

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Setting up a space for cooking
- » Making your kitchen safe and user-friendly
- » Trying your hand at a simple recipe

Chapter **1**

Cooking with Confidence

RECIPE IN THIS CHAPTER

Scrambled Eggs

Cooking is fun and interesting and can be relaxing, exciting, and even therapeutic. Cooking is a life skill, but it can also be a hobby and a passion. When you cook at home, you can eat for less money than you'd spend ordering take-out or dining in a restaurant every night, and you control the ingredients, flavors, and health profile of your food so you know exactly what you're eating.

Cooking gives you options, allowing you to adapt your meals to suit your own nutritional and taste preferences. When you cook, you can always get exactly the food you want. Plus, cooking the food you eat makes you more aware of your food, your health, and your environment.

Whether you have a cramped apartment kitchen with counter space the size of a cereal box or a sprawling country kitchen with a commercial stove and a work island, this chapter helps you set up an efficient and comfortable environment. Knowing how to use what you have efficiently is even more important than square footage. You'd be surprised to see how small some restaurant kitchens are; they work, however, because everything is in its place and is easily accessible.

In this chapter, we give you a broad overview of what you need to know to be an effective cook. We talk about how to set up your cooking space and introduce you to the major appliances of a kitchen. Then we discuss kitchen safety and help you get started with a nice, easy, practical recipe.

Creating a Cook-Friendly Kitchen

You don't need a fabulous kitchen to prepare fabulous food, but a well-designed workspace sure makes cooking easier and more pleasurable. Chances are, you aren't in the process of remodeling your kitchen, and you have to make do with the basic kitchen design you have. However, if you are at liberty to shift some things around or you're designing your cooking space, consider the concept of *access*. If you want to spend the day running, join a health club. If you want to enjoy an efficient and pleasurable cooking experience, consider where your main appliances are located and where you store the equipment and ingredients you use the most. Do you have to walk 10 feet from the stove to get the salt? That's not efficient. Although nothing is wrong with a large, eat-in kitchen, the design of the cooking area in particular should be practical.



REMEMBER

You should be able to move from your working counter space to the stove/oven, refrigerator, and sink in a smooth, unobstructed fashion. This working space actually has a name: the *kitchen triangle* (see Figure 1-1). It applies whether you have a long narrow kitchen, a U-shaped kitchen, or an L-shaped kitchen. Consider the positioning of these three major appliances and jettison any obstacles — if a table, plant, or small child is blocking the way, move it. Even if you can't redesign your kitchen space or move your refrigerator to another wall, you can arrange what you need in a way that works for you. Here's how to do that.



FIGURE 1-1:
One example
of an efficient
kitchen triangle.

Illustration by Elizabeth Kurtzman

Declutter your countertops

You can't chop vegetables, slice meat, or whip up a cake batter if you can't even fit a cutting board or a mixing bowl on your counter, so take a good look at your countertops. What's on them? Coffeemakers, blenders, food processors, racks of spice jars or canisters of flour and sugar, stacks of bills, permission slips, and grade school art projects? Is your countertop doubling as a magazine rack, plant holder, or wine rack? Consider this: Your kitchen counters aren't meant to be storage units. They are meant to be *food preparation areas*. A clean, clear counter space can inspire the creation of a great meal. A cluttered one is more likely to inspire a call to the pizza delivery guy. If your kitchen counter is cluttered with paraphernalia beyond usefulness, that's a problem you can fix.

The ultimate test for whether something should be allowed valuable countertop real estate is how often you use it. If you use an appliance or food ingredient (like coffee or flour) *almost every day*, then go ahead and give it hallowed ground. Otherwise, stow it. Be ruthless. Put away the mixer, the food processor, the bread machine, and the rice cooker. Away with the herb and spice rack, the bottles of nut oil and fancy vinegar. Find a better spot for the mail and the bills. As you rid your counters of this clutter, you also get rid of your excuses for not having the space to cook dinner.



WARNING

In addition to keeping your countertops clutter free, take steps to care for them. Use cutting boards for cutting and trivets for hot pots and pans, and wipe up spills quickly to prevent stains. The nicer your counters look, the more you'll enjoy being in the kitchen. (Flip to Chapter 22 for more information about countertop care.)

Let there be lighting

Efficient kitchens should be well lit so you can see what you're doing. Poor lighting increases mistakes, especially over the workspaces and stove. Lights under the stovetop hood can really help when stirring sauces or browning meat, and a nice bright oven light makes it much easier to assess the state of doneness of your casserole or cookies. You haven't replaced those burned-out bulbs in years? Time to do it! Get out your screwdriver and remove the panel over the lights. Unscrew the bulbs and take them with you to the store so you're sure to get the right replacement.

Another option is to have special lighting for the cooking area, either inset into overhead cabinets or in the ceiling. If your kitchen is poorly lit over the cooking area, the least expensive solution is a wall-mounted supplementary light — or a hard hat with a built-in flashlight.

Organize your pantry

The pantry is the place where you store your basic cooking staples, as well as other dry goods. (*Dry goods* are foods that aren't refrigerated or frozen, including staples like flour and sugar, and packaged foods like crackers, cookies, pasta, and rice.) If you're lucky enough to have an entire room or closet dedicated to a pantry, keep it well organized so you can see and easily reach the staples you use most, like flour, sugar, and cooking oil. Even if you have only a cabinet or two for your pantry, organization is the key to efficiency. (For tips on what to keep in your pantry, turn to Chapter 3.)

The first thing to consider in organizing your pantry is the kind of closet or cabinet you decide to use and whether the food you store inside of it is easily accessible.

We've seen many ingenious kitchen cabinets on the market, such as those that have extra storage shelves on swing-out doors; Lazy Susan-type cabinets that rotate for full access to round shelves; and cabinets with shelves, drawers, and baskets that roll out on tracks so you can easily reach even those things you store at the back. If your cabinets don't have these convenient features, you can improvise by mounting racks on the inside of the doors or installing those handy roll-out shelves yourself. Look for such kits in hardware or kitchen stores.

A good cabinet or closet system enables you to see exactly what's in your pantry, thus helping to inspire your culinary creativity and allowing you to grab what you need without knocking over vinegar bottles and stacks of spice jars. Store dried beans, pasta, different kinds of rice, flour, sugar, tea, and coffee in large glass or clear plastic jars with lids, or in containers with clear labels — it's practical and looks professional, too.

If you use something all the time, consider taking it out of the pantry and storing it closer to your stove or workstation, in a “satellite” pantry like a cabinet or shelf. You may want to do this with your cooking oils and sprays, your spice rack, or (if you like to bake) your baking supplies, such as baking soda, baking powder, and vanilla.



TIP

Kitchen islands are efficient food preparation stations, and they can also house considerable storage space. Moreover, they can double as a kitchen table or a place to serve party food. If you don't have an island (and you have the space), consider buying a butcher block-style table to act as one — with shelving underneath to store your stuff for easy access.

Introducing Major Appliances: Friends, Not Foes

Major appliances are your allies in good cooking if you work with them, not against them. Until you make friends with your stove, oven, refrigerator, and small appliances (which we discuss in Chapter 2), you'll never really feel at home in the kitchen. To know your appliances is to love them, and knowing each appliance's relative strengths and weaknesses can help you make the most of what they can do for you.



REMEMBER

Most major appliance companies have websites and toll-free customer service numbers with appliance experts on hand to answer questions about using and caring for any major appliance.

Stovetop and oven

Whether you have an old gas stove that looks like it belonged to your grandma or a fancy space-age-looking glass cooktop, your stovetop may be the cooking appliance you use the most. Right under it, or sometimes over it, or possibly off to the side, is your oven, which you'll probably use almost as much for baking, roasting, and warming up leftovers. Your stove and oven are your best friends in the kitchen, and if you're buying new ones, you have all kinds of new technology to choose from. Even if you won't be going appliance shopping any time soon, knowing exactly what kind of stovetop and oven you have and how to use them may help your cooking efforts.

Gas

Most serious cooks prefer gas stoves because the gas flame is ultimately adjustable, allowing you to turn the heat up or down quickly and to make minute variations in the size of the flame. Commercial gas ranges can cut your cooking time by as much as one-fourth, but simple home ranges work just fine for most purposes. New cooks may feel intimidated by gas because they fear the presence of gas in the kitchen, and that cooking flame is *actual fire*. Because gas stoves can produce higher heat than some electric stoves, they take a little more practice to use; it's easier to burn the food when you cook with gas. However, when you know what you're doing, there is no substitute for gas. When you can confidently proclaim, "Oh, I much prefer my gas stove," you know you've reached a whole new level of culinary prowess.



WARNING

Newer gas ranges should not smell of gas from flaming pilot lights. Newer models no longer have standing pilots. They ignite electronically; therefore, gas doesn't flow through the system unless the range is turned on. If you do smell gas, you have a leak in your system. This situation is dangerous — call your gas company immediately. Do *not* use the stove or any other electrical appliances, even your lights, because doing so can spark an explosion. This situation is rare but possible. Older gas ranges smell like gas, but the smell shouldn't be overpowering. Have your gas range serviced periodically to guard against any problems.

Electric heat

After all our fancy-shmancy talk about gas stoves, you may be eyeing your electric range with suspicion: Can it really produce anything worth eating? Of course! If you have an electric range, you can still love your stove and cook anything on it. You just have to realize that the burners will warm up (and cool down) more slowly and you may not be able to get quite the heat intensity you could on gas. But that's no big deal if you're used to cooking on electric.

Electric ranges became all the rage after World War II. They were considered clean, easy to use, and modern. The drawback to electric ranges is their slow response time. Reducing heat from high to low can take a minute; gas can do it in seconds. However, many professional chefs prefer electric ovens, especially for baking, because they're very accurate and consistent. Today's gas and electric ovens generally hold and maintain oven temperature within a variance of about 5 degrees. If you have a choice, gas is slightly preferable for stoves and electric slightly preferable for ovens.

Induction

Some professional chefs prefer *induction* heat, and some even predict it will soon replace all other systems. Whether that is true, induction cooking is pretty cool. Basically, it works on a *magnetic transfer* principle — heat passes via magnetic force from the burner to the pan. If you place a paper towel between the burner and the pan, the towel doesn't get hot. For that matter, neither will your hand — an induction burner turned on high will not burn you. Induction is just as adjustable and quick as gas, if not more so. A 2-quart pot of water comes to a boil in about a minute.



REMEMBER

An induction cooktop uses only selected metal pans to which a magnet adheres, such as stainless steel. Copper and glass cookware, for example, don't work. Induction cooktops run on electricity, so they're a great option when you want precision in your range but don't want to install a gas line. They are expensive, however, and can cost twice as much as an equivalent standard electric or gas cooktop. Even so, plenty of home cooks say they are worth every penny.

Convection ovens

Convection ovens cook food more rapidly and evenly than standard gas or electric ovens due to a small fan in the rear of the oven that circulates air all around the food. This efficient circulation means that your cooking time and/or temperature setting may be reduced. For example, a cake meant to bake for 30 minutes may be done after 20, or you may be able to set that 350-degree oven to 325 degrees. You always adjust recipes according to the manufacturer's instructions for your individual unit (and check for doneness at least 15 minutes earlier than you would when using a standard oven). Some oven manufacturers offer both regular and convection cooking at the flick of a switch. Do you need a convection oven? No. But if you bake often, you may learn to love one.



TIP

If a convection wall oven is over your budget, consider the smaller, less expensive convection toaster oven, especially if you're cooking for one or two. It can toast, bake a cake, broil a burger, and roast a small chicken. And cooking times are shorter than in conventional ovens. Small convection ovens can cost as little as a few hundred dollars, while larger, full-sized convection ovens can range from a couple thousand dollars to \$10,000 or more, depending on the model and brand.

Microwave ovens

Microwave cooking is unlike any other kind of conventional cooking. You must follow a different set of cooking rules. Although more than 90 percent of American kitchens have a microwave, most people use the microwave only as a reheating and defrosting device — and maybe to make popcorn. If this is your intention, you don't need an expensive, fancy microwave with a lot of different settings. If you're short on counter or wall space, consider a microwave–convection oven combination that allows you to cook by using either method.

Microwaves can't pass through metal, so you can't cook with traditional metal cookware. You can, however, use flameproof glass, some porcelain and ceramic, paper, and some plastics. (Be sure the plastic container or plate says "microwave safe"; recent research suggests that plastics can leach chemicals into the food and shouldn't be used in the microwave.) Some microwaves permit you to use aluminum foil to cover dishes, as long as the foil doesn't touch the oven walls or the temperature probe. Check your operating manual to see whether your appliance allows using foil in this way.



TIP

A microwave isn't a replacement for conventional cooking of grilled meats, baked breads, cakes and cookies, and other foods that need browning — unless it has a browning unit. Use your microwave for what it does best in combination with other appliances. For example, you can precook chicken in minutes in the

microwave and finish it under the broiler or on an outdoor grill. Following are some other microwave tips:

- » Recipes that require a lot of water, such as pasta, don't work as well in a microwave and probably cook in less time on your stovetop, although microwave rice cookers are efficient.
- » Foods must be arranged properly to cook evenly. Face the thickest parts, like broccoli stalks, outward toward the oven walls. Arrange foods of the same size and shape, such as potatoes, in a circle or square or like the spokes of a wheel.
- » Covering dishes eliminates splattering, and it also cuts down on cooking time. Use paper towels or waxed paper. Frequently stirring, turning, and rotating foods ensures an even distribution of heat.
- » As with conventional cooking, cutting foods into smaller pieces shortens cooking time.
- » Before cooking, pierce with a fork any foods that have skins, like potatoes, hot dogs, and sausages. Doing so releases steam that can lead to sudden popping and splattering (or a hotdog with an exploded end like a firecracker).
- » A number of variables, including the type of microwave, can affect a recipe's cooking time, so check for doneness after the minimum cooking time. You can always cook food longer. Also, always observe the recipe's "standing" time, because microwaved food continues to cook after you remove it from the oven.
- » Be sure to use the defrost power setting (30 to 40 percent of full power) when thawing food to ensure slow and even defrosting; otherwise, the outside of the food may start to cook before the inside is thoroughly thawed.

HOW DOES A MICROWAVE COOK?

Every microwave has an energy box called a *magnetron*, which produces microwaves (from electricity). The microwaves pass through materials like glass, paper, china, and plastic to convert to heat when they come in contact with food molecules. The microwaves cause the water molecules in the food to rotate so rapidly that they vibrate, creating friction and heat.

A major misconception is that microwaves cook from the inside out. They do not. Microwaves penetrate primarily the surface and no farther than 2 inches into the food. The heat spreads by conduction to the rest of the food.



WARNING

Read your microwave manual carefully before using it. One woman we know ruined her microwave oven because she used the cooking-time button as a kitchen timer, not realizing that you should never run an empty microwave — a warning found in just about every manual.

Refrigerator

Refrigerators are the black holes of the kitchen — objects drift in and are never seen again, at least until the next thorough cleaning. At that time, your leftovers may resemble compost. And what’s in this little ball of aluminum foil? *Do not open!*

Refrigerators come in many sizes and shapes. A family of four needs a minimum of 16 cubic feet and should probably buy one that’s at least 18 cubic feet (unless you have a teenage boy, in which case you need a second refrigerator). If you use the freezer a great deal, having the freezer compartment on the top or to the side is more convenient. If you are more of an “open the fridge and see what looks good in there” type, you may prefer a model with a bottom freezer, maybe even with expansive French doors. Make sure that the doors open in the most convenient way for your kitchen. If the entrance to the kitchen is blocked every time you open the refrigerator door, you’re going to get irritated. Also check the door compartments to see whether they can hold a bottle of wine or a jug of milk. Door space should be spacious, not cluttered with little compartments that just eat up space.



TIP

Try not to pack the refrigerator too densely. Cold air needs space to circulate around and cool the food. Store foods in the same spot each time so you don’t have to search for that little jar of mustard or jelly every time you open the door. Most refrigerator shelves are adjustable, so play around with the spacing until it works for the items you generally keep on hand. Transparent shelves and bins make it even easier to see where everything is.

The bottom drawers are usually the coldest and should be used for storing meat, poultry, and fish. Fresh vegetables are usually stored in the *crisper* drawer, which is often located just above the meat bin. Salad greens and leafy herbs can be washed, thoroughly dried, and wrapped in paper towels to extend their storage life. Other vegetables, like broccoli and cauliflower, should be washed just before serving. Excess water on any vegetable in storage can hasten its deterioration.

Liberate old food from the refrigerator every two weeks or so, and give the fridge a good soap-and-water bath every few months. An open box of baking soda at the back of a shelf soaks up odors. Remember to replace the baking soda every few months, when you do your major clean-out. Keeping your refrigerator clean, organized, and filled with fresh food you love is one of the most effective and inspiring ways to get excited about cooking.

Freezer

Most of us buy more at the store than we can eat in a week. What you won't eat this week, your freezer can keep for you until later. It can also keep leftovers fresh longer so you can reheat them on days when you want a home-cooked meal but don't have time or energy to make one from scratch. Package your leftovers in individual serving-sized containers or in freezer-friendly baking pans you can slide straight into the oven.

If you're lucky enough to have a stand-alone freezer, you can take advantage of sales on meat, frozen vegetables, and fruits. You can also cook in bulk, freezing leftover soups, stews, sauces, and desserts. You'll always have food handy at the touch of the microwave's defrost button.



TIP

Not everything freezes well (milk, lettuce, and block cheese are poor candidates for the freezer, for example), but many things do, especially if they're properly sealed or wrapped to keep out oxygen. To get the most use of the freezer space you have, stack things neatly and use bins to keep things organized. If you just toss everything in there randomly, you may not find things again until they've been in there for too long and are freezer burned or stale.

Finally, while you want your refrigerator/freezer within easy reach of your workspace, you can store a stand-alone freezer in another room off the kitchen or even in the basement or the garage.

Dishwasher

Because you probably have better things to do with your evening than wash the dishes, you likely want a dishwasher, especially if you cook for more than one or two. Your dishwasher may be built in, or it may be portable. You can even buy tabletop dishwashers for modest dishwashing needs. Dishwashers use a lot of water and electricity, but for people who'd rather load the dishwasher and then relax with their families after a good meal, the expense is probably well worth it.

Most major brand dishwashers get the job done in more or less the same fashion. Some have more controls for cycles, times, and power. Top-line machines use less water and power and, not insignificantly, are quieter.

Today, some models sanitize 99.9 percent of bacteria, which may be desirable if you have infants or are concerned about the cold and flu season. And if you don't like prewashing items before placing them in the dishwasher, ask about models that have a steaming function. Some machines even come with soil sensors, which measure the amount of food particles in the batch and automatically adjust power, temperature, and timing.

Garbage disposal

Garbage disposals are handy for the home cook. These grinders, housed in the underbelly of your sink drain, grind up the food that goes down the drain. If all you eat are frozen dinners and take-out, you probably won't need a disposal very often, but if you're always peeling, chopping, and wiping counters of the residue of cooking a good meal, you'll appreciate the convenience of a garbage disposal. *Note:* This doesn't mean that garbage disposals are the lazy man's trash bin. They're designed for only small scraps of food that can be ground up easily. Never toss in hard root vegetables, tough skinned foods like leeks, mounds of coffee grinds, or socks.



TIP

To keep your garbage disposal smelling good, grind up a few orange or lemon peels every so often. To keep the drain clean, once a month pour ½ cup baking soda down the drain, followed by 1 cup white vinegar. Let it sit, bubbling and foaming for 15 or 20 minutes, and then pour a pot of boiling water down the drain.

Kitchen Safety 101

Cooking is fun, but it also requires certain precautions. You're continually maneuvering around hot, sharp, slippery things, and it's easy to lose concentration.



WARNING

Always pay attention to what you're doing because one slip can cause great pain. (Keep in mind that dull knives can be even more dangerous because they force you to apply too much pressure, and you can lose control of the blade.) For more on kitchen safety and preventing or dealing with kitchen disasters, check out Chapter 22. Here are some basic rules of safety:

- » Store knives in a wooden block or on a magnetic bar mounted out of reach of children, not in a kitchen drawer. For more information about knives and knife safety, see Chapter 4.
- » Never cook in loose-hanging clothes that may catch fire, and keep long hair tied back for the same reason (not to mention keeping hair out of the food!).
- » Never cook while wearing dangling jewelry that can get tangled around pot handles or lost in the garbage disposal.
- » Professional chefs have hands like asbestos from years of grabbing hot pots and pans. You don't. Keep potholders nearby and use them.
- » Turn pot handles away from the front of the stove, where children may grab them and adults can bump into them.
- » Don't let temperature-sensitive foods sit out in your kitchen, especially in warm weather. Raw meat, fish, and certain dairy products can spoil quickly, so

refrigerate or freeze them right away. Put away hot foods within two hours after a meal.

- » Wipe up floor spills immediately so no one slips and falls, and wipe up counter spills to keep counters sanitary (and unstained).
- » Don't try to cook if your mind is elsewhere, because your fingers may wind up elsewhere as well.
- » Separate raw meat, especially poultry, from produce and other items in your refrigerator to avoid cross-contamination of harmful bacteria from one food to another. Never put cooked food or produce on a cutting board where you were just cutting raw meat.
- » Wash your hands before handling food. Hands can be a virtual freight train of bacteria, depending, of course, on what you do during the day. Also wash thoroughly after handling meat or poultry.
- » To avoid panic-stricken searches, always return utensils to the proper place. Always return a knife to its holder when you're finished with it.
- » Clean up as you work. We know people who can make a tuna salad sandwich and leave the kitchen looking as if they just served a lunch to the Dallas Cowboys. Clean and put away knives and other utensils, wipe down counters, and return food to the refrigerator between steps in a recipe — doing so keeps you thinking clearly and keeps your kitchen neat and organized. Plus, cleaning up as you go frees up that spatula or whisk for the next step of the recipe, so you don't have to use a new one and double the dirty dishes.
- » Every kitchen needs a fire extinguisher. It's inexpensive (about \$20), easy to use, and mounts on the wall (or can be stowed under the sink). This device may not do much for your cherries jubilee, but it can avert a disaster.

Now Get Crackin'!

If you're eager to jump in and start cooking, try your hand at this quick and easy recipe for scrambled eggs, which you can enjoy for breakfast, lunch, or dinner. Eggs are a healthy and nutritious protein source, and cooking them is easy (see Chapter 11 for more egg recipes). If you know how to cook scrambled eggs, then you *know how to cook*. At least, a little.



TIP

If you want to make excellent scrambled eggs, don't overbeat the eggs before you cook them. Some scrambled egg recipes call for cream, which adds a nice smoothness to the eggs; others call for water, which increases the volume by stimulating the whites to foam. You can use either ingredient, or milk, or nothing but the eggs. Try it different ways and see which you prefer. This recipe can be doubled or halved.

Scrambled Eggs

PREP TIME: ABOUT 5 MIN

COOK TIME: ABOUT 4 MIN

YIELD: 4 SERVINGS

INGREDIENTS

8 eggs
¼ cup light cream, half-and-half, milk (whole or low-fat), or water
2 tablespoons chopped chives (optional)
½ teaspoon salt (optional)
Few dashes black pepper (optional)
2 tablespoons butter

DIRECTIONS

- 1 Break the eggs into a medium bowl. With a fork or a wire whisk, beat the eggs just until they're blended to incorporate the yolks and whites.
- 2 Add the cream (or milk or water) and chives, salt, and black pepper (if desired), and beat a few seconds to blend.
- 3 Heat a 10-inch (preferably nonstick) skillet or omelet pan over medium heat. Add the butter. As it melts, tilt the pan to cover the surface with butter. Pour in the egg mixture.
- 4 Stir the eggs, pulling them gently across the bottom and sides of the pan with a spatula or wooden spoon as they set. Cook to desired doneness (from creamy to dry). Taste just before serving to determine whether you need more salt and/or black pepper.

PER SERVING: *Calories 228 (From Fat 167); Fat 19g (Saturated 8g); Cholesterol 450mg; Sodium 133mg; Carbohydrate 2g (Dietary Fiber 0g); Protein 13g.*

VARY IT! For a lower-fat option, eliminate the butter and spray the pan with cooking spray. You can dress up this basic scrambled eggs recipe by adding to the liquid egg mixture 2 tablespoons of chopped fresh herbs, like parsley or basil, a dash of Tabasco sauce, or a sprinkling of shredded cheese (¼ to ½ cup).

