kind of food poisoning and nothing to do with salmon!) can occur if raw meat, eggs or shellfish come into contact with cooked meat or ready-to-eat food. You become ill if you ingest raw meat, eggs or shellfish that carry salmonella. The bug is destroyed through cooking, which is why you need to keep raw foods away from cooked, and to wash your hands after you handle raw meat.

### Fish

Similar to raw meat, keep raw fish at the bottom of the fridge, wrapped up and on a plate to stop any juices dripping onto the bottom of the fridge.



## Pongy fridge?

As a rule, cover with cling film anything in your fridge that's cooked or opened to stop any smells from escaping.

If you do find your fridge is becoming a bit smelly, put a couple of slices of

lemon in a cup of boiling water and place in the fridge overnight. The citrusy smell fills the fridge and gets rid of any nasty pong.

You can keep any cooked fish, like tuna or smoked salmon, on the middle or upper shelves, but make sure that you cover them.

### *Vegetables*

Keep vegetables that need refrigerating in the vegetable drawer, if you have one. If not, keep them on the top two shelves of the fridge, ideally in a Ziploc bag or covered with cling film.

Table 1-3 gives you the low-down on storing vegetables.

<i>Vegetable</i>	<i>Fridge</i>	<i>Cupboard</i>
Potatoes and sweet potatoes		√
Tomatoes	√	
Peppers	√	
Ginger	√	
Mushrooms	√	
Broccoli and cauliflower	√	
Onions		√
Chopped onions	√	
Parsnips	√	
Carrots	√	
Garlic		√

## Chilling Out: Freezing Food

You can freeze most foods, and generally speaking they freeze better if they're raw. However, certain foods don't freeze well at all:

- ✔ Any greasy or fried food (they just get greasier)
- ✔ Mayonnaise
- ✔ Sour cream
- ✔ Gravy
- ✔ Yogurts
- ✔ Cheese
- ✔ Bananas, kiwi fruit, tomatoes, cucumbers, lettuce and other fruit and veg with a lot of water in them
- ✔ Eggs

Table 1-4 shows you how long you can keep things in the freezer and fridge.

<i>Food</i>	<i>Can Stay in the Freezer For ...</i>	<i>Can Stay in the Fridge For ...</i>
Raw fish	6–8 months	1–2 days
Cooked fish	2–3 months	3–4 days
Raw minced beef/lamb/pork	3–4 months	1–2 days
Cooked minced beef/lamb/pork	2–3 months	3–4 days
Raw steak	6–12 months	3–5 days
Cooked steak	2–3 months	3–4 days
Raw chicken breast	9 months	1–2 days
Cooked chicken breast	2–3 months	3–4 days

Most foods are okay spending a few weeks in a cold climate. To freeze them properly, follow these tips:

- ✔ Always label any foods that you put in the freezer. Minced beef and minced lamb look very similar when they're frozen!
- ✔ Put food in a freezer bag (or wrap it in a carrier bag) before putting in the freezer. If the food touches the inside of the freezer this can cause *freezer burn*, where the food loses moisture. You can spot grey or white patches on the food, and it affects the taste and texture.
- ✔ When you freeze liquid, make sure you leave a gap at the top of the container because the liquid expands by 10 per cent when frozen.
- ✔ Don't just whack a plate of food in the freezer – the cold will cause the crockery to crack!

## *Knowing What You Can and Can't Reheat*

Reheating food is another chance for potential bugs and germs to work their evil ways, so this section explains what foods you can and can't reheat.

### *Reheating foods safely*

Imagine you've just cooked a delicious chilli con carne (and by the time you've finished this book, this will happen) and have some leftovers. In order to reheat the food and eat it the next day, follow these few simple steps:

- 1. Allow the food to cool to room temperature.** This may take a few hours, so leave the leftover food in the pan, off the heat, and cover it with a lid to stop any flies or students nibbling at it.
- 2. When at room temperature, refrigerate or freeze the food.** If you're going to eat it the next day or the day after, put it in a bowl, cover with cling film and whack it in the fridge. If you plan to finish it off any longer

than a couple of days, you need to freeze it. Spoon the food into a freezer bag or Tupperware container, seal it and write what's inside and the date. This helps you remember when you cooked it and if it's still safe to eat. Wave goodbye as you put it in the freezer.

3. **If refrigerated, reheat until hot throughout.** The best way to reheat food is in the microwave because it heats from the centre outwards.
  - Pierce the cling film with a fork then place the bowl in the microwave and heat on full power for 2 minutes.
  - Peel back the cling film, give everything a good stir, cover again and heat for another 2 minutes.
  - Check that the food is piping hot all the way through before eating.
4. **If frozen, remove from the freezer and allow to defrost overnight in the fridge.** Make sure that you put the frozen bag or box on a plate to stop any juices leaking into the fridge as it defrosts. When the food is completely defrosted, follow Step 3. If your microwave has a defrost function, you can use this, but letting the food defrost naturally is better.



You can keep defrosted meat and fish for about two days in the fridge before cooking it. If, after a day, you decide not to cook it you can freeze it again, but *only* if you defrosted it in the fridge.



Make sure that your food is hot all the way through when you reheat it. The food needs to be *hot*, not warm. Most bacteria grow between 4°C and 60°C, so the temperature of the food must be above 60°C to destroy the bacteria.

## *What can't I reheat?*

The number one rule is that you can only reheat food once. Any bacteria that's survived the initial cooking process also survives the less intense reheating process, meaning it increases the chances of bacteria multiplying.

Only cook rice once and never reheat it. Uncooked rice can sometimes contain spores called *Bacillus cereus*. When the rice is cooked, the spores can still survive. If you leave the rice at room temperature, the spores grow into bacteria and multiply, and won't be destroyed during reheating.



For more advice on storing and freezing food, check out this great website: [www.stilltasty.com/questions](http://www.stilltasty.com/questions) or the excellent government website [www.eatwell.gov.uk/asksam](http://www.eatwell.gov.uk/asksam).

## Throwing stuff away

An overflowing bin in a student kitchen, stuffed with glass bottles, cardboard and paper is a shamefully regular sight. It doesn't take much to get into the habit of recycling, with many campuses now having their own recycling facilities or some close by.

Just remember that whatever you throw into a bin is thrown into a landfill. So get into the habit of sorting

out your rubbish into recyclable and non-recyclable materials.

It's not just packaging that ends up in the bin. Instead of instantly chucking away any leftover meat from a meal or less than perfect fruit, think about how you can use them again in another meal – a vegetable soup for example, or a chicken curry. Check out Chapter 10 for more ideas for leftovers.