5. Kitchen Basics

It wasn’t until you experienced dining-hall food that you began to truly appreciate Dad’s homemade blueberry pancakes. Well, it may not be until you are out on your own, feeling helpless in the kitchen that you suddenly begin to rank the dining hall chefs up there with Julia Child.

Since most of you will either be in a rigorous graduate school program or working long hours, quick and easy meals are the way to go. Coming home late at night to whip up a three-course meal is probably not your idea of a relaxing evening. However, if you do a good job stocking your pantry and freezer with some basics, you can throw together a decent, inexpensive meal in a matter of minutes.

Though takeout and pre-packaged meals may be tempting and easy, they can eat into your budget and may not be the healthiest options, as they’re typically loaded with salt, calories and fat. One alumnus says: “Forget the freshman fifteen — beware of the post-grad twenty. Working a nine-to-five job will make it harder to stay in shape than it was in college. You won’t have as much time to exercise. Without the convenience of the dining-hall chicken breasts and salad bar, it is really easy to get into the habit of living off macaroni and cheese…figure out how to make a diet work with your new schedule from the get-go.”

For grads on a budget, cooking at home can save a lot of money. One alumna notes “if you need to save money, actually making dinner from the raw ingredients and paying attention to how much they cost can make a difference.” She adds, “Bring your lunch to work. You can easily spend $5 to $10 daily for lunch, which can be almost $200 a month!” Another alumna suggests that you “cook Sunday night, divvy the food up into containers and you’re set for the rest of the week. Eating breakfast before you leave, packing a lunch, or cooking a simple dinner will save you loads of money, be much healthier than eating out, and really not take that much time once it becomes part of your routine. And then you won’t feel guilty at all when you do splurge on meals out.”
At first, cooking may seem like a chore, at least until you find your inner chef. An ’03 alumnus shares that he “never thought cooking would be such an important—and even enjoyable—part of my life. But to live within your (very small) food budget, cooking for you is essential. It’s remarkable that someone like me—who used to consider EasyMac and a granola bar to be a complete breakfast—now makes pad Thai and chicken and pasta dishes on a regular basis. If you do it right, it’s much healthier for you and much cheaper.”

No one becomes an expert chef overnight. Don’t be afraid to try a new recipe, or better yet, to make your own combinations. Know that not everything you try to make will turn out perfectly the first time; you may need to make the dish a few times before you have it just right. Occasionally your meals will turn out badly; don’t let this discourage you, it’s all part of the learning process. Remember, worst-case scenario, there’s always pizza!

Tips for the Novice Chef

This section was inspired by a 2010 grad who reluctantly admitted that he’s been eating cereal for almost every meal because he has no idea how to begin shopping for and preparing meals. If you can relate, or if the thought of cooking for yourself is frightening and overwhelming, read on. For those of you who have lived on your own, have grown up cooking with your family, or are budding foodies, chances are this section contains nothing new.

You may be really bad at cooking first, but stick with it. After the first month or so, your dishes should be edible and then it’ll get fun. (Note: Try to get at least one roommate who already knows how to cook.)

— Cristina Isabel Ceballos ’13

Food can be problematic, given that things usually aren’t sold in sizes fit for one person. Things will go bad fast if you buy loads, so make sure you know what you need, and maybe buy more frozen stuff to keep things fresh for longer. It helps to plan out the menu on the weekend before your week starts, so you can have a good idea of what to make. Also keep loads of canned soups, because sometimes when you don’t want to cook, a grilled cheese sandwich and some tomato soup can be very wholesome and healthy, and doesn’t require too much effort.

—Alumna ‘14
As far as cooking goes, I’d recommend just getting in the kitchen and practicing. I used a service called Blue Apron that sends you the ingredients and recipes for three meals a week to help me build my basic cooking skills and repertoire of recipes, and other online services like Plated do the same. Cooking is an easy way to save money, have fun, and decide what you eat.

-Nick Defiesta ‘14

Kitchen Equipment — What You Need To Get Started

If you’ve been living on-campus during your four years at Yale, this may be the first time you’ve had to purchase kitchen supplies and cookware. Before you can become an iron chef you need to have a few basic pieces of equipment; below is a general list of supplies to start with.

Knives: A few good knives are all you need for now. Remember, “good” and “expensive” are not synonymous. Don’t feel like you need to spend a fortune — shop around.

Chef’s knife: A good chef’s knife is a foundation of any kitchen and can be used for a variety of tasks from chopping vegetables to dicing chicken; you can usually find a decent, sturdy knife for $10.

Paring knife: Depending on your cooking abilities and preferences, a paring knife may also be a wise investment. A paring knife is basically a smaller version of the chef’s knife and is best for more delicate tasks that require more control and maneuverability, such as cutting fruits or removing eyes from potatoes.

Steak knives: Though not everyone has the cooking know-how or the room in their grocery budget to enjoy steak dinners at home on a consistent basis, if you know you’ll be preparing meats on a regular basis, you may want to purchase a couple of inexpensive steak knives. Vegetarians, don’t let the name deter you; these are great all-purpose knives you can use for chopping veggies.

Serrated knife: These are sometimes referred to as bread knives, since that is what they are most often used for. They’re also great for cutting tomatoes. Unless you eat a lot of bread, specifically loaves that aren’t pre-sliced, you may want to pass on this one for now.
Cutting board: Using your new knives will be much easier, and safer, if you have an appropriate cutting surface. Wood or synthetic — your choice, both are fine. You can purchase either type inexpensively. You don’t need a huge cutting board; something small and easy to store and clean is fine. Kitchen counters are not a substitute for a cutting board. You will damage the counter; unless you want to forfeit some of your security deposit when you move out of your apartment to cover the cost of a new counter, you need to buy a cutting board.

Mixing bowl: One or two versatile mixing bowls are a nice addition to a new grad’s kitchen. Glass, stainless steel and plastic are all good choices. These bowls can be used for everything, from tossing salads to mixing cake batter.

Baking sheets and dishes: There are many different types out there; start by evaluating your needs. Find one that’s versatile and will work for what you plan to cook. Those who love to bake cookies or make garlic bread may prefer a shallow cookie sheet, while the more ambitious who have plans to roast meats, bake chicken or make lasagna may want to buy a deeper glass or ceramic baking dish. If you have no intention of using your oven, you can pass on these for now.

Pots and pans: Though high-end pans are nice, they’re not necessary. Buying expensive pans will not make you a better cook. Depending on your cooking abilities and interests, a few basic pots and pans will be enough to get you started. Think functional.

Saucepans: One or two of varying sizes, depending on your needs (large enough to boil water for pasta, small enough to heat sauce).

Skillets: One or two, a smaller diameter (5”-7”) and a larger diameter (10”) is typically more than enough. If you can only buy one, start with the larger skillet.

Microwave: Some of you may put this item in the essential category. Believe it or not, everything you cook in the microwave can also be cooked on the stove or in the oven. Yes, it may take longer, but it is possible. If you’re short on cash, try living without a microwave for a while.

Coffee maker: Coffee lovers will remember the alum in the budgeting section sharing the advice that the $4 lattés at Starbucks can really add up and make a dent in your budget. Making your own coffee is a cost effective way to get your morning caffeine without spending a fortune. You can pick up a small coffee maker for as little as $15 and it will last for years.
Countertop grill: Alumni and students alike have raved about the George Foreman Grill with one calling it “the world’s greatest invention since the wheel, maybe since fire.” Others have complimented the ease of cooking fish, chicken, hamburger patties, and veggies, stating that it cleans up easily.

Dishes and cutlery: Plates, bowls, silverware, and glasses are all necessities if you plan to eat at home. You do not need to spend a lot of money on these; you can pick up a dinnerware starter set from Ikea for $20. Unless you plan to hold elaborate dinner parties, you don’t need to have a large supply. Depending on how often you and your roommate(s) wash dishes (hopefully every day) and how many of you there are, you can get by on as little as one four-piece set. Don’t forget to pick up a dish scrubber, dish towels and a drying rack.

Here are some additional kitchen supplies you may want to pick up.

- Can opener
- Colander/strainer
- Wooden or plastic cooking spoons
- Spatula
- Measuring cups
- Plastic storage containers, a few practical sizes, you don’t need a lot of these, only the basics.
- Potholders

While shopping for the basics you may be tempted to purchase some of the many other gadgets and small kitchen appliances out there. Before you give into temptation ask yourself how often you will actually use that egg poacher, bread machine or ice cream maker. Don’t waste your money on something that will sit in your cupboard collecting dust.

Cooking Resources

Below are a few cookbooks and websites recommended by alums as sources of recipes and cooking tips. They’re broken down by difficulty.

Easy

- [www.cooks.com](http://www.cooks.com)
- [www.allrecipes.com](http://www.allrecipes.com)
- [www.eatingwell.com/recipes_menus](http://www.eatingwell.com/recipes_menus)
Intermediate to Advanced
- www.smittenkitchen.com
- www.tastespotting.com
- www.epicurious.com

Cookbooks
- *The Healthy College Cookbook* by Alexandra Nimetz
- *Cooking Outside the Pizza Box* by Jean Patterson
- *How to Cook Everything* and *How to Cook Everything Vegetarian* by Mark Bittman

There is a website called yummly.com which allows you to search recipes based on ingredients (and further eliminate recipes if you don’t have supplementary ingredients such as eggs). Really useful if you have a main ingredient but don’t know how to prep it or if you need to make last minute muffins for your work potluck in the morning and need to find a recipe without eggs.

— Gabriella Puente ’13

When you find recipes online that you enjoy, make sure to bookmark them. Better yet, get your own collection of recipes started by copying them into a Google Doc; don’t forget to add notes to help you remember any changes or suggestions for next time.

Smart Shopping — Stocking Your Cupboards

Wandering into a grocery store can be overwhelming. There are so many choices and ingredients, some of which you may not have a clue what to do with. It can be tempting to grab only what you’re familiar with, such as a box of cereal, frozen dinners or mac and cheese. Its fine to gravitate towards the familiar staples in the beginning, but it’s important to also push yourself to learn how to prepare healthy, low-cost foods instead of exclusively relying on pre-packaged foods, which often are high in calories and sodium.

The Mayo Clinic advises shoppers to concentrate on the perimeter of the grocery store where the fresh produce section, the meat and seafood departments, and the dairy case are all located. Fresh foods are generally healthier than the ready-to-eat foods found in the middle aisles.
Stock your cupboards and refrigerator with basic ingredients that you can build upon, such as pasta, beans, rice, vegetables (fresh and frozen), cheese and chicken or tofu. Think about your favorite foods growing up and your current favorites; are there common ingredients that you can easily have on hand? Include those foods and ingredients in your list of basics that you build your meals around.

Also plan to purchase cooking necessities, such as olive oil and butter or margarine, and a few basic spices, such as salt, pepper, garlic and other similar spices that you’re drawn towards, such as curry powder or basil. Most grocery stores also stock spice blends tailored towards a specific culinary genre, such as Italian, Indian or Mexican, or for specific types of foods, such as seafood or chicken. Always check the sodium levels before you purchase spice blends; look for ones with lower sodium levels.

Emergency Stash

It’s a good idea to have at least a three-day emergency supply of water and ready-to-eat foods in your pantry. Blizzards, earthquakes, power outages, water main breaks and the like can limit your access to the grocery store, take-out and clean water, and may prevent you from cooking. As a precaution, pick up a few gallons of water, canned goods such as soup, tuna, crackers, granola bars, peanut butter and similar foods that can be eaten without any cooking or preparation. Don’t forget to periodically check the expiration dates on these items and refresh your supplies accordingly.