

**Part One**  
Making Sense of Food Choices



# Chapter 1:

## The Art and Science of Cooking

*by Chef Joseph Forest*

### Cooking Is an Art

In any type of art, there are unlimited ways of assimilating, blending, and combining materials—whether musical notes, water colours, oil paints, or food ingredients—to produce an end result that satisfies in new ways. Fuse together food with creativity, motivation, and passion, throw in a bit of culinary science, mix it with an understanding of technique, and you can produce unforgettable culinary experiences.

During my apprenticeship years, I had the good fortune of working in a fine-dining restaurant in Edmonton called Walden's. At the time I worked there, it was considered one of the top restaurants in Canada. It was named after Walden Pond in Massachusetts because of its atmosphere of serenity—and the sheer number of plants and trees it housed. Walden's was a large, 180-seat garden restaurant with enormous skylights that nourished hundreds of fully grown plants, which sprawled from one end of the restaurant to the other. A fixed menu changed twice a year, and there were numerous opportunities to create daily specials to complement the main bill of fare. The emphasis on presentation was paramount and was the motivation of the kitchen team. Each plate was a little masterpiece—delicious works of art delivered to hundreds of satisfied customers every day.

The early part of my career was also completely focused on food artistry. I had the opportunity to successfully participate in provincial culinary art competitions, as well as to observe the inner workings of the most prestigious culinary art competitions at the highest international level. The culinary thinking that surrounded me in the late 1980s was that food was a medium for eye appeal and taste. Our attention centred on new ingredients, colour combinations, textures, novel ways of fusing flavour, and building artistic pyramids of food on the plate. Nutritional considerations were peripheral.

### Cooking Is a Science

Cooking is not only an art but also a science. Have you ever been curious about why a pinch of salt makes a raw apple taste sweeter, or why flour thickens a sauce? What about why it

takes longer to cook potatoes in Jasper, Alberta, than in Vancouver, or why the best way to cook rice is to boil the water first, then add the grain? The answers to these questions lie in the well-documented science of cooking. Every process and technique used in the kitchen today can be understood and explained by science.

Yes, it is true that you don't need to have a PhD in order to make a pot of spicy soup or a tangy vinaigrette. However, understanding culinary technique can go a long way toward improving cooking skills and eliminating the margin of error in the kitchen.

There are usually good reasons why recipe ingredients are not all combined at once in a bowl or saucepan, stirred together, and then served. There are steps to assembling most recipes, and these procedures are based on sound culinary principles that ought to be followed before moving on to the next step. Think of cooking as a process of building layers, where one technique is followed by another. For best results, each layer ought to be developed and brought to a stage of completion before laying down the next layer.

## The Science of Nutrition

In addition to the science of cooking, there is a science of nutrition. Nutrition can be summarized as the study of nourishment, or the act of taking nutrients into the body for the purpose of building and maintaining health. Nutrition proponents have been advising humans how to eat for hundreds of years. In 400 BC, Hippocrates, the father of modern medicine, told his students, "Let your food be your medicine, and your medicine be your food." And furthermore, "A wise man should consider that health is the greatest of human blessings."

Science has expended a great deal of energy in analyzing the nature of food to discern its components: how much or how little of a particular nutrient is present in any given food, why we need specific nutrients, and the amounts of those nutrients needed to maintain physical, mental, and emotional health, or to regain it if lost. Knowing what nutrients your body needs and familiarizing yourself with their food sources can be a foundation for well-being.

This book is designed to assist vegetarians, and others who are interested in adding more plant-based foods to their diet in pursuit of optimum health. Ensuring that your dietary choice is well balanced and provides all the nutrients you need will keep you and your family in excellent health and also serve to inspire others and let them know that this is a viable choice.

## Developing a Healthy Relationship with Food

For individuals at one end of the spectrum, food is a central theme in enjoying life. Sometimes referred to as "foodies," they have a deep affinity to discovering new ingredients, eating, and cooking. There simply aren't enough meals in a day to prepare all the food they want to try. Their kitchens are full of staples and gadgets, and their fridges are overflowing with items for the next dinner party. Travel plans to exotic countries centre on culinary tourism. In visits to the marketplace, the abundance of colours, aromas, and sounds take culinary imaginations on wild-carpet rides.

For many people at the other end of the spectrum, food is just another commodity; preparing and eating it is a chore, a task that interrupts the more important things they have to do. They consider themselves inept at cooking, and their refrigerators sit empty most of the time—save for a few bottles of sauce, just in case they are forced to make a meal. For these folks, cooking is a struggle that includes a good dose of chaos and ends in frustration, disappointment, and another promise to eat prepackaged entrées for dinner starting tomorrow. Those who can afford it eat most of their meals in restaurants.

If you fall into the first camp, this book may serve you by extending your love of food into the vegetarian arena. If you struggle with the idea of preparing food and it is nothing more than a utilitarian act for you, or if you fall in between these two groups of people, what we offer in this book will help to broaden your interest in cooking, enhance your relationship with food, and establish an appreciation for preparing most of your meals at home.

## The Science of Perception: The Physical Senses

When approaching your culinary experiences, consider how your five senses might be more consciously engaged in expanding your awareness, skills, and confidence in the kitchen. Sight, smell, touch, hearing, and taste are the physical means by which you perceive and navigate through the physical world. Think of your eyes, nose, hands, ears, and tongue as extensions of your kitchen tools. They all have a role to play in your deepening relationship with food and will lead to unlocking opportunities that include a deeper appreciation of food preparation, improved cooking dexterity, expansion of kitchen wisdom, enhanced timing, greater creativity, and an improved sense of your intuitive abilities. As a result you will create wholesome food for yourself, family, and friends. Enter the kitchen without paying attention to your senses and you are more susceptible to disorganization, frustration, mistakes, and perhaps even injury.

### Awareness Starts in the Marketplace

Your senses play a significant role long before your ingredients are assembled on the kitchen counter. Think of when you shop for food. The common expression “We eat with our eyes first” reflects the strong affinity we have for artistic presentation. Look at the showcase in popular delicatessens, where a good deal of time and energy is spent arranging the food. Packaging is designed to make food visually appealing to consumers. We choose fresh ingredients according to its quality (sight) and avoid foods that are wilted, dull, or bruised.

We handle (touch) avocados, lemons, and peaches to determine how ripe they are. You may have *tasted* an olive at a Greek grocer, or been offered a sample that led to a purchase. A whiff (smell) of coffee or freshly baked bread in the market may have spurred you to buy a pound of roasted beans or a loaf of bread. Perhaps you smell melons and tomatoes to determine if they are ripe. On the other hand, a bad food odour may repulse you, in which case you steer away from it. You may buy fresh green beans or baby spring

carrots because of the crisp *snap* (hearing) they make, or tap a watermelon with your knuckle in search of the right *thud* before taking it home.

## Expanding Sensory Awareness in the Kitchen

**Sight:** Learning how to look for signs before proceeding with a recipe can help reduce your reliance on the recipe's timing instructions. Often the directions will ask you to use your eyes when assembling a dish. For instance, the instructions to cook the onion "for 3 minutes or until transparent" and to cook the pancake "for 3 minutes or until the bottom is crispy brown" are visual cues. By looking for and becoming familiar with these indicators, you can relax and not be fixated on your clock, timer, or recipe instructions. This step alone will go a long way toward building your kitchen intuition.

**Smell:** Smell is a great way to connect with food. Think of garlic cooking in a skillet, freshly brewed coffee in the morning, or the scent of cinnamon and vanilla emanating from the oven when you bake a cake. As foods heat up, their volatile oils are released into the atmosphere, giving clues to what stage of cooking they're at. Kitchen aromas change as food shifts from one form to another. Some of these changes are obvious, though many are more subtle, but they can be identified if you pay attention to the fragrances in the air, which can guide and prompt you into taking the next step.

Don't be afraid to get your nose close to the cutting board and smell the food as you work with it. Smell your freshly chopped garlic and discern how it smells raw versus when it is heating up in the skillet. Slow down and smell freshly cut herbs, ground spices in your grinder, or that zest of lemon peel. Bend your head over a skillet or soup pot and take a deep whiff. Make friends with your ingredients.

**Touch:** Handling raw ingredients is an excellent way to familiarize yourself with food's consistency, texture, and other qualities, and it is a great way to connect with the process of cooking. Get your hands in there: don't be afraid to get them wet, sticky, oily, or messy.

People who love to bake their own bread often say they love it because of the kneading process. They enjoy the feel of the dough as they knead it, and the way the texture changes over a short period. Professionals often talk about "mouth feel" when describing the interaction a food has in the mouth. (Wine tasters use this term to discern the qualities of a wine.) This is a form of touch that can help you to evaluate food characteristics.

The next time you pierce a food with a sharp knife to test for doneness, feel the resistance or, alternatively, the ease in which the blade passes into the food. Bite into a green bean or spaghetti to check for *al dente*. These methods of using your sense of touch are ways to deepen the interaction with your nourishment and enhance your cooking skills.

**Hearing:** Here's an exercise in developing your kitchen awareness: spend time making meals without any background noise, such as the television, radio, or a CD, and see how this helps you connect with your food experience. Listen. Pay attention to the sounds around you as you cook. Listen to the sizzle of onions cooking in the skillet, the turbulent sound water makes as it comes to a boil, the popping of pumpkin seeds

roasting in the oven. The sound of a lid rattling on top of a saucepan most likely means the liquid is simmering too strongly and needs a decrease in temperature for the food to cook with less vigour. Take note of the distinctive sounds liquid makes as it fills a jar or soup pot. Sounds in the kitchen are loaded with information and can indicate the need to engage with the next step of your recipe. Setting a timer is a valuable practice, but listening to your intuition is even better, as it can prompt you to check on the food before the buzzer rings.

**Taste:** As humans, we derive great pleasure and satisfaction from the taste of food and beverages. Taste is the ability to detect flavour and is perhaps the most prominent sense used in the kitchen. Taste is a component of flavour: although the terms “taste” and “flavour” are often used interchangeably, they have different meanings.

Taste is detected by approximately 9,000 elongated taste buds located on the upper surface of the tongue, throat, pharynx, and soft palate. Each taste bud has minute hairs on its surface, a barrel-shaped “bud” in the middle, and 15 to 20 taste receptors at the base, which are attached to nerve fibres that carry taste impulses to the brain. Taste buds are specialized cells in that they detect six basic tastes: salty, sweet, sour, bitter, pungent, and astringent. (Western science recognizes only the first four primary tastes listed here, whereas Eastern schools of thought recognize the other two as well.) Let’s take a look at these tastes.

## Six Tastes

Have you ever had a meal that leaves you with an overwhelming sense of satisfaction? Many factors go into experiencing such a meal. The location, setting, atmosphere, occasion, company, your mood, and, last but certainly not least, the food all play important roles in the overall experience. Seasoning food to perfection always involves more than just adding salt and pepper. All six tastes play very important roles in bringing each dish into balance on its own or in relationship to the whole meal. It can be said that a dish or meal is well balanced when all six tastes are activated during the course of eating. The ideal proportions for balance vary from one individual to another and can depend on personal preference. In some cases, genetics play a role in determining inclinations toward taste.

In Appendix 1 you’ll find a list of foods specific to each taste category. Examining these lists will deepen your understanding of how the tastes can interact to produce harmonious agreement when mixed together. You’ll notice that some foods are found in more than one category. Foods found in more than one list typically have a predominant taste, with another taste coming through as a secondary quality.

**Salty:** There are two main sources of salt: sea water and rock salt. Sea water is evaporated to obtain the mineral, whereas rock salt is mined from enormous underground mineral deposits that were once large bodies of salt water. Salt has long been utilized as a preservative, but more commonly today it is used as a seasoning to enhance and bring out underlying flavours in food. Salt is nature’s true and original flavour enhancer. It adds vigour, depth, and strength to food and stimulates the appetite by

stimulating saliva and digestive juices. Used in excess, salt can blot out the other flavours. Examples of salty foods include salt (naturally), tamari, bottled sauces, and bouillon cubes and powder.

**Sweet:** Sweetness may be due to the presence of naturally occurring sugars; this is typical of fruits and root vegetables. In many prepared foods, sweetness is due to the addition of extracted sugars from beets, or from cane sugar, maple syrup, agave syrup, or barley malt, and more increasingly, high-fructose corn syrup. Such sweeteners give an immediate and strong perception of sweetness. Apart from added sugars, sweetness in food can come from the breakdown products of complex carbohydrates that start to be digested into simple sugars by salivary amylase, thus giving a sweet taste in the mouth. This occurs, for example, when you eat brown rice. Chewing a mouthful of brown rice 20 to 30 times before swallowing will begin to release the inherent sweetness of the grain, which the taste buds then discern. Knowing this, you may want to reduce your use and consumption of added sweeteners. Chewing makes you work a bit for that sweet experience.

Like salt, sweeteners enhance the flavour of food. Sweeteners have the capacity to accentuate flavour components in desserts in the way that salt does with savoury foods. Sweetness can balance the other tastes and take the edge off any harsh tones. Sweetness is soothing and relieves thirst. Sugar has another physiological effect: the simple sugar glucose raises the body's blood sugar level; the sugar that is delivered is fuel for the brain and it can satisfy the appetite. Examples of sweet foods are apricots, corn, rice, nuts, seeds, and many herbs and spices.

**Sour:** Sourness is the taste of acidic ingredients, which have the ability to sharpen the senses, stimulate the appetite, increase digestive juices, and promote digestion. They also have a cleansing effect on the palate and, indeed, the entire body. Some fine French restaurants serve lemon sorbet between courses to cleanse the palate. Sour foods added to a dish make it bright by accentuating and sharpening its inherent top notes (discussed on page 10).

Sourness enhances other flavours, adds intensity, and can decrease the need for salt. Balancing the acid content of a dish is critical to its success. Sour foods include lemons, vinegar, lemon grass, and molasses.

**Bitter:** Bitterness is detected at the very back of the tongue. Since many poisonous substances in nature are bitter, the tongue acts as a gatekeeper, providing a warning signal should a potentially toxic substance be about to be swallowed. But not all bitter taste is bad—far from it. For example, bitter-tasting foods are valued as a part of each meal in Japan, where it is recognized that this taste contributes particular health-supportive qualities. Bitter foods stimulate the digestion and have an alkalinizing effect on the blood, acting as a buffer and balancing acidity.

Many substances that we find bitter—for example in green tea, grapefruit, and vegetable greens—are actually health-promoting phytochemicals. Examples are the glucosinolates in kale, broccoli, cabbages, cauliflower, and other cruciferous vegetables with cancer-preventive properties. Our ancestors consumed a good amount of fruits and vegetables that were more bitter than their modern-day counterparts,



which have been bred to increase sweetness and reduce the bitter components, at the same time reducing some of the protective phytochemicals.

Overcooking bitter vegetables can accentuate this taste, so eat them raw or lightly steamed or cooked. Add bitter vegetables to soups, stews, and stir-fries at the end of the cooking process, heating until they are just cooked and still tender to the bite. These techniques are understood in Asian cuisine, where care is taken to prepare food in ways that minimize the bitterness while still imparting their health-supportive qualities.

A bitter taste stimulates the digestion and immediately wakes up the palate, creating a desire for balance with other tastes. Think of when you had bitter medicine: there was most likely an immediate desire to balance out the taste, probably with sweetness.

Plums, Brussels sprouts, cumin, and chocolate are all bitter foods.

**Pungent:** Pungent tastes are strong, hot, spicy, acrid, and biting. Such tastes are found in mustard greens, onions, garlic, chili peppers, black pepper, cayenne, and ginger. In small amounts, pungent tastes stimulate the digestion, clear the sinuses, dispel gas from the body, and help detoxify the body. In large amounts, they will outright make you cry—think of freshly grated horseradish or wasabi. Too much pungency can cause excessive salivation, leading to a drying of the mouth and increased thirst. Pungent tastes can also burn the mouth, make the eyes water, and create excess mucus secretion. Shortly after consuming pungent foods, the body heats up and may perspire. This is a natural cooling mechanism and is the reason spicy foods are popular in hot climates. Additional examples of pungent foods are raw garlic, cilantro, cinnamon, citrus peel, and some brands of extra-virgin olive oil.

**Astringent:** Astringent tastes can make the mouth dry and puckered, causing it to feel constricted. This sensation is because of the presence of tannins. These can tighten mucous membranes, contract tissues, and decrease inflammation. They have a cleansing effect on the palate, which is why many people enjoy drinking wine with their meal. Too much astringency can cause difficulty swallowing. The drying effect of astringent taste balances out excessive salivation or perspiration of pungent taste.

Whereas foods that are sour are found to be more acidic, foods with an astringent taste tend to be more alkaline. Leafy greens, legumes (beans, peas, lentils, and soy foods), green bananas, and cranberries are astringent in their taste profile. Beans, pomegranate, potatoes, and turmeric are other astringent foods.

## Flavour

The word “flavour” is often used as a synonym for “taste.” In truth, flavour includes what we perceive through our senses such as sight, and through the nerves in our mouth and nose. Our capacity to judge food with our eyes (“We eat with our eyes first”) has an impact on how we filter information from the outside world, in turn impacting how we perceive flavour. Mouth feel involves the texture and temperature of food. The nose detects flavour by sensing volatile oils in the food, attaching them to receptor sites in the nasal passage, and then sending a signal to the brain, which identifies different aromas, fragrances, and

odours. Other non-physical factors, such as frame of mind/mood, environment (e.g., a romantic atmosphere), and social conditioning (e.g., belief systems), play a role in how flavour is perceived by any given individual and at any given time. Flavour is subjective, the final verdict resting with each person. Taste, on the other hand, is more objective, though individuals vary physically and genetically in the extent to which their tongue perceives various tastes.

## Flavour Development

The topic of flavour development is a big one, and the world of creating artificial flavours is even bigger. Flavours are routinely synthesized in laboratories, subsequently finding their way into practically every processed food in the marketplace for the purpose of flavour enhancement and taste uniformity. In this book, however, flavour in the recipes is derived from natural, unadulterated food; it is developed by understanding the nature of taste and whether the combinations of ingredients blend well together. This is where the knowledge of the six tastes is valuable, especially for those who are inclined to move beyond the formal structure of a recipe to develop their own creations.

Although the world offers us thousands of ingredients from which to choose, and unlimited combinations, the tongue registers primarily six tastes. Good cooking may be viewed as the ability to bring these tastes into harmony with each other. The recipes in this book were created in exactly this way. If you examine the recipes and then glance at the taste lists in Appendix 1, you will see how salty, sweet, sour, bitter, pungent, and astringent foods can be assembled in order to create balanced and appealing flavour combinations.

## Food Composition

The composition of recipes has similarities to the arrangement of music within five horizontal lines known as a staff. Some musical notes are of a bass tone, or pitch, and positioned at the bottom of the staff, whereas others are found at the middle and top. Individual notes are organized into chords to produce an unlimited variation of sounds and compositions. It is the same with food ingredients. Consider the six tastes to be composed of flavours that make up a culinary musical scale. To create good food, base flavours are built upon with ingredients that have middle and top notes. A single ingredient, with its combination of tastes, is blended with another, and then another, until they all come together to create a satisfying symphony of tastes.

Just like the base line in music that carries a tune, so too in cooking. There are foods that blend well to form a base—specific chords, if you will. Take, for instance, the combination of three aromatic vegetables known as a mirepoix (pronounced “meer pwah”), which originated in 18th-century France. This classic mixture of onions, carrots, and celery is extensively used as a base for stocks, soups, stews, and sauces. This blend of food ingredients is just one example of countless food “chords” that act as a foundation in creating countless flavour combinations. Other examples of a few ingredients coming together to form a base are onion, garlic, and tomatoes in pasta sauce; ginger, curry, and

coconut milk in soup; and ginger, scallions, and soy sauce in dipping sauce (and you'll find recipes with these combinations in the book).

Once the base chord in a recipe has had a chance to develop a concentrated flavour, the next step is to build the middle tier by adding another layer. This is usually the main flavour ingredient of a dish. The "main" is usually (but not necessarily) accompanied with a few more ingredients, such as vegetable stock, black beans and toasted cumin seeds that might be added to the mirepoix base in the above example

This middle note of a dish is followed by the top layer: flavours that are subtler than those in the base or middle layer. Top notes may be those ingredients that, when eaten, gives just a hint of what it is—but one can't quite identify it. That is, a well-constructed recipe will leave one guessing as to what that mysterious ingredient is. To round out the example above, a splash of freshly squeezed lime juice added at the last minute will give a bright, refreshing tone to the black bean dish.

Examples for other dishes might include lemon, freshly cut herbs or chilies, or a combination of flavours such as tamari and balsamic. This range of flavour, from the base to the top note, helps bring the dish to the peak of satisfaction.

## Adjusting the Seasoning

Now that you have some understanding of taste and flavour development, I hope you will feel more comfortable when the time comes to make that final addition to your recipes. This is an important step because natural ingredients change from one garden plot, produce market, or supermarket to the next.

For instance, carrots may all look similar, but they are not all created equal. The flavour profile can vary tremendously from one carrot to another, even within the same variety. It depends in part where and how the carrot was grown, how it was stored, how old it is, and how it is prepared. Because there is so much variation with food ingredients, the final taste of a recipe will vary from one kitchen to another, even though the instructions may have been followed exactly as written. That is why it's important to consider the final step in a recipe—"adjust the seasoning" or "season to taste."

Adjusting the seasoning is more than just adding more salt or pepper. Finer tuning may be required to tweak the final taste and bring it into balance according to your preferences. Once you have a sense of how foods are categorized into the various tastes, you will be more adept at adjusting the seasoning. Is the dish too tart? Then add some sweetness. Is the food too salty? Then add a bit of acid, and so forth.

## Recipe Development

During past centuries, recipes evolved so that skilled cooks or chefs could pass on their wisdom to those with less experience in the kitchen. In this respect, recipes have some similarities to paint-by-number kits. In both, every detail is thought through to help the user reach a consistent and favourable result. Follow the steps diligently and the image or product the creator had in mind will emerge each time. It is important to read a recipe before you start (discussed in more detail below). Reading a recipe

first will help an image formulate in your mind's eye of the steps you will take, thereby making the cooking process easier and increasing the likelihood that you will reach the desired goal.

Some people follow recipes exactly, others refer to recipes for inspiration only or to consult the ratio of ingredients before rearranging a recipe as they go. Once you understand how food ingredients interact with each other, you can start to assemble them in ways that are complementary to each other, according to your creative enthusiasm, culinary ability, and dietary preferences.

## Kitchen Organization: The Key to Your Success

It's time to take these recipes to the kitchen. If this is where the system breaks down for you, the following information might help. The manner in which you approach food preparation can make or break your enjoyment of cooking. The key to success is organization.

During my chef's training, much emphasis was placed on advance preparation of ingredients before the restaurant guests arrived to maximize the efficiency of cooking hundreds of individual meals in a short period. A significant amount of time was given to this advance organization. The French term for this is *mis en place*, meaning, literally, everything in its place. We followed this system so that we could remain at our cooking station during service. In other words, once the lunch or dinner service began, it was important to have as much prep at arm's reach as possible so we didn't waste valuable time running around the kitchen once service began looking for, and cutting ingredients, or finding equipment.

Like a busy professional chef, you have deadlines, pressures, and interruptions, and you may not have as much time to spend in the kitchen as you would like. Rudimentary organizational skills can maximize your productivity and efficiency—and enjoyment—in the kitchen. Let's take a look at the four steps.

### Read Your Recipe First

Develop the habit of reading your recipe from beginning to end before you start your prep. This step cannot be overemphasized. It will give you an overview of the recipe procedures: the culinary techniques and the foods and equipment you will need. If you don't understand a particular part of the recipe, you can review the procedure before you start, rather than in the middle of cooking. If a recipe points to important information on another page in the cookbook, you can examine that material before starting your prep. Reading the recipe through will also help you visualize what you are about to do. If you can grasp the vision, you are in a good starting position.

### Gather All the Equipment

Equipment includes cutting board, knives, mixing bowls, measuring cups, spoons, food processor, pots, and so on. This step may prompt you to read the recipe again, so that you don't miss anything. Reading the recipe a second time can deepen your understanding

of what you are about to achieve, especially if you have not made the recipe before. The clearer your idea of what you are about to do, the less chaos there will be in your kitchen.

## Gather All the Ingredients

Knowing up front that you have all the ingredients eliminates the frustration of discovering halfway through a recipe that you didn't replenish a needed staple on your last shopping trip. This step also saves time. It will take less time to assemble a dish if you gather all the ingredients in front of you than if you continuously interrupt your cutting or measuring to return to the refrigerator or cupboard to look for the next item called for. This step also allows you to be more present in your actions. While you are preparing ingredients for the recipe, you may preheat the oven, boil water for pasta, or warm the skillet or soup pot over low heat.

## Set Up Your Counter Space

Setting up your counter space is perhaps not so much a step as a pattern to follow each time you prepare a dish. How you arrange and organize your ingredients and equipment just before cooking determines how smoothly and quickly your recipe takes shape. As an example, here is how I would prepare the Stir-Fry 101 (page 174).

First I clear from the counter everything that I do not need for the recipe. Then I lay a damp dishcloth on the counter and set my cutting board on top to prevent it from slipping—important when using sharp knives. The kitchen utensils I need are pulled from a wicker basket that holds all my cooking spoons, spatulas, and whisks. I gather all the food ingredients to the left of the cutting board and wash those that require it. My skillet is preheating on the lowest heat setting. (Heating a pot, pan, or skillet on the lowest setting distributes the heat so that when I raise the temperature, it comes up to medium or high quickly.) As vegetables are cut they are placed in separate piles on a baking sheet or large plate to the right of the board. All the dried herbs and spices are measured into a small bowl (or bowls, if called for at different points in the recipe). Ingredient packages and containers no longer needed are returned to the cupboard or fridge, and now I proceed to the stove, where I am poised to cook.

How you set up your counter space is partly determined by how much space you have. The above method is how I operate in my own kitchen, but this might change depending whether you are right or left handed, or what side of the stove your working counter is situated. If you are short of counter space, perhaps a portable table such as a fold down TV tray could be brought into the kitchen when needed, to help in organizing your ingredients.

When all ingredients are prepped and gathered within arm's reach, the actual cooking of food—whether you are stir-frying, assembling sushi rolls, or making soup—becomes a much easier task. You won't have to worry about the onions burning while you're still cutting the carrots. Your counter space will be more tidy, and with everything you need right there for you, you can focus on cooking. Organizing yourself in this manner will go a long way toward alleviating kitchen chaos.

## Food as a Source of Nourishment and Blessing

In closing, I want to address an important consideration about food that developed early in my career, an idea that has been deeply instrumental in forming my overarching vision and approach to working with food. It is the idea that food is sacred and has the potential to act as a conduit for deep blessings unto those who partake of food that has been prepared within the context of this awareness. This is not a viewpoint that can be measured by the mechanical instruments of science, but it can be measured by the sensitive mechanism of the heart. The idea that food is sacred is not new. This concept lies at the heart of Native traditions, religious beliefs, and spiritual practices around the world, wherein food is perceived as a gift, one that in essence offers people a spiritual blessing.

Food has long been respected and revered by humans. There are many examples of food occupying a central or elevated role in a culture—for instance, it was wild rice for the First Nations of the Great Lakes region, corn for the Aztec and Mayan cultures in Mexico. Quinoa, the ancient South America grain that was revered by the Incans, was referred to as “the mother of all grains.” In the spring, to show respect for what this plant provided the tribes, the Incan emperor was the first to sow quinoa seeds in the earth, using a gold-tipped shovel.

As well, major religions have sacred food traditions. The Jewish feast of Passover and Holy Communion in the Christian community are just two examples. Breaking a fresh coconut in Hindu temples dedicated to the deity Ganesha before auspicious social events and new beginnings is considered highly favourable, as is *prasad*, an offering, generally food, that is offered to a deity or saint for blessing, then distributed and consumed.

These traditions all point to food as having the capacity to offer the human body more than vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants. Central to these beliefs, customs, traditions, and rituals is the notion that at the core of human existence lies a spiritual component that can be accessed, touched, blessed, nourished, and healed with food; it is not the germ at the centre of the seed that gives and sustains life, but the living, breathing, active force of love that can manifest in daily nourishment. Imparting such a blessing is not the monopoly of Native traditions or religions; anyone with an intention of goodwill unto others or for oneself may.

When food is prepared with the awareness that it can be sacred, it can become imbued with spiritual substance. In essence, it is this substance that has the capability of transforming the server, the food, and those who partake of that sustenance. Although this subtlety cannot be measured by instruments, it can be perceived and appreciated. For instance, stories abound of apple pies baked by loving grandmothers that taste so much better than those made commercially in large volume. Is it because grandma made her pie with local, organic apples? Perhaps, but it also points to an invisible force at play: a genuine, comforting, and transforming spirit of love.

We can't eat Grandma's pie every day, but we all have the power to impart blessings on ourselves and others by the way we interact with our food. In fact, no one has more power to offer blessings upon your life than you do. The attitude and presence of mind that is brought to food preparation and its consumption is an important factor in generating

health and well-being. What I want to impart here is the idea of creating sacred space regarding all aspects of food, from the way it is produced or purchased to its preparation, service to others or oneself and final intake.

One potent method of creating sacred space and imparting blessing onto your food is through gratitude. Cultivating a spirit of thankfulness for food and its ability to provide vitality, strength, and well-being is a compelling way to be mindful that food does not need to be strictly utilitarian but that instead it can be a source of blessing. The kitchen has traditionally been the heart of the home, a powerful space to generate physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being, which in turn ripples out into the environment from all who share in this space. Food can be an exquisite component to everyday living. Acknowledging it as sacred rather than viewing it as just another commodity has the power to transform life, and a transformed life is a potent force in the world. May you all find comfort in body, mind, and spirit through the creation and partaking of your daily nourishment.

