

- » Decoding the parts of a meal bowl
- » Boosting nutrition through the layers of a meal bowl

Chapter 1

Bowl Basics

Meal bowls encompass some of the best parts of a salad, while adding elements that make for a complete meal in one bowl. Where salads are generally served cold, meal bowls can be cold, hot, or often a combination of both. In recent years, meal bowls have been everywhere! Bowls are popular because they offer a convenient way to eat more vegetables, boost nutrition, and give each person autonomy in terms of how they build their own bowl. That customizable approach to a meal, wrapped in one bowl, is perfection!

In this chapter, I walk you through the various parts of a bowl, using my bowl-building formula. Then I show you how to use those components to craft an Instagram-worthy bowl that tastes great, too!

Looking at the Parts of a Bowl

When I write bowl recipes, I start with a formula because the continuity makes them predictable and appealing:

Carbohydrate Base (1–2 cups) + Protein (3–6 ounces) + Vegetables (2–3 cups) +
Sauce (2–4 tablespoons) + Toppings

You assemble the components of this formula and layer them into a bowl. You can ramp up one part or another based on your nutrition needs or desires. And yes, your foods will all be touching.



Did you know that the fear of food touching is called *brumotactillophobia*? There's a good chance that if you bought this book, you don't have this fear. But if you're serving someone with an aversion to foods touching, serve the ingredients of the bowl in individual bowls, allowing them to create their own plate or bowl. This removes the pressure, leaving the meal to be enjoyed and savored in peace by everyone.

In the following sections, I walk you through each of the components of the bowl-building formula, so you know what to expect.

Creating a base of carbohydrates

Carbohydrates come in all different shapes and sizes, and their nutritional value varies, too. They include fruits, vegetables, legumes, and starches — a pretty expansive group of foods. Each of these foods offers nutritional value — even white rice or potatoes. Plus, carbohydrates give us fiber.



TIP

Complex carbohydrates improve mental acuity, mood regulation, and cognitive performance. Table 1-1 outlines the different types of carbohydrates and what they provide.

TABLE 1-1

Carbohydrates Used in Bowls

Type	Source	What It Provides
Complex carbohydrates	Whole grains, legumes, vegetables	Sustains energy due to slowed digestion, supports stabilized blood glucose, can positively impact mood and cognition
Simple carbohydrates	Sugars and refined grains	Immediate energy used by the brain, can cause spikes in blood glucose
Fiber	Vegetables, whole grains, fruits, and nuts	Improves gut motility, feeds the bacteria within the digestive system, and may improve the gut-brain connection
Resistant starches	Starchy green bananas and cooked then cooled potatoes, oats, and rice	Fermented by the bacteria in the digestive system, may improve cognitive function and reduce inflammation
Lactose	Dairy products	Provides glucose and galactose for energy

Many of the recipes in this book use a lot of complex carbohydrates, from whole grains to legumes and vegetables. You'll also find recipes that have simple or refined carbohydrates. You have the power to choose your grain. If you see a recipe that calls for white rice, you're welcome to swap it out with whole-grain brown rice or riced cauliflower.

As a dietitian, I embrace all carbohydrates. When I build a meal bowl, I focus on fiber coming not only from the base, but from all the vegetables, nuts, seeds, and legumes in the bowl.



REMEMBER

Research supports that it's the combination of carbohydrates, fats, and proteins that yield the greatest satiety after a meal.

Certain grains are ideal for bowl building. Here are some commonly used starches found in this book:

- » Beans
- » Bulgur
- » Couscous
- » Farro
- » Pasta
- » Potatoes
- » Quinoa
- » Ramen noodles
- » Rice (brown, white, and wild)
- » Rice noodles
- » Sweet potatoes



TIP

The size or amount really depends on your hunger. For most bowls, starting with 1 cup of starchy grains can be ample, but if you're feeling hungry, opt for more whole grains or a balance of grains and legumes.

Powering up the protein

Protein is found in a variety of foods, from meats and seafood to dairy, grains, nuts, seeds, and vegetables. Protein acts as the building blocks for muscles and provides energy. Protein is essential and part of the balancing equation in a daily eating regimen, and it's an essential part of making a meal bowl hearty and satisfying.

Protein goals can vary for individuals. The general recommendation of protein per meal is around 20 to 30 grams. Often people shoot for getting their protein from animal sources, not realizing that grains, legumes, dairy, nuts, and seeds can help boost that number as well. Table 1-2 lists serving sizes from frequently used meal bowl protein sources.

TABLE 1-2 **Protein per Serving**

Food	Serving Size	Protein per Serving
Almonds	1 ounce (28.2 grams)	6 grams
Beans (black, kidney, pinto, navy)	1 cup (28.2 grams)	15 grams
Beans (chickpeas)	1 cup (165 grams)	14 grams
Beef (lean ground)	4 ounces (113 grams)	30 grams
Cheddar cheese	1 ounce (28.2 grams)	7 grams
Chia seeds	1 ounce (28.2 grams)	5 grams
Chicken (breast or thigh)	4 ounces (113 grams)	30 grams
Cottage cheese	1 cup (225 grams)	21 grams
Edamame (shelled)	1 cup (225 grams)	28 grams
Eggs	1 large	6 grams
Feta cheese	1 ounce (28.2 grams)	4 grams
Fish (salmon, tuna)	4 ounces (113 grams)	30 grams
Greek yogurt	1 cup (240 grams)	15–21 grams
Lentils	1 cup (200 grams)	18 grams
Parmesan cheese	1 ounce (28.2 grams)	11 grams
Peanuts	1 ounce (28.2 grams)	7 grams
Pecans	1 ounce (28.2 grams)	2 grams
Pumpkin seeds	1 ounce (28.2 grams)	9 grams
Turkey (breast or ground)	4 ounces (113 grams)	30 grams
Walnuts	1 ounce (28.2 grams)	4 grams

A standard portion of protein is around 3 ounces, but that may leave you feeling hungry soon after the meal. I tend to plan for at least 6 ounces when prepping, knowing that whatever is leftover will be great for tomorrow's lunch!

Packing in nutrients with vibrant veggies

Vegetables are a large part of the bowl-building equation. They're what really makes meal bowls stand out as the nutrition powerhouses they are!

In the United States, the average person eats less than 2 cups of fruits and vegetables per day, but the American Cancer Society recommends 5 to 9 cups per day! Canadians get closer to 4½ cups per day, which is similar to those living in the European Union, but the consumption rates still fall short when it comes to cancer prevention. Fruits and vegetables are how we fight cancer through diet — not only do they provide fiber, vitamins, and minerals, but they’re full of *phytochemicals* (biologically active compounds found in foods). Research into phytochemicals is constantly evolving and continuing to uncover health benefits. To date, certain phytochemicals have been shown to work as antioxidants, contain anti-inflammatory properties, and promote heart health.



TIP

Phytochemicals are the coloring pigment of your fruits and vegetables, so simply looking at the color of your fruits or vegetables can provide insight as to which phytochemical you’re consuming. Table 1-3 shows a few specific health benefits found in each color.

TABLE 1-3 **Decoding Phytochemicals by Color**

Colors	Health Benefits	Foods
Blue, purple	Reduced risk of some cancers, improved memory, healthy aging	Cabbage (purple), carrots (purple), eggplants, grapes (purple), olives (black), onion (red), potatoes (purple)
Green	Reduced risk of some cancers, healthy vision, strong bones and teeth	Asparagus, avocados, bell peppers (green), broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cucumbers, herbs (green), microgreens, salad greens, spinach
Red	Reduced risk of heart disease and some cancers, improved memory function	Apples (red), beets, bell peppers (red), cranberries, grapes (red), strawberries, tomatoes, watermelon
White	Reduced risk of heart disease and some cancers	Cauliflower, garlic, leeks, mushrooms, onions, and radishes
Yellow, orange	Reduced risk of heart disease and some cancers, healthy vision, a stronger immune system	Bell peppers (yellow, orange), carrots, oranges, pumpkin, squash, sweet potatoes

Pairing it with the perfect sauce

Sauces pull the flavors of your bowl together. They should balance and not compete with other flavors of a bowl. Much like in salads with dressings, sauces or dressings in bowls provide moisture, act as a binding agent when you dip your fork into the bowl, and impart a creamy or tangy texture to the meal. Sauces can be spicy, zesty, sweet, salty, creamy, or tangy. They often add a pop of color or visual texture to the meal bowl, too.

I can't imagine my Ahi Poke with Edamame, Cabbage, and Sriracha from Chapter 10 without the drizzle of sriracha — not only because of the flavor, but because of the visual appeal created with the drizzle of red sauce zigzagged across the top. In Chapter 6, I share many of my favorite sauces, like Cilantro Cream and Spicy Mayonnaise.



TIP

I err on the side of “less is more” when adding sauces. I prefer the simple drizzle on top with the freedom to go back and add more. Sauces should balance your meal, not overpower it. The other elements of the bowl have their own flavors that you want to taste, so start with a drizzle and see how it goes.

Sparkling joy with crunchy toppings

Crunchy, crispy, and crackly toppings add that little extra zing to a bowl. Imagine biting into a crispy fried onion bit or crunching into a pistachio — these textured bites add dimension that help round out a bowl.



TIP

Stock up on these fun crisp additions next time you're at the grocery store:

- » Almonds
- » Coconut, toasted
- » Cranberries, dried
- » Croutons
- » Edamame, toasted
- » Fried onion crisps
- » Peanuts, toasted
- » Pecans, regular and candied
- » Pine nuts
- » Pistachios
- » Pita chips
- » Pumpkin seeds
- » Quinoa, puffed
- » Ramen noodles
- » Sesame seeds
- » Sunflower seeds

- » Tortilla strips
- » Walnuts
- » Wonton crisps

Crafting a Vibrant Bowl

You have the elements of building a tasty bowl meal. Now you need the tools to sculpt a bowl that will be a feast for your eyes as well!

Going beyond slicing and dicing

Learning how to hold and work a knife is an essential tool in any kitchen. Honing your knife skills will help you get meals on the table faster and help ingredients cook evenly, look more appealing, and improve the texture of each bite. I love a sharp chef's knife and a wooden cutting board when making bowls. Creating different shapes through specific cuts can add visual appeal, drawing the eye to the different shapes of each element of the bowl. Here are some common shapes I use throughout the book:

- » **Brunoised:** Tiny dice. Typically, a julienne is cut first; then the matchsticks are cut into tiny dice. Often used with bell peppers, carrots, and cucumbers in salads.
- » **Chopped:** Rough cuts, somewhat with the goal of cubes, but less structured in shape. Often used for onions or potatoes. Chopped foods often have uneven cuts, typically achieved with a faster knife cut, yielding a more rustic style, as with herbs.
- » **Diced:** Cubed shapes, either small ($\frac{1}{4}$ inch/6 millimeters), medium ($\frac{1}{2}$ inch/12 millimeters), or large ($\frac{3}{4}$ inch/1.9 centimeters to 1 inch/2.54 centimeters). Often used with beets, butternut squash, kohlrabi, potatoes, or sweet potatoes.
- » **Grated:** Often achieved using a box grater or hand grater. You can have a finer grate or a coarser grate. Beets, carrots, cheeses, cucumber, potatoes, zucchini, or any hard vegetable can be grated.
- » **Julienned:** Long, thin strips that look like matchsticks. Often used with beets, bell peppers, carrots, cucumbers, and jicama.
- » **Shredded:** Often achieved using a grater or mandolin slicer. Brussels sprouts, cabbage, fennel, or onions are often served shredded.

- » **Spiralized:** Continuous cut around food creating a long spiral. This cut requires a spiralizer. This is an attractive way to serve beets, broccoli stalks, carrots, cucumbers, zucchini, or any other hard vegetable.
- » **Zested:** Often achieved with a fine grater or Microplane. Zest is often used with chocolate, citrus peels, garlic, ginger, onion, or other hard vegetables.



TIP

A sharp knife is less likely to cause an accident than a dull blade. When you apply pressure to a dull blade, it can slip, possibly causing serious injury.

Stylizing the bowl

Bowls can be served in many different styles. Grab your favorite wide-rimmed, shallow bowl to get started. Styling the bowl adds structure and visual appeal.



TIP

Play up the contrasts in each vegetable or ingredient — chopped tomatoes next to diced cucumbers or grated purple carrots next to julienned yellow peppers.

Here are the main techniques I use:

- » **Charcuterie style:** Break out your favorite board. Using smaller bowls, arrange ingredients on the board. I often serve meal bowls for dinner parties. Using a charcuterie-style presentation of the ingredients allows each person to build their own bowl.
- » **Circular:** Working your eye around the bowl, this style is often achieved with grain as the base, protein centered on top, and the vegetables you use in the smallest quantities creating the first circles; then slowing work out to ingredients in larger quantities.
- » **Linear:** Often seen as lines. Consider alternating colors to help ingredients stand out from each other.
- » **Nesting:** Creating clumps or mounds of ingredients on top of the grains, often centered around the protein.



TIP

To build a bowl that's both tasty and beautiful, follow these tips:

- » **Keep it colorful.** When you're building a bowl, let the rainbow be your guide — everything from purple cabbage to deep green kale, red tomatoes, and orange carrots. I love finishing off a bowl with a pop of multicolored microgreens, a sprinkle of vibrant green herbs, or a dash of black sesame seeds.

- » **Ramp up nutrition.** Focus on whole grains, more vegetables, essential fats, and ample protein. Make nutrition a priority when stocking your pantry and building your bowls.
- » **Add texture.** Consider balancing out the squish of rice with the crisp of shredded cabbage or the crunch of chopped peanuts. If everything is crispy and raw, it may feel more like a salad than a meal bowl.
- » **Focus on flavor.** You want the elements of the bowl to mesh, not compete or overpower one another. There are flavor profiles to consider when building a bowl. *Salt Fat Acid Heat* by Samin Nosrat (Simon & Schuster) really highlights the importance of each element when balancing flavors. Be sure to stabilize or position each element with enough salt, the creaminess of fats, the balancing element of acid, and spice. While crafting the recipes in this book, I didn't shy away from salt, I added fat, I kicked things up with a hit of acid, and I layered in the spice.
- » **Master the presentation.** Knife skills can go a long way when building an aesthetically pleasing bowl. Coupled with how you design or arrange the meal bowl, it can take your bowl from boring to exciting.

FUNCTION OVER AESTHETICS

My food styling and chef side love a beautiful, Instagram-worthy bowl, but the mom in me knows that sometimes I just need to get food on the table. Not every meal needs to be designed and plated beautifully. Give yourself grace and kudos if you got the meal on the table, your family is fed, and everyone is nourished. The flavors will still be delicious and the bowls are still nutritious, even if they aren't stylized perfectly.

I wrote the recipes in this book with stylizing in mind, but you don't have to follow my instructions. Reduce your stress by serving family-style in individual bowls. This allows every family member to build their own bowl (which is incredibly creative and fun for kids *and* adults) and reduces pressure around the plate. Mealtimes are meant for joy, not stress. Family style also helps reduce food waste. I love to put all the toppings in individual glass storage containers. After the meal, whatever isn't used goes into the refrigerator, ready to be used in my next bowl.

Just keep in mind that after you mix ingredients, the storage stability goes down. For instance, tomatoes and cucumbers will make your greens get weepy and slimy, which doesn't sound super appealing for lunch the next day. So, lean into family-style dining, serve the ingredients in their own containers, and let the fun begin!

