HAUTE CUISINE



HAUTE CUISINE

The Art & Discipline of the French Kitchen

TWELVE ILLUSTRATED TECHNIQUE GUIDES

EIGHTY-FIVE CLASSICAL RECIPES

NO GADGETS REQUIRED

HAUTECUISINE.ORG

First edition. Set in Lora and Poppins.

The recipes in this book are classical and belong to nobody. The writing and the drawings are the author's, and may be quoted with attribution.

Every technique in this book was written to be executed with one twenty-centimetre chef's knife, a board, a heavy frying pan, a saucepan, a large pot, a sieve, a wooden spoon, a balloon whisk, a mixing bowl, an oven and a hob. Where the classical method assumes a machine, the hand method is given instead, and what changes is said plainly.

Every chapter in this book is also published free and ungated at hautecuisine.org.

CONTENTS

THE HAND · LA MAIN

Start Here *Le Chemin* 11

The Honest Kitchen *Le Matériel* 23

Knife Skills *Le Travail du Couteau* 35

Heat & Fat *Le Feu et la Matière Grasse* 53

Seasoning *L'Assaisonnement* 67

THE FOUNDATIONS · LES FONDEMENTS

Eggs *Les Œufs* 83

Stocks *Les Fonds* 101

THE SAUCES · LES SAUCES

Sauce Making *La Saucier* 117

Emulsions *Les Émulsions* 133

The Sauce Tree *L'Arbre des Sauces* 147

APPLYING HEAT · LA CUISSON

Searing & Roasting *Saisir et Rôtir* 163

Braising & Stewing *Braiser et Mijoter* 177

Poaching & Steaming *Pocher et Cuire à la Vapeur* 191

Vegetables *Les Légumes* 205

THE BENCH · LE FOURNIL

Pastry & Doughs *La Pâtisserie de Base* 223

THE TABLE · LA TABLE

The Larder *La Garde-Manger* 245

Plating & Service *Le Dressage et le Service* 263

THE RECIPES · LES RECETTES

Egg Recipes *Les Œufs* 283

Soups *Les Soupes et Potages* 305

Vegetable Dishes *Les Légumes* 325

Chicken *La Volaille* 349

Meat *Les Viandes* 371

Fish & Shellfish *Les Poissons et Coquillages* 397

Sauce Recipes *Les Sauces* 419

Desserts *Les Desserts* 443

REFERENCE · LE LEXIQUE

Glossary *Le Lexique* 469

PART ONE

THE HAND

La Main

Before technique there is only the hand: how it holds a knife, how it reads heat, how it seasons.

CHAPTER 1

Start Here

Le Chemin

A curriculum, not a shelf of recipes. Six stages, in order, each one earning the next. Read this chapter once properly and you will not need to ask what to cook next for a year.

What haute cuisine actually is

Haute cuisine is not expensive ingredients. It is not foam, or tweezers, or a dozen components stacked on a plate the size of a dinner table. It is the disciplined, repeated application of a small number of techniques — perhaps thirty in total — until they stop requiring thought.

That is the whole secret, and it is a slightly disappointing one the first time you hear it. There is no shortcut ingredient, no piece of equipment, no single recipe that makes a cook good. What makes a cook good is that a *roux* comes out the same colour every time, that a piece of fish is never once overcooked, that an onion is always the same size as its neighbour. Escoffier did not codify French cooking by inventing new flavours; he codified it by writing down, precisely, what already worked, so that it could be taught and repeated. This school does the same thing, at home, with a domestic hob and one pan.

The corollary matters as much as the claim: **everything in this book can be done in an ordinary kitchen.** No stand mixer, no blast chiller, no siphon, no

scale beyond a cheap digital one. Where a professional kitchen would reach for a machine, we will show you the hand method and tell you plainly what changes — see The Honest Kitchen for the full argument and the shopping list. What you need instead of equipment is time, attention, and a willingness to cook the same dish more than once.

Technique is not a constraint on creativity. It is what creativity stands on. You cannot improvise a sauce you have never learned to make correctly.

THE SECOND LAW OF THE SCHOOL

How to use this school

This book has three kinds of chapter, and they work together. **Technique pages**, under Techniques, teach one skill in depth — knife work, heat, a mother sauce — with diagrams, cues, and a fault-finder for when it goes wrong. **Recipe pages**, under Recipes, are where technique becomes dinner. **Reference chapters** — The Larder, The Honest Kitchen, the glossary, Plating & Service — sit underneath everything and are worth a slow read early on, then kept for reference.

This chapter is the spine that holds the other three together. Each stage below names the technique chapters to read, in order, and the dishes to cook once you have read them. Follow the order. A béarnaise is a much shorter lesson once you have failed and rescued a mayonnaise by hand three times; searing a steak well is much easier once you actually know what a hot pan sounds and smells like. Nothing here is arranged for novelty. It is arranged for compounding.

Do not read a technique chapter once and consider it done. Read it, cook from it, and come back to it a month later — you will notice sentences that meant nothing on the first pass and everything on the second.

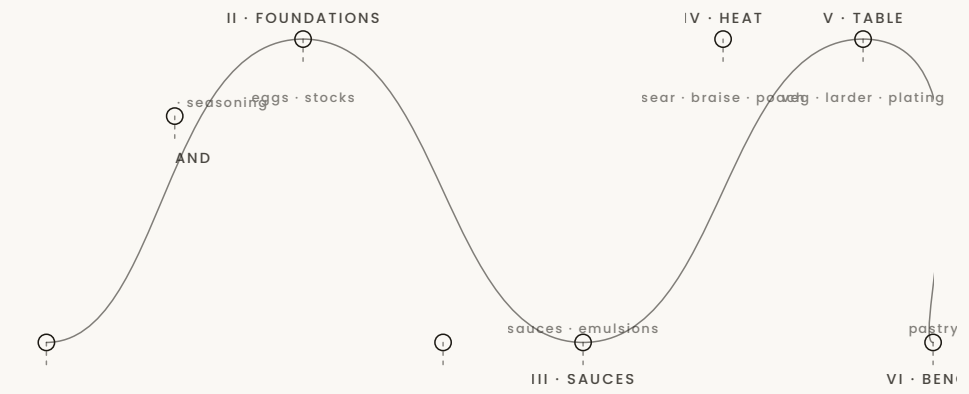


FIGURE 1 · THE PATH

Six stages, one route. Each dot is a stage; the small branch below each names the technique pages that belong to it. The path only goes forward.

Stage One — The Hand

What you learn. Control of a knife, control of heat, and control of salt — the three variables that sit underneath every single dish in this book. Read, in order: Knife Skills, Heat & Fat, Seasoning.

Why it comes first. Every later stage assumes you can cut evenly, judge a pan's heat by eye and ear rather than a dial, and season by tasting rather than by measuring. Teach these out of order and every subsequent lesson has to stop and re-teach them anyway, badly, in the middle of something more complicated.

Cook these to prove it.

- A plain omelette — see Eggs — cooked three times until the outside sets before the inside overcooks.
- A green salad with a proper *vinaigrette*, made by eye, tasted and adjusted before it touches the leaves.
- *Soupe à l'oignon* — see Soups — which is entirely a knife and heat exercise disguised as a soup: the onions must be sliced with the grain and coloured slowly, not rushed.

How you know you have finished. You can dice an onion without looking at your hands more than twice, you can tell a pan is at the right heat before you put anything in it, and you have stopped tasting a dish only at the end.

Stage Two — The Foundations

What you learn. Eggs, properly, in all their forms, and stock — the liquid that underwrites nearly everything else in French cooking. Read: Eggs, then Stocks.

Why it comes second, not first. Both depend on Stage One. Poaching an egg cleanly is a heat-judgement exercise; a good stock depends on the vegetables being cut to a consistent *mirepoix* so they release flavour at the same rate. Skip the hand and you get a stock that tastes half-raw and half-boiled at once, from vegetables the wrong sizes.

Cook these to prove it.

- A white chicken stock, start to finish, including the patience to skim it properly — see Stocks.
- A poached egg with a fully set white and a still-liquid yolk, four times running.
- The base of a *blanquette de veau* — see Meat — which asks you to make a stock, thicken it, and control its temperature all in one dish, without browning anything.

How you know you have finished. Your stock is clear, not cloudy, and tastes of what went into it rather than of nothing; your poached eggs no longer trail wisps of white through the water.

Stage Three — The Sauces

What you learn. The mother sauces and the two great emulsions, warm and cold. Read: Sauce Making, then Emulsions, and keep The Sauce Tree open beside you as a map of how every classical sauce descends from a handful of these.

Why it comes third. A sauce is stock, or fat, or egg, taken one step further under exact control of heat — which is precisely the order this curriculum has taught you those things. Attempt a hollandaise before you understand heat and

you will scramble the yolks; attempt it before you have a decent stock instinct and you will not know what a sauce is supposed to taste like when it is right.

Cook these to prove it.

- A *béchamel* gratin — smooth, no lumps, cooked out until it no longer tastes of raw flour.
- Mayonnaise, entirely by hand with a balloon whisk, including deliberately breaking one and bringing it back.
- *Beurre blanc* — a shallot reduction mounted with cold butter, the most unforgiving small sauce in the repertoire.
- Hollandaise — the warm cousin of mayonnaise, and the real test of Stage Three.

How you know you have finished. You can rescue a split sauce without panic, because you understand why it split rather than following a rescue by rote.

Stage Four — Applying Heat

What you learn. The three families of cooking method that cover almost the entire classical repertoire between them: dry, fierce heat; long, wet heat; and gentle, controlled heat. Read, in order: Searing & Roasting, Braising & Stewing, Poaching & Steaming.

Why it comes fourth. This is where Stages One to Three combine: a roast needs knife work to break down the bird and a sauce to finish it; a braise needs a stock and a knife-cut mirepoix; a poached fish needs the same gentle heat discipline as the egg you mastered in Stage Two, applied to something that punishes you far more for getting it wrong.

Cook these to prove it.

- A whole roast chicken, jointed by hand as taught in Knife Skills — see Chicken.
- *Bœuf bourguignon* — see Meat — a full braise, from browning to a glossy, reduced sauce.
- A piece of white fish, poached in a light stock and served with a sauce from Stage Three — see Fish.

How you know you have finished. You can look at a cut of meat or a fillet of fish and choose the right one of the three methods without having to be told, and your roast chicken rests before it is carved without you needing reminding.

Stage Five — The Table

What you learn. How a dish becomes a meal: vegetables cooked as more than a side, the larder that turns a plain dish into a considered one, and the discipline of plating and service. Read: Vegetables, then The Larder, then Plating & Service.

Why it comes fifth. Until now every dish has stood alone. Composing a menu — timing three courses so each arrives at the right temperature, choosing what accompanies what — is a different, later skill, and it only makes sense once the individual components are no longer effortful to produce.

Cook this to prove it.

- A full three-course menu for four people, cooked and served in one sitting: a starter, a main with a sauce and a properly cooked vegetable, and dessert timed to arrive when the table is ready for it — see Vegetables and Sauces for components.

How you know you have finished. You served all three courses at the temperature you intended, and you were not still cooking when your guests sat down for the first one.

Stage Six — The Bench

What you learn. Pastry — the one part of the kitchen that behaves more like chemistry than cooking, and the reason it sits last rather than first. Read: Pastry & Doughs.

Why it comes last. Pastry rewards the patience and precision the previous five stages exist to build, and punishes their absence more sharply than almost anything savoury: a badly judged oven, a rushed dough, an uneven cut of butter shows immediately and cannot be seasoned away at the end. Bring the discipline of Stages One to Five to the bench and pastry stops being frightening.

Cook these to prove it.

- *Tarte aux pommes* — a shortcrust base, precisely blind-baked, and thinly sliced fruit laid by hand — see Desserts.
- *Choux* pastry, piped by hand from a freezer bag with the corner cut — see The Honest Kitchen for the method — baked into *éclairs* or a simple *Paris-Brest*.
- *Crème anglaise*, the custard that stands behind half the dessert menu, cooked to the exact point before it curdles.

How you know you have finished. You can judge a custard by how it coats the back of a spoon rather than by a thermometer, and a choux bun rises without you holding your breath.

> NO GADGETS REQUIRED, EVEN HERE
>
> Pastry is the stage where people reach hardest for machines — a stand mixer, a food processor, a pasta machine. None of the recipes in this book require any of them. The Honest Kitchen sets out the hand method for each, and Stage Six is, deliberately, where you will use all of them.

A realistic weekly practice

Do not try to advance a stage every week; you will arrive at Stage Six with none of the earlier habits actually settled. A better rhythm, sustainable alongside an ordinary working week, looks like the grid below: one evening of pure technique practice with no pressure to produce a finished plate, one evening cooking a full dish from the current stage, and one weekend session with more time, used either to repeat a dish that went wrong or to attempt the next one.

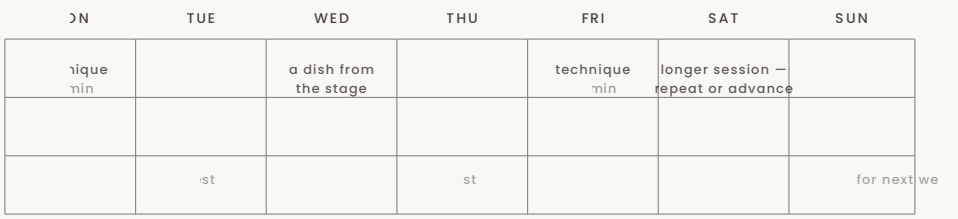


FIGURE 2 · A WEEKLY RHYTHM

Two short technique drills, one weekday dish, one longer weekend session. The rest days are not wasted — a technique settles while you are not thinking about it.

SESSION	LENGTH	PURPOSE
Technique drill	10–15 min, twice a week	Pure repetition — the ten-minute knife drill, a whisked emulsion, a stock reduction — no plate at the end
Weekday dish	45–60 min	One dish from the current stage, cooked start to finish
Weekend session	2–4 hours	A braise, a stock, a menu, or a deliberate repeat of last week's failure
Notes	5 min	Write down what happened before you forget it — see the habits below

Seven habits of a competent cook

None of these are difficult. All of them are easy to skip under time pressure, which is exactly when they matter most.

01 Mise en place

Everything weighed, cut, and within reach before the pan goes on the heat. A dish that requires you to chop an onion while something else burns is a dish you have not prepared properly, not a dish that went wrong.

02 **Taste constantly**

Before salt, after salt, at every stage of a reduction. A recipe's quantities are a starting point written for someone else's ingredients, not a guarantee for yours. See Seasoning.

03 **Clean as you go**

A clean board and an empty sink mid-cook are not fastidiousness; they are working space. Chaos on the counter produces chaos in the pan.

04 **One new thing at a time**

A new technique, in a dish you already know, or a new dish built entirely from techniques you have already mastered. Never both at once — you will not learn which part went wrong.

05 **Cook the same dish five times**

The first attempt teaches you the recipe. The second through fifth teach you the dish — where your oven runs hot, how your pan behaves, what "cooked" actually looks like on your stove. Most people stop after the first.

06 **Keep notes**

What time it took, what went wrong, what you would change. A page a dish. In six months this becomes more useful to you than any book, because it is calibrated to your kitchen specifically.

07 **Feed people**

Cooking for an audience — even one other person — introduces a small, useful pressure that cooking alone does not. It also gives you an honest second palate, which is worth more than a recipe's reassurance that a dish is correct.

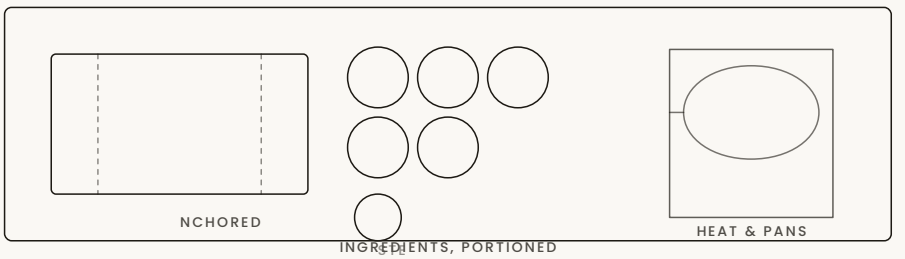


FIGURE 3 · THE BENCH, LAID OUT

Board on the working hand's side, ingredients already portioned in small bowls within reach, one bowl for waste, and the heat station close enough to move to without crossing the whole kitchen.

THE MOST COMMON FALSE ECONOMY

Skipping mise en place to save five minutes at the start routinely costs fifteen minutes of scrambling in the middle, and it is the single biggest cause of a burnt garlic, a split sauce, or a forgotten pan. The five minutes are not optional.

When a dish fails

Every cook who worked on this book has split a hollandaise, over-reduced a stock to salt, and burnt a batch of caramel badly enough to open a window. Failure is not a sign you are unsuited to this; it is what the fifth repetition in Habit Five is for.

The dish is inedible and dinner is in twenty minutes

You are out of both time and, usually, the key ingredient.

FIX Have a genuine fallback — an omelette, pasta with butter and cheese — and use it without embarrassment. A ruined main is not a crisis if you do not treat it as one.

You do not know why it went wrong

The most common failure of all, and the most useful one if you catch it.

FIX Write down everything you did, in order, while it is still fresh, and check it against the relevant technique page's fault-finder before you decide it was bad luck.

The same fault keeps recurring

Usually a habit, not a recipe — a pan that is never quite hot enough, salt added too late.

FIX Isolate the single variable across two attempts of the same dish. Change one thing, not three.

You are avoiding a technique because you failed at it once

Common with emulsions and pastry, both unforgiving on a first try.

FIX Repeat it this week, smaller and lower-stakes — a single portion of hollandaise for yourself, not for guests.

Guests are waiting and something is visibly wrong

A split sauce, a collapsed soufflé, a grey-brown braise that should be dark and glossy.

FIX Serve it if it is safe and merely imperfect; most faults cost appearance, not edibility. Say nothing unless asked — a confident cook does not apologise for a slightly pale gratin.

What comes after Stage Six

There is no Stage Seven in this book, because there does not need to be one. By the end of Stage Six you have the full working vocabulary of a classically trained home cook: knife, heat, salt, eggs, stock, the mother sauces, the three heat families, a properly composed table, and pastry. Everything else — regional variation, seasonal menus, your own combinations — is application, not new technique, and application is a matter of cooking often rather than reading further.

What is genuinely worth doing next is going back. Re-read Knife Skills after a year of Stage Six pastry work and you will cut differently. Cook *bœuf bourguignon* again with the palate you built at the sauce station. The curriculum is a spiral, not a ladder: each pass through it, the same pages teach you something the last pass could not, because you are no longer the cook who first read them.

> WHERE TO GO NEXT, LITERALLY
>
> Go to Knife Skills now, tonight if you can, and do the ten-minute drill. Then read The Honest Kitchen before you buy anything — it will very likely stop you spending money you do not need to spend.

You are not collecting recipes. You are building a small number of reliable movements, and then applying them to everything you will ever cook.

THE THIRD LAW OF THE SCHOOL

CHAPTER 2

The Honest Kitchen

Le Matériel

Professional kitchens are equipment-poor and technique-rich. Eleven things, bought once and cared for, will outlast and outperform any drawer of gadgets.

The equipment-poor kitchen

Walk into the back of almost any serious restaurant and you will find surprisingly little. A few pans, a few knives, a stack of bowls, a scale. What fills the rest of the space is people who know exactly what to do with those few things.

The domestic kitchen equipment industry runs on the opposite premise: that the right machine will close the gap between you and a good cook. It will not. A stand mixer does not know when egg whites have reached soft peaks; you do, once you have watched it happen with your own eyes a dozen times. A gadget can perform a task, but it cannot teach you to recognise when the task is done — and recognising when a task is done is most of what cooking actually is.

There is also a quieter cost that rarely gets mentioned in a shop: storage, cleaning, and maintenance scale with every device you own, not with how often you use it. A juicer used four times a year still needs a cupboard, still needs washing after each use, and still needs remembering it exists the next time a recipe calls for juice. Eleven well-chosen objects, used constantly, are lighter

on a kitchen — and on a cook's attention — than forty objects used occasionally.

This chapter has two halves. The first is short: the eleven things you genuinely need, and what to spend on each. The second is longer, and more useful, because it is the half nobody sells you — the hand method for every machine a recipe will tell you that you need, and what changes when you use it.

> *A kitchen full of single-purpose machines is a kitchen designed by people who have never had to use all of them at once, on a Tuesday, with one pair of hands.*
>
> THE FOURTH LAW OF THE SCHOOL

The eleven essentials

Everything below fits in one cupboard and one drawer. Buy the knife and the pans well; the rest is far less fussy than shops would like you to believe.

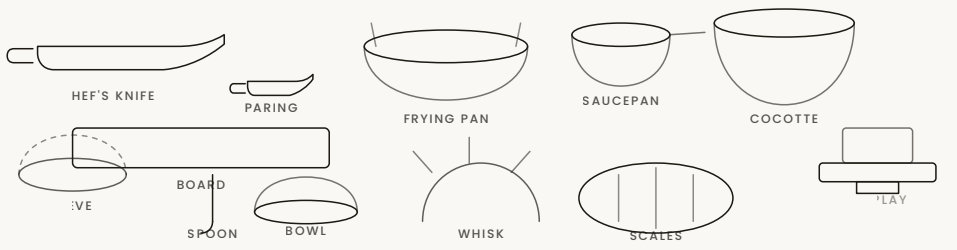


FIGURE 1 · THE WHOLE KITCHEN

Eleven objects, drawn to relative scale, is genuinely everything the technique pages in this book assume you own.

ITEM	LOOK FOR	SPEND	IGNORE
Chef's knife, 20 cm	Full tang, a handle that fits your hand, a spine you can pinch comfortably — see Knife Skills	€35–90	Etched patterns, Damascus folding, celebrity branding
Paring knife, 8–10 cm	A small, rigid blade for work done in the air, not on the board	€8–20	A matching boxed set of six you will never use
Board	Wood or thick plastic, at least 30 × 40 cm, heavy enough to sit still	€15–40	Glass or marble — both blunt an edge within weeks
Heavy frying pan, 24–28 cm	Thick base for even heat, a handle that stays cool, stainless or carbon steel	€30–70	Non-stick coatings that cannot take high heat or a metal spoon
Saucepan, 18 cm	Heavy base, a lid that fits properly, stainless steel	€25–50	A set of seven sizes you will use two of
Cocotte / large pot, 24 cm+	Enamelled cast iron or thick stainless, oven-safe, heavy	€60–150	Bright colours priced for the colour rather than the iron
Sieve	Fine mesh, a rim that hooks over a bowl, stainless	€8–15	Plastic mesh, which stains and softens with heat
Wooden spoon	Plain, long-handled, a flat edge for scraping a pan's corners	€3–8	Silicone-tipped hybrids that melt near real heat
Balloon whisk	Wide, springy loops — this is the shape that actually incorporates air	€6–15	A flat "roux whisk" as your only whisk — it cannot whip
Mixing bowl	Stainless steel, wide-based, one large one small	€10–25 the pair	A nesting set of eight you will store, not use
Scales	Digital, 1 g precision, a tare button	€10–20	Anything without tare, and anything analogue

> THE ONE INDULGENCE WORTH IT
>
> If you spend more than the ranges above on anything, spend it on the cocotte. A heavy, well-fitted pot is doing real physics for you every time you braise — see Braising & Stewing — and a thin, cheap pot cannot be coaxed into behaving like one no matter how carefully you cook.

Why scales beat cups

A cup of flour can weigh anywhere from 115 g to 150 g depending on how it was scooped, whether it was sifted first, and how firmly it was packed — a swing of more than twenty per cent before a single other variable enters the recipe. Pastry in particular, at Stage Six of Start Here, is close enough to chemistry that a twenty per cent error in flour is the difference between a dough that behaves and one that does not.

Weight is also simply faster once you are used to it: one bowl on the scale, tare, add, tare, add, with no washing up of measuring cups in between. A cheap digital scale with a tare button, accurate to one gram, is one of the smallest purchases in this chapter and one of the most useful.

Five nice-to-haves, in order of usefulness

None of these are required by anything in this book. All of them save time once the eleven essentials are second nature. Buy them in this order, if at all — later items on the list solve smaller and smaller problems.

01 **Fish slice / palette knife**

A thin, flexible blade for turning delicate things — fish, an omelette, a fried egg — without tearing them. The single most-reached-for item after the essentials.

02 **Tongs**

An extension of the hand for turning meat and vegetables near high heat. Genuinely useful, genuinely optional — a fork and a spoon did this job for centuries.

03 Ladle

For stock and soup, mostly a matter of not scalding your wrist with a jug. Convenient, not essential — see Stocks.

04 Box grater

Faster than a knife for cheese and citrus zest, slower and more dangerous than a knife for almost everything else people use it for.

05 Thermometer

Deliberately last. A thermometer is a crutch that prevents you from learning the sensory cues — colour, smell, sound, resistance — that this entire school is built on teaching. Useful once for calibrating your sense of a hot oven or a set custard against a real number; useless, even counterproductive, if you never put it down again.

What to do instead of every gadget

This is the important half of the chapter. Every one of the machines below solves a real problem. None of them is required, because the problem was solved by hand for centuries before the machine existed, and the hand method is what a technique chapter in this book will actually teach you.

GADGET	WHY PEOPLE BUY IT	THE HAND METHOD
Stand mixer	Whipping cream, egg whites, and beating butter without tired arms	A wide bowl and a balloon whisk. Slower, but you feel the exact moment soft peaks become stiff ones — the machine only beeps when a timer says so.
Food processor	Fast, uniform chopping	A sharp 20 cm knife — see Knife Skills. Genuinely faster than fetching, filling, and washing a processor bowl for anything under a kilo.

GADGET	WHY PEOPLE BUY IT	THE HAND METHOD
Blender	Smooth soups and purées	A sieve and a wooden spoon, working the solids through by hand — coarser but often better textured; a mouli, if one was inherited, does this faster with less effort.
Mandoline	Perfectly even, thin slices	Square the vegetable into a block first, then slice — see the carrot method in Knife Skills. No blade guard, no risk to fingertips.
Ricer	Lump-free mashed potato	A sieve and the back of a wooden spoon, worked through firmly. Slower, equally smooth.
Sous-vide	Exact, unattendable temperature control	A low oven, a heavy pan of water, and attention: check texture and colour at intervals rather than trusting a set-and-forget number — see Poaching & Steaming.
Blowtorch	A caramelised, browned top	A hot grill, watched closely and not left unattended for a second — the grill was doing this job long before the torch existed.
Piping bag	Neat, controlled shapes for choux and cream	A sturdy freezer bag, filled, twisted at the top, with one corner snipped off. Identical result, no bag to wash.
Ceramic baking beans	Weighing down pastry during a blind bake	Dried rice or dried beans, kept in a jar solely for this purpose and reused indefinitely.
Pasta machine	Even, thin sheets of dough	A wine bottle as a rolling pin and patience: roll from the centre out, turning the sheet a quarter turn between passes.
Garlic press	Fast, hands-free crushing	A pinch of coarse salt and the flat of the knife blade, dragged repeatedly across chopped garlic — see Knife Skills. No fiddly press to clean out afterwards.

GADGET	WHY PEOPLE BUY IT	THE HAND METHOD
Thermometer	Certainty about doneness	Sensory cues — colour, smell, the sound of a pan, the resistance of meat when pressed. Every technique page in this book names the cue explicitly.
Digital timer	A reminder before something burns	Your nose. Almost everything announces the moment before it burns; the habit of staying in the kitchen to smell it is worth more than any alarm.

> THE TRAP
>
> A gadget does not make a difficult technique easy; it makes an easy technique slightly faster, while quietly removing the repetition that would have taught you to do it without the gadget at all. Learn the hand method first, always — you can add the machine back later once it can no longer replace judgement you have not yet built.

None of this is an argument against owning any of these machines eventually, once the hand method is genuinely second nature and the machine is chosen to save time rather than to avoid learning. A cook who has puréed two hundred litres of soup through a sieve by hand has earned the blender they eventually buy, and will use it with a better sense of what texture they are actually asking it for. The trap is only in reaching for the machine first.

Care and maintenance

Knives

Hone before each session, sharpen on a stone every four to six weeks, wash by hand and dry immediately, store blade-protected — see the full method in Knife Skills. A knife left wet in a sink is a knife rusting or, worse, a knife someone reaches for blind.

Carbon steel and cast iron seasoning

Both build a slick, near-non-stick surface through repeated use, not through a single treatment. Wash with hot water and minimal soap, dry immediately over

a low flame to drive off all moisture, then wipe with a thin film of neutral oil while still warm. Never leave either wet, and never put either in a dishwasher.

Wooden boards and spoons

Wash with hot water, never soak, dry standing on edge so air reaches both faces. Oil a board with food-safe mineral oil every month or so, more often if it looks pale and thirsty. A wooden board that is cracking has usually been left flat and wet, or dried too fast next to direct heat.

Copper

Rare in a home kitchen and not required by anything in this book, but if you inherit a copper pan: it conducts heat superbly and reacts with acidic food, which is why good copper is tin-lined. Polish the exterior with a paste of flour, salt and vinegar or lemon; never let the tin lining scorch dry, and have it re-tinned by a specialist once it wears through rather than replacing the pan.

Stainless steel

The least fussy metal in the kitchen and the one people worry about most. It does not season and cannot be damaged by acid, soap, or a dishwasher, though hand-washing still protects the finish longer. Sticking is almost always a heat problem, not a pan problem: let the pan heat fully before the fat goes in, and let the fat shimmer before the food goes in — see Heat & Fat. Cloudy staining after cooking is mineral deposit from hard water or salt added too early; a splash of vinegar and a wipe brings the shine straight back.

Setting up a small kitchen for one-pan work

Most of what this book teaches can be cooked from a single hob ring and one oven, which matters if your kitchen is small. The principle is the same one behind the curriculum itself: arrange for one thing to be happening cleanly rather than three things happening badly.

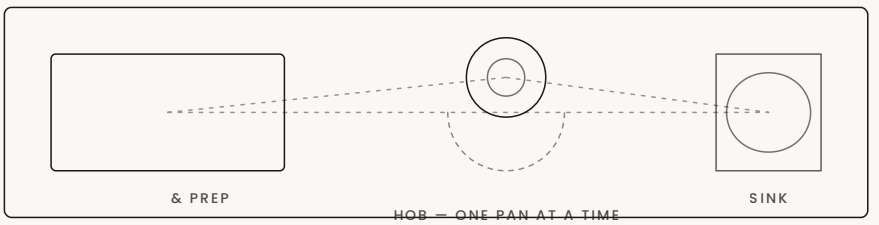


FIGURE 2 · THE WORK TRIANGLE

Board, hob and sink each within one step of the other two. Everything you are not using right now lives off this triangle, not on it.

- **One pan, sequentially.** Sear, remove, deglaze, reduce, return — nearly every braise and sauce in this school is written for exactly this rhythm; see Braising & Stewing.
- **The oven does the waiting.** A low oven holds a finished element warm while the hob works on the next, and does the slow, hands-off work of a braise or a roast while you are free for other tasks.
- **Prep before heat.** With one ring, there is no second burner to hide a late chop behind. Mise en place is not optional in a small kitchen — it is the only way one ring can keep up.
- **Wash as you empty a vessel.** One bowl, one board, one pan, reused through a whole menu, only works if each is clean the moment it is free.

What to buy first on a small budget

If you are starting from nothing, buy in this order. Each stage is usable on its own — you do not need to complete the list before you can cook properly.

ORDER	BUY	ROUGH COST	UNLOCKS
1	Chef's knife + board	€50–100	All of Stage One — see Knife Skills

ORDER	BUY	ROUGH COST	UNLOCKS
2	Heavy frying pan + wooden spoon	€35–75	Searing, eggs, most weeknight cooking
3	Saucepan + sieve	€35–60	Stocks, sauces, blanching vegetables
4	Mixing bowl + balloon whisk + scales	€25–50	Emulsions and the start of pastry
5	Cocotte / large heavy pot	€60–150	Braises, stocks in volume, one-pot menus
6	Paring knife	€8–20	Fine work: turning, hulling, segmenting

Total spend for a genuinely complete kitchen, bought at the low end of every range above, comes to well under two hundred euros — and every item on it will still be working in twenty years if you follow the care notes above.

Second-hand and inherited equipment

Buy the knife new, so it fits your own hand from the start. Almost everything else in this chapter is better second-hand than new, because heavy, well-made pans and pots were built to outlast their first owner and rarely wear out — they simply change hands.

- **Cast iron and enamelled cast iron.** Look past surface rust — it scrubs off and re-seasons. Reject only a pan that is cracked or has a chipped enamel base exposing bare iron to acid.
- **Copper.** Worth acquiring second-hand precisely because good copper is expensive new; budget for a re-tinning if the interior looks pink or coppery rather than silver.
- **Wooden boards.** An inherited board with decades of knife scarring is not damaged, it is broken in — plane or sand it flat if it has genuinely warped, otherwise leave it alone.
- **Bowls and sieves.** Stainless does not wear meaningfully; buy these second-hand without hesitation.

- **Scales.** The one item worth buying new — old mechanical scales drift out of calibration in ways you cannot easily check.

> A NOTE ON INHERITANCE
>
> A grandmother's mouli, a well-worn board, a cocotte with someone else's dents in it, carries a kind of calibration a new purchase cannot: it has already been used correctly, for years, by someone who knew what they were doing. Trust it over a shop display.

Markets, house clearances and restaurant-supply liquidations are worth more attention than most home cooks give them. Professional-grade pans, built for a working kitchen's abuse, routinely outlast three generations of consumer-grade equipment bought new, and turn up second-hand for a fraction of their original price once a restaurant closes or upgrades. Ignore cosmetic wear entirely — a scratched, dented, thoroughly used pan is not a worse pan, it is a pan with a head start.

Food sticks constantly to a supposedly non-stick pan

The coating has worn through, usually from metal utensils or a dishwasher.

FIX Replace it with a heavy stainless or carbon steel pan and learn to preheat properly before adding fat — see Heat & Fat. You will not miss the coating.

A cast iron pan is sticky and dull after cleaning

Too much oil left on after seasoning, which turns gummy rather than polymerising.

FIX Wipe the pan almost dry after oiling — a whisper of oil, not a film — before it goes back over heat.

A wooden board smells sour

Moisture and food residue trapped in the grain, usually from soaking or storing damp.

FIX Scrub with coarse salt and half a lemon, rinse briefly, dry standing on edge. Never leave it flat and wet again.

Digital scales read inconsistently

Usually a dying battery or a surface that is not level.

FIX Replace the battery first — it is the cause more often than the scale itself — and always weigh on a hard, flat surface, not a folded cloth.

A *knife feels blunt again within days of sharpening*

Almost always the board, not the blade — glass, stone, or a bare countertop dulls an edge in a single session.

FIX Cut only on wood or thick plastic, and hone before every session as described in Knife Skills.



FIGURE 3 · WHY WEIGHT MATTERS

A thin base carries heat unevenly from the flame outward, scorching directly above the ring while the edges lag behind. A heavy base spreads and stores heat, so the whole surface arrives at temperature together.

Buy the eleven things well, once, and then stop shopping. Everything after that is practice.

END OF THE HONEST KITCHEN

CHAPTER 3

Knife Skills

Le Travail du Couteau

Nothing else in this school compounds so fast. A cook who can cut cleanly is already halfway to cooking evenly.

Why cutting is cooking

A pan cannot fix an uneven cut. If half your onion is 2 mm and half is 6 mm, the thin half burns while the thick half stays raw, and the dish tastes of both mistakes at once.

This is the whole argument for knife work, and it is not about speed or theatre. Classical French cooking is built on the assumption that everything in the pan is the same size, so that everything in the pan finishes at the same moment. The famous cuts — *brunoise*, *julienne*, *paysanne* — are not decoration. They are a shared language for cooking time.

You do not need to be fast. Speed is what happens to a cook who has been accurate for a year. Chase accuracy and speed arrives on its own; chase speed and you get a scar and a bag of uneven onion.

> *Cut it the same size, and the pan will do what you expect. That is ninety per cent of what people call instinct.*
>
> THE FIRST LAW OF THE SCHOOL

The one knife you need

A French kitchen runs on three knives, but you can learn everything in this chapter with one: a **chef's knife of 20 cm** (8 inches). Not a santoku, not a 15 cm utility knife, not a cleaver. The 20 cm chef's knife has enough belly to rock, enough length to slice a cabbage in one pass, and enough weight that the blade does the work instead of your shoulder.

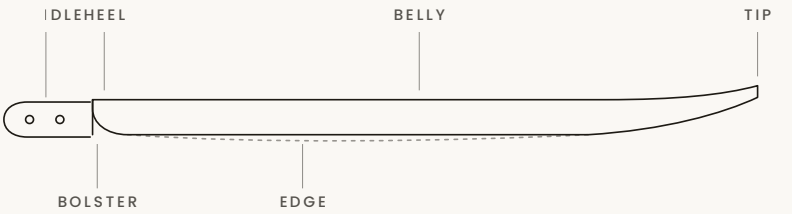


FIGURE 1 · ANATOMY

The tip does fine work and never leaves the board. The belly does the rocking. The heel takes the force for anything tough. The bolster is where your fingers pinch — not the handle.

> NO GADGETS REQUIRED
>
> Carbon steel takes a keener edge and rusts if you leave it wet; stainless is forgiving and needs sharpening slightly more often. Either is fine. What matters far more than the steel is that the edge is sharp today, and that the handle fits your hand. A €35 knife you sharpen beats a €300 knife you do not.

The other two, when you are ready

- **A paring knife (8–10 cm).** For anything held in the air rather than laid on a board: turning vegetables, hulling strawberries, peeling a shallot.
- **A serrated bread knife (23 cm).** For bread, tomatoes when your chef's knife is dull, and cutting sponge cake into layers. It cannot be sharpened at home, so buy a cheap one and replace it every few years.

A boning knife is a luxury; a flexible fillet knife is a luxury. You can break down a chicken with a 20 cm chef's knife and a pair of kitchen scissors, and we will do exactly that below.

Sharp, without gadgets

A dull knife is the most dangerous object in a domestic kitchen, because it slides off skins instead of biting into them, and it slides towards your hand. Sharpness is not a purchase, it is a habit.

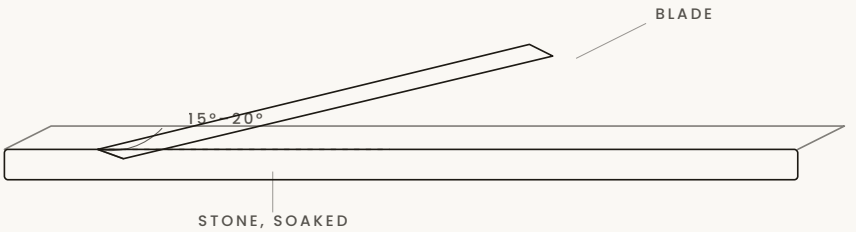


FIGURE 2 · THE ANGLE

Two stacked coins under the spine of a 20 cm blade gives you roughly the right angle. Hold it there and stop thinking about degrees.

01 Soak the stone

A combination whetstone — coarse on one side (around 1000 grit), fine on the other (around 3000–6000) — is the only sharpening tool worth owning. Soak it in water for ten minutes, until it stops sending up bubbles. Set it on a damp cloth so it cannot slide.

YOU WANT *a stone that looks wet and dark all over, and does not move when you push it.*

02 Set the angle and keep it

Lay the blade across the stone at roughly 15–20°, edge facing away. Two fingers of your free hand press flat on the blade, just behind the edge. Push the knife away from you along the stone as though shaving a thin layer off its surface, then draw it back with no pressure.

Work the whole edge: as you push, slide the knife sideways so the contact point travels from heel to tip. Ten passes, then move to the next section.

CUE *A quiet, even hiss. A chattering or grinding sound means your angle is changing mid-stroke.*

03 Raise a burr, then take it off

Keep going on the coarse side until you can feel a tiny wire of metal — the burr — folded over on the opposite side of the edge. Run a fingertip *across* the blade, never along it. When the burr runs the full length of the edge, turn the knife over and do the other side until the burr flips back.

Now switch to the fine side and repeat with light pressure, six or eight passes a side, alternating. The burr breaks away and leaves a clean edge.

CUE *The burr is felt, not seen. It is the whole test of whether you have actually sharpened rather than polished.*

04 Test on paper, then on a tomato

Hold a sheet of paper by one corner and slice down through it. A sharp knife takes a clean curl with no tearing. Then rest the blade on the skin of a tomato and draw it back with no downward pressure at all: it should part the skin on the first pass.

FAILS? *Almost always a burr you never fully removed. Six more light alternating passes on the fine side.*

05 Between sharpenings, use a steel

A honing steel does not sharpen — it straightens an edge that has rolled over microscopically with use. Six light strokes a side, before each session, at the same 15–20°. A ceramic steel is gentler and better for kitchen knives than a ridged steel one.

With daily use, hone every session and sharpen properly every four to six weeks.

NEVER *A pull-through sharpener. It scrapes metal off at a fixed, wrong angle and will ruin a good knife within a year.*

> IF YOU HAVE NO STONE TONIGHT
>
> The unglazed ceramic ring on the bottom of a coffee mug is a passable emergency hone. Turn the mug upside down, hold the blade at 20° against the rough ring, and draw it towards you five or six times a side. It is crude and it works. Buy a stone this month anyway.

Setting the board

Wood or thick plastic, and it must be big enough to hold what you cut plus what you have cut. A board smaller than 30 × 40 cm makes you work in the middle of a pile, and working in a pile is how people cut themselves.

- **Anchor it.** A damp cloth or a sheet of damp kitchen paper flat under the board kills all slide. Do this every single time; it takes four seconds.
- **Clear the far edge.** Cut at the near half of the board. Push finished work to the far corner or, better, into a bowl. French kitchens call the habit *mise en place* and it is mostly about keeping your working surface empty.
- **One bowl for waste.** Peelings go into a bowl, not into a growing hill beside your hand. If the peel is onion skin, carrot tops, leek greens and parsley stalks, that bowl is tomorrow's stock — see Stocks.
- **Dry hands, dry handle.** Wipe both whenever they get wet. A wet handle rotates in the grip.

The grip and the claw

Both hands have a job, and both jobs are learnable in a single evening.



FIGURE 3 · TWO HANDS, TWO JOBS

Left: thumb and forefinger pinch the flat of the blade just ahead of the bolster; the remaining three fingers wrap the handle. Right: the guiding hand curls into a claw, fingertips tucked behind the knuckles, so the flat of the blade rides against the knuckles and physically cannot reach the fingertips.

The knife hand

Pinch the *blade*, not the handle. Thumb on one flat, the side of your bent index finger on the other, both just in front of the bolster. The other three fingers curl around the handle. This feels wrong for about twenty minutes and then feels like the only sensible way to hold a knife: it moves your hand's centre of control onto the blade itself, which is what lets you steer a cut instead of merely dropping it.

Your wrist stays loose. Your elbow, not your shoulder, drives the movement. If your shoulder aches after ten minutes of chopping, you are gripping too hard and pushing down instead of forwards.

The guiding hand — the claw

Curl the fingers of your other hand so the fingertips point straight down into the board and the middle knuckles stand out furthest forward. The thumb hides behind the fingers. Rest the flat of the blade lightly against those knuckles and let them act as a fence.

Now the important part: **you set the thickness of every slice by how far you retreat the claw**, not by aiming the knife. Move the claw back 2 mm, you get 2 mm slices. The knife never has to think about it.

> THE ONE RULE THAT PREVENTS CUTS
>
> The blade never lifts higher than the knuckles that guide it. If the tip stays on the board and the heel rises only a little, the edge has nowhere to go but down into the food. Almost every domestic knife injury comes from lifting the blade clear of the guide hand and then losing track of where the fingers are.

The three motions

All the cuts below are made from three movements. Learn them separately, then stop thinking about them.

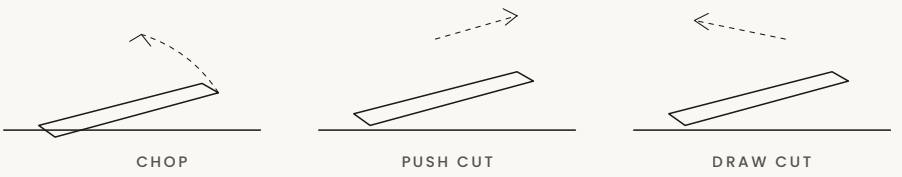


FIGURE 4 · THREE PATHS

The tip stays down in all three. What changes is whether the blade travels forward, backward, or pivots.

- **The rock chop.** Tip pinned to the board; the heel rises and falls while the blade pivots on the belly. For herbs, garlic, and reducing anything already sliced into something finer. It is the noisiest cut and the least precise, so it is a finishing motion, not a shaping one.
- **The push cut.** The blade moves forward and down together, so the edge slices rather than crushes. This is the workhorse: onions, carrots, celery, potatoes, anything firm. Start with the heel near the food, push the knife away from you, and let the edge travel through as it descends.
- **The draw cut.** The reverse: the blade is drawn back towards you as it descends. For soft or skinned things that a push would squash — tomatoes, mozzarella, cooked meat, a terrine. Long, single, unhurried strokes; never saw.

> THE TEST OF A GOOD CUT
>
> A clean cut makes almost no sound. Loud chopping is the sound of a blade hitting a board with force, which means it is crushing its way through instead of slicing. Quieten your board and your knife work improves at the same moment.

The classical cuts

These sizes are not folklore; they are cooking times expressed as geometry. Learn four of them well and you can read almost any French recipe.

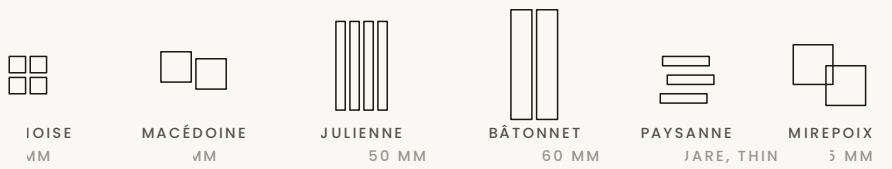


FIGURE 5 · THE REGISTER OF CUTS

Drawn to relative scale. Notice that julienne and brunoise are the same cut at two stages: dice the julienne and you have brunoise.

CUT	SIZE	MADE FROM	WHERE IT BELONGS
Brunoise	3 × 3 × 3 mm	Dicing a julienne	Garnish in consommé, sauces, tartare, anything where you want flavour without texture
Macédoine	5 × 5 × 5 mm	Dicing a bâtonnet	Vegetable salads, garnishes with bite, *macédoine de légumes*
Julienne	2 × 2 × 50 mm	Squared block, sliced then stacked	Fast-cooking garnishes, raw salads, *céleri rémoulade*
Bâtonnet	6 × 6 × 60 mm	Squared block	Pommes frites, crudités, anything roasted alongside meat
Paysanne	12 mm square × 2 mm	Flat slices of a squared block	Rustic soups and *garbures*; cooks fast, reads as home cooking
Mirepoix	12–15 mm rough	Rough dicing, no precision	The aromatic base of stocks and braises — it is strained out or cooked to nothing
Émincer	2–3 mm slices	Straight slicing	Onions for soup, mushrooms, fennel
Chiffonade	1–2 mm rib-bons	Rolled leaves, sliced across	Basil, sorrel, lettuce, spinach

CUT	SIZE	MADE FROM	WHERE IT BELONGS
Tourné	Seven-sided barrel, 5 cm	Paring knife	Formal garnish; mostly a discipline exercise now

> THE GADGET YOU ARE TOLD YOU NEED
>
> A mandoline makes julienne faster and takes fingertips off. You do not need one. A squared block and a sharp knife gives you julienne in ninety seconds, and the block itself — squaring off the rounded sides — is the step that makes every subsequent cut regular. Keep the trimmings for stock.

The onion

The onion is the exam. Everything about grip, claw, and geometry is tested by it, and you will cut thousands. Done properly, it takes forty seconds and produces dice of near-perfect regularity without a single horizontal cut towards your hand.



FIGURE 6 · THE ONION, IN FOUR MOVES

The root is never cut through until the very end. It is the hinge that holds every layer in place while you work.

01 Halve it through the root

Trim only the top (the stalk end). Leave the hairy root plate entirely intact. Stand the onion on its cut top and halve it from top to root, so each half keeps half the root. Peel the skin back and off; the root holds it together.

WHY *Cut the root out now and the onion becomes forty loose curved sheets. Keep it and it stays a solid block you can cut geometrically.*

02 Lay it flat and cut radially

Cut side down, root pointing towards your guide hand. Make vertical cuts angled towards the centre of the root — not straight down, but fanning like the spokes of a wheel — stopping about 1 cm short of the root every time. The tip does this work; keep it low.

Space determines your dice: 3 mm apart for a fine dice, 6 mm for a standard one.

CUE *Angling the cuts towards the root centre is what corrects for the onion's curve. Straight-down cuts give you wide dice at the outside and slivers at the middle.*

03 One horizontal cut, and often none

For a large onion, make a single horizontal cut through the middle, parallel to the board, again stopping short of the root. Keep the knife flat, fingers of the guide hand spread on top and well clear of the blade's path.

For a small or medium onion, skip this entirely. The natural layers already give you the third dimension.

SAFETY *This is the only cut that travels towards your hand. Flatten your guide hand on top of the onion, never around its far side.*

04 Cross-cut, and the dice fall

Turn the onion 90°. Now slice across at the same spacing you used for the radial cuts. Perfect dice drop away with each pass. Work from the stalk end towards the root and stop when you reach it.

The root end and the last centimetre go into the stock bowl. That is the only waste.

CUE *If the dice are not falling free, your radial cuts did not reach far enough down. Go deeper next time, not harder now.*

Sliced onions — *émincer*

For soup, tarts, and anything long-cooked, you want slices, not dice. Halve through the root as before, then slice each half *with the grain* — root-to-tip, following the lines you can see on the onion's surface. Those slices hold their shape through an hour in the pan. Slicing across the grain gives you softer, faster-collapsing pieces, which is what you want for a purée and not what you want for soupe à l'oignon.

> ON CRYING
>
> The tearing compound is released by damaged cells and travels through the air. A genuinely sharp knife bursts far fewer cells than a dull one, so sharpening is the real fix. Beyond that: chill the onion for twenty minutes first, cut near an extractor or an open window, and do not lean over the board. Everything else — bread in the mouth, candles, goggles — is folklore or an admission that the knife is dull.

Garlic and shallot

Peeling garlic without a gadget

Lay the clove flat, put the side of the blade over it, and strike the flat once with the heel of your hand. The skin splits and lifts away. If the recipe needs whole intact cloves, drop them in warm water for a minute instead and the skins slip off.

Three grades of garlic, three different dishes

- **Sliced thin.** Sweetest and most forgiving. It gilds rather than burns and is what you want in a pan of vegetables or oil.
- **Chopped.** Rock-chop the sliced garlic. Stronger, cooks in seconds, burns in ten more. Add it after the onions have softened, never with them.
- **Puréed with salt.** Chop coarsely, add a pinch of coarse salt, then drag the flat of the blade across the pile at a shallow angle, repeatedly, until it becomes a smooth paste. The salt crystals do the grinding. This is the correct way to start an aïoli or a vinaigrette, and it needs no press, no grater, and no bowl.

> **BURNT GARLIC CANNOT BE RESCUED**
>
> Garlic goes from fragrant to acrid in about fifteen seconds, and once it is bitter the whole pan is bitter. If it browns before the rest of the dish is ready, tip the pan out, wipe it, and start the garlic again. It costs one clove and thirty seconds, and it saves the dish.

Shallots

A shallot is a small onion with tighter layers and a sweeter, more delicate flavour, and it is the aromatic of the sauce station. Treat it exactly as the onion above, at half the scale, and skip the horizontal cut always. For a *beurre blanc* or a *sauce bordelaise*, the shallot wants to be very fine indeed — the dice should almost disappear into the reduction.

Herbs and chiffonade

Herbs bruise. A bruised herb leaks its oils onto the board, turns black at the edges, and tastes of grass. The whole technique is about cutting them once, cleanly, at the last possible moment.

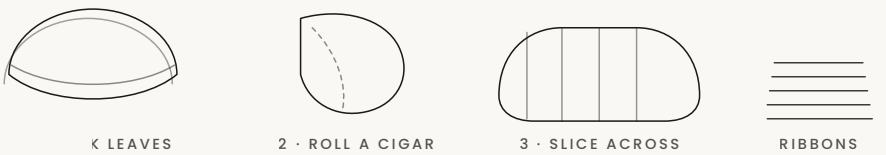


FIGURE 7 · CHIFFONADE

Stack the leaves largest first, roll them into a tight cigar along the length, then slice across in single clean passes. One pass per ribbon — never return over the same cut.

- **Dry them first.** Wet herbs stick to the blade and to each other, and they cannot be cut, only mashed. Spin or pat them thoroughly dry.
- **Soft herbs get one pass.** Basil, tarragon, chervil, mint: chiffonade or a single coarse chop. Never rock-chop them to dust; you are pressing the flavour into the board.

- **Hard herbs can take a rock chop.** Rosemary, thyme, sage and parsley stems are robust enough to be reduced finely. Strip thyme by pinching the top of the stalk and pulling downwards against the leaves' growth.
- **Parsley wants to be dry twice.** Chop it, then gather it in a corner of a clean cloth and wring it out. It becomes bright, separate and dry, and it keeps for a day.
- **Keep the stalks.** Parsley, thyme and tarragon stalks are the backbone of a *bouquet garni*. See Stocks.

Carrot: bâtonnet to brunoise

The carrot teaches the single most useful idea in knife work: **make it square first**. Round things roll and produce irregular pieces. A squared block produces identical ones, every time, forever.

01 Cut a flat, then square the block

Peel the carrot and cut it into lengths of about 6 cm. Slice a thin strip off one long side so it lies flat and dead still. Now trim the other three sides to make a rectangular block. You will lose perhaps a quarter of the carrot — it goes to the stock bowl.

CUE *The block should not rock at all when you press it. If it rocks, take another thin pass off the base.*

02 Plank it

Lay the block down and slice it lengthways into planks: 6 mm thick for bâtonnet, 2 mm for julienne. Keep the claw retreating steadily and let the thickness come from the knuckles.

03 Stack and stick

Stack two or three planks — no more, or the stack slides — and cut them into sticks of the same width as their thickness. Now you have bâtonnet (6 mm) or julienne (2 mm).

CUE *Square section, not rectangular. If the sticks are 6 × 3 mm, your planks were the wrong thickness for that spacing.*

04 **Turn and dice**

Gather the sticks, line up the ends, turn them 90° and cut across at the same spacing again. Bâtonnet becomes *macédoine*; julienne becomes *brunoise*. That is the whole family.

The same sequence works on celeriac, swede, potato, courgette (square the flesh, discard nothing — the seedy core goes to stock), and the white of a leek once it is split and washed.

The tourné

Seven flat facets, 5 cm long, barrel-shaped, cut with a paring knife. It exists because seven-sided vegetables of identical size cook at identical rates and look, arranged on a plate, quietly astonishing. It is also the traditional way French kitchens weeded out cooks who lacked patience.

You will rarely need it. Learn it anyway, in a spare half hour with a bag of potatoes, because it teaches your paring hand to work in the air with control — and that skill transfers to peeling, segmenting citrus, and trimming artichokes.

- Cut the vegetable into 5 cm barrels, then quarter them lengthways.
- Hold a quarter between thumb and fingers of the guide hand, the paring knife thumb braced against the vegetable itself.
- Draw the blade from top to bottom in a single arced stroke, taking off one facet. Rotate slightly, repeat, seven times.
- The trimmings become potage. Nothing is wasted, which was always the point.

Breaking down a chicken

A whole chicken costs substantially less per kilo than its parts, gives you eight portions, and leaves you a carcass that becomes two litres of stock. Doing it yourself is the single biggest saving in a home kitchen, and it takes six minutes once you have done it three times.

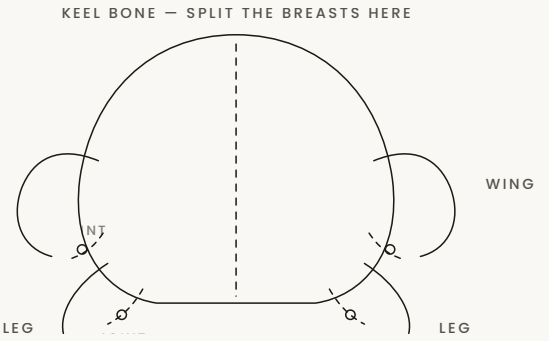


FIGURE 8 · EIGHT PIECES

Solid lines are where the knife travels; circles mark joints, where you cut cartilage rather than bone. A knife should never meet bone in this whole operation.

01 Remove the legs

Breast up. Pull one leg away from the body and cut through the skin in the crease between thigh and breast. Now bend the leg backwards until the ball of the thigh bone pops out of its socket — you will hear it. Cut through the exposed joint and the leg comes away. Repeat.

CUE *Take the little nugget of dark meat on the back near the thigh, the sot-l'y-laisse — the "oyster". It is the best mouthful on the bird.*

02 Split each leg into thigh and drumstick

Lay the leg skin side down. There is a thin line of fat running across it — that line sits exactly over the joint. Cut straight down through it and you pass between the bones with no resistance.

IF YOU HIT BONE *You are a centimetre out. Lift the knife, shift, and try again — never force it.*

03 Take the wings

Pull the wing out, find the shoulder joint with the tip of the knife, and cut through it. Trim the bony wing tip off and put it straight into the stock bowl.

04 Remove the breast crown, then split it

Stand the carcass on its neck end. Cut down each side of the ribcage, following the natural line where the breast meat ends, to free the whole crown from the back. Kitchen scissors make this easy if your knife feels wrong.

Then lay the crown skin up and cut hard down along one side of the central keel bone, following the bone with the blade, to release each breast whole.

CUE *Keep the blade in contact with bone throughout. Meat left on the carcass is meat you paid for.*

05 The carcass is the point

Chop the back and ribs roughly, add the wing tips, and either roast them for a brown stock or use them raw for a white one. Two litres of real stock is worth more than the chicken.

> SCISSORS ARE NOT CHEATING
>
> A sturdy pair of kitchen scissors will cut a ribcage faster and more safely than any knife, and French home kitchens have always used them. Use the knife for joints and meat, the scissors for bone.

When it goes wrong

Slices come out wedge-shaped

The blade is tilting as it descends, usually because the wrist is stiff and the arm is pushing sideways.

FIX Loosen the pinch grip until the knife almost rotates in your fingers, and let the elbow — not the shoulder — drive the stroke.

Food sticks to the blade and stacks up

Normal with starchy or wet food; the vacuum between blade and slice holds it on.

FIX Push cut instead of straight down, so the slice is released forwards, and sweep the pile aside every few cuts with the back of the blade — never the edge.

The onion falls apart before you dice it

The root was cut through, or the radial cuts went too far and severed it.

FIX Stop every cut a full centimetre short of the root. The last centimetre is a handle, not an ingredient.

Herbs turn black and smell of hay

Bruising from a dull knife or repeated chopping over the same pile.

FIX Sharpen, dry the leaves, and cut once. Chop soft herbs at the last moment, after everything else is ready.

The board slides mid-cut

Nothing under it, or a wet ring of juice acting as a bearing.

FIX Damp cloth flat underneath, wiped dry surface on top. Reset it whenever you wipe the board.

Your hand aches after five minutes

Gripping the handle in a fist and forcing the knife down through the food.

FIX Move to the pinch grip and cut forwards rather than downwards. A sharp knife needs almost no downward pressure at all.

The ten-minute drill

Do this three times a week for a month and your knife work will be unrecognisable. It costs about the price of a coffee in vegetables, and everything you cut goes into a soup, a stock, or a potage at the end.

MINUTES	DRILL	WHAT YOU ARE TRAINING
0–1	Hone the knife, damp cloth under the board, bowl for waste	The ritual that prevents accidents
1–3	Two onions, diced — one large with the horizontal cut, one small without	Grip, claw, root discipline, radial geometry
3–6	Two carrots: square the block, plank, bâtonnet, then macédoine	Squaring, consistent thickness, stacking
6–8	One carrot to julienne, then brunoise	Fine control at the tip; the hardest cut in this chapter
8–9	A bunch of parsley, chopped and wrung dry; a handful of basil in chiffonade	Single-pass cutting, not bruising

MINUTES	DRILL	WHAT YOU ARE TRAINING
9–10	Wash and dry the board and knife immediately, by hand	The habit that keeps the edge you just made

> NEVER IN THE DISHWASHER
>
> Detergent pits the steel, the heat loosens riveted handles, and the rack knocks the edge against other metal. Wash a knife by hand in warm water, dry it at once, and put it away in a block, on a magnetic bar, or in a sheath — never loose in a drawer.

You are not learning to cut vegetables. You are learning to make a pan behave predictably, and this is where that begins.

END OF STAGE ONE, LESSON ONE

CHAPTER 4

Heat & Fat

Le Feu et la Matière Grasse

A knife makes food the same size. Heat is what turns that food into dinner — and almost every kitchen disaster is heat mismanaged, not a bad recipe.

What heat actually does

Heat is not a switch with two settings, on and off. It is a rate, and almost everything you are actually controlling in a kitchen is that rate — how fast energy moves from the flame, through the pan, into the food, and out again as steam and smell.

At the molecular level, heat makes water move, proteins unfold and re-bond, sugars break apart and recombine into hundreds of new flavour compounds, and connective tissue dissolve into gelatine. None of that is mysterious once you separate it into what is actually happening: water either stays liquid, or it boils away as steam, or it is driven off the surface fast enough that the surface itself gets hotter than boiling — and it is only that last state, a dry, very hot surface, that produces colour and the flavours everyone means when they say something tastes "cooked" rather than merely "hot".

This is the single idea underneath the whole page: **wet food cannot brown**. Whatever heat is doing — searing, roasting, sautéing — its first job on any dry-heat method is chasing the water off the surface. Once the surface is dry, and only then, the temperature at that surface can climb past 100°C towards the

140–165°C where browning happens. Everything below on pans, fats and crowding is really one long argument about how to get a dry, hot surface reliably, in a normal kitchen, without a gadget to tell you when you have it.

You are not cooking food. You are managing the rate at which heat arrives. Everything else follows from that.

THE SECOND LAW OF THE SCHOOL

Conduction, radiant, convection

Heat reaches food by three routes, and a domestic kitchen uses all three, usually at once, in different proportions depending on the method.

- **Conduction.** Direct contact, molecule to molecule: hob to pan, pan to food, food surface to food interior. It is the fastest route and the one you control most precisely, because it depends on what the food is touching and how hard. A frying pan, a griddle, the base of a saucepan — all conduction.
- **Radiant heat.** Infrared energy crossing empty space, no contact needed: a grill element, the glow of coals, the walls of a hot oven. It cooks the side facing the source fastest and leaves shadows, which is why you turn food under a grill and do not under most conduction cooking.
- **Convection.** Heat carried by a moving fluid — hot air circulating in an oven, or hot liquid moving in a pot of stock. A fan oven forces the air to move faster, which is why fan ovens cook faster and more evenly than a still one, and why oven manufacturers' temperatures for fan and conventional settings genuinely differ.

Frying and sautéing are almost pure conduction. Roasting is convection plus a good deal of radiant heat off the oven walls. Grilling is mostly radiant. Poaching and steaming — see Poaching & Steaming — are convection through a liquid or vapour that is capped at or near 100°C, which is exactly why they cannot brown anything: the medium itself cannot get hot enough.

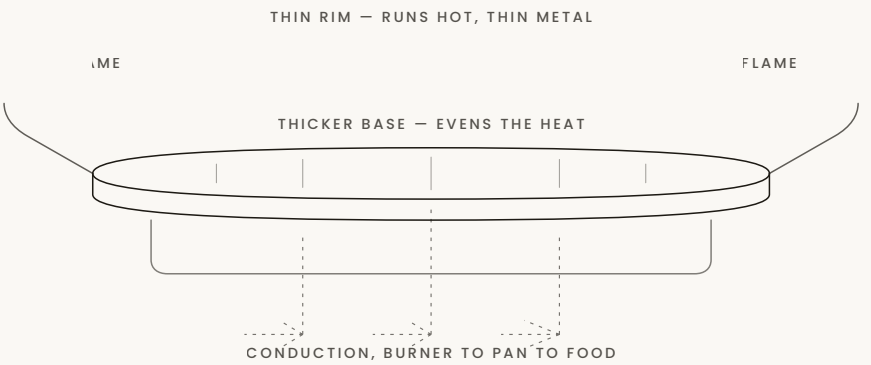


FIGURE 1 · CROSS-SECTION OF A PAN

The thin, splayed rim of most frying pans heats faster than the thicker base and will scorch food pushed to its edge. Heavy pans exist to slow that difference down, not to eliminate it.

Reading a pan without a thermometer

A restaurant kitchen does not carry an infrared thermometer to the stove for a reason: the pan and the fat already tell you everything, faster and more usefully than a number would, because what matters is not one temperature but a moving state — is the pan still climbing, has it plateaued, is it starting to smoke. Three tests cover nearly every situation.

01 The water-droplet test, for a dry pan

Before any fat goes in, flick a few drops of water into the empty, heating pan. Below about 100°C they simply hiss and evaporate. Around 150–160°C they gather into one bead and skitter across the surface for several seconds before vanishing — this is the *effet Leidenfrost*, the Leidenfrost effect: the underside of the droplet flashes to vapour and the bead rides on its own steam cushion.

CUE *A single bead that dances and slides rather than a hiss that dies immediately means the pan has reached searing range. Add fat now.*

02 The shimmer, for oil

Add oil and watch the surface, not a clock. Cold oil sits flat and glassy. As it nears cooking temperature it starts to move on its own — a faint, heat-haze shimmer, like air above tarmac in summer — because it is thin enough now to convect visibly. That shimmer is oil at roughly 160–190°C, the range for most sautéing and shallow frying.

CUE *Shimmer, not smoke. If you see the first thin wisp of smoke, the oil has gone past shimmer into its upper range; lower the heat before it browns itself.*

03 The smoke point, as a ceiling not a target

Every fat has a temperature at which it stops behaving as a cooking medium and starts breaking down — visible smoke, an acrid smell, and the beginning of bitter, carcinogenic decomposition products. Smoke is the pan telling you to act, not a colour cue to cook towards. Pull the pan off the heat, let it drop back, and if the fat has gone from clear to brown and acrid-smelling, discard it and start again.

NEVER *Cook "to the smoke point" on purpose. It is a warning line, not a gas mark.*

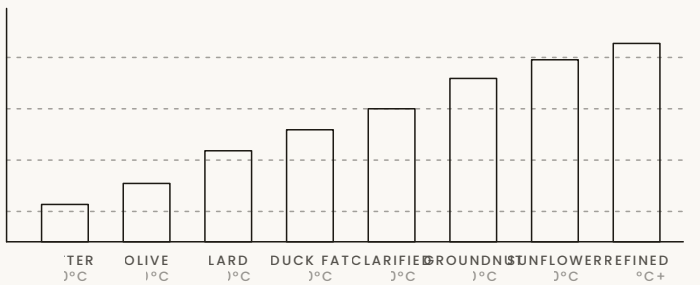


FIGURE 2 · THE SMOKE-POINT LADDER

Height is smoke point, not quality. Butter's low ceiling is what makes it burn before meat colours — the reason to reach for a higher fat, or clarify the butter, when real heat is needed.

Why preheating matters, and how long it really takes

A pan is a store of heat, not merely a conductor of it. When cold food touches a barely-warm pan, the pan's temperature collapses on contact and both the pan

and the food sit in a lukewarm no-man's-land where nothing browns and everything sweats. A properly preheated pan has enough stored heat that adding food only dents its temperature, not destroys it.

A thin pan on a domestic hob is ready for oil in perhaps ninety seconds to two minutes; a heavy cast-iron or thick carbon-steel pan wants a genuine three to five minutes on a medium flame before it has heated through, not just at the surface. Rushing this is the single most common reason a home sear turns into a home steam.

> HEAT THE PAN, THEN THE FAT, THEN THE FOOD
>
> Add the fat once the dry pan has already shown its water-droplet cue, not before. Fat added to a cold pan heats at the same slow rate as the pan itself and gives you no independent signal; fat added to a properly hot pan shimmers within seconds and tells you the truth.

The fats, and what each is for

Fat in a pan does three jobs at once: it conducts heat evenly across the metal, it prevents food sticking by filling the microscopic gaps between food and pan, and it carries flavour — its own, and whatever you cook in it afterwards. Choosing a fat is choosing among those three jobs, not choosing a flavour alone.

FAT	SMOKE POINT	CHARACTER	BELONGS WHERE
Butter, whole	~150°C	Milk solids and water; browns fast, burns faster	Gentle sautéing, finishing, basting, anything under five minutes in the pan

FAT	SMOKE POINT	CHARACTER	BELONGS WHERE
Clarified butter / *beurre noisette*	~200°C	Pure butterfat, milk solids removed; the noisette version is deliberately browned first	Searing at real heat while keeping butter's flavour — see below
Extra virgin olive oil	~190°C	Grassy, peppery, robust; loses subtlety with heavy heat	Sautéing vegetables, dressing, finishing raw — not deep frying
Neutral oil (sunflower, groundnut, rapeseed)	~225–230°C	Flavourless, reliable, cheap	High-heat searing, and mixed with butter to raise its ceiling
Duck fat	~190°C	Rich, savoury, faintly gamey	Roast potatoes, confit, searing duck breast in its own fat
Lard (pork fat)	~190°C	Clean, mild, superb for pastry	Frying, roasting potatoes, short pastry — see Pastry & Doughs

Why butter burns, and how to cook in butter anyway

Whole butter is roughly eighty per cent fat, and the rest is milk solids and water. The water has to boil off before anything can brown, which is why butter foams loudly when it first hits a hot pan — that noise is water leaving. Once the water is gone, the milk solids, which have nowhere near butterfat's heat

tolerance, start to scorch at around 150°C, turning first golden and fragrant, then dark and bitter within moments. That narrow window between "the water has gone" and "the solids have burnt" is what makes butter the most flavourful and least forgiving fat in the kitchen.

Two honest ways round it, both classical:

- **Cut it with a higher fat.** A spoon of neutral oil added alongside the butter raises the point at which the whole mixture starts to burn, because the oil dilutes the milk solids and conducts the excess heat away from them. This is the everyday kitchen trick, not a cheat — it is how a pan of butter can sear a chop without turning black.
- **Clarify it.** Melt butter gently, let the milk solids sink and the water evaporate, then skim or pour off the clear golden fat above, leaving the solids behind. What remains — *beurre clarifié*, clarified butter — has no water left to boil off and no solids left to scorch, and its smoke point rises to around 200°C: high enough for a proper sear.

Push clarification one step further and you get *beurre noisette*, brown butter: instead of skimming the solids out before they colour, you let them toast in the fat until they turn the colour of a hazelnut and smell of it too, then strain them out or use the whole thing at once over something that wants that nuttiness — skate, sole, a simple green vegetable. It is the same chemistry as the smoke-point warning above, deliberately steered: colour the solids on purpose, on low heat, watching constantly, and stop the moment the smell turns from nutty to acrid.

> BROWN BUTTER HAS SECONDS, NOT MINUTES
>
> Once the foam subsides and the solids begin to speckle brown at the bottom of the pan, it is thirty seconds at most from perfect to burnt. Have whatever you are serving it over already plated. Pour the butter the instant it smells of hazelnuts, off the heat, into a cool bowl if it must wait even a minute — the pan alone holds enough heat to carry it on to bitter.

Pan materials, and what a beginner should actually own

Four materials cover everything this school asks of a pan. None is universally best; each trades evenness, responsiveness, and forgiveness against the others.

- **Carbon steel.** Thin, light, heats and cools fast, takes a seasoned near-non-stick surface with use, and is what most professional kitchens actually reach for. It needs seasoning and cannot go through a dishwasher. The best single pan a serious beginner can buy, and the one this school assumes.
- **Cast iron.** Heavy, slow to heat, very slow to cool, holds an enormous amount of stored heat once hot. Superb for a sear that must not collapse when food is added, and for finishing in the oven. Poor for anything needing quick temperature changes — an omelette, a delicate sauce.
- **Stainless steel (usually clad with an aluminium core).** Does not season, does not react with acidic food, cleans easily, and is honest about temperature — what you see is what you get, with no seasoned layer to protect you from sticking. Right for sauces, for deglazing, and for anything acidic that would strip a seasoned pan.
- **Non-stick.** Genuinely useful for eggs and fish skin at low-to-medium heat, and nothing else. Its coating cannot take a real sear, scratches, and degrades with time and high heat. Treat it as a specialist tool, never the only pan in the kitchen.

> IF YOU OWN ONE PAN
>
> Buy a 26–28 cm carbon-steel frying pan. It sears, sautés, finishes in the oven, and will outlast you if you look after it. Add a stainless saucepan for sauces and a large pot for stock — see The Honest Kitchen — before you spend a further penny on cookware.

Seasoning and caring for carbon steel and cast iron

Both metals are bare iron underneath, which rusts on contact with water and air, and both are rescued by the same trick: a thin, baked-on layer of polymerised oil that fills the pores of the metal and stops food and water reaching it

directly. That layer is the "seasoning", and it is built and maintained by heat and use, not bought.

01 Strip and heat

Wash a new pan with soap once — this is the only time soap is correct — to remove its factory coating. Dry it completely, including the handle rivets, then set it on high heat until it just begins to smoke.

02 Oil it, thinly, off the heat

Off the heat, wipe a teaspoon of neutral oil over the entire interior with a cloth, then wipe almost all of it off again — the layer should look nearly dry, not glossy. Too much oil pools and turns gummy rather than baking hard.

CUE *The pan should darken slightly and lose its shine each time. Several thin coats beat one thick one.*

03 Repeat and cook

Return it to high heat until it smokes again, let it cool, and repeat the thin oiling three or four times. After that, the pan seasons itself further every time you cook something fatty in it — the first weeks of use matter more than the initial ritual.

- **Clean with hot water and a stiff brush, not soap.** Soap dissolves the fat that is the seasoning. Salt scrubbed with a cloth lifts stuck food without damaging the surface.
- **Dry it on the heat.** A minute on the hob after washing drives off every trace of water before it can rust.
- **Oil it very lightly before storing.** A wiped film, not a pool.
- **Acid strips seasoning.** A long-simmered tomato sauce or a deglaze with wine belongs in stainless, not a newly seasoned pan.

Heat management on gas, electric and induction

The hob decides how fast you can change your mind. Gas responds instantly and visibly — you can see the flame area shrink the moment you turn the dial —

which makes it forgiving for a beginner learning to read a pan. Electric coil and solid-plate hobs store heat in the element itself and lag several seconds to a minute behind the dial, so you must anticipate and turn down before the pan looks ready, not when it does. Induction heats the pan directly through a magnetic field and responds almost as fast as gas, but only with pans that are magnetic — cast iron and most carbon steel qualify, and thin aluminium or unclad stainless generally do not.

> TWO BURNERS SOLVE MOST HEAT MISTAKES
>
> Keep a second ring on low. A pan running away from you moves there in three seconds, buying time to think, while the food keeps cooking rather than sitting off the heat entirely.

Crowding the pan

Food releases moisture the instant it meets heat. In a pan with room to spare, that moisture rises as steam and disperses into the kitchen air. In a crowded pan, the steam has nowhere to go — it collects above the food, saturates the air just over the surface, and the food ends up simmering in its own vapour instead of contacting dry, hot metal. The pan's temperature also drops further and recovers more slowly the more cold food is dropped in at once, compounding the problem.



FIGURE 3 · CROWDED VERSUS SPACED

Same pan, same heat. The only variable is how much room the steam has to leave before it condenses back onto the food.

The fix is unglamorous: cook in batches, keeping each piece with clear space on every side, and resist the urge to add everything at once because the pan looks big enough. A pan that has visibly dropped in temperature and gone quiet — no sizzle, food sitting in liquid rather than fat — is crowded, and no amount of extra time fixes it; only removing food and starting the next batch on a re-heated pan does.

The Maillard reaction and caramelisation

Two related but distinct chemistries produce almost all the colour and savoury depth in cooked food, and it is worth knowing them apart because they respond differently.

- **The Maillard reaction** is a reaction between amino acids (from protein) and reducing sugars, starting in earnest around 140°C and accelerating up to about 165°C. It is responsible for the crust on a steak, the skin of roast chicken, the brown edge of a seared scallop, toasted bread — hundreds of new flavour and aroma compounds appearing where there was only raw protein and starch before.
- **Caramelisation** is sugar alone, breaking down under heat with no protein involved, starting around 160°C for ordinary table sugar and lower for fructose-rich fruit. It is what browns onions cooked low and slow, what happens to sugar in a pan for crème caramel, what darkens the natural sugars at the cut edge of a roasted vegetable.

Both need the same precondition stated at the top of this chapter: a dry surface. This is the moisture rule stated plainly — **neither reaction can proceed while there is still liquid water at the surface**, because that water cannot exceed 100°C and both reactions need well above it. Pat meat dry before it meets the pan. Do not salt vegetables destined for a hot sauté until they are already in the fat, because salt draws water out onto the surface exactly where you need it driest. Do not crowd the pan, for the same reason stated above from a different angle: crowding keeps the surface wet with trapped steam.

> NO THERMOMETER FOR THE CRUST
>
> Colour and smell are the only instruments a classical kitchen ever used to judge browning. A pale, straw crust means the reaction has barely started; deep mahogany with a nutty, roasted smell means it is at its peak; black and acrid means it has gone past both reactions into simple carbon, which tastes only bitter. Pull the food a shade before you think it is ready — residual heat, below, will carry it the rest of the way.

Residual heat, carryover, and deglazing

Food does not stop cooking the instant it leaves the pan or oven. The outer layers are hotter than the centre, and heat keeps migrating inward from that stored surface heat for several minutes after the source is removed — what professional kitchens call carryover. A large roast can climb 3–5°C in internal temperature after resting; a seared piece of fish, being thinner, carries over in under a minute but still enough to matter. Pull food from the heat a little earlier than instinct says, and let carryover finish the job while the exterior settles and the juices redistribute.

The pan itself carries residual heat too, and that heat is not waste — it is the basis of a sauce. Once meat or fish is seared and removed, the brown, stuck-on residue left in the pan — the *sucs*, the French term for exactly this — is concentrated Maillard flavour. Add a splash of liquid (wine, stock, even water) to the hot pan off direct flame, and scrape the base with a wooden spoon as it bubbles: the liquid lifts every trace of the *sucs* into itself. This is *déglacer*, deglazing, and it is the first step of dozens of pan sauces described fully in Sauce Making.

> DO NOT WASH A PAN YOU ARE ABOUT TO DEGLAZE
>
> Every rinse under the tap between the sear and the sauce takes the *sucs* down the drain. If a pan needs to rest between the meat coming out and the sauce going in, leave it exactly as it is.

SIGNAL	WHAT IT TELLS YOU	ACT ON IT BY
Water bead skitters, does not vanish instantly	Dry pan is at searing temperature	Adding fat now

SIGNAL	WHAT IT TELLS YOU	ACT ON IT BY
Oil shimmers, faint heat-haze	Fat is at cooking temperature, ~160–190°C	Adding food now
First wisp of smoke	Fat is at or past its ceiling	Lowering heat or swapping the fat
Loud, wet sizzle that quietens fast	Pan overcrowded, temperature collapsing	Removing half the food, reheating, batching
Butter foam subsides, flecks turn gold	*Beurre noisette* is seconds away	Watching constantly, ready to pour
Brown residue stuck to the pan base	*Sucs* — concentrated flavour, not burnt mess	Deglazing, not scrubbing away

When it goes wrong

Food steams grey instead of browning

The pan was crowded, or the food was wet on the surface, or both — the steam had nowhere to go and the surface never dried out.

FIX Pat food dry before it meets the pan, cook in batches with space between pieces, and reheat the pan fully between batches.

Butter turns black and bitter within a minute

Whole butter's milk solids were taken past their scorch point with nothing to protect them.

FIX Cut it with a spoon of neutral oil next time, or clarify it first for anything that needs real heat.

A seared piece of meat sticks fast and tears

The pan was not fully preheated, or the surface of the meat was still wet, or it was moved before a crust had formed.

FIX Wait for the fat to shimmer, dry the meat first, and leave it alone — a properly seared surface releases itself from the pan when it is ready.

Oil smokes almost as soon as it goes in

Either the pan was preheated too aggressively before the oil went in, or the wrong fat was chosen for the heat the dish needs.

FIX Lower the flame, let the pan settle for thirty seconds, and add fresh fat — a fat that has already smoked has begun to break down and will not recover.

A new carbon-steel pan sticks everywhere

The seasoning has not built up yet, or too much oil was used in seasoning and it never baked hard.

FIX Keep cooking fatty things in it — eggs are the traditional test — and repeat the thin-oil, high-heat seasoning cycle once more if sticking persists after a week.

A roast is overdone by the time it is carved

Carryover was not accounted for; the roast was pulled at its target temperature rather than short of it.

FIX Pull large joints 3–5°C, and thin cuts a shade of colour, before you think they are ready, then rest.

Master the pan and every recipe that follows is really the same lesson, wearing a different sauce.

STAGE ONE, LESSON TWO

CHAPTER 5

Seasoning

L'Assaisonnement

Salt is not an ingredient you add once. It is a technique you apply repeatedly, with judgement, from the first onion in the pan to the last taste before the plate leaves the kitchen.

Salt is a technique, not an ingredient

A recipe that says "season to taste" is not being lazy. It is telling you the truth: no quantity of salt is correct in the abstract, because the right amount depends on the water content of what you are salting, how much of the dish will reduce, and what else is already in the pot.

Treat salt the way you treat the knife or the pan — as a tool applied with judgement at the right moment, not a measurement copied from a recipe and never revisited. A recipe's gram figure for salt is a starting estimate written for one particular batch of tomatoes, one particular cut of meat, one particular brand of stock; your tomatoes, your meat and your stock will differ, sometimes by a great deal. The only reliable instrument is your own palate, used repeatedly through cooking rather than once at the end.

This is also why volume measures — a teaspoon, a pinch — lie more than they help. Salt crystals vary enormously in size and therefore in how much sodium chloride fills a given spoon: a level teaspoon of fine table salt weighs roughly twice what a level teaspoon of flaky sea salt weighs, because the flakes

are larger and pack more air between them. A recipe written against one salt and followed with another, at the same spoon measure, can be under- or over-seasoned by a genuinely dangerous margin. Weigh salt when precision matters — curing, brining, baking — and otherwise season by tasting, not by counting spoons.

Salt does not make food taste of salt. Used correctly, it makes food taste more like itself.

THE THIRD LAW OF THE SCHOOL

The kinds of salt

A kitchen needs only two or three salts, each doing a different job, and none of them a novelty.

- **Fine salt (table or fine sea salt).** Dissolves fastest and most evenly, which makes it right for anything mixed into a liquid or a batter — pasta water, stocks, doughs, brines. Its crystals are small and dense, so a given volume carries more sodium than the same volume of a coarser salt.
- **Coarse sea salt.** Slower to dissolve, easier to judge and control by hand because you can feel individual crystals between your fingers. The standard salt for seasoning meat, vegetables and a pan directly, where you want to see and feel how much you are adding.
- ***Fleur de sel.*** Hand-harvested flakes skimmed from the surface of salt pans, delicate and faintly moist, with a clean, rounded flavour and none of the harshness of a processed salt. Never cooked with — its texture and subtlety are wasted in heat. Reserved for finishing: a last touch over a sliced tomato, a piece of grilled fish, sliced meat just before serving, where individual crystals should still be felt on the tongue.

> NO SALT CELLAR NEEDED
>
> A small bowl of coarse salt kept beside the hob, seasoned by pinch rather than shaken from a grinder, is the entire classical set-up. It lets you judge quantity by touch and control exactly where the salt lands — over the centre of a pan, not scattered past its edge.

When to salt

Every category of food has its own correct moment, and the reasons are chemical, not habitual.

- **Vegetables destined for a raw or lightly dressed salad.** Salt just before serving. Salt draws water out of cut vegetables by osmosis — useful when you want that water gone, ruinous when you want the vegetable crisp and full.
- **Vegetables going into a hot sauté.** Salt once they are already in the fat, not before, and not into the raw, dry vegetable on the board. Early salting on the board draws water to the surface exactly where a dry surface is needed for browning — see Heat & Fat on the moisture rule.
- **Meat, well before cooking.** Salt a roast or a steak generously at least forty minutes ahead, or right at the last minute — never in between. Early salt draws moisture out, then the meat's own proteins reabsorb it over the following half hour, carrying the salt inward and seasoning the interior, not just the crust. Salt applied ten minutes before cooking sits on the surface, draws water out, and has no time to be reabsorbed — the worst of both approaches.
- **Pasta water.** Salt generously once the water is at a full boil, before the pasta goes in — it should taste distinctly, pleasantly salty, close to the sea. Pasta absorbs a portion of that salt as it cooks and this is the only chance to season the inside of the noodle itself; sauce afterwards can only season the outside.
- **Batters and doughs.** Salt at the mixing stage, weighed rather than spooned, because it also affects gluten structure and yeast activity, not flavour alone — see Pastry & Doughs.

- **Eggs.** Salt scrambled eggs several minutes before cooking, not at the pan — the salt begins to break down the egg proteins in advance and produces a softer, creamier curd. Salt an omelette at the very end instead, since the technique wants a fast set with no waiting. Full detail at Eggs.



FIGURE 1 · WHEN TO SALT, ACROSS A DISH

The line runs from raw ingredient to plate. Most salting happens in the middle, revisited after every reduction — but meat has its own separate rule, either right at the start or right at the end.

The salting ladder through a dish

A braise, a soup, a sauce — anything cooked over time — should be salted more than once, lightly each time, tasting between additions rather than guessing a total up front. This is the salting ladder: a little at the start to season the base, a check partway through, and a final adjustment once the dish has reached the texture and reduction it will be served at.

01 Season the base lightly

Salt the aromatics — onion, carrot, celery — as they soften in fat, before liquid is added. This is a small amount, intended only to help those vegetables release their own liquid and begin to caramelise, not to season the finished dish.

02 Taste once the liquid is in and simmering

Once stock or wine joins the pot, taste it plainly, on its own, before deciding anything. Add salt in small increments — a pinch, stirred in, given a minute to distribute and for the palate to reset — never a large dose at once.

CUE *The dish should taste pleasant but underseasoned at this stage. Long cooking concentrates flavour, salt included; season for where the dish will end up, not where it is now.*

03 Re-check after every reduction

Any time liquid is boiled down — a sauce reduced, a braise uncovered to thicken — its salt concentration rises even though nothing more was added. Taste again after every reduction, not only once at the very end.

WARN *A sauce that tasted correctly seasoned at twice its final volume will taste oversalted once reduced by half. Season the last third of a reduction, never the first.*

04 Finish, off the heat, at serving temperature

Salt tastes different hot than at the temperature a dish is actually eaten. Do the final taste and final adjustment close to serving, and finish delicate dishes with a few flakes of *fleur de sel* rather than folding more fine salt through the whole pot.

Rescuing an over-salted dish, honestly

There is no way to remove salt once it is dissolved through a liquid; anything that claims otherwise is managing the symptom, not the cause. Be honest with yourself about which situation you are in.

- **Dilution, where the dish allows it.** Add more unsalted liquid — stock, water, cream — and, where the dish is a soup or braise, more of the solid ingredients in proportion, so the same amount of salt is spread through a larger volume. This is the only real fix, and it only works if the dish can take more volume without ruining its texture or balance.
- **The raw potato myth.** A peeled potato simmered in an oversalted liquid does not pull salt out of the liquid to any meaningful degree; it mostly just ab-

sorbs some of the liquid itself, very slightly diluting it. It is folklore repeated because it feels like it should work. Do not rely on it.

- **Balance rather than removal.** Fat, acid and sugar can each make a dish read as less aggressively salty without removing a single grain of sodium — a spoon of cream, a squeeze of lemon, a pinch of sugar in a tomato sauce. This masks rather than fixes, and works only within a narrow margin.
- **When you cannot rescue it.** A dish salted well past the point of dilution being practical — a small, concentrated sauce, a dry rub gone wrong — is usually best abandoned and restarted with what remains of the good ingredients. Serving an oversalted dish out of stubbornness serves no one; losing thirty minutes of work is cheaper than losing an evening's appetite.

> PREVENTION, NOT RESCUE
>
> Because there is no true fix, the ladder above — small additions, frequent tasting — is not a suggestion. It is the only reliable defence against ever needing this section.

Acid, the second seasoning

A dish that tastes dull, muddy or simply uninteresting is very often not undersalted at all — it is missing acid. Salt and acid solve different problems and an inexperienced cook reaches for salt for both, oversalting a dish that actually needed brightness. Learn to tell the two apart before reaching for either.

- **Under-salted** tastes flat and thin, as though the flavours present are all quieter than they should be, and a pinch of salt makes the whole dish snap into focus at once.
- **Flat, needing acid** tastes heavy, rich or one-note even though the individual flavours are present and correctly seasoned — a stew, a braise, a cream sauce that tastes "of itself" but tires the palate after a few bites. A few drops of vinegar or lemon juice, stirred through and tasted, cut through that heaviness and let the other flavours read again.

The classical acids each carry their own character, and choosing between them is itself a seasoning decision:

- **Wine vinegar (red or white).** Sharp and direct; the default for vinaigrettes and deglazing red-meat pans.
- **Sherry vinegar.** Rounder, faintly nutty and sweet; suits braises, lentils, and anything with mushroom or roasted flavour.
- **Cider vinegar.** Softer and fruitier; good with pork, apple, and in a mustard vinaigrette.
- **Lemon juice.** Cleaner and more floral than any vinegar, and the standard acid for fish, egg dishes and finishing vegetables — see Vegetables.
- **Wine itself, reduced.** Contributes acidity along with sugar and tannin; the base of a *beurre blanc* reduction and countless pan sauces.

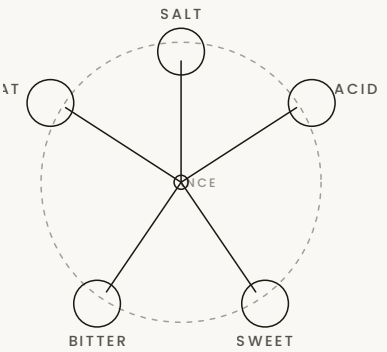


FIGURE 3 · THE FIVE POINTS OF BALANCE

No single point is the goal. A dish reads as balanced when each pulls against the others rather than one dominating — too much of any point, even salt, unbalances the centre.

Fat as a carrier, sugar's small savoury role

Fat is not usually thought of as a seasoning, but it behaves like one: many of the compounds responsible for aroma and flavour are fat-soluble rather than water-soluble, so a dish's flavour compounds need fat present to carry them across the palate and up to the nose, where much of what we call taste is actually smelled. This is why a sauce finished with a knob of butter — *monter au*

beurre, discussed fully in Sauce Making — tastes rounder and more complete than the same sauce without it, quite apart from any change in salt or acid.

Sugar's role in savoury cooking is smaller but real. A pinch in a tomato sauce, a stew, or a vinaigrette does not make the dish taste sweet; in tiny quantities it rounds off harsh acidity and bitterness and lets other flavours read more clearly, the same masking effect acid has on excess salt. Used with a heavier hand it announces itself and unbalances a savoury dish, so treat a pinch as the ceiling, not a starting point.

Pepper, properly

Black pepper's aroma lives in volatile oils that begin evaporating the moment the peppercorn is cracked. Pre-ground pepper sitting in a tin has usually lost most of that aroma weeks before it reaches your food, leaving behind mostly the raw, one-note heat and little of the citrus-and-pine complexity a fresh grind carries. Buy whole peppercorns and a mill; it is the single cheapest upgrade available to a kitchen.

- **Black pepper.** The dried, whole berry — the standard pepper, sharp and aromatic. Grind it close to the moment of use, and, for anything that will cook further, add it later rather than earlier, since prolonged heat drives off much of that same aroma.
- **White pepper.** The same berry with the dark outer skin removed before drying, giving a hotter, more fermented, less aromatic flavour. Chosen for pale sauces and dishes — a velouté, mashed potato, a béchamel — where visible black flecks would look wrong, not because it is milder.
- **When to add it.** Season with pepper towards the end of cooking or at the table, in the same spirit as salt's final adjustment; treat an early, generous grind into a long braise as wasted aroma rather than a mistake to avoid entirely — a little pepper this early still contributes some flavour to the braise itself, but it will not be the pepper the diner tastes at the table.

The aromatic base kit

Beyond salt, acid, fat and pepper, French cooking leans on a small number of standard aromatic bases, built once and used everywhere. Learn these and half of classical cooking's ingredient lists stop looking like a memory test.

BASE	COMPOSITION	RATIO	USED FOR
Mirepoix	Onion, carrot, celery, roughly diced	2 : 1 : 1 by weight	Stocks, braises, soups — the foundational aromatic base; see Stocks
Bouquet garni	Thyme, bay leaf, parsley stalks, tied in leek green or in string	3–4 sprigs thyme, 1–2 bay, small handful parsley stalks	Simmered whole in stocks and braises, removed before serving
Sachet d'épices	Peppercorns, bay, thyme, parsley stalks, sometimes clove or garlic, tied in muslin	1 tsp peppercorns, 1 bay, few sprigs thyme, per 2 litres liquid	Where whole spices would be unpleasant loose in the finished dish
Mirepoix blanc	Onion, celery, leek white — no carrot	Equal parts	Pale stocks and velouté, where carrot's colour and sweetness are unwanted

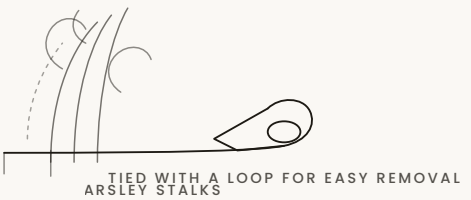


FIGURE 2 · THE BOUQUET GARNI TIE

Leave a long tail of string looped over the pot handle. Fished out by that loop in a second at the end of cooking, rather than hunted for through a full pot of braise.

Classical herb and spice pairings by ingredient

These pairings are not rules so much as centuries of French cooks converging on what works, and they are the fastest way to season confidently without a recipe in front of you.

INGREDIENT	CLASSICAL PAIRING
Chicken	Thyme, tarragon, bay, lemon
Beef	Bay, black pepper, thyme, rosemary in small quantity
Lamb	Rosemary, garlic, thyme, anchovy
Pork	Sage, fennel seed, cider vinegar, apple
Fish, white	Parsley, chervil, lemon, white pepper
Fish, oily	Dill, fennel, mustard, vinegar
Eggs	Chives, tarragon, chervil, white pepper
Tomato	Basil, oregano, garlic
Mushroom	Thyme, parsley, sherry vinegar
Root vegetables	Thyme, bay, nutmeg in small quantity

Building layers: start, middle, end

A finished dish that tastes flat despite a correct total of salt is usually a dish seasoned only once, at the end, rather than through the cooking. Each stage of seasoning does a different job and none of them substitutes for another.

- **At the start.** Salt on the aromatics, in the marinade, in the dry rub — this seasoning has time to work its way into the food, not just sit on its surface. It also, as noted above, helps vegetables release water and brown.
- **In the middle.** Salt and acid added to a simmering liquid become part of the dish's structure, extracted into and dissolved through everything that continues to cook in it. This is where a stock, sauce or braise gets most of its depth, and where the ladder in this chapter's earlier section does its main work.

- **At the end.** A last flake of salt, a final squeeze of lemon, a fresh grind of pepper — these sit on the surface of the finished dish and are the first thing the tongue meets. They read as brightness and immediacy rather than depth, and a dish missing this final layer, however well seasoned underneath, tastes unfinished.

A well-built dish carries evidence of all three. Taste a good *daube* or a good roast chicken and you find a savoury foundation from the start, a rounded depth from the middle, and a lift of freshness from the end — three separate decisions, not one measurement copied from a recipe card.

> SEASON IN LAYERS EVEN FOR A SIMPLE DISH
>
> A pan of sautéed vegetables benefits from exactly the same logic at a smaller scale: salt as they go into the fat, taste and adjust once tender, and finish with a few flakes and perhaps a squeeze of lemon just before serving.

The four-question tasting routine

Every time you taste a dish with intent to adjust it — not just to check it is not burning — ask the same four questions, in the same order. It turns a vague "something's missing" into an actionable answer.

01 Salt — does it taste of itself, or of nothing?

Undersalted food tastes muted and distant, as though you are tasting it through a slight fog. This is the first and most common gap, and the cheapest to close.

CUE *A pinch added and tasted again should make individual ingredients more distinct, not simply "saltier".*

02 Acid — does it taste heavy, or does it taste alive?

If the salt is right but the dish still sits heavily, ask whether it needs brightness. A few drops of vinegar or lemon, tasted before committing more, answers the question directly.

03 Fat — does the flavour linger, or does it vanish?

A sauce or soup that tastes correct but thin and fleeting, gone from the palate almost as soon as it arrives, is often missing fat to carry its aroma. A spoon of cream or a knob of butter, stirred in off the heat, is the test.

04 Heat — pepper, chilli, mustard: does it need an edge?

Only once the first three are settled, ask whether the dish wants a point of sharpness or warmth. Added earlier, this question tends to mask a genuine salt or acid problem rather than solve it.

SYMPTOM	MOST LIKELY GAP	TRY
Tastes muted, far away	Salt	A pinch, stirred in, tasted again after a minute
Tastes heavy, one-note, tiring	Acid	A few drops of vinegar or lemon
Correct but thin, vanishes fast	Fat	A spoon of cream, a knob of butter off the heat
Flat even after salt and acid	Fat or aromatics	Check both; a dish can be technically seasoned and still dull without either
Sharp, aggressive, one loud note	Too much acid or pepper too early	A pinch of sugar to round it, or dilute if the dish allows

When it goes wrong

> ***The dish tastes flat despite following the recipe's salt exactly***
>
> The recipe's gram figure was written for a different batch of ingredients, or the dish reduced more than the recipe assumed, concentrating some flavours but not compensating salt for others.
>
> FIX Taste and adjust independently of the written figure every time; treat the number as a starting point, not a target.

A *sauce tastes perfect hot, oversalted once served*

Salt reads differently at serving temperature than at cooking temperature, and the final taste was done too early, off a spoon straight from a hot pan.

FIX Do the last adjustment close to serving temperature, on a small tasted spoonful cooled briefly, not straight from the pot.

A *braise tastes oversalted only after it is reduced*

It was correctly seasoned at a larger volume, then reduced further without re-tasting, concentrating the salt along with everything else.

FIX Salt the last third of any reduction, never the first, and re-taste after every significant loss of volume.

Pre-ground pepper tastes only hot, no aroma

Ground pepper loses its volatile aromatic oils to the air within weeks of grinding.

FIX Buy whole peppercorns and a mill; grind at the point of use, not before.

A *dish tastes correctly salted but still boring*

Salt was the only tool reached for; the dish may be missing acid or fat rather than more salt.

FIX Run the four-question routine in order — salt, acid, fat, heat — rather than adding more of whatever was added last.

A *vegetable sauté tastes watery and undersalted at once*

Salted on the board before cooking, drawing water out onto a surface that then could not brown, diluting the seasoning that was there.

FIX Salt vegetables once they are already in the hot fat, not before — see Heat & Fat.

Seasoning is not correcting a dish at the end. It is a decision made and remade at every stage of cooking it.

STAGE ONE, LESSON THREE

PART TWO

THE FOUNDATIONS

Les Fondements

The egg and the stockpot. Everything in the second half of this book is built on these two chapters.

CHAPTER 6

Eggs

Les Œufs

No ingredient is cheaper, no ingredient forgives less, and no dish tells you faster whether a cook has learned to control heat. The egg is the oldest examination in the trade.

The examination

Ask a French chef to judge a stranger's cooking with one dish, and most will ask for an omelette. Not because it is difficult to make edible — a child can scramble eggs into something a family will eat — but because it is almost impossible to make well without genuine control of heat, and there is nowhere to hide a lapse.

Flour forgives a slack hand. A stew forgives an extra ten minutes. An egg does not: it is raw, then it is perfect, then it is rubber, and the distance between the second and third states can be under thirty seconds in a hot pan. Everything in this chapter is really one lesson taught six ways — recognising the exact moment an egg has set enough, and stopping.

Show me your omelette and I will tell you how you cook everything else.

KITCHEN PROVERB, ATTRIBUTED TO A HUNDRED CHEFS

What an egg is made of

A hen's egg is roughly 10% shell, 60% white and 30% yolk by weight. The shell is calcium carbonate, porous enough to breathe and to let odours in, which is one reason eggs are stored away from strong-smelling food. Underneath it, two membranes trap a pocket of air at the blunt end — small in a fresh egg, large in an old one, which is the whole basis of the float test below.

The white, or *albumen* (l'blanc), is around 90% water and 10% protein, mostly ovalbumin. Those proteins are folded into tight balls in a raw egg; heat, whisking or acid unfolds them, and once unfolded they bond to each other and trap water and air between them. That is the entire chemistry of cooking an egg: proteins unfold, then link into a net. Too little heat and the net never forms — the egg stays runny. Too much and the net squeezes tighter and tighter, forcing the trapped water back out — the egg turns rubbery and weeps.

The yolk is about 50% water, 30% fat and 16% protein, plus the lecithin that makes it an emulsifier without equal in the kitchen. Its proteins set at a slightly higher temperature than the white's, which is the whole reason a soft-boiled egg is possible at all: there is a real window in which the white has set and the yolk has not.

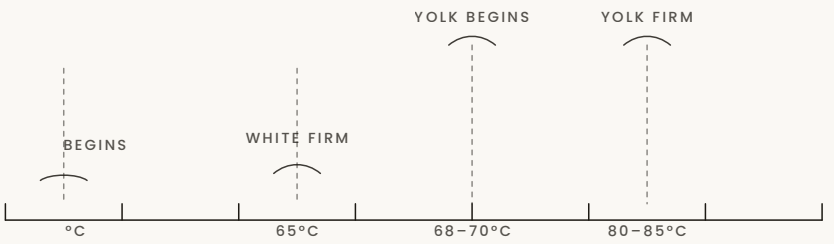


FIGURE 1 · THE SETTING LADDER

The white starts to turn opaque well before the yolk moves at all. This gap of roughly 15–20°C is the entire window in which a soft-boiled egg, an œuf mollet, or a barely-set poached egg is possible.

TEMPERATURE	WHITE	YOLK
60°C	Begins to turn milky and opaque	Still liquid
65°C	Soft, barely holding together	Still liquid, thickening slightly
68–70°C	Fully set, tender	Begins to thicken and turn matte
70–75°C	Firm, still moist	Custard-thick, still flows
80–85°C	Firm to slightly rubbery	Fully set, crumbly if overshot
Above 85°C	Rubbery, weeping water	Chalky, the surface turns grey-green

> THE GREY-GREEN RING
>
> That ring around an overcooked hard yolk is iron sulphide — iron from the yolk reacting with sulphur from the white under prolonged high heat. It is harmless to eat and entirely a sign of poor technique: too long in the pot, or cooled too slowly afterwards. See the boiling method below to avoid it every time.

Buying, storing, the float test

Buy the best eggs you can reasonably afford — free-range at minimum, and from a source you trust for turnover, since freshness matters more to an egg than almost any other food in the larder. A fresh egg holds its shape in the pan, sits tall when fried, and whips whites into a finer, more stable foam. A tired egg spreads thin, and its whites collapse faster than they should.

Store eggs in the refrigerator, pointed end down — this keeps the air pocket at the top, away from the yolk, and slows its enlargement. Take out only what you need twenty to thirty minutes before cooking; room-temperature eggs whip further and are far less likely to crack a shell from thermal shock when lowered into simmering water.

01 The float test

Lower the egg gently into a bowl or glass of cold water, deep enough for it to hang freely.

CUE *Lies flat on the bottom: very fresh, under a week old. Stands up at an angle on the bottom: about one to two weeks, still excellent for everything, ideal for poaching. Bobs upright with the top breaking the surface: three weeks or more — fine for baking or hard-boiling, where a slightly larger air pocket actually helps the peel. Floats clear of the bottom: discard it.*

02 The sniff and the crack

The float test is a proxy, not a certainty. Crack any egg you are unsure of into a small bowl on its own before it joins others — a sulphurous smell or a flat, spread-out white with no structure means it goes down the drain, not into the pan.

> FRESHNESS CUTS BOTH WAYS
>
> A very fresh egg is best for poaching and frying, where you want the white to cling tightly to the yolk rather than feathering across the pan. A week-old egg is genuinely better for hard-boiling, because the shell separates more cleanly from the white once the air pocket has grown a little — see peeling, below.

The French omelette

The *omelette roulée* — rolled omelette — is pale, soft-set, faintly glossy, and rolled into a plump cigar with no colour on it at all. It takes under a minute to cook and a hundred attempts to get right, and it is the single dish most likely to be asked of you in a professional kitchen trial.



FIGURE 2 · THE ROLLED FOLD

The pan tilts throughout. Curds are pushed to the centre, the omelette is folded from the far side towards the handle, and it lands seam-down on the plate — the whole action takes ten to fifteen seconds once the eggs are barely set.

01 Whisk hard, season late

Three eggs per person, cracked into a bowl. Whisk vigorously with a fork or small whisk for a full thirty seconds — you want the whites and yolks fully combined, with a little air beaten in, not just broken up. Salt just before cooking, not before: salted raw egg left standing starts to break down the proteins and toughens the finished omelette.

02 Small pan, real heat, real butter

A 20–22 cm pan for two to three eggs — too large a pan spreads the mixture thin and it overcooks before it can roll. Melt a walnut of butter over medium-high heat until it foams and the foam just starts to subside, which is the moment it is hot enough without being brown.

CUE *The butter should smell nutty, not sharp or dark. If it browns, wipe the pan and start again — burnt butter tastes of the whole omelette.*

03 Pour, then pull the curds inward constantly

Pour in the eggs. Wait three seconds for the base to set, then, holding a fork flat, stir rapidly in small circles while shaking the pan gently with the other hand, drawing the set curd from the edges to the centre and letting the raw egg run out to the sides to meet the hot pan.

Keep this moving for perhaps fifteen seconds. You are aiming for something between scrambled and set: small, soft curds throughout, with the surface still glistening and a little runny.

CUE *Stop the moment the surface stops looking wet and starts looking merely moist. There should be no colour anywhere on the underside — lift an edge with the fork to check.*

04 Fold and roll off the pan

Tilt the pan away from you at 45°, so the omelette slides towards the far lip. Use the fork to fold the third of the omelette nearest the handle over the middle, then tip the pan further and let the whole thing roll over itself onto a warm plate, landing seam-side down. The residual heat finishes the very centre in the seconds it takes to plate.

CUE *A good rolled omelette is a plump, three-fold cigar, pale gold, with no brown anywhere and a faint sheen from the butter. Cut into it and the centre should still be very softly set, almost creamy.*

05 A last brush of butter

Rub the surface with a small knob of cold butter on the tip of a knife, or a folded paper towel dipped in melted butter. It is what gives a French omelette its shine and its last note of richness.

> NO GADGETS REQUIRED
>
> A thermometer helps nobody here — by the time you have read it the omelette has moved past the state you were checking for. The whole method is designed to be judged by eye and by the sound of the fork against the pan, which is why it is taught as a physical drill, not a recipe with timings.

The country omelette, and fillings

Set the rolled omelette against its opposite: the *omelette paysanne* (country or flat omelette), which is not rolled at all, takes colour without apology, and is closer to a Spanish tortilla or an Italian frittata than to the version above. It exists for fillings too heavy or too wet to roll — potato, bacon, sorrel, a whole diced ratatouille.

- **Fillings go in first, not last.** Cook them separately until done — potatoes soft, bacon rendered, mushrooms dry — and warm them in the pan before the eggs go in. A raw or wet filling folded into a rolled omelette steams the eggs from the inside and ruins the texture.
- **The flat omelette sets slowly.** Lower heat, no stirring once the eggs are poured over the filling, and finish it under a low grill or with a lid for the last minute so the top sets without a hard, dark base.
- **Fines herbes is the classic rolled filling.** A fine mince of parsley, chervil, chives and tarragon in equal parts, stirred into the eggs before they go in the pan — see chiffonade and herb work for the cutting. Cheese, ham and mushroom duxelles are the other classical fillings; scatter them over the curds just before the fold, never before, so they warm through without weeping into the pan.

Scrambled eggs, the French way

French scrambled eggs — *œufs brouillés* — bear almost no resemblance to the fast, high-heat, dry curds common elsewhere. They are cooked slowly, in a small heavy pan, over low heat, moved without pause, and taken off the heat while they still look slightly underdone, because the pan's own heat finishes them on the way to the plate.

01 **Low heat from the very start**

Butter in a small heavy-based saucepan or pan, set over the lowest heat your hob offers. Add the beaten, seasoned eggs cold, straight from the fridge if you like — the slower the rise in temperature, the finer the curd.

02 Stir without stopping

A wooden spoon or silicone spatula, moving continuously across the base and into the corners. The mixture will look like nothing is happening for what feels like a long time — do not raise the heat to hurry it.

CUE *Small, glossy, custard-like curds forming slowly, never a hard set anywhere. If you see any part turning matte and dry, the heat is too high.*

03 Take it off before it looks done

Pull the pan from the heat while the eggs still look about 80% set and slightly loose — they will continue cooking from residual heat for another ten to fifteen seconds even off the stove.

04 Mount with butter or cream

Off the heat, stir in a knob of cold butter or a spoonful of crème fraîche. This is *monter au beurre* — the same finishing move used to gloss a sauce — and it stops the residual cooking dead while adding shine and richness. Season with salt only at this final stage; salted early, eggs release water and scramble thin and grey rather than thick and glossy.

> ONCE IT LOOKS DONE, IT IS ALREADY OVERDONE
>
> Egg proteins keep tightening for as long as they are hot, whether the pan is on the heat or not. There is no stage at which scrambled eggs are "finished cooking" in the way a steak rests — they are always drifting towards rubber, and the only defence is pulling them off early and serving at once.

Œufs en cocotte

An egg baked in cream, in its own small dish, set over a water bath — the gentlest cooking method in this chapter and a useful one for a nervous beginner, because the water bath makes overcooking slow rather than sudden.

- Butter a small ramekin generously. Add a spoonful of cream, or a little sautéed spinach or ham if you like, then break in one egg.
- Set the ramekin in a roasting tin, pour boiling water halfway up its side, and cover the tin loosely with foil.

- Into an oven at 180°C (350°F, gas mark 4) for eight to ten minutes.
- CUE *The white is fully opaque and just set; the yolk still moves as a soft dome when the dish is nudged. Carry over is real here too — pull it a shade early.*

The four boiled states

Boiling is not one technique but four, distinguished only by time, and the single most common domestic failure — the grey-green ring, the rubbery white — comes from treating them as interchangeable. Two further decisions matter as much as the clock: starting the egg in cold water or lowering it into already-boiling water, and how it is cooled afterwards.

STATE	FROM COLD WATER, TO THE BOIL THEN OFF HEAT, COVERED	LOWERED INTO BOILING WATER	RESULT
Coddled / very soft	30 seconds off the heat	3 minutes	White barely set at the edge, yolk entirely liquid
Soft-boiled (à la coque)	3–4 minutes off the heat	4–5 minutes	White fully set, yolk liquid and warm — the classic egg cup egg
Mollet	6 minutes off the heat	6–7 minutes	White fully set, yolk thick and just holding its shape when peeled
Hard-boiled (dur)	10–11 minutes off the heat	10–12 minutes	White and yolk both fully set, yolk pale and unbroken by a grey ring

> COLD START OR BOILING START
>
> Starting eggs in cold water and bringing them up together gives a gentler, more even set and is more forgiving of an odd-sized egg — this is the method timed above. Lowering a room-temperature egg into already-simmering water gives more precise, repeatable timing once you know your own hob and pan, which is why professional kitchens prefer it. Either works; pick one and learn its timings rather than switching between them.

> NEVER A ROLLING BOIL
>
> A hard boil knocks the eggs against each other and the pan, cracking shells and letting white leak out. Bring the water to the boil, then take it straight down to a bare simmer — a few slow bubbles, not a churn — for the whole cooking time.

Peeling

The moment the timer sounds, lift the eggs into a bowl of iced water and leave them a full five minutes. This does two things: it stops the cooking dead — the reason for the grey-green ring is often not overcooking alone but a slow cool-down that lets the reaction continue — and it contracts the white away from the shell membrane, which is what actually makes peeling easy.

Crack the shell all over on a hard surface, then peel starting at the wide, blunt end, where the air pocket sits and gives you a place to get a thumbnail under the membrane. Peel under a thin, running stream of cold water if the shell is clinging, working the water between shell and white. Eggs a week to ten days old peel far more cleanly than eggs laid yesterday, for the reasons given under the float test above — this is worth planning for if you know you are boiling a batch.

Poaching without any gadget

No cling film, no silicone cup, no perforated spoon sold specifically for the job — just a wide pan, water, vinegar, and a fresh egg. A poached egg is a white cooked just enough to hold a soft, wobbling yolk inside it, with no shell and no dish to shape it.

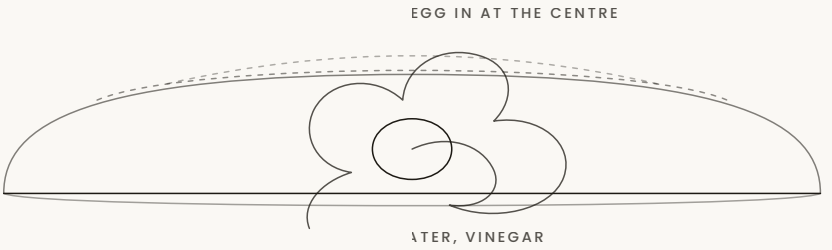


FIGURE 3 · THE WHIRLPOOL

Spinning water carries loose white strands around the yolk in a spiral and holds them against it as the outer layer sets, instead of letting them drift away and feather across the pan.

01 Fresh eggs, always

Poaching is the technique most exposed by a tired egg: the thin outer white of an older egg has already begun to separate from the thick white nearest the yolk, and it will feather into ragged strands the moment it hits hot water no matter what else you do. Use the freshest eggs you have, and crack each one into its own cup or small bowl before it goes anywhere near the pan.

02 Water, vinegar, a bare simmer

A wide, deep pan of water — deep enough that the egg can hang without touching the base — with a good splash of white wine vinegar or plain vinegar, about one tablespoon per litre. The acid speeds the white's proteins into setting, tightening it before it has time to spread. Bring to the boil, then down to a bare simmer: small bubbles only, never a boil, which would tear the egg apart.

03 Spin the water, slide in the egg

Stir the water briskly with a spoon to set up a whirlpool, then slide the egg gently into the very centre, at the point of least movement. The spiral wraps the loose white strands around the yolk as it falls and sets, instead of letting it scatter.

04 Three minutes, then lift and check

Three minutes for a classic soft, wobbling yolk; nearer four for a firmer set. Lift with a slotted spoon and rest it briefly on a folded paper towel or clean cloth to drain.

CUE *Press the egg very lightly with a fingertip. It should give, springing back slowly, with a clear sense of liquid moving beneath a set surface. No give at all means the yolk is already firm.*

05 Trim and hold for service

Trim any ragged trailing white with kitchen scissors for a neat, oval shape. To poach ahead — genuinely useful for serving several at once, as for œufs pochés or a poached egg over asparagus — lift the just-set eggs into a bowl of cold water and hold them there, refrigerated, for up to a day. To serve, lower them into a pan of hot, not boiling, water for 30–60 seconds to warm through, then drain.

> NO GADGETS REQUIRED
>
> Cling-film pouches and silicone poaching cups exist to rescue eggs that are not fresh enough for the whirlpool method. Buy better eggs instead — the whirlpool costs nothing and gives a properly ragged, handmade-looking white, which is exactly what a poached egg should look like.

Œufs mollets

Halfway between soft-boiled and poached in effect: a boiled egg, timed to six minutes from cold water off the heat (see the table above), then peeled while still warm with real care, since the white is barely firmer than the yolk beneath it. Peel under a trickle of cold water, starting from the blunt end.

The point of the œuf mollet is that it can be peeled and handled whole — unlike a poached egg — while keeping a yolk almost as soft. It is the classical garnish for a rich sauce or a bed of spinach, where a fully hard yolk would sit inert on the plate and a poached egg's ragged edges would look wrong.

The egg as a thickener

Egg yolks thicken a sauce by the same mechanism that sets a boiled egg: their proteins unfold with heat and link into a network, in this case within a liquid rather than around themselves, turning it silky and slightly denser rather than solid. The technical name for this is a *liaison* — sauces finished this way include a classic velouté, a blanquette, and any custard-based dessert.

01 Whisk the yolks in a bowl, off the heat

Never add cold yolks directly to a hot pan. Whisk them first in a bowl, sometimes with a spoonful of cream, until loosened and pale.

02 Temper: hot liquid into the yolks, not the reverse

Ladle a small amount of the hot sauce or liquid into the yolks, whisking constantly, then a second ladle, then a third — each addition raising the yolks' temperature gradually rather than shocking them. This is *tempering*, and it is the one step that separates a silky liaison from scrambled egg floating in a sauce.

CUE *The yolk mixture should feel warm to the back of a finger, not hot, before it goes anywhere near the main pan.*

03 Return to low heat, stir without stopping

Pour the tempered yolks back into the pan of sauce over low heat, and stir constantly, in the same way as scrambled eggs, with the pan never left unattended.

04 Watch the spoon, not the clock

The sauce is done the moment it coats the back of a spoon and holds a clear line when you draw a finger through it — *nappe*. This can happen well below a simmer; a liaison-thickened sauce must never boil, or the yolk proteins overshoot straight into curds, the same failure as an overheated scramble, but now dispersed through your whole sauce with no way to fix it.

> **A CURDLED LIAISON CANNOT BE SAVED BY WHISKING**
>
> Once yolk proteins have overcooked and clumped, no amount of stirring reunites them — you are chasing solid curds through a thin liquid. The only real rescue is to strain the sauce through a fine sieve to remove the curds, accept a thinner result, and start the liaison again at lower heat next time.

The egg as an emulsifier

Lecithin in the yolk lets an egg hold fat and water together in a stable suspension — the whole basis of mayonnaise, hollandaise and aïoli. That is a large enough subject to earn its own page: see Emulsions for how a yolk binds oil or butter into a sauce, and how to save one that has split.

Whipping whites by hand

A stand mixer makes this faster; it does not make it possible only that way. Whites have been whipped by hand with a balloon whisk and a bowl for as long as there has been an egg white to whip, and doing it once by hand teaches you exactly what a mixer's beater is hiding from you — the moment a foam goes from soft to firm to broken.

01 **A spotless bowl, whites at room temperature**

Any trace of yolk, grease or water stops whites whipping properly — fat coats the protein strands and prevents them unfolding into a stable net. Wipe the bowl and whisk first with a little vinegar or lemon juice on a cloth, then dry. Separate eggs well ahead of time and let the whites come to room temperature; they whip to a greater volume warm than cold.

02 **A wide bowl, a real balloon whisk**

Use the widest bowl you own — you are folding as much air as possible into the whites, and a narrow bowl restricts the whisk's arc. A large balloon whisk, held loosely, moving in a full, wide, fast circle that drags the whisk right up out of the mixture on each pass, aerating rather than just stirring.

03 Soft peaks, then sugar or salt, then firm peaks

Whip until the foam holds a soft peak that gently folds over when the whisk is lifted — this is the stage for folding into a soufflé base or a mousse. For meringue, add sugar a spoonful at a time from this point, still whisking, until the peak stands fully upright and glossy with no droop at all.

CUE *Tip the bowl. Soft peaks slide slowly; firm peaks do not move even held upside down over your head. Stop the moment they reach firm — beyond it, the foam turns grainy and starts to weep a thin, watery liquid as the protein net over-tightens and squeezes water out, exactly as with an overcooked white in a pan.*

04 Fold, do not stir

Add a third of the whipped whites to the heavier mixture first and beat it in without ceremony, to loosen the base. Then add the rest and fold: a large metal spoon or spatula, cutting down through the centre, along the base, and up the side, turning the bowl a quarter turn between each fold. You are combining, not smoothing — stop as soon as no streaks remain. Every extra fold knocks air back out.

> THE COPPER-BOWL QUESTION
>
> Copper ions from an unlined copper bowl bond weakly with the egg-white proteins and genuinely produce a more stable foam that is harder to overwhip — an old and correct piece of French kitchen lore, not folklore. It is not necessary. A spotlessly clean stainless or glass bowl, plus a pinch of cream of tartar or a few drops of lemon juice added at the soft-peak stage, gives nearly the same stability by acidifying the whites in the same way vinegar does for poaching. Buy a copper bowl if you fall in love with meringue; do not feel undersupplied without one.

Separating eggs by hand

Crack the shell firmly on a flat surface, not the rim of the bowl, which drives shell fragments in. Break the egg open over a small bowl and pass the yolk gently back and forth between the two half-shells, letting the white fall through into the bowl below each time, until only the yolk remains. Work over a small bowl, not the final mixing bowl, so one broken yolk does not ruin a whole batch of whites — decant each white into the main bowl only once its yolk has come through clean.

When it goes wrong

The rolled omelette browns before it sets

Pan too hot, or butter allowed to darken before the eggs went in.

FIX Wipe the pan, lower the heat a notch, and use fresh butter taken off the heat the moment it foams. Colour on a French omelette is always a fault, never a style.

Scrambled eggs turn grey and watery

Salted too early, or left on the heat past the point of being just underdone.

FIX Salt only at the very end, off the heat, and pull the pan while the eggs still look slightly loose — residual heat does the rest.

Hard-boiled yolks have a grey-green ring

Overcooked, or cooled too slowly after cooking, letting sulphur and iron keep reacting.

FIX Follow the timings in the table exactly and plunge into iced water the instant the timer sounds, for a full five minutes.

Boiled eggs will not peel cleanly

The egg was very fresh, or not cooled properly, so the white still clings tightly to the membrane.

FIX Use eggs a week to ten days old for boiling and save the freshest for poaching and frying. Peel under running water starting at the blunt, air-pocket end.

Poached eggs feather into ragged strands

The egg was not fresh enough, the water was boiling rather than simmering, or there was no whirlpool to hold the white together.

FIX Use the freshest eggs available, add vinegar, keep the water at a bare simmer, and slide the egg into a spinning centre rather than still water.

A liaison-thickened sauce goes grainy

The yolks were added cold and direct, or the pan was allowed to boil after they went in.

FIX Temper the yolks with hot liquid gradually, off the heat, then return to low heat and stir without stopping until it coats a spoon — never let it simmer.

Whipped whites will not hold a peak, however long you whisk

A trace of grease or yolk in the bowl, or the whites were whipped straight from the fridge.

FIX Wipe bowl and whisk with vinegar and dry thoroughly; start again with fresh whites at room temperature. There is no rescue for a genuinely greasy bowl mid-whisk.

An egg has nothing to hide behind — no marinade, no sauce, no long braise to cover a mistake. Learn to read it and you have learned to read heat itself.

END OF STAGE ONE, LESSON FOUR

CHAPTER 7

Stocks

Les Fonds

Everything downstream of this one — every sauce, every braise, every soup worth the name — is stock with something added. Get the foundation right and the rest of the cuisine follows.

Why stock is the foundation

A stock cube dissolves into salt, fat, flavour-enhancers and a whisper of the animal or vegetable it claims to represent. Real stock is the animal or vegetable itself, patiently persuaded into water. The two are not the same food wearing different names — they behave differently in a pan, they reduce differently, and they taste, quite simply, of different things.

Stock — *fond*, literally "foundation" — is the base of the great majority of classical French sauces, the braising liquid for meat and vegetables, the backbone of a soup, and the liquid a risotto or a *blanquette* is built on. Escoffier organised an entire cuisine around a small number of "mother" preparations, and stock sits underneath even the mother sauces: a velouté is a stock thickened with a roux; a demi-glace is a brown stock reduced and refined for days. Master this chapter and every later technique page in this book — Sauce Making, Braising & Stewing, Poaching & Steaming — becomes an extension of it rather than a separate subject.

A cube fails on three counts. It is salted for the finished dish, which removes your ability to reduce it — reduce a cube-based liquid and you concentrate salt, not flavour. It carries no gelatine, so it never gives a sauce body or a cold terrine its set. And it tastes of itself first and your ingredients second. None of this is snobbery; it is simply what a cube is for, which is speed, not depth.

A kitchen with good stock in the freezer is never more than twenty minutes from a real sauce.

KITCHEN PROVERB

The family of stocks

Five liquids cover almost everything a home kitchen needs, and they differ mainly in what goes in raw and what is roasted first.

- ***Fond blanc* — white stock.** Chicken or veal bones, never roasted, simmered gently with aromatics. Pale, clean, versatile — the base for velouté, blanquette, and most poultry and vegetable soups.
- ***Fond brun* — brown stock.** Veal or beef bones roasted hard until deeply coloured, then simmered with roasted aromatics and often a spoonful of tomato paste. Dark, deep, the base of demi-glace and of almost every classical brown sauce.
- ***Fumet de poisson* — fish stock.** White fish bones and heads only, never oily fish, sweated briefly in butter rather than roasted, then simmered — briefly, unlike the others. The base for fish veloutés and beurre blanc-family sauces.
- ***Court-bouillon.*** Not a stock at all in the strict sense — no bones — but an aromatic poaching liquid of water, vinegar or wine, vegetables and herbs, made fresh each time and generally discarded after use. For poaching whole fish, shellfish and some vegetables.
- ***Bouillon de légumes* — vegetable stock.** No bones, no gelatine, built entirely from vegetables and needing a different hand than the others — see below.

Ratios: bones, water, aromatics

Every stock in this family follows the same underlying ratio: roughly equal parts bones and water by weight, with the classical *mirepoix* — onion, carrot, celery, in a rough 2:1:1 ratio — at around a tenth of the bone weight. Scale up or down to whatever pot you have; the method does not change.

STOCK	BONES/BASE PER 4L WATER	MIREPOIX	AROMATICS
Fond blanc (chicken)	2–2.5 kg carcasses and wings	400 g rough-cut	Bouquet garni, 6 peppercorns, no salt
Fond blanc (veal)	2.5–3 kg knuckle and shin bones, blanched	400 g rough-cut	Bouquet garni, 6 peppercorns, no salt
Fond brun (veal/beef)	3 kg bones, roasted	500 g roasted with the bones	Bouquet garni, 1 tbsp tomato paste, no salt
Fumet de poisson	1.5 kg white fish bones and heads, gills removed	250 g, finer cut, sweated in butter	Bouquet garni, splash of dry white wine, no salt
Bouillon de légumes	1.5 kg mixed vegetables	As the base itself	Bouquet garni, no roasting, no salt

> NEVER SALT A STOCK
>
> Stock is a building block, reduced later into sauces and soups that are each seasoned in their own right. Salt it now and every dish built on it inherits a salt level you cannot undo — worse, once reduced to a glace the salt concentrates to something inedible. Season the final dish, never the stock.

The roasting step for a brown stock

A brown stock's colour and depth come entirely from the Maillard reaction — the browning of proteins and sugars under dry heat — applied to bones and ve-

getables before they ever meet water. Skip this step and a "brown" stock is merely a pale one with tomato paste stirred in.

01 Roast the bones hard and dry

Spread veal or beef bones in a single layer in a roasting tin — crowd them and they steam rather than brown. Into an oven at 220–230°C (425–450°F, gas mark 7–8) for 40–50 minutes, turning once, until deeply mahogany brown all over, not merely tanned.

CUE *The bones should smell roasted and faintly sweet, and look like polished dark wood. A smell of scorching means you have gone too far — see below.*

02 Roast the mirepoix separately, then together

Add the roughly cut onion, carrot and celery to the tin for the final 15–20 minutes only — vegetables burn faster than bone. Stir once so they colour evenly rather than catching against the hot metal at the edges.

03 Deglaze the tin — nothing is wasted

Tip the bones and vegetables into your stockpot, then set the roasting tin over a hob burner with a splash of water or wine, and scrape up every dark, sticky patch on the base with a wooden spoon. That fond — the French word for both "stock" and the caramelised base of a pan, not a coincidence — carries a third of the finished stock's flavour and goes straight into the pot.

> HOW DARK IS TOO DARK
>
> Mahogany-brown is the target; black is burnt, and burnt bones give a bitter, acrid stock that cannot be corrected by simmering, only diluted and weakened. If any bone or vegetable has gone matt black rather than glossy dark brown, discard that piece before it goes anywhere near the pot — one scorched carrot can taint four litres.

Never boil, always simmer

This is the single rule that separates a clear, clean stock from a cloudy, muddy one, and it holds for every stock in the family. A rolling boil is violent enough to

physically smash fat globules into microscopic droplets and beat them into the water — an emulsion, exactly the mechanism explained on the Emulsions page, except here it is an accident rather than a goal. Once fat is emulsified through a stock, no amount of straining removes it, and the stock stays permanently cloudy and tastes faintly greasy rather than clean.

A bare simmer — the water barely trembling, a bubble breaking the surface every second or two, never a churn — cooks the bones just as thoroughly over a longer time, extracting collagen into gelatine and flavour into the water, without ever agitating the fat into suspension.

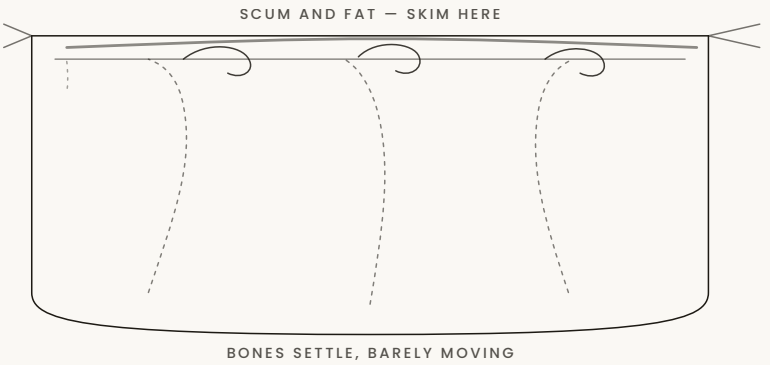


FIGURE 1 · CONVECTION AT A BARE SIMMER

Gentle currents carry impurities up the sides to the still surface at the centre, where they gather as scum instead of being beaten back through the liquid by a rolling boil.

Skimming, and why the first twenty minutes matter most

As a stock comes up to temperature, proteins from the bones and any clinging blood coagulate and rise as grey foam — this is the scum, and it carries the impurities that would otherwise cloud and dull the finished stock. It rises fastest and thickest in the first fifteen to twenty minutes, tapering off sharply after that.

- **Bring to the boil, then straight down.** Bring the pot up to a boil once, uncovered, purely to drive the scum to the surface quickly — then immediately drop the heat to a bare simmer for the rest of the cooking time.

- **Skim with a ladle or large spoon, not a whisk.** Draw the scum off the surface towards the edge of the pot and lift it away; do not stir it back through the liquid.
- **Skim every few minutes for the first twenty.** This is where the bulk of the impurity comes off. After that, a check every fifteen to twenty minutes for the rest of the simmer is enough.
- **Top up with cold water if the level drops sharply.** A small splash of cold water also helps drive any remaining fat and scum back to the surface, an old trick that still works.

> NO GADGETS REQUIRED
>
> A dedicated skimmer is a fine thing to own and entirely unnecessary. A large metal spoon or a small ladle held flat against the surface does exactly the same job.

Timings by stock type

Longer is not automatically better. Past a certain point a stock stops gaining flavour and starts gaining a dull, over-extracted, slightly bitter note from bone marrow and connective tissue breaking down too far — fish stock in particular turns bitter and gluey if pushed past its window.

STOCK	SIMMER TIME	WHY
Fumet de poisson	20–30 minutes	Fish bones are delicate; collagen releases fast and the flavour turns bitter well before an hour
Fond blanc (chicken)	3–4 hours	Enough time to render collagen from the carcass into gelatine without the meat turning to felt
Court-bouillon	20–30 minutes, then cool before use	An infusion, not an extraction — it needs no long simmer, only time for the aromatics to perfume the water

STOCK	SIMMER TIME	WHY
Fond blanc (veal) / Fond brun	6–8 hours, up to 12 for a professional-depth stock	Dense bones release gelatine slowly; the long, low simmer is what gives a demi-glace its body
Bouillon de légumes	45 minutes, covered	Vegetables give up their flavour quickly and turn muddy and bitter if pushed much past this

Straining without a chinois

A conical fine-mesh chinois is a professional convenience, not a requirement. A large sieve — ideally metal, resting over a big bowl or clean pot — lined with a double thickness of damp muslin or a clean, damp tea towel does the same job at home, and does it thoroughly.

01 Lift the solids out first

Fish or lift out the bulk of the bones and vegetables with a slotted spoon before you pour anything, so the sieve is not doing all the work of a colander as well as a filter.

02 Ladle, do not pour, through the lined sieve

Pouring a heavy pot in one motion drives sediment straight through a cloth. Ladle the liquid through gently in stages, and let each batch drain through under its own weight rather than pressing it.

CUE *Do not press or squeeze the solids in the sieve — that forces cloudy fat and fine particles through with the liquid. What is left behind in the cloth is spent; the trimmings that gave real flavour are already in the stock.*

03 A second pass for real clarity

For a stock destined to be a consommé or a very refined sauce, strain a second time through a fresh, damp cloth. Each pass removes finer sediment than the last.

Reducing to a glace, degreasing, storing

A finished stock reduced hard, uncovered, at a steady simmer, becomes *glace de viande* or *glace de volaille* — meat or chicken glaze — a syrupy, intensely flavoured reduction that sets almost solid when chilled, thanks to the gelatine concentrating along with everything else. A spoonful stirred into a thin sauce at the last minute does more for it than almost any other single ingredient in a French kitchen.

- **Reduce in stages.** Take an unsalted, well-strained stock down by half, let it cool slightly, strain again if any fat or sediment has surfaced, then continue reducing. This catches impurities that a single long reduction would concentrate straight into the glace.
- **Watch the last stretch closely.** A glace can go from properly reduced to scorched in a few careless minutes once the volume is small — reduce the heat as the pot gets emptier and stir more often.
- **Degrease hot, then degrease cold.** While the stock is still hot, skim visible fat from the surface with a ladle held flat — most of it comes off this way. Then chill the stock fully; the remaining fat solidifies into a firm cap that lifts off cleanly in one piece, taking with it fat you could never fully skim from a hot liquid.
- **Freeze in usable portions.** Ice cube trays for spoon-sized amounts to enrich a sauce, small tubs or freezer bags laid flat for larger batches. Stock keeps three to four days refrigerated and up to six months frozen; glace, being concentrated and low in water, keeps even longer.

PRODUCT	REDUCTION	FRIDGE LIFE	FREEZER LIFE
Stock, as strained	None	3–4 days	4–6 months
Demi-glace style reduction	By half	1 week	6 months
Glace de viande / volaille	By 8–10 times	2–3 weeks	Up to a year

The bouquet garni and sachet

The classical *bouquet garni* is a small bundle of aromatics — traditionally a few parsley stalks, a sprig of thyme and a bay leaf — tied together with kitchen string, sometimes wrapped in the green part of a leek, and dropped into the pot whole so it can be lifted out entire at the end, leaving no loose herb stalks to strain out later. A *sachet d'épices* does the same job for anything you would rather not tie: peppercorns, a clove, a bay leaf and herb stalks knotted into a small square of muslin.

Neither needs to be elaborate. What matters is that it is retrievable — never scatter loose bay leaves and peppercorns straight into a stock you intend to reduce, or you will be picking them out of a syrupy glace with a teaspoon later. Parsley and herb stalks trimmed while preparing vegetables are exactly what belongs in the bundle — nothing here is bought specially.

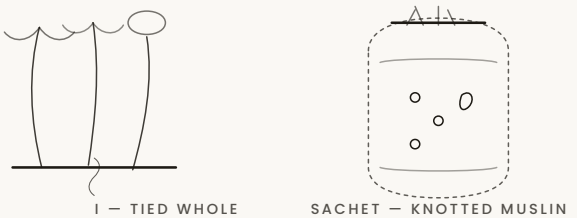


FIGURE 2 · RETRIEVABLE AROMATICS

Both bundles do the same job: they perfume the liquid, then leave without a trace, so nothing needs picking out of the finished stock by hand.

Consommé and the egg-white raft

A consommé is a stock clarified until it is close to transparent, using egg whites to trap and lift every particle of sediment and fat that straining alone leaves behind. It is one of the great set-pieces of classical French cooking, and also, honestly, one of the more theatrical uses of a Sunday afternoon — worth understanding, not worth doing every week.

01 Build a clarification mixture

For every litre of cold, well-degreased, fully chilled stock, mix in roughly 100 g of very finely minced lean meat (or fish for a fish consommé), one egg white lightly beaten, and a small dice of aromatic vegetable — the classical version calls this the *clarification*.

02 Start cold, heat gently, stop stirring once it moves

Whisk the clarification into the cold stock in the pot, then bring it up very slowly over low-medium heat, stirring constantly at first. The moment the mixture begins to form solid, cloudy clumps and rise — usually just as it approaches a simmer — stop stirring completely and leave it alone.

CUE *A crust of egg white, meat and vegetable rises and knits together into a solid disc — the raft. A hole often forms at the centre as it cooks, which is useful: it lets you watch the liquid below clarify from clear.*

03 A bare simmer under the raft, never a boil

Let the stock simmer very gently below the raft — enough movement to keep pulling liquid up through it and filtering it, not enough to break it apart — for 45 minutes to an hour. A rolling boil will shatter the raft and send everything it has caught straight back into the liquid.

04 Ladle through the hole, then through cloth

Ladle the clear liquid out gently through the hole in the raft, taking care not to break it, then pass it once more through a fine, damp cloth as described above. The result should be close to the colour of dry sherry and genuinely transparent.

> WHEN NOT TO BOTHER
>
> A consommé is largely a demonstration of skill and clarity for its own sake — it does not taste meaningfully better than the good, well-skimmed, well-strained stock it started from, and a decent amount of flavour is genuinely sacrificed to the raft. Make it when the occasion calls for a formal clear soup and the theatre of a transparent broth arriving at the table. For every other use — a sauce base, a braise, a family soup — stop at a well-strained stock and put the effort into the dish that follows instead.

Vegetable stock, and why it needs different treatment

Without bones, a vegetable stock has no collagen and therefore no gelatine, no body, and none of the slow, several-hour extraction that a meat stock rewards. Treat it like a meat stock — hours of hard simmering — and it turns muddy, bitter and flat rather than deep.

- **Cut the vegetables small.** More surface area for a shorter cooking time — rough dice rather than the large chunks a long-simmered meat stock can use.
- **Sweat before you simmer, sometimes.** A few minutes in a little butter or oil before the water goes in builds real depth quickly — an optional step meat stocks achieve instead through roasting.
- **Avoid the cabbage family and very starchy vegetables.** Cabbage, broccoli and cauliflower turn sulphurous over any real simmer; potato clouds the liquid with starch. Onion, leek, carrot, celery, mushroom trimmings, fennel and tomato are the reliable base.
- **Keep it short — 45 minutes, covered.** Covering the pot matters more here than for a meat stock, since there is no long reduction ahead to concentrate a thin result; a lid keeps the aromatics from evaporating away too early.

> USING A WHOLE CHICKEN CARCASS
>
> If you have broken down a whole bird using the method on Knife Skills, the carcass, wing tips and any trimmed bone go straight into a white stock raw, or are roasted first for a brown one. This single habit — a carcass into the stockpot rather than the bin, every time a chicken is broken down — is the most reliable route to a freezer that is never without good stock.

Food safety — cooling stock fast without equipment

A large pot of hot stock left to cool slowly on the counter can sit in the temperature range where bacteria multiply fastest — roughly 5–60°C — for hours, which is a genuine food-safety risk for a liquid you may keep several days. None of the fixes below need equipment beyond what is already in the kitchen.

01 Divide into smaller, shallower containers

A deep stockpot of hot liquid cools from the outside in and can take most of a day to reach the middle. Ladle the strained stock into several shallow containers or bowls instead — more surface area to volume means far faster cooling.

02 An ice-water bath in the sink

Plug the sink, fill it with cold water and a generous amount of ice, and stand the pot or containers in it, stirring occasionally so the cooling liquid at the edges mixes with the warmer liquid at the centre. This alone can take a large batch from near-boiling to close to room temperature within thirty to forty minutes.

03 Refrigerate once it stops steaming

Move the containers to the fridge as soon as they are no longer visibly steaming — you do not need to wait for them to reach fridge temperature first, and getting it cold quickly matters more than getting it perfectly cold before it goes in. Leave lids slightly ajar until fully chilled, then seal.

> NEVER COOL A STOCK BY LEAVING IT OUT OVERNIGHT
>
> A pot left on the counter overnight, however well-intentioned, spends far too long in the danger zone described above. If you are ever unsure how long a stock has been cooling unrefrigerated, the safe choice is to discard it rather than risk it — the bones and vegetables that made it cost far less than the meal it might spoil.

When it goes wrong

The stock is cloudy

It was boiled hard rather than simmered, emulsifying fat into the liquid, or it was stirred and pressed too roughly while straining.

FIX There is no fixing a cloudy stock after the fact — only preventing it next time by keeping the pot at a bare simmer throughout and straining gently, without pressing the solids.

The stock tastes flat and weak

Too much water for the bones, not enough simmering time, or bones that were not roasted when the recipe called for a brown stock.

FIX Reduce the finished stock on the hob to concentrate what flavour is there, and use a closer ratio of bones to water next time.

A brown stock tastes bitter or acrid

The bones or vegetables were roasted past mahogany into black, scorched territory.

FIX There is no rescuing a scorched batch — discard it and start again, watching the oven closely in the last ten minutes next time.

Fish stock tastes bitter or turns gluey

Simmered too long, or oily fish bones were used instead of white fish.

FIX Keep fumet strictly to 20–30 minutes and white, lean fish bones only — salmon, mackerel and other oily fish belong in a court-bouillon, not a fumet.

The glace scorches during reduction

Left on too high a heat as the volume dropped, so the sugars at the base caught before you noticed.

FIX Lower the heat progressively as the pot empties and stir more frequently in the final stages; use a heavy-based pot, which scorches far less readily than a thin one.

The consommé raft breaks apart

The liquid was allowed to boil, or it was stirred after the raft had begun to form.

FIX Reduce the heat immediately to a bare simmer and leave it completely undisturbed. A broken raft can sometimes be salvaged by straining through cloth and accepting a slightly less than crystal result.

Learn to make a stock properly once, and you will never again reach for a cube without feeling faintly embarrassed about it.

END OF STAGE ONE, LESSON FIVE

PART THREE

THE SAUCES

Les Sauces

Five mothers, three hundred children, and two ways of making liquid hold together.

CHAPTER 8

Sauce Making

La Saucier

A sauce is a decision about texture and a decision about flavour, arrived at separately and then joined. Everything below is one of six ways to make that first decision.

What a sauce is for

A sauce is not a garnish. It is the part of the dish that carries flavour to places the knife and the pan could not reach — into the folds of a piece of fish, around a joint of meat, across a plate of plain vegetables.

Classical French cooking treats sauce as a discipline of its own, with its own station in a professional kitchen — the *saucier*, traditionally the most senior cook after the head chef, because a sauce hides nothing. An undercooked vegetable can be called rustic. A broken, floury or over-salted sauce is simply wrong, and everyone at the table can taste it.

A good sauce does three things at once: it carries fat (which carries flavour, since most flavour compounds are fat-soluble), it adds a contrasting texture to whatever it sits beside, and it concentrates in a spoonful what took hours to build in a pot. Nearly every sauce in this school begins with a stock — see Stocks — because a sauce with a thin, watery base can never be rescued by thickening alone. Thickening changes texture. It does not add flavour. Get the base right first.

Thickening is not the sauce. It is the container you pour the sauce's flavour into.

THE FIRST LAW OF THE SAUCE STATION

The six ways to thicken

Every thickened sauce in the French repertoire uses one of six methods, or occasionally two together. Knowing all six, and which one a given dish calls for, matters more than knowing any single recipe by heart.

METHOD	WHAT HAPPENS	BEST FOR
Roux	Cooked flour and fat, whisked into a liquid; starch granules swell and burst, trapping water	Béchamel, velouté, espagnole — anything that must hold for service
Reduction	Water boiled away; nothing added, everything concentrated	Pan sauces, jus, anything where the base is already rich
Liaison	Egg yolk and cream, tempered in, thickens by gentle coagulation, never boiled again	Fricassées, old-style velouté-based sauces, some soups
Beurre manié	Raw flour worked into soft butter, whisked into a simmering liquid in small pieces	Last-minute correction; a stew or braise that is thinner than it should be
Starch slurry	Cornflour or arrowroot mixed with cold water, whisked into a boiling liquid	Clear, glossy sauces — Asian-leaning dishes, some fruit sauces, glazes
Purée	The solids themselves, blended or pushed through a sieve, are the thickener	Vegetable coulis, some tomato sauces, soups finished as sauces
Monter au beurre	Cold butter whisked into a hot liquid off the heat; an emulsion, not a starch thickening	The final gloss and body on a reduction or a pan sauce

Roux gives body that survives reheating and holding, which is why it underpins the mother sauces a professional kitchen needs to hold through service. Reduction gives the truest flavour, because nothing foreign is added, but it only works when the base liquid was good to begin with — reduce a thin stock and you get concentrated thinness. Liaison gives silkiness and shine but cannot be boiled again once added. Beurre manié is roux's emergency cousin: use it to correct, not to build. Slurry gives clarity and almost no flavour of its own, which is exactly the point when you want the sauce to look like glass. Purée thickens with the ingredient itself, so the sauce tastes purely of what it is made from. Monter au beurre is not really thickening at all — it is emulsifying fat into a liquid to change how it coats and feels in the mouth — and it belongs at the very end of nearly everything else in this chapter.

> NO GADGETS REQUIRED
>
> A blender purées faster and smoother, but a sieve and a wooden spoon — or the back of a ladle pressed through a sieve set over a bowl — will purée anything in this chapter. It takes longer and it is quieter, and the result strains itself as it purées, which a blender does not.

The roux, in detail

A roux is equal parts flour and fat by weight, cooked together before any liquid is added. It is the single most useful preparation in this whole school, because it is the base of three of the five mother sauces and of nearly every gravy, chowder and cream soup you will ever make.

01 Melt the fat, add the flour, and stir

Melt butter (or use rendered fat, or oil for a darker roux) over medium-low heat, then tip in an equal weight of plain flour all at once. Stir constantly with a wooden spoon — a whisk clogs with the paste at this stage — until every trace of flour is wetted and the mixture looks like wet sand.

YOU WANT *a smooth, slightly grainy paste that pulls cleanly away from the sides of the pan as you stir.*

02 Cook out the raw taste

Keep stirring over gentle, steady heat. Raw flour tastes chalky and faintly bitter because its starch granules are still tightly bound and its proteins are still raw; cooking ruptures the granules and drives off that taste, the same way cooking out raw flour in a cake batter matters, only faster and more directly here. A white roux needs three to four minutes of cooking at a bare simmer — no colour, just heat.

CUE *The chalky smell fades to something closer to warm pastry or shortbread. Taste a fleck on the spoon: if it still tastes of raw flour, it needs more time, not more heat.*

03 Colour it, or don't, depending on the sauce

Leave it three to four minutes for a **white roux** (béchamel). Take it to pale straw, six to eight minutes, for a **blond roux** (velouté). Take it to the colour of hazelnut shells, twenty to thirty minutes over lower heat, stirring constantly and watching hard in the last third, for a **brown roux** (espagnole).

WARNING *A roux browns very slowly and then very fast. The last two minutes before hazelnut are also the last two minutes before ash-grey and bitter. Never leave it once it starts to colour.*

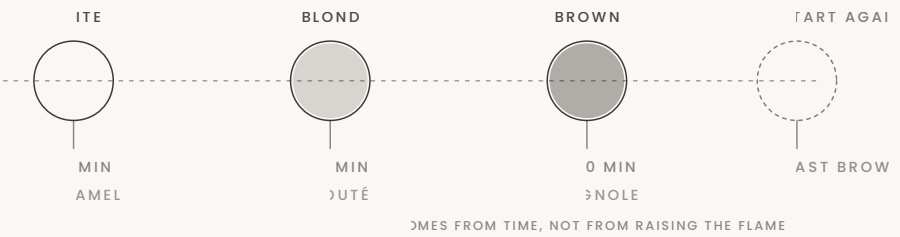


FIGURE 1 · THE ROUX COLOUR LADDER

Thickening power falls as colour rises — a brown roux thickens about half as strongly as a white one, weight for weight, because prolonged cooking breaks down some of the starch. Espagnole compensates with more roux or a longer reduction.

Hot into hot, and beating out lumps

There is an old argument in home kitchens about whether the liquid must be cold when the roux is hot, or hot when the roux is hot, to avoid lumps. In practice, either works, and the version that gives you the most control with only a whisk is this: **add the liquid hot, but add it gradually, whisking constantly, off the heat for the first ladleful.**

A cold liquid into a very hot roux can seize the fat and clump it before the starch has a chance to disperse evenly. A hot liquid into a hot roux disperses fastest of all but leaves you no time to react if lumps do form, because everything is already near boiling. The compromise — hot liquid, added a ladleful at a time, whisked hard between additions, off the direct heat until the first third is in — gives you the speed of hot-to-hot with the control of cold-to-hot.

- **Ladleful one, off the heat.** Pour a small amount of hot stock or milk into the roux and whisk vigorously until it forms a single smooth, thick paste with no visible lumps. This is the moment that decides whether the whole sauce will be smooth.
- **Ladleful two and three, building.** Once the paste is smooth, add slightly more each time, whisking constantly. The mixture loosens with each addition; by the third ladleful it should move like double cream.
- **The rest, all at once, back on the heat.** Once the base is smooth and loose, the remaining liquid can go in together. Return to medium heat, whisking, and bring to a simmer.

If a lump does appear despite all this, do not panic and do not reach for a blender. A balloon whisk worked hard against the side of the pan, in tight fast circles, will break up any lump that has not fully cooked — the whisk's wires shear it apart mechanically faster than you would think. A lump that has cooked solid, though, will not break up by whisking; it must be strained out, which is one of several reasons every roux-based sauce is passed through a sieve before it reaches the table (see Straining, below).

> THE MISTAKE THAT CAUSES MOST LUMPS
>
> Adding all the liquid at once. It is not the temperature of the liquid that causes lumps nearly as often as the volume added in one go — a flood of liquid separates pockets of roux from each other before the whisk can reach them all. Go gradually for the first third of the liquid regardless of temperature, and lumps become rare.

Béchamel

The simplest mother sauce and the base of every cream soup and gratin in this school: a white roux, milk, and quiet seasoning. Named for the Marquis de Béchamel, though the technique long predates him.

01 Make a white roux

50 g butter, 50 g plain flour, cooked to the white stage as above — three to four minutes, no colour.

02 Whisk in 500 ml warmed milk, gradually

Warming the milk first (just to steaming, not boiling) speeds this stage and reduces the chance of a skin forming, though cold milk works if you are patient and whisk harder.

03 Simmer twenty minutes, stirring often

This is not optional and it is the step most home cooks skip. A béchamel simmered five minutes tastes of raw starch no matter how pale the roux was. Twenty minutes of gentle simmering, stirred every minute or so to stop it catching on the base, is what makes it taste of milk and butter rather than paste.

CUE *The sauce coats the back of a spoon in an even film, and running a finger through that film leaves a clean line that does not immediately flood back in — the classic nappe test, covered in full below.*

04 **Season and strain**

Salt, a good grating of nutmeg, and a whisper of white pepper — nutmeg is traditional in béchamel specifically and nowhere else in this chapter. Push through a fine sieve if any skin or lumps have formed.

Béchamel bound with grated Gruyère becomes *sauce Mornay*, the base of a gratin. Bound with cream and reduced further it becomes *sauce crème*. Add sautéed onion, simmered in and then strained out, and you have *sauce soubise*.

Velouté

Béchamel's savoury cousin: a blond roux and a white stock — chicken, veal or fish, never a dark or roasted one — built exactly the same way. See Stocks for the base itself; nothing here works without a genuinely good stock underneath it.

01 **Blond roux, then stock**

50 g butter, 50 g flour, cooked to pale straw, six to eight minutes. Whisk in 500 ml hot white stock exactly as described under Béchamel, ladleful by ladleful at first.

02 **Simmer, skim, reduce**

Simmer twenty to thirty minutes, skimming any froth from the surface with a large spoon every few minutes. The sauce should reduce gently by perhaps a fifth as it cooks, concentrating both the roux's body and the stock's flavour together.

A chicken velouté finished with a liaison of egg yolk and cream, off the heat, becomes *sauce suprême* — one of the oldest and finest sauces in the whole repertoire, and worth learning the liaison technique for on its own; see Emulsions for the general principle of tempering egg into a hot liquid without scrambling it. A fish velouté enriched the same way with cream and lemon becomes *sauce bercy* when shallot and white wine are reduced into it first.

Sauce tomate

The odd one out among the mothers: thickened chiefly by reduction and purée rather than by roux, though a small amount of roux or a mirepoix of vegetables cooked down to nothing is traditional. Built from tomatoes, aromatics, and time.

01 Sweat the aromatics

A fine dice of onion, carrot and celery — the classical *mirepoix*, see Knife Skills — sweated slowly in a little fat until soft and translucent, ten minutes, no colour.

02 Add tomatoes and a little stock

A generous kilo of ripe tomatoes, roughly chopped (skins and all — they will be strained out), or good tinned plum tomatoes when fresh ones are out of season and taste of nothing. A splash of stock or water, a bay leaf, a sprig of thyme, a knuckle of garlic crushed under the flat of the knife.

03 Simmer forty-five minutes to an hour, uncovered

Uncovered, so water can escape and the sauce concentrates as it cooks — this is the reduction doing the thickening work. Stir occasionally, more often as it thickens and starts to catch.

CUE *The oil separates visibly at the surface and the sauce holds its shape in a spoon rather than pooling flat.*

04 Purée and finish

Push through a sieve with the back of a ladle to remove skins, seeds and herb stalks — this is the purée method of thickening doing its second job, giving the sauce its final silky body. Finish with a little sugar if the tomatoes were acidic, and a knob of butter off the heat.

Espagnole and the modern shortcut

The grandest and slowest of the mothers: a brown roux, a dark veal or beef stock, tomato purée, and a mirepoix of vegetables browned in fat, all simmered

for hours and skimmed repeatedly, then strained. Escoffier's version takes the better part of a day and produces the base for *demi-glace*, itself the base for dozens of small sauces.

A home kitchen almost never needs true espagnole, and this school will not pretend otherwise. The honest modern shortcut, used by good restaurant kitchens as much as home ones, is a **well-made, well-reduced brown stock** (roasted bones, roasted mirepoix, tomato paste, hours of simmering — see Stocks) finished with either a small brown roux or, better, simple reduction and a mount of butter at the end. You lose nothing a home cook would notice and save the better part of a day.

> IF YOU DO WANT THE CLASSICAL VERSION
>
> Brown a mirepoix and a spoonful of tomato paste hard in the fat left from browning meat trimmings, deglaze with a little of the stock, then combine with a brown roux and the remaining stock. Simmer at the barest shiver — never a rolling boil, which clouds it — for three to four hours, skimming every fifteen minutes, then strain through muslin. This is a weekend project, not a Tuesday one.

The small sauces

The genius of the mother-sauce system is that dozens of finished sauces are really the same base plus one or two additions. Learn the mothers and this table is mostly things you can guess.

MOTHER	SMALL SAUCE	ADDITION
Béchamel	Mornay	Gruyère and a little cayenne
Béchamel	Soubise	Onion purée, simmered in and strained
Béchamel	Crème	Cream, reduced further
Velouté (chicken)	Suprême	Cream and a liaison of egg yolk, off the heat
Velouté (fish)	Bercy	Shallot and white wine, reduced in first
Velouté (veal)	Poulette	Mushroom cooking liquor, egg yolk, lemon
Espagnole / jus	Bordelaise	Red wine and shallot reduction, bone marrow
Espagnole / jus	Chasseur	Mushroom, shallot, white wine, tomato, tarragon

MOTHER	SMALL SAUCE	ADDITION
Espagnole / jus	Robert	Onion, white wine, mustard stirred in off the heat
Sauce tomate	Provençale	Garlic, olive oil, black olive, basil

Notice the pattern in the espagnole family especially: shallot sweated, liquid (wine, usually) reduced hard with it, then loosened with the mother sauce or a good jus, then finished with butter or a specific garnish. Learn that four-beat rhythm — **sweat, reduce, loosen, finish** — and you can invent a passable small sauce from whatever is in the pan.

Reduction and the nappe

Reduction is the simplest thickening method there is: boil water off, and whatever is left behind — fat, gelatine, dissolved solids, flavour compounds — becomes proportionally more concentrated and the liquid becomes proportionally thicker. No flour, no egg, nothing added; only water removed.

How far to reduce is judged the same way across the whole of French cooking, by the *nappe* test — literally, "to coat". Dip the back of a spoon into the sauce, lift it out, and draw a fingertip across the coated surface. A sauce at the nappe stage leaves a clean track where the finger passed; the sauce on either side does not flood back in to fill the line, or does so only slowly.



FIGURE 2 · THE NAPPE TEST, BEFORE AND AFTER

Left: a finger drawn through undercooked sauce leaves no clean edge — it is still too thin. Right: at nappe, the line holds its shape because the sauce is now thick enough to resist flowing back over itself for several seconds.

Reduce over a wide pan rather than a narrow one — surface area is what drives evaporation, so a sauté pan reduces a given volume several times faster than a small saucepan. Reduce at a steady simmer, not a violent boil, which throws droplets over the side and can make a stock-based reduction taste scorched at the rim. And taste as you go: reduction concentrates salt as fast as it concentrates everything else, so a sauce seasoned before reducing is very easily oversalted by the time it reaches nappe. Season mostly at the end.

Monter au beurre and why the sauce must not boil after

Monter au beurre — "to mount with butter" — means whisking cold, diced butter into a hot liquid off the direct heat, a piece or two at a time, until it disappears into a glossy, slightly thickened emulsion. It is the finishing touch on a reduction, a pan sauce, a beurre blanc, almost anything savoury that needs a final polish.

What is actually happening is an emulsion: the butter's fat is being dispersed into tiny droplets held in the watery liquid by the milk solids and proteins naturally present in butter, which act as an emulsifier — the same principle covered fully in Emulsions. This is why the sauce must not return to a hard boil once the butter is in: heat that vigorous breaks the emulsion apart, the fat separates back out, and you are left with a thin, oily puddle with flecks of butter floating on top rather than a sauce.

- **Off the heat, or the gentlest possible heat.** Pull the pan away entirely for the first few pieces of butter, swirling or whisking, then return briefly to the lowest heat only if needed to melt the last piece.
- **Cold butter, small pieces.** Cold butter melts gradually as it is whisked in, giving the emulsion time to form. A whole warm knob dropped in at once tends to simply melt and split.
- **Serve promptly.** A monté sauce holds for a short while off the heat but is not designed to be reheated. Make it as close to service as the rest of the plate allows.

Seasoning, straining, keeping warm

Three habits separate a competent sauce from a professional one, and none of them involve a new technique.

Season in layers, taste at the end

Salt lightly while building, taste properly once the sauce is at its final consistency, and adjust last with acid — a few drops of lemon juice or a splash of vinegar — which most sauces need more than they need salt. A flat, heavy sauce is very often simply missing acid, not missing salt.

Pass everything

Every roux-based sauce and every reduction that has held vegetables or bones in it should be passed through a fine sieve before serving — the habit French kitchens call *passer*. It is not fussiness. It removes the small cooked lumps a whisk cannot break up, the last shreds of shallot or herb stem, and any skin that formed on the surface, and it is the difference between a sauce that looks composed and one that looks like washing-up water.

Keeping a sauce warm without splitting it

Never hold a finished, butter-mounted sauce directly over heat. Set the pan over a larger pan of barely warm water — an improvised bain-marie, the same principle used for hollandaise in Emulsions — off the direct flame, and stir it every few minutes. A roux-based sauce held this way is more forgiving and can even be brought back to a very gentle simmer if it needs reheating; a butter-mounted sauce cannot, and is best made last, close to the moment of service.

> NO THERMOMETER REQUIRED
>
> "Barely warm" for a bain-marie is water you can hold a finger in comfortably for a count of five. If it stings, it is too hot for a delicate sauce and will start to split it from underneath, invisibly, before the surface shows anything wrong.

Fixing a sauce that has gone wrong

The sauce has split — fat floating, watery below

Usually a butter-mounted or cream-finished sauce taken back to too hard a boil, or built too fast.

FIX Off the heat, whisk in a tablespoon of cold water or cream vigorously — this often re-forms the emulsion. If not, start a fresh tablespoon of cold liquid in a clean pan and whisk the split sauce into it gradually, as though it were the fat in a fresh emulsion.

The sauce is lumpy

Liquid was added too quickly to the roux, or the roux was not fully smooth before liquid went in.

FIX Whisk hard against the side of the pan while still soft; if the lumps have cooked solid, pass the whole sauce through a fine sieve, pressing with the back of a ladle.

The sauce is thin

Under-reduced, or a roux-based sauce simmered for too short a time.

FIX Simmer longer to reduce, or whisk in a small beurre manié — equal parts soft butter and flour, mashed to a paste — a pea-sized piece at a time, simmering two minutes between additions until the consistency is right.

The sauce tastes floury or chalky

The roux was undercooked, or the sauce was not simmered long enough afterwards for the starch to fully hydrate.

FIX There is no shortcut once it is in the pan: simmer it longer, twenty to thirty minutes total, stirring often. If the roux itself was barely cooked, the sauce may never fully lose the taste, and it is worth remembering for next time rather than serving this one.

The sauce has over-reduced and turned gluey or too salty

Reduced too far, concentrating salt and gelatine past the point of pleasantness.

FIX Loosen with a splash of unreduced stock or water and bring back to a bare simmer, then re-check the seasoning — the added liquid dilutes the salt as well as the texture.

A skin has formed on top while it waited

Surface exposed to air, usually a milk- or cream-based sauce cooling slightly.

FIX Whisk the skin back in if the sauce will be strained anyway; otherwise lift it off with a spoon. Press a piece of buttered paper or cling film directly onto the surface of any sauce that must wait, to stop the next one forming.

The five-minute pan sauce

This is the fastest useful sauce in the whole repertoire, and it uses nothing but the pan a piece of roast meat just came out of. Learn it once and you will never serve a roast dry again.



FIGURE 3 · THE PAN-SAUCE SEQUENCE

Three moves, one pan, five minutes: lift the fond with liquid, boil it down to nappe, then finish with cold butter off the heat.

01 Rest the meat, pour off the excess fat

Lift the roast to a warm plate to rest. Tip the pan to one side and spoon off all but a tablespoon of fat, leaving the dark, sticky *fond* — the caramelised roasting juices stuck to the pan — behind. That fond is most of the flavour of this sauce.

02 Deglaze

Set the pan over medium-high heat and pour in a good splash of wine, stock, or even water — 100–150 ml. It will hiss hard. Scrape the base firmly with a wooden spoon, lifting every scrap of fond into the liquid.

CUE *The pan base goes from dark and matte to clean and shiny as the fond lifts.*

03 Reduce to nappe

Let it bubble hard for two to three minutes, until it has reduced by half or more and coats the back of a spoon. Add any resting juices that have pooled under the meat — they are pure concentrated flavour.

04 **Mount with butter, off the heat**

Pull the pan off the heat and whisk in a knob of cold butter, a piece at a time, until glossy. Season, strain if you want it perfectly smooth, and pour it over the sliced meat at once.

The same three-beat sequence — deglaze, reduce, mount — underlies the whole small-sauce family described above. Once it is automatic, a roasting pan is never wasted, and neither is anything else this school teaches you to cook: see Searing & Roasting for the roasts this sauce is built to sit beside.

A sauce is the last thing the cook controls and the first thing the eater notices. Nothing in this chapter is optional if you want that moment to go well.

LA SAUCIER

CHAPTER 9

Emulsions

Les Émulsions

Oil and water do not want to mix. An emulsion is the small, temporary trick that persuades them to — and every sauce in this chapter is that same trick, played with a whisk and a bowl.

What an emulsion is, and why it breaks

Oil and water separate the instant you stop stirring, because keeping them mixed costs energy their molecules would rather not spend. An emulsion is a temporary state where one is forced into tiny droplets suspended inside the other, and it holds only as long as something is standing guard at the surface of every droplet.

That guard is called an emulsifier. It is a molecule with one end that is happy in fat and one end that is happy in water, so it sits at the boundary of every droplet, facing both ways at once, and stops the droplets finding each other and merging back into two separate layers. Egg yolk is the classical kitchen emulsifier because it is unusually rich in exactly this kind of molecule — chiefly lecithin. Without an emulsifier, oil and water mixed by force will separate again within seconds; with one, the same mixture can hold for hours, or indefinitely.

An emulsion breaks — cooks say it "splits" or "curdles" — when the droplets are given a chance to find and merge with each other faster than the emulsifier can keep them apart. That happens in a small number of predictable ways: too

much oil added too fast, so there are more droplets than the emulsifier on hand can coat; too little emulsifier for the amount of fat being asked to disperse; heat applied so violently that the emulsifier itself is damaged (an egg yolk that scrambles can no longer emulsify anything); or simple cold, which stiffens fat into a state that will not disperse into fine droplets at all. Every rescue technique in this chapter works by doing the one thing that actually fixes a split: starting a fresh, small, stable emulsion and feeding the broken mixture into it gradually, rather than trying to persuade the broken mixture to fix itself.

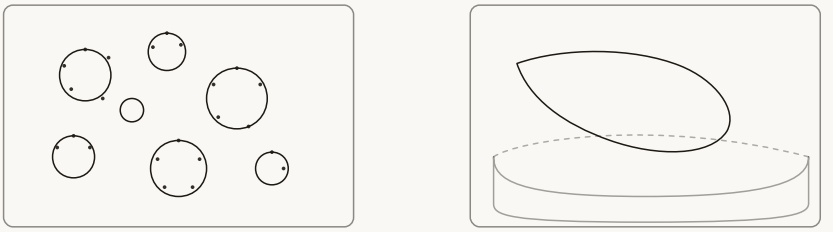


FIGURE 1 · INTACT VERSUS BROKEN

Left: every fat droplet is individually coated with emulsifier (the small dots at each surface) and kept apart from its neighbours. Right: the emulsifier has been overwhelmed or damaged, so the droplets have found each other and pooled back into a single layer of fat over water.

An emulsion is not a mixture you make once. It is a state you maintain, one droplet at a time, for as long as the sauce needs to hold.

THE FIRST LAW OF THE SAUCE STATION, CONTINUED

The emulsifiers a kitchen has

Four ingredients do almost all the emulsifying work in a French kitchen, and knowing which is doing the work in a given sauce tells you exactly how much fat it can carry and how it will fail.

EMULSIFIER	STRENGTH	FOUND IN
Egg yolk	Strong — one yolk holds up to 200 ml oil	Mayonnaise, hollandaise, béarnaise, aïoli when made the modern way
Mustard	Moderate, but very stable and heat-tolerant	Vinaigrette, and stiffens mayonnaise further when added alongside egg
Butter's milk solids	Weak — carries only a small amount of extra fat	Beurre blanc, monter au beurre, where whole butter is whisked into a reduction
Garlic (pounded to a paste)	Moderate, and flavours as it emulsifies	Aïoli in its oldest form, before egg yolk became standard

Notice the huge gap in strength between egg yolk and butter. This is why beurre blanc collapses so much faster than hollandaise if you are careless with it — the milk solids in butter are a genuinely weak emulsifier doing a small job (holding melted butter together as a sauce), while the lecithin in a yolk is a strong emulsifier holding an enormous quantity of oil relative to its own volume. Treat beurre blanc with more caution, not less, because it has less margin for error.

Vinaigrette and the mustard trick

The simplest emulsion in the kitchen and the one most people make without realising it is one. Classical ratio: three parts oil to one part acid (vinegar or lemon juice), by volume.

- **Whisk the mustard in first.** A teaspoon of Dijon whisked into the vinegar, salt and pepper before any oil is added gives the emulsifier a head start and

produces a vinaigrette that holds together in the bowl for a genuinely long time rather than separating within a minute.

- **Add the oil in a thin, steady stream, whisking constantly.** The same principle that governs mayonnaise below, at a smaller scale and with far more tolerance for error — a split vinaigrette is fixed by ten seconds of hard whisking, or by shaking it in a jar.
- **Taste before dressing anything.** A vinaigrette should taste slightly too sharp on its own spoon; leaves mute the acidity once dressed.

A jar with a tight lid, shaken hard, makes a passable vinaigrette without any whisking at all — the agitation does the same job as the whisk, just more roughly, and a well-mustarded vinaigrette tolerates it. It is the one emulsion in this chapter where a shortcut is genuinely fine.

Mayonnaise, by hand

Mayonnaise is a large amount of oil suspended, drop by drop at first, in a small amount of egg yolk. It needs no machine of any kind, and making it with a whisk and a bowl teaches you the whole logic of every emulsion in this chapter. Deliberately: **this school teaches it by hand and does not offer the blender method**, because the pace a hand whisk forces on you is exactly the pace that prevents a split.

01 Steady the bowl

Set a mixing bowl on a folded damp cloth, so it cannot slide as you whisk one-handed. This single trick is what makes hand mayonnaise practical — without it you are fighting the bowl as much as the sauce.

02 Whisk the yolk, mustard and a little acid together

One egg yolk, a teaspoon of Dijon mustard, a teaspoon of vinegar or lemon juice, a pinch of salt. Whisk thirty seconds until pale and slightly thickened. This base is where every drop of oil will land.

CUE *The mixture lightens in colour and thickens just enough to coat the whisk.*

03 Oil in drop by drop, then a thin stream

Begin adding a neutral oil (or a mix of neutral oil and a little olive oil for flavour) genuinely one drop at a time for the first two tablespoons, whisking hard and constantly. Once the mixture has visibly thickened and taken on a pale, glossy look, the emulsion is established and you can move to a thin, steady stream, still whisking without pause.

CUE *The moment it "takes" feels sudden — the mixture goes from thin and slippery to noticeably resistant against the whisk within a few drops.*

04 Loosen and finish

As it thickens past the point of a stiff paste, whisk in a teaspoon of warm water or a little more acid to loosen it before continuing with oil — this keeps the emulsion from becoming so concentrated it turns fragile. Finish with salt, more acid to taste, and use within the day, kept cool.

> NO GADGETS REQUIRED
>
> A blender or stick blender makes mayonnaise in twenty seconds and is genuinely useful for a large batch. But it also disperses oil so fast that it papers over sloppy technique, and a beginner who only ever uses one never learns to feel an emulsion forming. Learn it by hand first; use the machine later, once you understand what it is doing for you.

Aïoli, rémoulade, gribiche, tartare

Mayonnaise is a base as much as a finished sauce. Almost every classical cold sauce in the French repertoire is mayonnaise (or a close relative) plus one deliberate addition.

- ***Aïoli*, garlic mayonnaise.** Pound two or three garlic cloves to a smooth paste with a pinch of coarse salt, using the flat of a knife blade as described in Knife Skills, then build the mayonnaise directly onto that paste instead of onto plain yolk. Olive oil, used in full here, gives it its traditional weight and colour.

- ***Rémoulade.*** Mayonnaise finished with capers, cornichons and herbs (parsley, chervil, tarragon), all very finely chopped, plus a dash of anchovy essence in the classical version. The base for *céleri rémoulade*.
- ***Sauce gribiche.*** Built the other way round: chopped hard-boiled egg yolk, mashed to a paste and used as the emulsifier in place of raw yolk, then oil whisked in as normal, finished with the chopped white, capers, cornichons and herbs. Traditional with cold poached fish and calf's head.
- **Sauce tartare.** Mayonnaise with finely chopped cornichon, caper and shallot, and a good deal of chopped herb — parsley and chervil, classically, though many kitchens add chive. The everyday partner to fried fish.

Notice that all four use exactly the same emulsion, at exactly the same ratio, and differ only in what is chopped into it — which is the same lesson the sauce mothers teach on Sauce Making, applied to the cold side of the kitchen.

The warm family

The warm emulsions — hollandaise, béarnaise, beurre blanc — trade the raw stability of mayonnaise for something more fragile and, arguably, more delicious: melted butter held in suspension by egg yolk (hollandaise and béarnaise) or by butter's own milk solids alone (beurre blanc). All three are made over gentle, controlled heat, and all three need a bain-marie or its improvised equivalent.

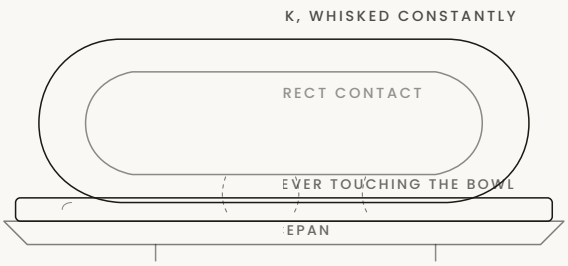


FIGURE 2 · THE IMPROVISED BAIN-MARIE

A mixing bowl set into the mouth of a saucepan holding a few centimetres of barely simmering water. The bowl's base must sit above the waterline, heated by steam alone — direct contact with boiling water is hot enough to scramble the yolk within seconds.

Any pan and any heatproof bowl that nest together loosely will do. The two things that matter: the water beneath must never touch the base of the bowl, and it must never do more than shiver — a hard simmer sends up too much heat and too much moisture, either of which can cook the yolk before it has finished emulsifying the butter.

Hollandaise over a bain-marie

Butter, egg yolk, lemon, cayenne. The base of eggs Benedict and the classical partner to asparagus and poached salmon — and, technique for technique, the single best sauce to learn the whole warm-emulsion family from.

01 Clarify the butter, gently

Melt 150 g butter slowly in a small pan until it separates into a clear golden layer on top and milky solids underneath. Skim off any foam and pour off the clear butter, leaving the milky solids behind. This is not strictly necessary for hollandaise as the milk solids will still emulsify fine, but clarified butter gives a cleaner, more stable sauce and a purer colour.

02 Whisk yolks and a little liquid over the bain-marie

Two egg yolks and a tablespoon of water (or the classical reduction of vinegar and cracked pepper, cooled) in the bowl, set over the barely simmering water. Whisk constantly and vigorously, lifting the bowl off the heat every few seconds if it seems to be catching too fast.

CUE *The mixture turns pale, doubles in volume, and leaves a visible ribbon trail across itself when the whisk lifts. This stage is called the sabayon and it is the whole foundation of the sauce.*

03 Add the warm butter, slowly at first

Off the direct heat now (bowl set on the damp cloth, not over the pan), add the warm clarified butter in a very thin stream, whisking constantly, exactly as with mayonnaise — a few drops at first, building to a slow stream as the emulsion establishes itself.

CUE *Same as mayonnaise: a sudden thickening and resistance against the whisk once the emulsion takes hold.*

04 **Season and hold gently**

Lemon juice, salt, a pinch of cayenne, whisked in at the end. If it needs to wait, keep the bowl over the barely warm (not simmering) water, whisking occasionally — never over direct heat, and never for more than twenty or thirty minutes, after which it is safer to make a fresh batch than to keep pushing an old one.

> THE ONE RULE THAT PREVENTS SCRAMBLED YOLKS
>
> If at any point the mixture in the bowl looks like it is thickening into curds rather than a smooth cream, lift it off the heat immediately and whisk hard, off the heat, for a full ten seconds before deciding whether to continue. Heat that has scrambled a yolk cannot be undone by whisking; heat that has merely come close can often be saved by simply removing it in time.

Béarnaise and sauce mousseline

Béarnaise is hollandaise's savoury cousin, built the same way but with the sabayon flavoured by a hard reduction instead of plain water.

- **Reduce first.** Two tablespoons of finely chopped shallot, a tablespoon of chopped tarragon stalks, black peppercorns cracked, and 100 ml each of white wine and white wine vinegar, simmered together in a small pan until reduced to about two tablespoons of syrupy liquid. Strain, pressing the solids to extract everything, and cool slightly.
- **Then follow hollandaise exactly**, using the strained reduction in place of the plain water in the sabayon stage. Finish with plenty of freshly chopped tarragon and chervil, and no lemon — the vinegar reduction already supplies the acidity.

Sauce mousseline is hollandaise (or occasionally béarnaise) lightened at the very last moment with softly whipped cream, folded in gently off the heat. It is not whisked in like the butter — folding preserves the air already beaten into the cream, which is the entire point of the sauce and the source of its name.

Beurre blanc and beurre rouge

The most fragile sauce in this school, and the clearest possible demonstration of an emulsion held by nothing but butter's own milk solids — no egg at all.

01 Reduce shallot and wine hard

Two tablespoons of very finely minced shallot with 100 ml dry white wine (use red wine and a touch of red wine vinegar for *beurre rouge*) and a tablespoon of white wine vinegar, simmered in a small pan until reduced to little more than a tablespoon of thick, syrupy liquid — almost, but not quite, dry.

02 Lower the heat, add butter in small pieces

Turn the heat down to the gentlest possible simmer, almost off. Add cold, diced butter — around 150 g total — a piece or two at a time, whisking constantly, letting each piece melt into a creamy emulsion before adding the next rather than dumping it all in.

CUE *The sauce should look like a pale, opaque, slightly frothy cream, never like clear melted butter. Clear and oily-looking means it has already begun to split.*

03 Pull off heat before it looks finished

Beurre blanc has almost no thermal buffer — take it off the heat a little before you think it needs it, because the pan's residual heat will finish emulsifying the last pieces of butter regardless. Strain out the shallot if you want it perfectly smooth, though many kitchens leave it in deliberately.

Serve beurre blanc within minutes of making it, and never let it sit over any heat at all once finished — see Rescuing a broken emulsion below for what to do when, not if, it splits on you the first several times.

Temperature windows at a glance

Each emulsion has a narrow band of heat where it can actually form, bounded on the cold side by fat too stiff to disperse and on the hot side by the emulsifier

being destroyed. Reading these cues correctly matters more than reading a thermometer, because a thermometer cannot tell you the texture in the bowl.

SAUCE	WORKING TEMPERATURE	VISUAL CUE IT IS RIGHT	VISUAL CUE IT IS FAILING
Vinaigrette	Cool, room temperature	Glossy and slightly thickened when whisked	Separates within a minute of standing still — normal; re-whisk before use
Mayonnaise	Room temperature ingredients, no heat	Pale, thick, holds a soft peak on the whisk	Thin and slippery, oil pooling at the edge of the bowl
Hollandaise	Sabayon warm to the touch, never hot; finished sauce barely warm	Sabayon leaves a ribbon trail; finished sauce is thick, pale yellow, glossy	Yolk mixture looks grainy or lumpy — it is scrambling
Béarnaise	Same as hollandaise	Same as hollandaise, flecked green with herb	Same as hollandaise
Beurre blanc	Barest simmer, almost off the heat	Pale, opaque, faintly frothy cream	Turns clear and oily, or the butter separates into visible fat

Across every warm emulsion, oil or melted butter must go in **slowly at first and can go in more quickly later**, and the reason is the same reason in every case: at the start there is very little emulsifier already spread across very little surface area, so each new drop of fat is competing for a small, easily overwhelmed supply. Once a stable base of small droplets exists — once the sauce has visibly "taken" — that same emulsifier is already coating a huge surface area of tiny droplets, and new fat has an easier time finding a droplet to join rather than pooling on its own. The curve is steep at the start and flattens fast; that is the whole reason the early drops matter so much more than the later stream.

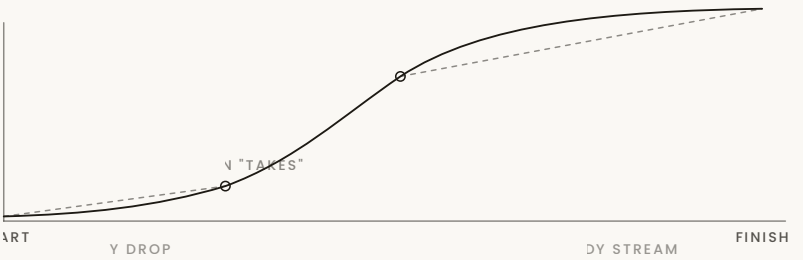


FIGURE 3 · RATE OF OIL ADDITION

The safe rate of adding fat rises through the sauce, not in a straight line. It stays nearly flat — drop by drop — until the emulsion visibly takes, then rises quickly once a stable base of fine droplets exists to absorb it.

Rescuing a broken emulsion

Mayonnaise has split — thin and oily, oil pooling

Oil added too fast for the yolk to disperse, or the yolk itself was too cold and stiff to take oil readily.

FIX, METHOD ONE In a clean bowl, whisk a fresh egg yolk (or a teaspoon of warm water, or a teaspoon of mustard) until smooth, then whisk the split mixture back in *very* slowly, exactly as though it were the oil in a fresh mayonnaise.

Mayonnaise won't come back with a fresh yolk

Sometimes the split mixture is too cold or too much has separated for a plain yolk to catch it quickly.

FIX, METHOD TWO Warm the split mixture very slightly (a few seconds over the lowest possible heat, off again immediately) before whisking it into the fresh yolk — warmth alone often loosens fat enough to disperse again.

Mayonnaise is stubbornly split even after both fixes

Rare, but it happens with an old or very cold yolk.

FIX, METHOD THREE Whisk a teaspoon of Dijon mustard alone in a clean bowl, then add the split mixture in a very thin stream — mustard's own emulsifying power is often enough to rescue what egg yolk alone could not.

Hollandaise has split — grainy, or oil floating on a thin liquid

The sabayon overheated and partially scrambled, or the butter went in too fast.

FIX In a clean bowl, whisk a fresh egg yolk with a teaspoon of warm water over the bain-marie until it ribbons, then whisk the split hollandaise in very slowly, as though it were the butter. If the yolk itself has visibly scrambled into curds, strain those out first — they will not smooth out no matter how long you whisk.

Beurre blanc has broken — clear, oily, separated

Too much heat, too much butter added at once, or the pan left over direct heat too long.

FIX Off the heat, whisk in a teaspoon of cold water or cream — this alone often reforms it, because it gives the milk solids a small amount of fresh liquid to grip. If that fails, start a fresh teaspoon of cream warmed gently in a clean pan and whisk the broken sauce into it gradually.

Vinaigrette separates in the jar

This is normal and not a fault — vinaigrette without enough mustard will always settle given time.

FIX Shake or whisk again immediately before dressing. If it separates within seconds every time, add more mustard next time; it is the fix that actually lasts.

Making hollandaise for six, without it splitting

Hollandaise is a famously bad sauce to make in advance because it neither reheats nor waits well by the usual rules — but a dinner for six cannot be made à la minute, one spoonful at a time, without the cook missing the whole first course. The solution is not a trick; it is simply respecting the sauce's actual tolerance.

- **Scale the recipe up properly, do not just multiply blindly.** For six, three or four yolks and 300 g clarified butter is plenty — a larger volume of sabayon is, if anything, slightly more stable than a small one, because it has more thermal mass and reacts less suddenly to heat.
- **Make it twenty to thirty minutes before serving, not two hours.** That window is the sauce's real limit. Anything held longer should be remade rather than nursed.
- **Hold it off the heat entirely, over lukewarm — not hot — water, whisking every few minutes.** The bowl should feel comfortably warm to the back of a hand, never hot. This is the same discipline as the sauce-station habit of

keeping any finished emulsion off direct heat, covered generally in Sauce Making.

- **Loosen it just before serving.** A hollandaise that has waited tends to thicken slightly as it cools; a teaspoon of warm water whisked in just before plating restores it to pouring consistency without any risk, since no more fat is being added.

Serving hollandaise or béarnaise for a larger table is really a scheduling problem dressed up as a cooking problem: make the sauce last, after everything else is essentially ready, and give it the shortest possible wait before it reaches the table.

Food safety with raw yolks

> READ THIS BEFORE SERVING MAYONNAISE OR AÏOLI TO ANYONE VULNERABLE
>
> Mayonnaise, aïoli and gribiche use raw egg yolk and are never cooked afterwards. In most home kitchens, with good eggs and clean hands, this is a very low risk — but it is not zero, and it is not a risk worth taking with pregnant women, small children, the elderly, or anyone immunocompromised. Use pasteurised eggs for those guests, or serve them a cooked alternative instead.

- **Buy eggs you trust and check the date.** Fresher eggs carry lower risk and also emulsify better, which is a fortunate coincidence.
- **Keep everything cold until the moment of use, then use promptly.** Mayonnaise and its relatives should go straight into the refrigerator once made and be eaten within a day.
- **Hollandaise and béarnaise are gentler on this point,** since the yolk is warmed through in the sabayon stage even though it never reaches a full scramble — but they are still not fully cooked, and the same caution about vulnerable guests applies.
- **Clean hands, clean bowl.** The bacteria of concern travel on eggshell and on hands far more often than they start inside a fresh, intact egg — wash both before you begin.

Every emulsion in this chapter is the same short argument between fat and water, and every rescue in this chapter is the same short argument won a second time, in a clean bowl.

LES ÉMULSIONS

CHAPTER 10

The Sauce Tree

L'Arbre des Sauces

The map of the whole territory: five mother sauces, the small sauces built from each, and the independent sauces that answer to no mother at all.

Carême, Escoffier, and the point of it

Every sauce in this chapter is either one of five mothers, a child of one of them, or an outsider that never joined the family at all. Learn the shape of the tree once and a French menu stops being a list of foreign words and becomes a set of recognisable relationships.

The idea of organising sauces into a family tree belongs to *Marie-Antoine Carême*, the early nineteenth-century chef who first tried to bring order to the enormous, chaotic sauce repertoire of French cooking. Carême proposed four *sauces mères* — mother sauces — each built on a distinct base and thickening method, from which every other sauce in the kitchen could be said to descend by a small, describable addition. Nearly a century later, *Auguste Escoffier*, codifying French cuisine for a new era of grand hotel kitchens, revised the list to five, promoting *sauce tomate* to full mother status alongside Carême's original set.

The classification was never decoration. Before it, a cook memorised hundreds of sauces as separate recipes. After it, a cook memorised five methods and a much shorter list of additions — and could reconstruct, or even invent, a

plausible sauce for an unfamiliar dish by reasoning from first principles: what protein is this, what is the classical mother for that context, what garnish or reduction would suit it. It is a system for thinking, not merely a filing scheme, and it is why this chapter exists as a companion to the technique page rather than a duplicate of it: that page teaches you to make a roux and mount a butter sauce; this chapter teaches you where any given sauce sits and what it is related to.

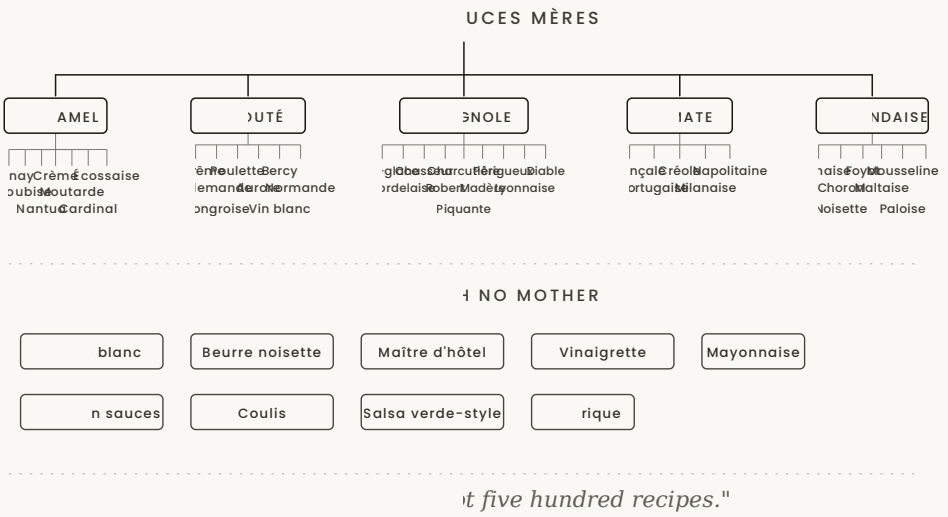


FIGURE 1 · THE FULL TREE

Five mothers along the trunk, their acknowledged children beneath each, and the great independent sauces — thickened by nothing but reduction, butter, or emulsion — set apart below. This is the whole classical system in one diagram; every entry is covered in full below.

A sauce is not a recipe you memorise. It is a base plus a thickening method plus a decision about what it should taste of. Learn the decision, and the recipes write themselves.

THE ARGUMENT FOR THE WHOLE SYSTEM

Béchamel

Base — milk. **Thickener** — a white *roux* (equal parts butter and flour, cooked briefly with no colour). **Ratio** — roughly 60 g butter and 60 g flour to 1 litre milk for a medium sauce, adjusted up towards 90 g each for a thick binding sauce (a soufflé base, a gratin) and down towards 40 g each for a thin coating sauce.

Working method, in brief — melt the butter over gentle heat, stir in the flour, cook two minutes without colouring to lose the raw taste, then whisk in warm milk gradually, off the heat at first to prevent lumps, returning to a gentle simmer for eight to ten minutes, stirring often, until it coats the back of a spoon and no longer tastes of flour. Season with salt, white pepper, and a scrape of nutmeg. Full method and troubleshooting at Sauce Making.

Faults specific to béchamel — a raw, floury taste (undercooked roux, or milk added too fast and too hot, which shocks the starch before it can cook through); a skin forming on top as it cools (press cling film directly onto the surface, or dot with butter and stir it through as it cools); scorching on the base of the pan (heat too high, or too little stirring — use the heaviest pan you own).

DERIVATIVE	ADDITION TO BÉCHAMEL	BELONGS TO
Mornay	Gruyère and Parmesan, egg yolk to finish	Gratins, eggs, fish dishes finished under the grill
Soubise	A purée of very slowly cooked onion	Roast lamb, egg dishes, a base for stuffed onions
Nantua	Crayfish butter and cream, diced crayfish tails	Quenelles de brochet, poached fish

DERIVATIVE	ADDITION TO BÉCHAMEL	BELONGS TO
Crème	Extra cream, reduced	Poached chicken, delicate vegetables, sole
Moutarde	Dijon mustard stirred in off the heat	Grilled fish, ham, rabbit
Cardinal	Lobster or crab butter, a touch of cayenne	Poached lobster, fish gratins
Écossaise	Brunoise of hard-boiled egg white and yolk	Poached fish, especially in Scots-inflected menus

Velouté

Base — a light white stock: chicken, veal, or fish, never beef. **Thickener** — a blond *roux*, cooked a shade longer than béchamel's so it takes on the faintest straw colour but no browning. **Ratio** — the same 60 g each of butter and flour to 1 litre stock as béchamel, since the thickening chemistry is identical; only the liquid changes.

Working method, in brief — cook the roux to a pale sandy colour, whisk in hot stock gradually, simmer thirty to forty minutes, skimming, until silky and reduced by roughly a fifth. The stock must be good — a velouté is only ever as good as the stock behind it; see Stocks.

Faults specific to velouté — tasting thin and one-note (weak or under-reduced stock — no amount of roux disguises a poor stock, it only thickens the poverty); a grey, dull colour (roux browned too far, or a stock with too much impurity left unskimmed); separating into a thin liquid with floating fat once cooled and reheated too briskly (reheat gently, whisking, never at a hard boil).

DERIVATIVE	ADDITION TO VELOUTÉ	BELONGS TO
Suprême	Chicken velouté, cream, mushroom essence	Poached or poêléed chicken, vol-au-vents
Allemande	Egg yolk and cream liaison, lemon	Sweetbreads, veal, poached eggs

DERIVATIVE	ADDITION TO VELOUTÉ	BELONGS TO
Poulette	Allemande plus mushrooms, parsley, lemon	Mushrooms à la grecque, tripe, snails
Aurore	Tomato purée stirred through	Poached eggs, boiled chicken, veal
Bercy	White wine, shallot reduction, fish velouté	Grilled or poached fish
Normande	Fish velouté, mushroom and oyster liquor, cream	Sole normande, poached fish
Hongroise	Onion sweated in butter, paprika, white wine	Chicken, veal, egg dishes with a Central European accent
Vin blanc	Fish velouté, white wine reduction, butter	Poached or steamed fish

Espagnole

Base — brown veal or beef stock, built on roasted bones. **Thickener** — a brown *roux*, cooked to a genuine hazelnut colour, plus a *mirepoix* (carrot, onion, celery) and tomato purée browned alongside it for depth and colour. **Ratio** — roughly 90 g each of butter and flour to 1.5 litres brown stock, with 250 g rough-cut mirepoix and two tablespoons tomato purée, simmered and skimmed for at least two hours, traditionally far longer.

Working method, in brief — brown the mirepoix well in the same fat you will make the roux in, add tomato purée and cook briefly to lose its rawness, make and colour the roux separately or in the same pot, whisk in the hot brown stock, and simmer at the barest tremor for two hours or more, skimming constantly, until deeply flavoured and glossy. Nearly every kitchen today reduces espagnole further with more stock into *demi-glace* before using it, which is itself listed as its own derivative below because that is how completely it has taken over the mother's role in practice.

Faults specific to espagnole — a bitter, scorched taste (the roux or the mirepoix caught and burned rather than browned — there is a narrow window between hazelnut and burnt, and it does not forgive an unwatched pot); a thin, greasy sauce that never develops body (insufficient reduction time — es-

pagnole rewards hours, not an evening, and there is no shortcut); a muddy rather than glossy brown (stock not skimmed enough during the long simmer).

DERIVATIVE	ADDITION TO ESPAGNOLE	BELONGS TO
Demi-glace	Further reduced with more brown stock, by half	The base for most of what follows; game, beef, roasts
Bordelaise	Red wine and shallot reduction, poached bone marrow	Grilled steak, especially entrecôte
Chasseur	Mushrooms, shallot, white wine, tomato, tarragon	Sautéed chicken and rabbit — *poulet chasseur*
Robert	Onion, white wine, mustard stirred in at the end	Grilled pork, especially pork chops
Charcutière	Robert plus gherkins, julienned	Grilled pork, sausages
Madère	Reduced with Madeira wine	Ham, tournedos, offal
Périgueux	Madère plus chopped or puréed truffle	Filet mignon, foie gras, the grandest tables
Lyonnaise	Onion softened slowly, white wine vinegar	Offal, especially kidneys and liver
Diable	Shallot, white wine, vinegar, cayenne	Grilled poussin, deviled kidneys
Piquante	Shallot, vinegar, gherkins, capers, herbs	Pork, tongue, leftover boiled beef



FIGURE 2 · FOUR WAYS TO THICKEN A SAUCE

Roux-based thickening scales with how long and how dark it is cooked — a white roux thickens most for its weight, a brown roux least, because the starch that does the thickening is partly broken down by the longer, hotter cooking that gives espagnole its colour and its flavour. Hollandaise thickens by an entirely different mechanism — emulsified fat and egg protein, no starch at all — which is why it cannot simply be reduced or diluted the way a roux-based sauce can.

Sauce Tomate

Base — tomatoes, ideally ripe and fresh, tinned plum tomatoes an entirely honest substitute out of season. **Thickener** — none, in the modern reading; the sauce thickens by reduction and by the natural pectin and pulp of the tomato itself. Escoffier's original version used a light roux and a piece of salt pork or bacon for savour, but the roux has fallen away almost everywhere as the tomato itself does the work. **Ratio** — roughly 1.5 kg tomatoes, a small mirepoix, a bulb of garlic halved, a bay leaf and thyme, reduced by half over forty-five minutes to an hour.

Working method, in brief — sweat the mirepoix in olive oil or a little pork fat without colouring, add the tomatoes (crushed by hand, never blitzed to a purée at this stage — the texture should come from cooking down, not from a machine), garlic and herbs, and simmer uncovered until thick, stirring to prevent catching, then pass through a sieve for a smooth, formal sauce or leave rustic for a home one.

Faults specific to sauce tomate — tasting sharp and acidic (under-ripe or poor tomatoes, or too little cooking time to mellow the acid — a small pinch of sugar corrects a genuinely poor batch but should not be routine); watery and thin (not reduced enough, or tomatoes with excessive water content — salt the

tomatoes and let them sit twenty minutes first to draw some off if this is a recurring problem); bitter (garlic or tomato paste browned rather than sweated).

DERIVATIVE	ADDITION TO SAUCE TOMATE	BELONGS TO
Provençale	Garlic, olive oil, herbes de Provence, sometimes olives	Fish, chicken, aubergine, anything of the south
Portugaise	Onion, garlic, parsley	Eggs, white fish, veal
Créole	Pepper, onion, celery, a touch of chilli	Rice dishes, prawns, chicken
Milanaise	Ham and mushroom julienne, Parmesan	Pasta, veal Milanese
Napolitaine	Garlic and basil, cooked briefly	Pasta, the plainest and most useful of the family

Hollandaise

Base — clarified or whole melted butter. **Thickener** — an emulsion: egg yolks whisked over gentle heat with a little acidic liquid (water and lemon, or a vinegar reduction) until pale and ribboned, then butter worked in gradually so the fat suspends as microscopic droplets in the yolk rather than pooling. **Ratio** — roughly 3 yolks to 200–250 g clarified butter and a tablespoon of acid liquid, enough for four as a sauce.

Working method, in brief — whisk yolks with the acid liquid over a bain-marie or the very lowest direct heat until thick, pale, and holding a ribbon trail, remove from the heat, and add the warm melted butter in a very thin, steady stream, whisking constantly, until fully emulsified and thick enough to hold a trail from the whisk. The full method, the temperature discipline, and how to rescue a split sauce belong at Emulsions — this chapter assumes you have read it.

Faults specific to hollandaise — splitting into a greasy puddle (butter added too fast, or the yolks overheated and scrambled before the fat was ever added — see the rescue method in the Emulsions chapter); too thin to hold its shape on a plate (not enough butter worked in, or the yolk base was never properly ribboned before the butter began); a raw, eggy taste (insufficient initial cooking of the yolk-and-acid base before the butter is added).

DERIVATIVE	ADDITION TO HOLLANDAISE	BELONGS TO
Béarnaise	Reduction of tarragon, shallot, vinegar, and peppercorn in place of the lemon base	Grilled steak, the single most-cooked derivative in this family
Choron	Béarnaise plus tomato purée, tarragon omitted or reduced	Grilled meat, particularly tournedos
Foyot	Béarnaise plus meat glaze (glace de viande)	Grilled meat wanting extra savour
Maltaise	Blood orange juice and zest in place of lemon	Asparagus, especially in spring
Mousseline	Lightly whipped cream folded in at the end	Asparagus, poached fish, anything wanting lightness
Noisette	Butter browned to *beurre noisette* before whisking in	Fish, white asparagus, a nuttier register
Paloise	Béarnaise with mint in place of tarragon	Lamb, especially grilled

NO GADGETS REQUIRED

Every sauce and derivative in this chapter is made with a saucepan, a bowl, a balloon whisk, and a sieve. A blender gives you a smoother, more stable hollandaise with less risk of splitting, and it is a perfectly honest shortcut — but the hand version, whisked over a bain-marie, is the one that teaches you what an emulsion actually feels like as it comes together, which is worth learning once.

Sauces with no mother

Not every important French sauce descends from Carême or Escoffier's five. A large and, in a modern kitchen, increasingly central group of sauces were never absorbed into the classification at all, because they are built by entirely different logic: reduction and emulsion with butter rather than a roux; raw emulsion rather than cooking; a simple dressing rather than a simmered base; a reduction of sugar and vinegar rather than stock. These sauces are not a lesser or

incomplete set — several of them, beurre blanc and vinaigrette especially, are cooked far more often today than most of the derivatives above.

- **Beurre blanc.** A reduction of shallot, white wine and vinegar, emulsified with a great deal of cold butter whisked in piece by piece off the heat. Warm, pale, and unctuous; the standard partner for poached or steamed fish. See Emulsions for the method.
- **Beurre noisette.** Butter cooked in the pan itself until the milk solids brown and it smells of hazelnuts, then used immediately, often with a squeeze of lemon and capers. The simplest sauce in this entire page and one of the best.
- **Beurre maître d'hôtel.** Softened butter beaten with chopped parsley and lemon juice, rolled into a log, chilled, and sliced into discs to melt over a hot grilled steak or fish at the table. A compound butter, not a cooked sauce at all.
- **Vinaigrette.** Oil and acid (vinegar or citrus) emulsified together, classically at a ratio of three parts oil to one part acid, with mustard as the emulsifier that holds it together rather than merely flavouring it. The most-made sauce in any kitchen, French or otherwise.
- **Mayonnaise and its children.** Egg yolk, oil, and acid, emulsified cold rather than warm. *Aïoli* adds garlic pounded to a paste; *rémoulade* adds mustard, capers, and gherkins; *sauce tartare* adds chopped egg, capers and cornichons; *sauce verte* adds a purée of green herbs. All are mayonnaise with one addition, in exactly the derivative logic of the mothers above, but the family was never formally adopted into Carême's system.
- **Jus and pan sauces.** The liquid released by roasting or searing meat, deglazed from the pan with wine or stock and reduced, sometimes finished with a knob of butter (*monter au beurre*). Thickened by nothing but reduction and, at most, that last butter. The everyday sauce of a home kitchen and the fastest of everything in this chapter.
- **Coulis.** A sauce made by cooking and passing a single vegetable or fruit through a sieve — tomato, red pepper, raspberry, mango. No roux, no emulsion, simply concentrated purée, sweet or savoury.
- **Salsa verde-style herb sauces.** Chopped or pounded fresh herbs, garlic, capers and anchovy bound loosely with olive oil and a little acid — no cook-

ing at all. The Italian salsa verde, French persillade, and Argentine chimichurri all share this logic and none of them belongs to any mother.

- **Gastrique.** Sugar caramelised and deglazed with vinegar, the oldest sweet-sour base in the repertoire, used to cut through rich meat (duck, pork) or to underpin a fruit sauce.

Why the classification stopped mattering for this whole group: Carême and Escoffier were codifying a specific, roux-and-stock-based grand cuisine, and the system describes that cuisine extremely well. But French cooking — like all cooking — kept moving, towards lighter, faster, emulsion- and reduction-based sauces that owe far more to a hot pan and a whisk than to a simmering pot of stock. The tree above is still the right way to understand where a given classical sauce sits; it was simply never meant to, and never did, contain everything worth knowing how to make.

Which sauce with what

A working decision table, organised by protein and cooking method rather than by mother — which is how a cook actually reaches for a sauce at the stove.

	AMEL	VELOUTÉ	ESPAGNOLE	TOMATE	HOLLANDAISE	ORPHAN
	●	●			●	●
	●	●	●	●		
			●		●	●
			●			●
	●	●				●
	●			●	●	
						●

FIGURE 3 · SAUCE-FOR-DISH MATRIX

Each dot marks a genuinely classical pairing between a protein or course and a sauce family — read down a column to see what a mother sauce is really for, or across a row to see a dish's full range of options. The Orphan column, deliberately, has a mark in every row: the independent sauces above have quietly become the most versatile family in the kitchen.

PROTEIN / METHOD	CLASSICAL CHOICE	QUICKER HONEST ALTERNATIVE
Poached or steamed white fish	Sauce vin blanc, sauce normande	Beurre blanc
Grilled or pan-fried fish	Sauce bercy	Beurre noisette with capers and lemon
Grilled steak	Bordelaise, béarnaise	Pan jus with a knob of butter
Roast chicken	Suprême, chasseur	Pan gravy from the roasting tin
Poached chicken	Allemande, aurore	Velouté finished with cream
Roast lamb	Sauce soubise, or a classic mint sauce (a variant of gastrique logic)	Pan jus with rosemary and garlic
Grilled pork	Sauce robert, charcutière	Mustard stirred through pan juices
Offal (kidneys, liver)	Lyonnaise, diable	Deglazed pan with vinegar and mustard
Braised beef, game	Espagnole, demi-glace, périgueux for the grandest occasion	The braise's own reduced cooking liquid
Asparagus, artichoke	Mousseline, maltaise	Melted butter and lemon
Cold poached fish, salads	Mayonnaise or its children (tartare, verte)	A sharp vinaigrette
Pasta, gratins	Napolitaine, Mornay	A quick tomato sauce or cream reduction

Quantities and making ahead

As a working figure across nearly every sauce in this chapter: 60–90 ml of finished sauce per person for a roux- or stock-based sauce served as an accom-

paniment (velouté, espagnole family, tomate), and rather less — 25–40 ml — for a rich emulsified butter sauce like hollandaise or beurre blanc, since a little of those goes a long way and too much reads as heavy rather than generous. A vinaigrette for a dressed salad wants roughly 15–20 ml per person; more than that and the leaves drown rather than glisten.

Roux-based sauces (béchamel, velouté, espagnole and their derivatives) keep well and, for espagnole in particular, genuinely improve over a day or two in the refrigerator as the flavours settle — make them a day ahead without hesitation, reheating gently with a splash of stock or milk to loosen. Tomato-based sauces likewise keep and often improve for a day. Emulsified sauces are the exception: hollandaise and its children hold for perhaps an hour at a bare, warm — never hot — temperature (a wide-necked flask, or a bowl set over barely warm water) and do not reheat once cold without breaking; make these last, close to service, exactly as set out under the timing of a dinner in Plating & Service. Beurre blanc behaves the same way. Vinaigrette and mayonnaise, by contrast, hold for days under refrigeration, since neither depends on heat to stay emulsified.

When it goes wrong

A roux-based sauce tastes of raw flour

The roux was undercooked, or liquid was added before the flour had a chance to cook through.

FIX Cook the roux for the full two minutes stated for its colour, and simmer the finished sauce a full ten minutes minimum before judging it.

Espagnole or demi-glace tastes thin despite hours of simmering

The stock behind it was weak, or the mirepoix was never properly browned for depth.

FIX There is no fixing a poor stock after the fact — begin again with a properly made brown stock; see Stocks.

An emulsified sauce splits

Fat added too fast, or the base overheated before or during emulsification.

FIX The rescue — a fresh yolk or a spoon of cold water, whisked in gradually with the split sauce added back slowly — is covered in full at Emulsions.

A *derivative tastes only of its addition, not of its mother*

Too much of the flavouring addition relative to the base sauce, or a weak base to begin with.

FIX Build derivatives from a full-strength, well-reduced mother sauce, and add flavourings gradually, tasting — a derivative should still taste recognisably like its mother underneath.

Sauce tomate never develops real body

Insufficient reduction, or watery tomatoes.

FIX Simmer uncovered, never covered, and be patient — forty-five minutes to an hour is normal, not excessive.

A *reheated sauce separates or turns grainy*

Reheated too fast or too hard, especially anything containing cream, egg, or emulsified butter.

FIX Reheat gently over low heat, whisking constantly, and never let a cream- or egg-finished sauce return to a full boil.

Escoffier did not invent French sauces. He drew the map so the rest of us would stop getting lost.

END OF THE SAUCE TREE

PART FOUR

APPLYING HEAT

La Cuisson

Dry heat and wet, fierce and gentle — the four ways a kitchen turns raw into cooked.

CHAPTER 11

Searing & Roasting

Saisir et Rôtir

Dry heat is the simplest cooking there is and the easiest to get slightly wrong. This is how to get it right, without a thermometer, in one pan and one domestic oven.

Browning and the dryness rule

Colour is flavour, not decoration. The deep gold-to-mahogany crust on a seared steak or a roast bird is hundreds of new compounds that did not exist in the raw meat, produced by heat acting on protein and sugar at the surface. Nothing in the middle of the joint will ever taste of this. It only happens at the surface, and only if the surface is dry.

This is the *réaction de Maillard* — the Maillard reaction — and it needs three things at once: a surface above roughly 140°C, protein and a trace of sugar, and, critically, an absence of water. Water on the surface boils at 100°C and refuses to let the surface rise past it until every drop has gone. A wet steak in a hot pan spends its first two minutes steaming, not browning, and steamed meat greys instead of browns. This single fact — **water blocks browning** — explains almost every rule that follows in this guide.

Salt draws moisture out by osmosis, so timing matters: salt well ahead (see Seasoning) and pat dry again just before the pan, or salt at the very last second with the surface already dry. Salting ten minutes before cooking and doing nothing else about the moisture it pulls is the worst of both options.

A wet surface cannot brown. Everything else in this chapter is a way of getting a piece of food dry, hot, and left alone.

THE DRYNESS RULE

Drying and tempering

- **Dry it properly.** Lift the meat from its packaging, pat every face with kitchen paper until the paper stops darkening, and leave it uncovered on a rack in the fridge for an hour if you have one — the surface dries further and the browning is faster and more even.
- **Temper it.** Bring meat out of the fridge thirty to sixty minutes before cooking, depending on thickness. A cold centre means the outside is overcooked by the time the middle catches up, because the pan has to do more work over more time. This matters far more for a thick steak or a joint than for a thin escalope, which cooks through before temperature has time to matter.
- **Season just before the pan, generously.** A dry, well-salted surface is the single largest lever you control before the heat is even on.

The pan and the fat

You need one heavy pan — cast iron or a thick-based stainless pan — and a fat with a high smoke point. A thin pan cannot hold its heat: the moment cold meat touches it, the surface temperature collapses and you are back to steaming.

- **Clarified butter or a neutral oil (sunflower, groundnut, light olive) for the initial sear.** Whole butter burns at around 150–160°C, well below a proper searing temperature, and turns bitter and black.
- **Whole butter comes in afterwards, for basting** — see below — once the pan has cooled slightly and the crust is already made.
- **Enough fat to film the pan, not drown it.** A shallow, even film conducts heat into the food; a deep pool of oil insulates it and you are shallow-frying, which is a different technique with a softer result.

NO GADGETS REQUIRED

A thermometer takes the guesswork out of oil temperature, but you do not need one. Drop a cube of bread or a pinch of flour into the fat: brisk, immediate bubbling and a bread cube that colours in about thirty seconds means the fat is at searing heat, around 190–200°C. Smoke rising off the fat means it is already past its point and should be swapped out before it flavours the food with bitterness.

The sear itself

Heat the empty pan first, over a high flame, for a full two minutes before the fat goes in — this is what tells you the pan itself, not just the fat sitting in it, is hot. Add the fat, let it shimmer, then lay the meat away from you so any spatter goes into the pan rather than at your wrist.

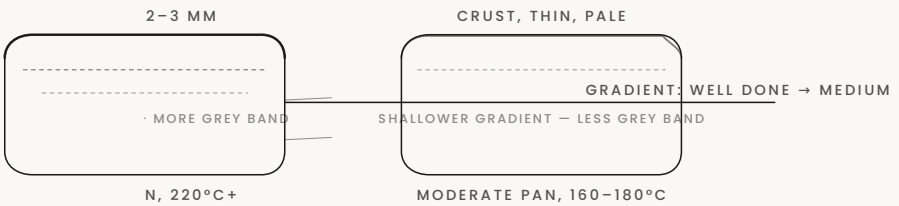


FIGURE 1 · THE DONENESS GRADIENT

A fierce pan browns fast but pushes a wider band of overcooked grey meat under the crust before the centre is done. A moderate pan browns more slowly but the doneness gradient is gentler, so more of the steak stays the colour you wanted.

01 Lay it down and do not touch it

Once the meat is in the pan, leave it. The single most common fault in home searing is moving the food to check on it, which tears the crust away before it has finished forming and welds itself to the pan.

CUE *A steak that is ready to turn releases from the pan on its own, with a light shake of the handle. If it resists and tears, it needs longer.*

02 **Listen, and watch the edges**

A confident, continuous sizzle means the pan is holding its heat. A sizzle that fades to a whisper within thirty seconds means the pan has lost too much heat to the cold meat and you have overcrowded it or started with too low a flame. The colour should be creeping visibly up the cut edge of the meat as it cooks.

03 **Turn once, browning both faces properly**

Turn with tongs, not a fork — piercing the meat lets juice escape exactly where you do not want it to. Give the second side the same undisturbed time. For a thick cut, sear the edges too by standing it on its side.

04 **Do not crowd the pan**

Each piece of meat needs its own patch of hot metal and a clear escape route for the steam it releases. Two steaks in a pan built for one drop the pan's temperature by far more than you expect and both end up grey and boiled rather than browned. Cook in batches, keeping the first batch warm, rather than crowding.

WHY *Steam that cannot escape sits over the food and condenses back onto it — the dryness rule again, this time caused by crowding rather than a wet surface.*

Basting — *arroser*

Once both faces are browned, this is where a good steak becomes a very good one, and it costs nothing beyond butter, a sprig of thyme, and a clove of garlic. Reduce the heat slightly, add a generous knob of butter, a bruised garlic clove and a sprig of thyme to the pan, and tip the pan towards you so the melted, foaming butter pools at the low side. Spoon it continuously over the meat for the last minute or two of cooking.



FIGURE 2 · ARROSER

Tilting the pan pools the foaming butter deep enough to submerge a spoon. The fat carries the aromatics of the garlic and thyme up and over the meat with every pass, basting the top surface the flame cannot otherwise touch.

What basting does that leaving the meat alone cannot: it cooks the top surface — the side not in contact with the pan — by convection through hot fat, so a single-sided sear becomes an all-over one without a second turn that would cost you crust. It also perfumes the meat with browned milk solids, garlic and thyme oil, which no amount of resting or seasoning afterwards can replace. Basted correctly for the last ninety seconds of a steak's cooking, this is the single most useful trick in the book: it upgrades a good sear into a restaurant one with no extra equipment and no extra skill beyond a steady wrist.

> THE SAME TRICK, LARGER
>
> Basting is exactly what an oven-roasted joint wants too, with a spoon and the fat pooled in the roasting tin, every fifteen to twenty minutes. It is also why a whole roast bird is traditionally started breast-down: the back sits in its own fat and juices and effectively self-bastes the part of the bird most prone to drying out. See the roast chicken, below.

Doneness without a thermometer

A thermometer is accurate and there is no shame in owning one — but a French kitchen taught doneness by touch for two centuries before instant-read probes existed, and the touch test is worth learning honestly, including where it fails.

DONENESS	TOUCH EQUIVALENT	CENTRE TEMPERATURE	LOOK
Bleu	The base of your thumb, hand fully relaxed	46–49°C	Cool red centre, seared outside only
Rare	Thumb and index finger touching lightly	50–54°C	Red centre, warm throughout
Medium-rare	Thumb and middle finger	55–58°C	Pink centre, the classical French default
Medium	Thumb and ring finger	60–63°C	Pale pink core, firmer throughout
Well done	Thumb and little finger	68°C+	No pink, noticeably firm

The method: touch the fleshy pad at the base of your thumb with each fingertip in turn and feel how its resistance changes, then compare that resistance to the meat by pressing it gently with a fingertip. This works, approximately, because the hand's own muscle tightens progressively as the fingers curl. It is honest to say where it breaks down: hand tension varies from person to person and day to day, the comparison is only ever approximate, and it says nothing reliable about a very thick joint, where the surface can feel done long before the centre is. Use it for steaks, chops and other pieces under about 4 cm thick, calibrated against a thermometer the first few times so your hand learns what correct actually feels like.

The skewer-and-lip test, for everything else

For a thicker cut, or a whole joint where touch cannot reach the centre, push a clean metal skewer into the thickest part, hold it there for five seconds, then draw it out and touch it to your lower lip — the lip is far more sensitive to temperature than a fingertip. Cool: still raw in the middle. Warm: rare to medium-rare. Hot: well on the way to well done. This is the test a chicken's juices-run-clear check descends from, and it is the more reliable of the two for a piece of meat rather than a whole bird.

> COLOUR ALONE LIES
>
> Never judge doneness by cutting into the meat to look, particularly not partway through cooking. Every cut lets juice escape at exactly the moment the meat can least afford to lose it, and a cut face browns and looks more "done" than the meat around it within seconds of exposure to air. Judge by touch, skewer, or thermometer — never by an exploratory slice.

Resting, and for how long

Heat drives the muscle fibres to contract and squeezes juice towards the centre and away from the surface faster than it can redistribute. Cut a steak straight from the pan and that juice runs out onto the board in a pool, which is juice lost rather than juice eaten. Resting gives the fibres time to relax and the moisture time to move back out through the meat evenly, so it stays inside when you finally do cut it.

- **A steak or chop:** rest for roughly half its cooking time, minimum five minutes, on a warm plate, loosely tented with foil — not sealed, which traps steam and softens the crust you just made.
- **A roast joint or a whole bird:** rest for fifteen to twenty-five minutes depending on size, in a warm spot away from a draught, foil tented loosely over the top.
- **Never rest under a tight foil seal.** The trapped steam is the same water that blocked browning in the first place, and it will soften every bit of crust you worked for.

High heat, low heat, and the reverse sear

A domestic oven can roast three different ways, and each suits a different cut.

- **High heat throughout (220–240°C).** Fast, and it browns the outside well, but it drives a wide grey band of overcooked meat under the crust, exactly like the fierce pan in Figure 1. Right for small, quick joints and for poultry, where you want crisp skin more than a perfectly even interior.

- **Low heat throughout (120–150°C).** Slow and even — the whole joint approaches doneness at close to the same rate, so there is almost no grey band — but the outside never gets hot enough to brown on its own and needs a hard sear before or after.
- **The reverse sear.** Roast low first, until the centre is within a few degrees of the doneness you want (checked by skewer), then finish with a very hot, brief sear — in the pan, or under a hot grill — for the crust. This gives you the even, edge-to-edge doneness of the low-heat method and the crust of the high-heat one, and it is the most reliable route to a large, expensive joint cooked correctly all the way through. It needs nothing beyond a domestic oven and a hot pan.

> NO GADGETS REQUIRED
>
> A meat thermometer or probe makes the reverse sear more precise, but the skewer-and-lip test above will get you there. Check every ten minutes once the joint has been in the low oven for two-thirds of its expected time, and stop the low stage a little earlier than instinct suggests — carryover, below, will finish the job.

The roast chicken done properly

More gets written about roast chicken than almost any other single dish, and most of it disagrees. Here is the version that actually delivers moist breast, cooked-through thigh, and crisp skin, in a domestic oven, with no special equipment.

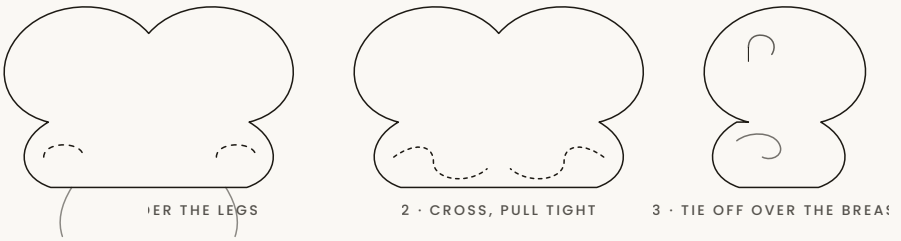


FIGURE 3 · TRUSSING IN THREE MOVES

The string does one job: it holds the legs against the body so the thin wing tips and drumsticks cannot dry out ahead of the breast, and it keeps the bird's shape so it browns evenly and carves cleanly.

01 Truss it

Slide a length of string under the tail end and up over both drumsticks, cross the ends over the top, pull them down and around the ends of the drumsticks to draw the legs in against the breast, then bring the string forward along the sides, flip the bird, and tie off over the wings to pin them against the body. It does not need to be elegant; it needs to be tight.

WHY IT MATTERS *An untrussed bird's legs splay outward into the hottest part of the oven and dry out well before the breast is cooked. Trussed, the whole bird cooks as one even shape.*

02 Season under the skin, and inside

Loosen the breast skin with your fingers and push butter, salt and a little thyme directly against the flesh — this bastes the breast meat from the inside for the entire cook. Season the cavity generously and put in half a lemon and a bruised garlic head if you have them.

03 Start breast-down

Set the bird breast-down on a rack or on a bed of roughly cut vegetables in a roasting tin, at 220°C, for the first twenty-five minutes. In this position the breast sits away from direct heat and bathes in its own rendering fat and juice, while the back and thighs — which can take more heat — face the oven floor.

04 Turn breast-up and reduce the heat

Turn the bird breast-up (tongs in the cavity, a cloth on the tin) and drop the oven to 190°C for the remainder of the cook — about fifty to sixty-five minutes more for a 1.6–1.8 kg bird, basting with the tin juices every fifteen minutes. This is the same *arroser* from earlier in this chapter, applied to a whole bird.

05 Test the juices, in the right place

Push a skewer into the thickest part of the thigh, near but not touching the bone, and press gently. Clear, faintly golden juice means it is done; any trace of pink or red means back in for another ten minutes. Testing the breast is misleading — it cooks faster than the thigh and will always look done first.

CUE *The leg should also wiggle loosely in its socket when you nudge it, a sign the connective tissue there has finally softened.*

06 Rest it, properly, before carving

Fifteen to twenty minutes, breast-up, loosely tented with foil, tipped slightly so the cavity juices run out into the tin — save them for the gravy. Do not skip this for a chicken any more than you would for a steak; the same physics applies at a larger scale.

> THE THERMOMETER MYTH WORTH KEEPING IN MIND
>
> 75°C at the thigh is the food-safety figure often quoted, and it is a fine target if you own a probe. But juices running clear at the thigh joint is the older, equally reliable test that needs no equipment, and it is what generations of French kitchens relied on. Trust either one; do not trust neither.

Roast potatoes

Good roast potatoes are governed by one rule: fat, steam, then agitation, in that order, with nothing skipped.

- **Par-boil until the edges are just breaking up** — about eight minutes for even-sized chunks of a floury potato, from cold salted water. This is the

steam stage: it cooks the interior and roughs up the surface starch that will crisp later.

- **Drain hard, then shake the pan with the lid on** until the surfaces look scuffed and slightly fluffy, not smooth. This scuffed surface is what turns crisp in the oven; a smooth-drained potato roasts pale and dense.
- **Fat must be already screaming hot** in the tin — beef dripping, duck fat, or a neutral oil, heated in the oven for ten minutes beforehand — before the potatoes go in. A cold or cool tin means the same steaming problem from the top of this chapter: no crust forms until the water has boiled off.
- **Turn once, halfway,** and no more. Constant turning knocks the crust off before it has set.

Roasting vegetables alongside the meat

Root vegetables — carrot, parsnip, celeriac, squash — roast well in the same tin as a joint, cut to a size that finishes in roughly the same time (see Knife Skills for cutting them to a consistent size). Add them for the last forty to fifty minutes only, tossed in a little of the rendered fat from the tin, so they brown rather than stew in the meat's juices. Softer vegetables — courgette, tomato, whole shallot — want less time still, twenty to twenty-five minutes, or they collapse to mush before the joint is done.

Carryover cooking, with real numbers

Meat continues to cook after it leaves the heat, because the outer layers are hotter than the centre and keep conducting heat inward during the rest. A large roast can rise 4–6°C in the centre during a twenty-minute rest; a steak, being much smaller, typically rises only 1–3°C over five to ten minutes. This is why every roasting method above tells you to pull the meat before it reaches your final target — take it out at the temperature or touch-test stage roughly one grade under what you actually want, and let the rest finish the job. Pulling a large joint exactly at your target temperature all but guarantees it overshoots into the next doneness band while it rests.

Making the gravy from the pan

Everything a gravy needs is already sitting in the roasting tin: browned meat residue, rendered fat, and the juices released during resting. Pour off most of the fat, leaving the dark sediment behind, set the tin over a medium hob flame, and deglaze with a splash of stock or wine, scraping up every browned fleck with a wooden spoon — those flecks are the same Maillard compounds from the top of this chapter, now flavouring a sauce instead of a crust. From there the method is a straightforward reduction and thickening; the full technique, roux and all, lives at Sauce Making.

Resting racks, foil, and the myths about both

> TWO SMALL CLARIFICATIONS
>
> A resting rack keeps the underside of a joint out of the juice that collects on the plate, so the crust there stays crisp instead of steaming in its own liquid — useful, not essential; a couple of upturned spoons under the meat do the same job. Foil, tented loosely rather than sealed, slows heat loss without trapping steam. The myth to drop is that tightly wrapping a rested joint in foil "locks in the juices" — it does the opposite, softening the crust with trapped steam for no real gain in moisture, which is retained by the resting itself, not by the foil.

Carving with the grain

Muscle fibres run in one direction, visible as fine parallel lines on the cut face. Slice along those lines — with the grain — and you are asking your teeth to do the work of separating long, intact fibres, which is exactly what makes meat feel tough and stringy regardless of how well it was cooked. Slice across the grain — against it — and every fibre is already cut short, so the meat feels tender however it happens to have cooked.

- **Find the grain before you start,** by looking at the surface, not by guessing partway through.

- **Turn the joint if the grain changes direction** across it, which it does on a whole roast chicken breast and on cuts like flank or brisket — carve each section on its own angle.
- **Use the draw cut** from Knife Skills: long, unhurried strokes, never a saw.

CUT	GRAIN DIRECTION	CARVING NOTE
Roast chicken breast	Along the length of the breast	Slice across, on a slight diagonal, off the bone
Sirloin or ribeye	Usually runs the length of the cut	Turn ninety degrees from how it looks and slice thinly across
Flank or bavette	Long and highly visible	Always thin, always sharply across — this cut is unforgiving of grain mistakes
Leg of lamb	Changes direction around the bone	Carve in sections, following the muscle groups rather than one straight line

> NO GADGETS REQUIRED
>
> A carving fork steadies the joint and keeps your fingers well clear of the blade; a second fork or a pair of tongs does the same job if you do not own one. What actually matters is a sharp knife — see Knife Skills — since a dull one tears the fibres you are trying to cut cleanly and undoes the whole point of carving with the grain in mind.

When it goes wrong

The steak looks grey, not brown

The surface was wet, the pan was overcrowded, or the flame was too low to hold its heat against the cold meat.

FIX Dry thoroughly, heat the empty pan longer before adding fat, and cook in batches rather than crowding it.

Crust tears away and sticks to the pan

The meat was moved or turned before the crust had finished forming and released on its own.

FIX Leave it alone longer. A properly seared piece lets go of the pan with a gentle shake; force is a sign it needed more time.

Chicken breast is dry, thigh is perfect

Breast meat cooks faster than thigh and was taken to the thigh's doneness rather than its own.

FIX Trust the breast-down start to protect the breast, and test the thigh, not the breast, for the final call — the breast will always be a little ahead of it.

Roast potatoes are pale and dense, not crisp

Either the fat was not properly hot when they went in, or the par-boiled surfaces were not roughed up by shaking before roasting.

FIX Heat the fat in the oven until it shimmers before adding the potatoes, and shake them hard in the dry pan after draining until the surface looks scuffed.

Juice floods the board the moment you carve

The meat was carved straight from the pan or oven, with no rest, so the contracted fibres had no time to relax and reabsorb their juice.

FIX Rest properly — half the cooking time for a steak, fifteen to twenty-five minutes for a roast — loosely tented, never tightly wrapped.

Meat cut with the grain feels tough despite a good cook

The knife travelled parallel to the muscle fibres instead of across them.

FIX Find the grain before the first cut and turn the joint so every slice runs across it, even if that means several changes of angle on one piece.

Dry it, heat it, leave it alone, then let it rest. Everything else in this chapter is detail in service of those four words.

STAGE THREE, LESSON ONE

CHAPTER 12

Braising & Stewing

Braiser et Mijoter

The cheap, tough cuts turn into the best thing you cook, and the method that does it needs almost no attention once it is set going.

Braising versus stewing

The two are the same chemistry at two different scales, and the confusion between them is mostly a matter of the size of the pieces and how much liquid covers them.

***Braiser* — to braise** — cooks one large piece of meat, or a small number of large pieces, part-submerged: the liquid comes perhaps two-thirds up the sides, never over the top. The exposed top surface stays in contact with the hot, humid air of the closed pot rather than the liquid itself, and that air basts it continuously with rising steam. A daube, a pot-roast, a whole braised chicken are all braises in this sense.

***Mijoter* — to stew** — cooks meat cut into smaller, roughly even pieces, fully submerged in liquid. Because every piece is surrounded, a stew cooks more uniformly than a braise piece for piece, but it also has no dry, basted surface, so the character is different: a stew is entirely a dish of its sauce, while a braise keeps something of a roast's identity underneath the sauce it swims in.

Both rely on exactly the same transformation happening inside the meat, low and slow, which is the whole subject of this chapter.

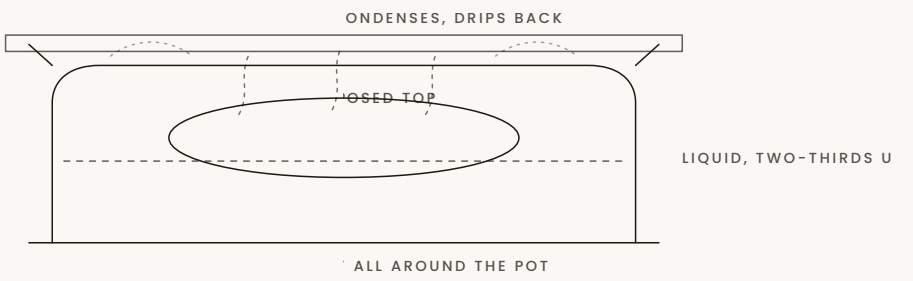


FIGURE 1 · THE BRAISING POT

The exposed top of the meat is never dry — steam rising off the liquid condenses on the lid and drips back, basting it continuously, which is why a lid that fits properly matters more than any other piece of equipment here.

Collagen into gelatin

Every muscle that does real work — a shoulder, a shin, a neck, a cheek — is threaded through with collagen, the tough connective tissue that holds muscle fibres together and lets the animal move. Cooked quickly and hot, as you would a fillet steak, collagen stays tough and rubbery no matter how long you chew it. Cooked slowly at a moderate temperature and held there, that same collagen dissolves into gelatin, and gelatin is what gives a good braising liquid its silky, lip-sticking body and gives the meat itself a melting, yielding texture no quick-cooked cut can match.

The transformation needs both heat and time, and neither alone will do it: collagen begins converting to gelatin at around 60°C, but at that temperature the process takes many hours. Held at 82–96°C — a gentle simmer, never a boil — it converts fully in roughly two and a half to four hours depending on the cut and the size of the pieces. This is the entire argument for braising: you are not cooking the meat until it is done, you are cooking the connective tissue until it has changed into something else altogether, and the muscle fibres happen to come along for the ride.

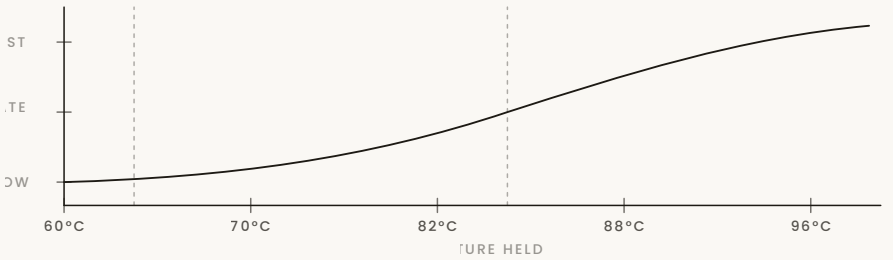


FIGURE 2 · COLLAGEN INTO GELATIN

Conversion accelerates sharply above about 80°C. Below that, it still happens — this is why an overnight low braise works — but it takes far longer than a kitchen evening allows.

WHY BOILING RUINS A BRAISE

A rolling boil, 100°C, sounds like it should convert collagen faster still, and in a sense it does — but the same violent heat also drives moisture straight out of the muscle fibres and toughens them, faster than the gelatin can compensate. The result is meat that is simultaneously falling apart in stringy shreds and dry to eat, sitting in a sauce that has gone thin and cloudy from the fat and liquid being battered together rather than gently married. Keep it at a bare simmer, never a boil, for the whole cooking time.

The cuts to buy

Braising cuts are, almost without exception, the cheapest meat in the shop, because they come from muscles the animal used constantly and are therefore full of the connective tissue this whole page is about. Buying them well is most of the cost saving in this technique.

CUT	ANIMAL	ROUGHLY, PER KILO	BEST IN
Beef shin	Beef	Cheapest beef in the shop	Daube, ragoût, long braises needing real body
Beef cheek	Beef	Mid-range, often overlooked	Braises wanting an especially silky, gelatinous result

CUT	ANIMAL	ROUGHLY, PER KILO	BEST IN
Chuck / blade	Beef	Modest	Everyday stews, bourguignon
Shoulder	Lamb	Cheaper than leg	Navarin, long braises, pulled dishes
Neck fillet	Lamb	The cheapest lamb cut	Navarin, rustic stews
Shoulder / hand	Pork	Cheap and generous	Slow braises, ragoût
Legs, thighs, whole bird	Chicken	Cheap, especially legs	Fricassée, coq au vin, blanquette
Oxtail	Beef	Cheap but bony — buy generously	Deeply gelatinous braises and soups

> BUY BY TEXTURE, NOT BY NAME
>
> Ask for whatever the butcher calls "stewing" or "braising" meat, and look for a cut with visible white marbling and sinew running through it rather than a lean, uniformly red piece — that marbling is the collagen you are relying on. A butcher will always know their own cuts better than a fixed shopping list; ask what came off a hard-working muscle and buy that.

The sequence

Every braise, whatever its name, follows the same six moves, and the order matters more than any individual ingredient.

01 Sear the meat, then remove it

Pat the meat dry and sear it hard in batches, in a little fat, in the same pot you will braise in — see Searing & Roasting for the dryness rule that governs this step. You are not cooking the meat here, only building the browned crust that will flavour the whole dish. Lift it out onto a plate the moment it is coloured.

CUE *A dark, evenly browned crust on every face, with a layer of brown residue — the sucs — left stuck to the base of the pot. That residue is not burnt; it is flavour waiting to be deglazed.*

02 Sweat the aromatics

In the same fat, over a gentler heat, sweat a *mirepoix* — onion, carrot, celery — plus garlic, until soft and translucent but not browned. This builds the sweetness that underlies the whole sauce.

03 Deglaze

Add wine or stock and scrape the base of the pot hard with a wooden spoon, lifting every fleck of the browned residue into the liquid. This is where most of the dish's colour and depth actually comes from.

04 Return the meat and bring the liquid to the right level

Put the meat back in, nestled among the vegetables, and add stock or more liquid until it sits two-thirds up the sides of the meat for a braise, or fully covers it for a stew. Bring it just to a simmer on the hob first — do not put a cold pot straight into the oven, or the centre will lag badly behind the outside.

05 Lid on, into a low oven

A tight-fitting lid, and into an oven at 140–160°C. This is the stage that does almost all the actual work, and it needs almost no attention beyond an occasional check that the liquid has not dropped too low.

06 Test, then finish

The meat is ready when a fork meets no resistance and slides in and out cleanly — not when a clock says it should be. See Finishing, below, for turning the braising liquid into the sauce that is served with it.

Why the oven beats the hob

A hob applies heat from one point at the base of the pot, so the liquid nearest the flame is always hotter than the liquid at the top and sides — left on a hob for hours, a braise needs frequent stirring simply to keep that difference from scorching the bottom. An oven surrounds the pot with even, ambient heat from every side, so the whole pot — sides, base, and the air trapped under the lid — settles to nearly the same temperature and stays there without intervention. That evenness is exactly what a multi-hour braise wants: a long, gentle, unwatched simmer rather than a hot spot that needs constant correcting.

The exact simmer you want

The target is specific and worth learning by eye: **a bubble breaking the surface every few seconds**, here and there, never a continuous roll. If you can count fewer than one bubble per second and the surface otherwise looks nearly still, you are in the right place. A fierce, continuous bubble means you have crossed from a simmer into a boil, with all the toughening described above.

> NO DIFFUSER NEEDED, ON A FIERCE HOB
>
> Some hobs, particularly gas ones, will not hold a low enough flame to keep a pot at a bare simmer, and a heat diffuser is the traditional fix — but you do not need to own one. Set the pot slightly off-centre from the flame so only part of its base is in direct contact with the heat, or set it on the smallest ring you have even if the pot overhangs it. Both slow the rate of heat delivered into the liquid without needing any extra equipment. Better still, once the braise is under way, move the whole covered pot into a low oven — the problem disappears entirely, which is the argument for the oven above.

Wine in a braise

Wine contributes acidity, which balances the richness of a long-cooked, fatty cut, and it contributes its own flavour once the alcohol has cooked off, over the first twenty minutes or so of gentle simmering. As a rough guide, use enough wine to make up roughly a third to half of the total braising liquid, topped up

with stock for the rest — an all-wine braise is sharp and one-dimensional; a wine-free one lacks lift.

Should you reduce it first? Reducing the wine by half in the empty pot, before adding stock, concentrates its flavour and burns off more of the raw alcohol edge before the meat goes back in — worth doing for a lighter-bodied wine that would otherwise taste thin after hours of dilution by the meat's own juices. Skip the reduction, and add the wine straight in at the deglazing stage, if the wine is already full-bodied and you are short on time; the long cooking that follows will finish the job anyway, just less deliberately. What you must never do is add wine and clap the lid on cold, straight into the oven — bring it to a simmer on the hob first so the raw alcohol has begun cooking off before the lid traps the vapour in.

The marinade question

A classical daube or a coq au vin often calls for the meat to marinate overnight in the wine and aromatics before it ever meets the pot. This does two real things: it lets the wine's flavour penetrate slightly beyond the very surface of the meat, and — because wine is mildly acidic — it begins to soften the surface fibres before cooking starts. It does not tenderise the interior of a large piece of meat in any meaningful way; that is what the hours in the oven are for. Marinating is worth the trouble when you have the time and want a slightly rounder, more integrated flavour by the time the dish is finished; it is entirely optional, and a braise made without one, followed correctly, will still be excellent.

Blanquette, fricassée, ragoût, daube, navarin

French names a great many braises and stews by small, specific differences in method rather than by ingredient, and the names are worth learning properly rather than treating as interchangeable.

NAME	MEAT BROWNED FIRST?	LIQUID	WHAT DISTINGUISHES IT
Blanquette	No — meat stays pale (*blanc*)	White stock, finished with cream and egg yolk	The gentlest of the family; veal or chicken poached rather than browned, then bound into a pale, silky sauce
Fricassée	Partly — meat is sweated in fat until it whitens, not browned	White stock or wine, often finished with cream	A halfway point between a blanquette and a browned stew; more flavour from the sweating stage than a blanquette, still no deep colour
Ragoût	Yes, hard	Stock, wine, or both, well reduced	The general term for a well-browned braise or stew with a thick, dark, clinging sauce — most French stews are technically a ragoût
Daube	Yes, often marinated first	Red wine, heavily aromatic	A Provençal beef braise, traditionally in a sealed earthenware pot (*daubière*), with olives, orange peel, or anchovy in some regional versions
Navarin	Yes, hard	Stock and often tomato	Specifically lamb or mutton, garnished with small spring vegetables — *navarin printanier* is the classic version, named for the vegetables added towards the end

The thread running through all five: whether the meat is browned decides the colour and depth of the finished sauce, and everything else — the liquid, the finish, the garnish — follows from that one choice made at the very start of the sequence.

Finishing: reducing, mounting, adjusting acid

The braising liquid is not the finished sauce; it needs a few minutes of attention once the meat is out.

- **Lift the meat out** and keep it warm, covered, while you work on the liquid alone.

- **Strain if the sauce needs to be smooth** — for a formal daube or navarin — pressing the vegetables through the sieve to extract their body before discarding the fibrous remains, or leave the vegetables in for a rustic, home-style finish.
- **Skim the fat** that has risen to the surface; a wide spoon dragged flat across the top lifts most of it off.
- **Reduce** over a fast simmer on the hob until the liquid coats the back of a spoon and no longer runs off it in a thin sheet — the same test used for a classical sauce reduction; see Sauce Making.
- **Mount with butter,** a knob at a time, off the heat, swirling the pan rather than stirring with a spoon, for a glossy finish and a rounder mouthfeel.
- **Adjust the acid** last, with a small spoon of wine vinegar or a squeeze of lemon — hours of slow cooking flatten acidity, and a braise that tastes merely rich rather than alive is almost always missing this final correction.

A braise is not finished when the meat is tender. It is finished when the sauce has been reduced, skimmed, and brought back to life with acid.

THE LAST FIVE MINUTES

Braising vegetables

Whole or halved vegetables — fennel, endive, cabbage wedges, celery hearts — take beautifully to the same part-submerged method used for meat, cooked in stock and a little butter with the lid on, low and slow, until a knife slides in without resistance. The method turns vegetables that can be watery or bitter raw — chicory, endive — genuinely sweet, because the same slow heat that converts collagen also breaks down tough cell walls and mellows bitterness.

The glazed-vegetable method — à blanc and à brun

This is the small classical trick behind every plate of glossy, mahogany-glazed baby carrots or pearl onions you have ever eaten in a French restaurant, and it needs no special pan — a wide saucepan or a sauté pan with a lid does the job.

- ***Glacer à blanc* — glazed white.** The vegetables (turnips, small onions) go into a pan just large enough to hold them in a single layer, with butter, a pinch of sugar, a pinch of salt, and enough water or light stock to come roughly halfway up them. A round of buttered paper — the *cartouche* — sits directly on top of the vegetables, and the pan is covered and cooked gently until the vegetables are tender and the liquid has all but evaporated into a pale, buttery glaze that clings to them without colouring.
- ***Glacer à brun* — glazed brown.** Exactly the same method, but the liquid is allowed to reduce further, past the glaze stage, until the sugar and butter left behind begin to caramelise around the vegetables in the last few minutes, uncovered, over slightly higher heat, turning them gently until evenly coated in a deep amber glaze.

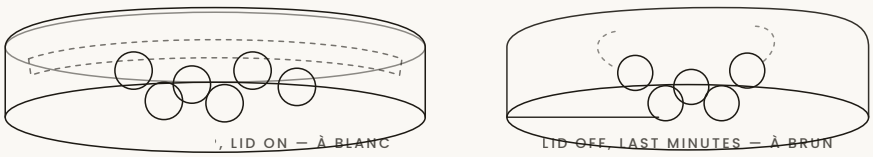


FIGURE 3 · THE CARTOUCHE

Paper resting directly on the vegetables holds a layer of steam against them so they cook evenly on every surface, while the pan lid above stops that steam escaping — no special glazing pan required, only paper cut to size.

> NO GADGETS REQUIRED
>
> A proper *cartouche* is simply a circle of greaseproof paper cut a fraction larger than the pan, buttered on the underside, and pressed down onto the surface of the food. Fold a square of paper into eighths, hold the point at the centre of the pan, and trim the outer edge to the pan's radius — one snip of the scissors and it opens into a circle. No specialist tool involved.

Why a braise is better the next day, and how to reheat it

Two real things happen overnight. First, the flavours that were introduced in stages — the browning, the aromatics, the wine, the reduction — have time to diffuse into one another and settle into a single, rounder taste, rather than reading as separate ingredients. Second, the gelatin released from the collagen sets as it cools, which is not a fault: warmed back through gently, that same gelatin is what gives the reheated sauce its cling and body.

- **Cool it properly** before refrigerating — uncovered until the steam has stopped rising, then covered, within about two hours of coming off the heat.
- **Reheat low and slow,** covered, on the hob or in a low oven, never at a fast simmer. The meat is already fully cooked; a hard reheat only risks the same toughening a boil causes the first time round.
- **Loosen with a splash of stock or water** if the sauce has set very firm from the gelatin — it will return to a pourable consistency gently over heat.
- **Bring the whole pot to a bare simmer, not a boil,** and hold it there just long enough to heat through, then serve. Ten to fifteen minutes for a domestic quantity is usually enough.

Overcooked braises: dry meat in wet sauce

It sounds contradictory — meat swimming in liquid, yet dry to eat — and it is one of the most common faults in home braising. Past a certain point, continued cooking squeezes moisture out of the muscle fibres faster than the surrounding gelatin can compensate, exactly as a hard boil does but more slowly;

the fibres themselves become dry and stringy even while sitting in an abundant sauce. The fix is entirely about timing, not liquid: test with a fork from the moment the collagen-conversion window in Figure 2 would reasonably be complete, and take the pot out the moment resistance disappears rather than leaving it in "for safety" or out of habit. A braise does not improve the longer it sits past doneness; it only degrades more slowly than a quick-cooked piece would.

When it goes wrong

Meat is tough despite hours in the oven

The oven or hob was too hot, so the liquid was at a rolling boil rather than a bare simmer, toughening the fibres faster than the collagen could convert.

FIX Drop the oven to 140–150°C and check for the "bubble every few seconds" cue described above, not a rolling boil.

Sauce is thin and greasy, not glossy

The fat was never skimmed off, and the sauce was served straight from the braising liquid without reduction.

FIX Strain, skim the fat with a flat spoon, then reduce hard on the hob until it coats the back of a spoon before serving.

Meat is dry even though the sauce is rich

The braise was left in well past the point the collagen had fully converted and the fibres began to dry out despite being surrounded by liquid.

FIX Start testing with a fork earlier, and pull the pot the moment it slides in with no resistance — see Overcooked braises, above.

The finished dish tastes flat and one-note

No acid was added at the end to counter the flattening effect of long, slow cooking.

FIX A small spoon of wine vinegar or a squeeze of lemon at the very end, tasted and adjusted, almost always fixes it.

The base of the pot has caught and the whole dish tastes burnt

The liquid dropped too low during a long hob-top braise, or the heat was too concentrated at the base.

FIX Move the braise to a low oven, which heats evenly from every side; if it must stay on the hob, check the liquid level every thirty minutes and top up with hot stock.

Glazed vegetables have coloured unevenly or stuck to the pan

The pan was too large for the quantity of vegetables, so the liquid spread too thin and reduced unevenly, or the cartouche was left off.

FIX Use a pan barely larger than the vegetables in a single layer, and keep the buttered cartouche pressed directly onto them throughout the covered stage.

Tough is not a flaw in the meat. It is a promise, and a low oven and a closed lid are how you collect on it.

THE ARGUMENT FOR BRAISING

CHAPTER 13

Poaching & Steaming

Pocher et Cuire à la Vapeur

The gentlest methods in the repertoire, and the ones cooks reach for last — which is backwards, because nothing rewards attention so generously for so little heat.

The most French, the most misunderstood

Ask a home cook to name a French cooking method and they will say sauté, or roast, or reduce. Almost nobody says poach, and yet poaching and its cousin steaming underpin more of the classical repertoire than any other heat — the whole of the fish station, most of the egg station, the great family pots, and every fruit dessert that isn't baked.

The reason it goes unnoticed is that poaching looks like nothing is happening. There is no sear, no colour, no fond to deglaze, no dramatic hiss. A liquid sits at a near-silence and something cooks inside it, evenly, all the way through, without ever toughening on the outside before the centre catches up. That evenness is the entire point. A steak wants a violent exterior and a gentle interior; a fillet of sole wants gentleness everywhere, because its structure cannot survive anything else.

The misunderstanding is thinking gentle means imprecise. It is the opposite. A rolling boil forgives you a few degrees either way — it is already at the only temperature water can reach at sea level. A *frémissement* (a shiver) has no such safety net: five degrees too hot and you have simmered instead of poached, and

a poached egg becomes a boiled one, ragged and tough. Precision at low heat is a discipline of watching, not of thermometers, and that watching is what this chapter teaches.

> *A rolling boil is a method with no judgement in it. A frémissement asks you to look at the pan every minute and know exactly what you are seeing. That is why it is the more advanced skill, not the easier one.*
>
> ON GENTLE HEAT

Frémir to rolling boil, by eye

Water and stock pass through four recognisable states between cold and a hard boil. French classical training names each one and expects a cook to move between them by sight, because a thermometer left in a pan of court-bouillon gets in the way of the fish going in and out.

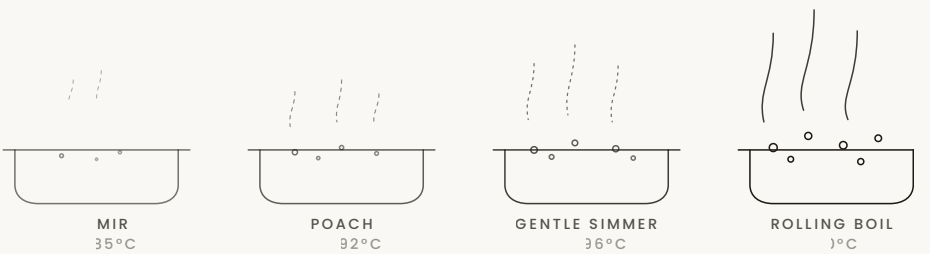


FIGURE 1 · THE BUBBLE LADDER

Four pans, the same volume of liquid, increasing only in heat. Count the bubbles and their size, not the degrees — that is the only thermometer a French kitchen ever used.

- **Frémir — the shiver (75–85°C).** The surface trembles rather than moves. A single small bubble rises from the base every few seconds and dies before it

reaches the top. Nothing breaks the surface. This is the temperature for œufs pochés and for any fish so delicate it would tear at anything hotter.

- **Poaching heat (85–92°C).** A scatter of small bubbles rises steadily from the base and bursts gently at the surface, which now has a faint, lazy movement to it — like a pond in a light wind rather than glass. This is the working temperature for most poached fish, chicken breasts, and fruit in syrup.
- **Gentle simmer (92–96°C).** Bubbles are larger, more frequent, and visibly disturb the surface without breaking it into froth. This is where a *pot-au-feu* or a stock lives for hours — too vigorous for delicate protein, exactly right for anything that needs long, slow extraction.
- **Rolling boil (100°C at sea level).** Big bubbles from the base, constant surface turbulence, steam rising freely, noise. Correct for pasta, blanching, and reducing a sauce hard — wrong for almost everything else in this chapter.

> NO THERMOMETER, NO PROBLEM
>
> If you must use one: frémir sits just under the point where you'd call it simmering at all, roughly 75–85°C; a gentle simmer is 92–96°C; a boil is 100°C. But train your eye instead. A thermometer left in the pan cannot tell you the surface is about to break into a rolling boil thirty seconds from now — your eyes can, and thirty seconds is the difference between a poached egg and a ruined one.

Court-bouillon

A *court-bouillon* — literally "short broth" — is the seasoned, acidulated water that fish, offal and some vegetables are poached in. It is not a stock, and confusing the two is the single most common mistake made by home cooks reaching for this technique.

A stock is built for hours from bones to extract gelatine and body, and it is a finished ingredient in its own right. A court-bouillon is built in twenty minutes from aromatics and acid, exists purely to season and protect whatever is poached in it, and is usually discarded or reduced afterwards rather than served as is. It has no meat, no bones, and no long cooking — long cooking would only concentrate vegetable bitterness with nothing to balance it.

COMPONENT	TYPICAL AMOUNT PER 2 LITRES WATER	PURPOSE
White wine or vinegar	150–250 ml wine, or 60 ml vinegar	Acid firms fish flesh and keeps it white; also flavour
Carrot, sliced	1 medium	Sweetness and colour in the broth
Onion, sliced	1 medium, or 2 shallots	Base aromatic
Celery	1 stick	Savoury lift
Bouquet garni	Thyme, bay, parsley stalks	Background herb note, removed before use
Peppercorns	1 tsp, whole, added late	Aromatic heat without bitterness — bitter if boiled long
Salt	10–12 g per litre	Seasons the poaching medium so it seasons the fish

01 Simmer the vegetables and acid first

Combine everything except the peppercorns in cold water and bring to a simmer. Cook for 15–20 minutes so the vegetables give up their flavour — no longer, or the broth turns bitter and dull.

CUE *The liquid should smell bright and appetising, not stewed.*

02 Add peppercorns, strain, cool

Add the peppercorns for the final five minutes only. Strain out the solids — a court-bouillon is used clear. For fish, it is almost always cooled to room temperature or below before the fish goes in; see below for why.

> NO FISH KETTLE REQUIRED
>
> The classical *poissonnière* is a long, narrow pan with a perforated rack for lifting a whole fish out without breaking it. A roasting tin, deep enough to submerge the fish, with a double layer of foil folded into a sling under the fish and left long at both ends, does the same lifting job for nothing.

Poaching fish, whole and in fillets

Fish flesh is held together by very little connective tissue, which is why it flakes so readily and why it punishes rough handling. Poaching is kind to it precisely because there is no agitation to break the flakes apart before they are meant to separate.

Whole fish

Start a whole fish — salmon, sea bass, trout — in **cold** court-bouillon, not hot. A large fish dropped into liquid already at temperature cooks unevenly: the outer flesh is overdone by the time heat has travelled to the bone at the centre. Starting cold lets the fish and the liquid heat together, so the whole fish reaches doneness within moments of itself. Bring to a bare frémir, then hold it there — never above 85°C — for roughly 10 minutes per kilo, measured at the thickest point.

Fillets and steaks

A fillet is thin enough that it has no need of the slow, shared warm-up a whole fish needs. Bring the court-bouillon (or, for a simpler approach, well-seasoned water with a squeeze of lemon and a bay leaf) to a frémir first, then lower the fillet in. It will be done in 4–8 minutes depending on thickness. Flat fish such as sole take the least time of all.

> NEVER LET IT BOIL
>
> The instant a poaching liquid holding fish reaches a simmer proper, the outer layer of flesh seizes, weeps its moisture into the liquid, and turns dry and stringy while the centre is still raw. If the surface starts to move, pull the pan half off the heat immediately — do not wait for the next check.

How to tell it is done, with nothing but your senses

- **The flake test.** Press a fork or the back of a spoon gently into the thickest part. Cooked fish separates into clean, opaque flakes with almost no resistance. Raw fish resists and looks glassy or translucent between the flakes.
- **The bone test, for whole fish.** At the point behind the head, where the flesh is thickest, slide a thin knife down to the backbone and gently lift a flake

away from it. If it lifts cleanly from the bone, it is done; if it clings, give it another minute or two.

- **The skewer-to-lip test.** Push a skewer into the thickest part, leave it three seconds, then touch it to your lower lip — the most sensitive skin you have. Warm through means done; cold at the centre means not yet; hot enough to flinch means you have overshot.

Poaching chicken without chalk

Poached chicken breast has a poor reputation entirely because it is usually cooked wrong. Boiled hard, a chicken breast tightens, expels its moisture, and turns into the dry, chalky texture everyone associates with "diet food." Poached properly, it is silken, and this is a technique failure, not an ingredient failure.

01 Bring the liquid to a frémir, not a simmer

Use a well-seasoned stock or water with aromatics, at a bare shiver — 75–85°C. Season it properly; the breast absorbs almost nothing from an under-seasoned liquid.

02 Slide the breast in and take the pan off direct heat

Lower the breast into the liquid, bring it back to a bare shiver, then move the pan to the lowest possible heat or off the heat entirely with a lid on. Chicken breast wants to come up to temperature slowly, almost by residual heat, and never wants to be at a rolling anything.

CUE *Almost no visible movement in the liquid. If you can hear it, it is too hot.*

03 Pull it at 68–70°C internal, or by feel

A skewer pushed to the centre and held to the lip should feel hot, not scalding. Pressed with a fingertip, the breast should give slightly and spring back — no resistance at all means it is not yet cooked; no give at all means it has gone too far.

CUE *Rest it in the liquid, off the heat, for five minutes before cutting. The centre continues to cook gently and the juices settle.*

Poule au pot and pot-au-feu

Poule au pot — hen in the pot — and its beef cousin *pot-au-feu* are the family meal at the heart of French home cooking: a whole bird or a tough cut of beef, simmered gently with vegetables until both the meat and the broth are worth eating, served as two courses from one pot.

The governing principle is the opposite of poaching a fillet: this is long, gentle simmering — 92–96°C, not a frémir — for the two to three hours a whole hen or a cut like beef shin needs to turn tender. Start the meat in cold, well-salted water so that flavour moves in both directions between meat and liquid, rather than sealing the meat's surface and trapping flavour inside it as a hot start would. Skim the grey foam that rises in the first twenty minutes scrupulously — it is coagulated protein and carries no flavour, only cloudiness — then add the vegetables (carrots, leeks, turnips, celery, whole onion studded with a clove) partway through so they finish exactly as the meat does.

Serve the broth first, with the vegetables, then the meat carved at the table with coarse salt, mustard and cornichons. This is the same family of technique as Stocks and shares its logic entirely — a pot-au-feu is, in effect, a stock you also intend to eat the solids from.

Œufs pochés

The poached egg is the frémir test in miniature, and everything said above about the shiver applies at its most exacting here. For the full method — the vinegar water, the whirlpool, the fresh-egg test, and the fault list for ragged whites — see Eggs. The principle to carry from this chapter is the same one: a poached egg cooked at a true frémir holds a tight, tender shape; cooked at even a light simmer, the white shreds into rags before the yolk is set.

Poaching fruit

Pears in wine — *poires au vin* — are the clearest teaching example of poaching fruit, and the same syrup and method apply to peaches, quince, and firm apples.

COMPONENT	RATIO	NOTE
Red or white wine	750 ml bottle	Red gives the classic garnet colour; white keeps the pear pale
Sugar	200–250 g	Roughly a 1:3 sugar-to-wine ratio by weight; less for very ripe fruit
Water	250 ml	Softens the syrup so it does not over-reduce before the fruit is done
Aromatics	Cinnamon stick, a strip of orange or lemon zest, a split vanilla pod	Added whole, removed before serving

Bring the syrup to a bare poaching heat — 85–92°C — before the fruit goes in; too hot and the outside collapses before the centre softens. Peel the pears, leaving the stalk on for presentation, and lower them in whole or halved. Cut a round of baking paper to the diameter of the pan with a small vent hole in the centre — the *cartouche* — and lay it directly on the surface of the syrup. It holds the fruit just submerged without a lid trapping too much heat, and stops a dry, discoloured cap forming above the liquid line where the fruit pokes through.

Poach 20–35 minutes depending on ripeness; a skewer should meet gentle, even resistance the whole way through, not the total absence of resistance you'd want from a purée. Lift the fruit out, then reduce the poaching syrup hard, at a full boil now that the fruit is out of it, until it coats the back of a spoon — this is the sauce.

Shallow poaching à la nage

À la nage — literally "swimming" — is shallow poaching: a small amount of well-flavoured, buttered liquid, just enough to come partway up the fish, simmered in a covered pan on the hob rather than submerged in a full court-bouillon. It is the standard restaurant method for fillets, because the poaching liquid and the sauce become the same thing.

01 **Build a shallow bath of aromatics**

Butter a wide, shallow pan, scatter finely chopped shallot over the base, and lay the seasoned fillets on top, skin side down if they have skin. Pour in fish stock or a light court-bouillon and white wine to come about a third of the way up the fillets — not to submerge them.

02 **Cover and poach on the hob**

Lay a cartouche or a lid on top and hold at a frémir. The trapped steam cooks the top of the fillet while the liquid cooks the base — the fish is poached and lightly steamed at once.

03 **Lift the fish, reduce the liquor into a sauce**

Move the cooked fillets to a warm plate under foil. Boil the remaining liquor hard until it reduces by half or more, then finish it off the heat with a whisk of cold butter, cube by cube — see Emulsions for the technique — or with a spoon of cream. The poaching liquid was the sauce all along; it only needed reducing.

Steaming without a steamer basket

Steam carries heat efficiently and touches food without a drop of liquid, which is why it is the gentlest of all the moist methods and the one that changes flavour least. You do not need a dedicated steamer to use it.



FIGURE 2 · THREE STEAMERS, NO STEAMER

All three do the same job: hold food clear of a shallow pool of simmering water, under a lid, so it cooks in trapped steam rather than liquid.

- **A sieve over a pan.** A metal sieve or colander set over a saucepan of simmering water, with a lid or a dome of foil over the top, steams vegetables and fish perfectly well. Keep the water level below the base of the sieve.
- **A plate on ramekins.** Stand two or three upturned ramekins or heatproof cups in a wide pan with 3–4 cm of simmering water, rest a plate on top, and put the food on the plate. This is the method for delicate things — a whole fish, a custard — that would fall through a sieve's holes or need to sit level.
- **A folded-foil trivet.** Fold a double sheet of foil into a long ridge, coil it into a flat ring about 3 cm high, and stand it in the base of a pan with water below its top edge. A plate or a heatproof bowl sits on the ring. This is the method when you have no ramekins and no sieve at all.
- **The improvised couscoussier.** The real *couscoussier* is a two-part pot, a stew simmering below and a perforated steamer basket of grain above, sharing the same rising steam and aroma. A large stockpot with a metal colander that sits snugly in its rim, covered with a damp cloth pressed around the join to stop steam escaping around the sides, does exactly the same job.

> BAMBOO STEAMERS ARE LOVELY, NOT NECESSARY
>
> A stacked bamboo steamer looks the part and steams several dishes at once, which is genuinely useful for a big dinner. For everyday cooking, any of the three improvisations above steams a portion of vegetables or a fillet of fish exactly as well, for the price of nothing.

Steaming in paper — the papillote as a whole method

Fish *en papillote* — in a paper parcel — is steaming taken to its most self-contained form: the food, a little liquid or butter, and its own released juices are sealed inside folded baking paper and roasted in a hot oven, so the parcel puffs with trapped steam and the fish or vegetables inside cook by that steam alone, sealed away from the dry oven air. It deserves to be thought of as a whole method in its own right, not a garnish on roasting, because nothing about it is dry heat — everything that happens inside the parcel is a fast, hot version of the sieve-over-a-pan idea above.

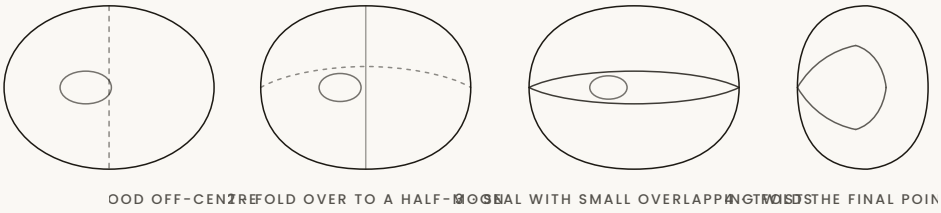


FIGURE 3 · THE PAPILLOTE FOLD

Each fold overlaps the last by about a centimetre, working around the curve from the wide end to the point, so the seal is airtight without any pinning or tying.

01 **Cut a heart, or don't bother**

A large square or rectangle of baking paper, folded once down the middle, is all you need — the classical heart shape is decoration, not function. Open it out and set the fish or vegetables slightly off-centre, towards one side of the fold line, with a little butter, a splash of white wine or stock, and thin slices of any aromatic vegetable.

02 Fold and seal from the wide end to the point

Fold the paper back over the food. Starting at one end, make a small fold of the edge, crease it hard, then fold the next small section over the top of it, overlapping by about a centimetre, working your way around the curve. Twist the final point tightly to close it — no string, no staples.

CUE *Each fold should crease sharply enough to hold its own shape when you let go.*

03 Roast hot, judge by the puff

A hot oven, 200–220°C, for 10–15 minutes depending on thickness. The parcel inflates with trapped steam as it cooks — that is the tell that it is sealed and working.

CUE *A well-puffed, taut parcel that has browned faintly at the folds is ready. Bring it to the table sealed and let the diner tear it open — the released steam carries the whole aroma of the dish in one moment.*

Blanching, refreshing, and why the ice bath matters

Blanchir — blanching — is a brief plunge into fast-boiling, heavily salted water, followed immediately by *rafraîchir*, refreshing in iced water. The two always go together; one without the other is not the technique, it is half of it.

Blanching does several different jobs depending on what is in the pot: it sets the bright chlorophyll green of a vegetable before heat has time to dull it, it loosens the skin of a tomato or an almond for peeling, it firms and partly cooks something that will finish by another method later, and it draws out excess salt or bitterness from bacon or certain vegetables. In every case, the plunge into iced water afterwards stops the cooking dead. Without it, residual heat inside the vegetable keeps cooking for several more minutes on the way to the colander, turning bright green beans a dull khaki and taking a firm carrot past crisp-tender into soft.

See Vegetables for the full method and the chemistry of why green vegetables lose colour under sustained heat and acid — the short version is that chlorophyll's magnesium centre is knocked out by heat and acid together, turning green to khaki, and a fast blanch followed by an immediate ice bath is the only defence.

On sous-vide, honestly

Sous-vide — cooking sealed under vacuum in a precisely controlled water bath — is, at bottom, poaching with a machine doing the watching for you. It is a genuinely useful piece of restaurant technology for certain narrow jobs, and it is entirely unnecessary in a home kitchen for anything taught in this chapter.

What sous-vide buys you is the ability to hold something at an exact temperature for hours without attention. What it costs you is a specialised, single-purpose machine, plastic bags, and — for anything that benefits from a seared crust — a second pan afterwards anyway. A cook who has learned to read a frémir by eye, rest chicken breast off the heat, and pull fish at the flake test has already bought, for nothing, the one thing sous-vide actually sells: control over gentle heat. Practise the eye instead of buying the machine.

JOB	WHAT SOUS-VIDE CLAIMS	WHAT TO DO INSTEAD
Chicken breast, moist through	Exact 65°C for an hour, no guessing	Frémir, off direct heat, rest in the liquid — see above
Fish, evenly cooked	No overcooking possible	Cold-start whole fish or à la nage for fillets, and the flake test
Egg, precise yolk	Exact temperature for a set white, runny yolk	A frémir and a timer; see Eggs
Fruit, evenly soft	No collapsed edges	Poach at 85–92°C under a cartouche, as above

When it goes wrong

> ***Poached fish is dry and stringy***
>
> The liquid reached a simmer or boil at some point, even briefly, and the outer flesh seized.
>
> FIX Hold strictly at a frémir; pull the pan half off the heat the instant the surface starts to move, and consider starting whole fish from cold liquid.

Poached chicken breast is chalky

Cooked at a simmer rather than a frémir, or left in direct heat rather than moved off it to finish gently.

FIX Bring to a bare shiver, then take the pan off direct heat with the lid on; rest the meat in the liquid five minutes before cutting.

Poached fruit collapses at the edges before the centre softens

Syrup too hot, or the fruit not fully submerged so it cooked unevenly.

FIX Poach at 85–92°C, never higher, and always under a cartouche so the whole surface stays wet and covered.

The papillote parcel leaks and dries out

Folds too shallow or spaced too far apart to hold under the pressure of trapped steam.

FIX Overlap each fold by a full centimetre and crease it hard with a fingernail before moving to the next.

Blanched green vegetables turn khaki on the way to the table

No ice bath, or too slow getting them into it, so residual heat kept cooking them after they left the pot.

FIX Have the iced water ready before the vegetables go into the boiling water, and move them across within seconds of being lifted out.

Court-bouillon tastes bitter

Simmered too long, or the peppercorns went in at the start instead of the last five minutes.

FIX Fifteen to twenty minutes for the vegetables and acid is enough; add peppercorns only at the end, and strain promptly.

Everything in this chapter is the same instruction said seven different ways: keep the heat just below where it wants to go, and let time do what force cannot.

ON PATIENCE AS A TECHNIQUE

CHAPTER 14

Vegetables

Les Légumes

One question governs almost everything a French kitchen does with a vegetable: do you want it green and fresh, or brown and sweet? Every method below is an answer.

The one decision

Before you choose a method, choose an outcome. Do you want the vegetable to taste of itself — bright, green, faintly mineral, cooked fast and stopped dead? Or do you want it to taste of what heat does to sugar — brown, sweet, soft, cooked slowly with nowhere to escape to?

Almost every vegetable failure in a home kitchen comes from trying to have both at once: green beans left in a hot pan "to get a bit of colour" that turn khaki and squeak between the teeth; carrots boiled hard and fast that never develop the sweetness twenty minutes of gentle glazing would have given them. Classical French technique keeps the two outcomes almost entirely separate, and names them separately — *à l'anglaise* for the first, *glacer* and its relatives for the second — because they ask for different water, different heat, different timing, and different vegetables.

This chapter is organised around that single fork. Learn to recognise which outcome a recipe wants before you light the hob, and most of the rest follows.

A vegetable does not know it is a side dish. Treat it with the same decision-making you would give a sauce, and it stops behaving like an afterthought.

ON VEGETABLE COOKERY

À l'anglaise — boiling done right

À l'anglaise — "in the English style" — is the classical French method for cooking green and pale vegetables so they stay bright, keep their bite, and taste of nothing but themselves: a large pan of heavily salted water at a full rolling boil, uncovered, the vegetable added in batches small enough not to drop the temperature, cooked briefly, then refreshed at once in iced water.

- **Salt like the sea.** 10–15 g of salt per litre — roughly a tablespoon per litre, tasted until the water is frankly salty. This is not a light seasoning; most of it stays in the water and drains away, but the vegetable needs to be surrounded by that concentration to season through in the short time it has.
- **A full rolling boil, and stay there.** Add vegetables in batches small enough that the water barely stops boiling. A pan that drops back to a simmer under a load of cold vegetables cooks them slowly and unevenly instead of fast and bright.
- **Uncovered, always.** A lid traps volatile acids released by the cooking vegetable — more on this below — and concentrates them against the vegetable itself, accelerating colour loss. Leave the lid off for anything green.
- **Refresh the instant it is done.** Straight into a large bowl of well-iced water, enough to chill it through in under a minute. Drain again once cold. This step is not optional; see Poaching & Steaming for the fuller treatment of blanching and refreshing.

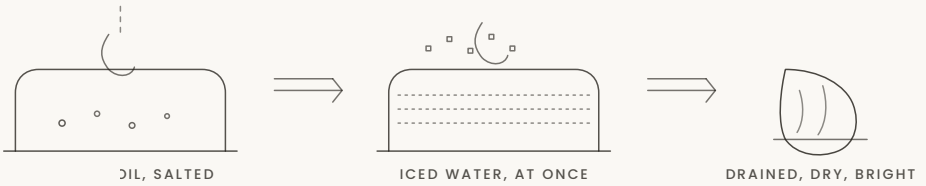


FIGURE 1 · BLANCH AND REFRESH

The gap between pan and bowl should be seconds, not a walk across the kitchen. Every second of delay is residual heat still cooking the vegetable.

WHY GREEN VEGETABLES LOSE COLOUR

Chlorophyll, the pigment that makes a bean or a bean's cousin green, is a ring-shaped molecule with a magnesium atom held at its centre. Heat and acid both knock that magnesium out and replace it with hydrogen, and the molecule that results — pheophytin — is a dull olive-khaki rather than bright green. A short blanch in an uncovered pan of alkaline-to-neutral water, followed by an immediate cold shock, gets the vegetable cooked before enough magnesium has been displaced to matter. A long simmer, a covered pan trapping acidic cooking vapours against the vegetable, or a squeeze of lemon added before serving all accelerate the same reaction — which is why the acid in a dressed green salad goes on at the very last moment, not while the leaves are still warm.

Sweat, sauté, roast, glaze, braise

Five verbs, five different relationships between vegetable, fat, and time. Knowing which one a dish calls for is most of what separates a competent vegetable cook from an uncertain one.

- **Sweat — *suer*.** Low heat, a covered pan, a little fat, no colour at all. The vegetable releases its own water and softens in it. This is how you start onions, shallots and mirepoix for a sauce or a soup base — you want their flavour dissolved into the dish, not caramelised into a separate one.
- **Sauté.** High heat, an open pan, enough fat to conduct heat evenly, constant movement. Built for speed and for a little colour without collapsing the ve-

getable — green beans, mangetout, sliced courgette finished in butter after blanching.

- **Roast.** Dry oven heat around a vegetable coated thinly in fat, on a tray with room to breathe. Water evaporates from the surface, sugars caramelise, and the vegetable concentrates rather than dilutes. Crowd the tray and you steam instead of roast — see Searing & Roasting for why spacing matters as much there as here.
- **Glaze — *glacer*.** A shallow pan, a little butter, sugar and stock or water reduced around the vegetable until it coats each piece in a syrupy sheen. Covered in detail below; the definitive answer to "brown and sweet."
- **Braise.** Vegetable partly or fully submerged in liquid, covered, long slow cooking, usually finished by uncovering to reduce. For tougher vegetables — braised lettuce, braised fennel, braised celery — that need real time to soften and take on the flavour of their cooking liquid. See Braising & Stewing for the full method, which applies to vegetables exactly as it does to meat.

The glazed vegetable — *glacer à blanc et à brun*

Glazing is the clearest expression of the "brown and sweet" side of the fork, and it needs no special pan, only a shallow one wide enough that the vegetables sit in a single layer.

The name splits into two related techniques. *Glacer à blanc* — glazing white — keeps the vegetable pale: butter, a little sugar, stock or water to half-cover, simmered under a cartouche until the liquid reduces to a thin, clinging syrup that coats without colouring. *Glacer à brun* — glazing brown — lets that same syrup run past the point of clear reduction into a light caramel, so the vegetable takes on a shining amber-brown coat and a real depth of sweetness, classically the method for small whole onions and carrots served alongside a roast.

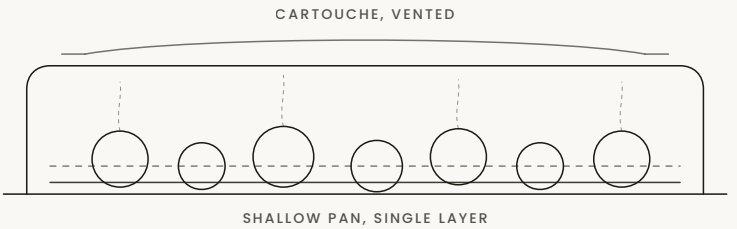


FIGURE 2 · THE GLAZING PAN IN SECTION

Liquid comes roughly halfway up the vegetables, never covering them — the exposed top half steams under the cartouche while the submerged half simmers in reducing syrup.

01 Cut evenly and start cold

Small whole vegetables (baby carrots, button onions, turnips turned or trimmed round) or evenly cut pieces of larger ones. Put them in the pan with butter, a pinch of sugar, salt, and water or light stock to come about halfway up — never fully submerged.

02 Cut a cartouche and simmer

A round of baking paper cut to the pan's diameter with a small vent hole in the centre, laid directly on the liquid. It holds in enough heat to steam the exposed tops of the vegetables while the liquid below simmers and reduces, so the whole vegetable cooks evenly without a lid's fuller seal trapping too much steam and boiling rather than glazing.

03 Uncover, and watch the syrup form

Once the vegetable is tender, lift off the cartouche and let the liquid reduce hard, swirling the pan by its handle rather than stirring, until it thickens into a syrup that clings to the vegetables in a visible sheen.

CUE FOR À BLANC *The syrup coats the back of a spoon and is still pale gold. Stop here.*

CUE FOR À BRUN *Keep swirling past that point; the syrup darkens to a light amber and the vegetables take on a faint shine and colour at the edges.*

> NO SPECIAL PAN NEEDED
>
> A sauteuse or a copper glazing pan is a delight to own and does nothing a heavy, shallow frying pan or a wide saucepan cannot do just as well. What matters is width — enough surface area for a single layer of vegetables and a shallow enough pool of liquid to reduce quickly.

Étuvée and the fondue de tomates

Étuvée — stewing gently in a covered pan with butter and no added liquid at all — relies entirely on the vegetable's own water. Shred or slice the vegetable finely (cabbage, leek, courgette), toss it in butter over low heat, season, cover tightly, and let it cook in the steam it releases itself, stirring occasionally. It is the gentlest possible cooking, closer to steaming than to sautéing, and it keeps a vegetable's own flavour undiluted by any other liquid.

The *fondue de tomates* — tomato fondue — is étuvée applied to tomato and is the base of half the tomato sauces in the French repertoire. Peeled, deseeded, roughly chopped tomato is cooked slowly in olive oil with sweated shallot or garlic, uncovered this time so the considerable water in a tomato can evaporate away, until it collapses into a soft, jammy purée with no trace of raw acidity. Twenty to thirty minutes on a low heat, stirred occasionally, is usual; rushing it with high heat scorches the sugars before the water has gone.

The potato canon

Five potato preparations account for most of what a French kitchen does with the vegetable, and each teaches a different principle.

Purée — without a ricer

A ricer gives an effortlessly smooth mash by forcing cooked potato through small holes under pressure, and it is a genuine convenience — not a necessity. By hand: cook peeled, evenly sized potatoes (a floury variety, not waxy) in well-salted water from cold, until a knife meets no resistance at all. Drain thoroughly and return them to the dry, hot pan for a minute over low heat to steam off excess moisture — a wet potato makes a gluey purée no matter what happens next.

Push the hot potato through a coarse sieve with the back of a ladle or a wooden spoon, in batches, into a clean pan — this does almost exactly what a ricer does, more slowly. Then beat in hot milk and butter over low heat with a wooden spoon, a little at a time, until the purée is loose and glossy.

> THE ONE THING THAT RUINS A PURÉE
>
> Potato cells are full of starch, and starch granules rupture and release a gluey, elastic starch called amylose when they are beaten or processed too hard. A food processor does this in seconds and turns purée into wallpaper paste; even a sieve or ricer, worked too vigorously or too many times over the same potato, does the same thing more slowly. Push it through once, beat in the butter and milk gently, and stop the moment it is smooth.

Pommes sautées

Cooked potato, sliced, then coloured hard in clarified butter or a neutral oil in a wide pan, turned only once it has released cleanly and formed a genuine crust. Boiling the potato first (rather than starting raw) means the outside is already starch-set and will crisp rather than stick; starting from raw slices, as for a home *pommes de terre sautées* without pre-cooking, needs a longer, lower, more patient pan and more turning.

Gratin dauphinois

Thinly sliced raw potato layered in a buttered dish, covered in cream (sometimes cream and milk together) infused with garlic and a little nutmeg, and baked slowly — around 150–160°C for an hour to ninety minutes — until the potato is fully tender and the cream has thickened around it and browned lightly on top. No cheese, no egg, no par-cooking, in the true Dauphiné version; those are all later additions that change the dish into something else.

Pommes boulangère

Sliced potato layered with sliced onion, moistened with stock rather than cream, and baked — traditionally in the baker's oven alongside a joint of meat, whose fat and juices would drip down onto it. At home, sit the dish under a roasting joint on a lower shelf, or bake it separately at 180°C for about an hour, basting once with a spoon of the roasting fat if you have it.

Pommes anna

Thin, even rounds of potato — a mandoline makes this fast and a sharp knife on a well-squared potato does it just as well, more slowly — arranged in tightly overlapping concentric circles in a heavily buttered pan, each layer buttered again, pressed down firmly, then cooked on the hob to set a crust on the base before finishing in the oven. Turned out in one piece, it should hold together entirely from the starch and butter binding the layers, with no other binder at all.

PREPARATION	POTATO TYPE	KEY TECHNIQUE
Purée	Floury (Maris Piper, King Edward)	Sieve once, beat gently, never a processor
Pommes sautées	Waxy or all-purpose	Pre-cook, then colour hard without crowding
Gratin dauphinois	Waxy, holds its shape in cream	Slow bake in infused cream, no par-cooking
Pommes boulangère	All-purpose	Layered with onion, moistened with stock
Pommes anna	Waxy, uniform rounds	Overlapping layers bound by butter and starch alone

Ratatouille done properly, and the quick version

Ratatouille is the vegetable stew of Nice, and it has two honest versions, not one right way and one wrong way — but the difference is worth knowing rather than defaulting to the easier version out of habit.

Done properly: aubergine, courgette, pepper and onion are each cut, salted where relevant (aubergine, to draw out bitterness and excess water), and cooked *separately* in olive oil, each to its own correct doneness — the aubergine soft and faintly caramelised, the courgette barely past raw, the pepper collapsed and sweet. Only once every vegetable is individually right are they combined with the tomato fondue and warmed gently together for a final ten minutes, just long enough to let the flavours meet without letting any one vegetable overcook into the mush of the others.

The quick version: everything cut and thrown into one pot together, cooked as a single stew until soft. It is faster, it is not wrong, and it is genuinely delicious — but the aubergine will have released water into the courgette and softened it past its best point, the pepper's cooking time and the courgette's are different and neither gets its ideal moment, and the dish loses the distinct identity of each vegetable that the separate method preserves. What is lost, precisely, is definition: the proper version tastes like four vegetables that agreed to share a plate; the quick version tastes like one vegetable that used to be four.

Mushrooms: why they must be dry, why the pan must be hot

A mushroom is mostly water held inside a fine, porous structure, and that structure is the whole problem. Washed and left wet, or crowded into a pan that has not fully come to heat, a mushroom simply steams in its own released water — grey, slippery, and without a trace of the browning that gives it flavour.

- **Dry them, don't drown them.** Wipe with a damp cloth or brush rather than washing under a tap; if they must be rinsed, dry thoroughly before they meet a hot pan.
- **A hot, wide, uncrowded pan.** High heat and enough surface area that the mushrooms sit in one layer, not stacked. As soon as the pan and fat are properly hot, the mushroom's surface sears before its interior water has time to weep out and pool.
- **Add salt late.** Salt draws water out by osmosis. Salt at the start of cooking and you guarantee the steamed, grey result you were trying to avoid; salt in the final minute instead.
- **Let the water cook off, then let them colour.** If a puddle does form in the pan despite your care, keep the heat high and let it evaporate before adding more mushrooms or trying to brown further — a wet pan cannot brown anything.

Duxelles

Duxelles is mushroom, finely chopped, cooked down with shallot and butter in exactly the manner above until every trace of moisture has driven off and what remains is a dense, dark, intensely savoury paste. It is the filling inside a *bœuf en croûte*, a stuffing for other vegetables, and a garnish in its own right, and it is nothing more than the mushroom principle above, taken all the way to the end.

Leeks, endive, artichokes, asparagus, fennel

Leeks

Split lengthways almost to the root, fan the layers under running water to wash out the grit that collects between them, then cook whole or sliced by any method above — braised in a little stock and butter under a cartouche is the classical treatment for whole leeks as a dish in their own right.

Endive

Chicory's bitterness is concentrated near the core; a small conical cut to remove it before cooking softens the bitterness considerably. Braised in butter with a little sugar and lemon juice, covered, over low heat, endive turns meltingly soft and the bitterness mellows into something closer to savoury caramel.

Trimming a globe artichoke by hand

An artichoke looks armoured and is not: everything inedible on it can be removed with a paring knife and a lemon half in about two minutes once you know the sequence.

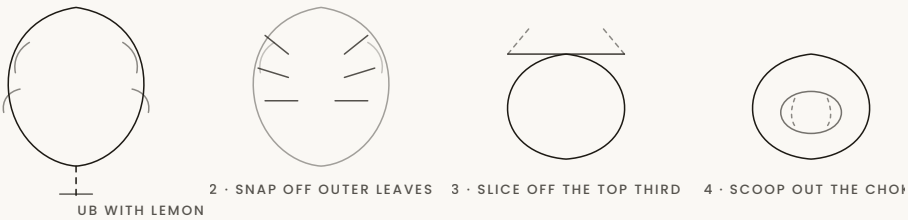


FIGURE 3 · THE ARTICHOKE IN FOUR MOVES

Rub every cut surface with lemon as you go — the flesh browns within a minute of exposure to air.

01 Trim the stem

Snap or cut the stem close to the base, then peel its tough outer skin with a paring knife to reveal the tender, pale core beneath — it is good to eat and often discarded needlessly. Rub every cut immediately with a cut lemon.

02 Snap off the tough outer leaves

Bend each outer leaf sharply back and down until it snaps at its own natural breaking point, near the base, rather than being cut — this leaves the tender pale base of the leaf attached to the heart instead of tearing it away. Work round until the leaves you are left with are pale yellow-green and pliable rather than fibrous.

03 Slice off the top third

With a large knife, cut straight across the top third to remove the sharp, tough tips of the remaining leaves in one motion. Trim any remaining tough green from around the base with the paring knife, turning the artichoke as you go, until only pale flesh is visible.

04 **Scoop out the choke**

Halve or quarter the artichoke and use a small spoon to scrape out the hairy, inedible choke and the tight purple-tipped inner leaves that surround it, right down to the smooth pale heart. Drop each piece into acidulated water (water with lemon juice or a little vinegar) as it is finished to stop it browning until it goes into the pan.

CUE *The choke lifts away in one scoop once you find the right layer — it should never need scraping repeatedly.*

Asparagus and peeling

Snap each spear near its base and it will break naturally at the point where the woody end begins — no measuring needed, the spear tells you. For thicker spears, peel the lower third with a vegetable peeler, working from just below the tip downwards, to remove the fibrous outer skin while keeping the tender core intact.

Fennel

Trim the base and the tough stalks, reserving the feathery fronds as a garnish, then halve or quarter through the root the way an onion is halved — the root holds the layers together for slicing. Fennel takes equally well to being eaten raw and shaved for a salad, or braised until soft and sweet by the same method as endive above.

Salads and the dressing-at-the-last-moment rule

A dressed leaf is a leaf under attack: the acid and salt in a vinaigrette draw water out of the leaf's cells by osmosis within minutes, and what began crisp turns limp and weeps its own dressing back out onto the plate. This is the same cellular mechanism, seen from the other direction, as the chlorophyll discussion above — acid changes a leaf, and it does so fast.

The fix is simply timing. Wash and dry leaves thoroughly well ahead of time — wet leaves dilute a dressing and refuse to hold it — and toss with the vinaigrette only in the last minute before the plate reaches the table, by hand or with two spoons, turning gently until every leaf is lightly coated rather than

swimming. A salad dressed five minutes too early is already a different, worse dish by the time it is eaten.

> ON VINAIGRETTE ITSELF
>
> The classical ratio is three parts oil to one part acid, whisked or shaken to a temporary emulsion, seasoned assertively because a cold dressing mutes seasoning more than a warm sauce does. See Emulsions for the mechanics of why oil and vinegar combine at all, and why they separate again if left standing.

Seasonality, month by month

France runs on markets, and markets run on seasons. This is not sentiment: a vegetable in its own season needs less technique to taste good, because the vegetable is doing most of the work.

MONTH	AT THEIR BEST
January	Leeks, celeriac, black radish, Jerusalem artichoke, chicory
February	Leeks, cabbage, salsify, turnip, chicory
March	Spinach, purple sprouting broccoli, spring onion, early radish
April	Asparagus begins, new potatoes, spring carrot, sorrel
May	Asparagus at its peak, peas, broad beans, radish, artichoke
June	Broad beans, peas, courgette, artichoke, first tomatoes
July	Tomato, aubergine, pepper, courgette, green beans, fennel
August	Tomato, aubergine, pepper, sweetcorn, cucumber — full ratatouille season
September	Tomato tailing off, wild mushrooms begin, pumpkin, leeks return
October	Pumpkin and squash, wild mushrooms, celeriac, Jerusalem artichoke
November	Cabbage, leeks, chicory, black radish, chestnuts
December	Cabbage, leeks, celeriac, salsify, chicory

> OUT OF SEASON IS NOT FORBIDDEN, JUST HARDER
>
> An out-of-season tomato needs the full slow fondue treatment to taste of anything at all; a July tomato barely needs cooking. Match your ambition to the season and the technique required drops accordingly.

When it goes wrong

Green vegetables come out khaki

Boiled too long, cooked covered, or left standing before refreshing.

FIX Boil uncovered at a full rolling boil, and have the iced water ready before the vegetable goes in so refreshing is instant.

Glazed vegetables are pale and watery instead of syrupy

Too much liquid to start, or the cartouche never came off to let the final reduction happen.

FIX Start with liquid at half height, not full submersion, and always finish uncovered, swirling until the syrup visibly clings.

Mushrooms are grey and slippery, not browned

Washed and left wet, or added to a pan that was not properly hot, or crowded into too small a pan.

FIX Dry them thoroughly, use a wide pan at real heat, and add salt only in the final minute.

Purée is gluey and elastic instead of light

Overworked — pushed through a sieve or ricer too many times, or beaten too hard, releasing amylose starch.

FIX There is no fix once it has happened; next time, pass it through once and beat in liquid gently, stopping the instant it is smooth.

Ratatouille turns to mush

Everything cooked together in one pot for too long, so the aubergine's released water softened the courgette long past its point and the pepper never had its own moment.

FIX Cook each vegetable separately to its own correct doneness, and combine only for a final ten minutes to let the flavours meet.

Salad leaves go limp before the table

Dressed too early; acid and salt have already drawn water from the leaves.

FIX Dress in the last minute only, and never let a dressed salad wait — plate and serve immediately.

A vegetable is not a garnish waiting for the meat to be ready. Cooked with the same decision-making as anything else on the stove, it is the dish.

ON VEGETABLE COOKERY

PART FIVE

THE BENCH

Le Fournil

Flour, butter, egg and sugar, worked by hand.

CHAPTER 15

Pastry & Doughs

La Pâtisserie de Base

No stand mixer, no food processor, no rolling pin. Cold hands, a bowl, and an understanding of what gluten is actually doing will take you from a tart shell to a choux bun.

What gluten is, and why it matters here

Bread wants gluten. Pastry wants almost none. That single sentence explains nearly every rule in this chapter, from why pastry recipes tell you to work quickly and coldly, to why bread recipes tell you to knead for ten minutes and let the dough rest warm.

Flour holds two proteins, glutenin and gliadin, that sit inert and separate in the dry powder. The moment water touches them and something works the dough — a spoon, a hand, a mixer — those proteins link into long elastic strands called gluten. The more water, the more working, and the more time, the longer and stronger those strands become. Strong gluten is what gives bread its chew and its ability to trap the gas from yeast without tearing. It is exactly what a short, crumbly pastry does not want.

Pastry technique is therefore a campaign against gluten development, fought on three fronts at once: keep the fat cold and generous so it coats flour particles in fat before water ever reaches them (this is called *shortening* — it is where "short pastry" gets its name); use as little water as the dough will accept;

and handle it as little and as coldly as possible, then let it rest so any gluten that did form can relax rather than spring back and shrink your tart shell in the oven.

Choux and puff pastry look like exceptions, and they are the useful ones to understand precisely because they aren't. Choux paste is deliberately built with some structure — enough gluten and enough egg protein to hold a wall of steam without bursting, which is why it is beaten hard rather than handled gently. Puff pastry keeps a short, only lightly worked dough but relies on layers of cold butter to do the lifting instead of asking the gluten to trap gas the way bread does. Once you see pastry this way — a spectrum from "no gluten, please" at one end to "just enough structure to hold steam" at the other — every recipe in this chapter reads as one family rather than six different tricks.

Bread is grown. Pastry is built, cold, and left to remember its shape before you ask it to hold one.

THE FIRST LAW OF THE PASTRY BENCH

The fat, flour and water logic

Every classical pastry is a ratio of three things — flour, fat, water — plus, in the sweet doughs, sugar and egg standing in for some of the water. Understanding the logic behind the numbers matters more than memorising them, because it tells you what to do when your kitchen is warmer than the book's, or your flour is thirstier than the book's.

- **Fat coats flour, and coated flour cannot absorb water as fast.** This is the whole trick of rubbing fat into flour before adding liquid: you are pre-emptively blocking gluten formation before the water that would trigger it ever arrives.
- **Cold fat stays in distinct pieces; warm fat smears into the flour.** Distinct pieces of fat melt in the oven and leave pockets of steam behind them — this is what makes brisée flaky rather than merely short. Smeared fat gives you a dense, sandy dough with no lift at all.

- **Water is the minimum that will bind the dough, never more.** Every recipe below is deliberately vague about exact water quantity, because flour's thirst changes with humidity, brand, and age. You are aiming for a dough that just holds together when squeezed, not one that feels wet.
- **Sugar and egg yolk are shorteners too.** This is why *pâte sucrée* (sweet pastry) is more forgiving and more biscuit-like than plain brisée: the sugar competes with the flour for the water that is present, further starving gluten of the moisture it needs.

> NO GADGETS REQUIRED
>
> This chapter assumes no stand mixer, no food processor, no rolling pin, no piping bag, no sugar thermometer and no ceramic baking beans. Where classical method leans on one of these, the hand method is given first and explained, not apologised for. A clean 750 ml wine bottle, chilled in the freezer for ten minutes, rolls pastry as well as any pin; its neck even gives you a handle.

Pâte brisée by hand

Pâte brisée — "broken pastry", so called because the fat is broken into the flour rather than dissolved — is the base savoury shortcrust of French cooking: quiches, savoury tarts, the lid of a *tourte*. Its sweet cousins follow in the next section using the same rubbing-in method with sugar and egg added.

01 Cold everything, weighed first

250 g plain flour, a good pinch of salt, 125 g cold unsalted butter cut into 1 cm cubes, and 50–60 ml ice water kept ready but not yet added. Chill the cubed butter in the freezer for five minutes if your kitchen is warm; butter above about 18°C smears rather than rubs.

CUE *The butter should feel firm and slightly resistant when pressed, not soft enough to leave a fingerprint.*

02 Rub in — the sablage

Tip the flour and salt into a wide, cool bowl and add the butter. Lift a handful of flour and butter together, and rub it between your fingertips and thumbs — not your palms, which are warmer — letting it fall back into the bowl as you go. Keep lifting from the bottom of the bowl so nothing sits ungrated at the base. This stage is called *sablage*, "sanding", because you are aiming for the texture of coarse, slightly buttery sand.

Work fast and stop the moment you reach that texture. Some pea-sized lumps of butter left visible are correct, not a failure — they are exactly what will melt into flaky pockets in the oven.

CUE *Squeeze a small handful: it should hold its shape loosely and crumble apart again when tapped, like damp sand. If it packs into a smooth putty, you have gone too far and warmed the fat.*

03 Water by feel, not by measure

Sprinkle in the ice water a tablespoon at a time, tossing the mixture with a fork or your fingertips between additions rather than stirring it in. You are trying to moisten every part evenly, not to make a wet patch in the middle. Stop as soon as the dough will clump when pressed — most 250 g flour doughs need somewhere between 45 and 65 ml, and the exact figure is not worth chasing.

CUE *Squeeze a small amount in your fist. If it holds together in one piece without crumbling and without feeling tacky on your palm, stop adding water immediately.*

04 Fraisage — smearing the dough together with the heel of the hand

Tip the shaggy, still-crumbly dough onto a lightly floured surface. Working in small portions, push each one away from you with the heel of your hand in a single firm smear, six to eight centimetres long, then gather it back into a pile. Repeat until the whole dough has been smeared once, twice at most.

This is *fraisage*. It is not kneading — you never fold or gather-and-press the way bread dough is worked. Its purpose is to finish distributing the remaining fat and moisture into thin, even sheets without developing meaningful gluten, which is exactly what a rolling pin, hurried, would otherwise ask the dough to do all at once.

CUE *After fraisage the dough should look striated — faint streaks of butter running through it — and hold together as one mass without cracking when you press it flat.*

05 Rest, always

Press into a flat disc about 2 cm thick, wrap in greaseproof paper or a clean cloth, and chill for at least 30 minutes, ideally an hour. This does three things: it firms the butter back up after the warmth of your hands, it lets any gluten strands that formed relax instead of springing back and shrinking your shell, and it lets the flour finish absorbing the water evenly.

NEVER *Skip the rest and roll straight away. The dough will fight you while rolling and shrink dramatically in the oven, pulling away from the sides of the tin.*

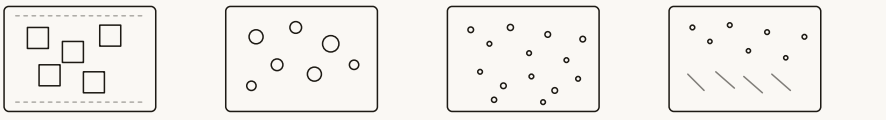


FIGURE 1 · FOUR TEXTURES

The particle size shrinks steadily from cube to sand; stop rubbing at stage 3, before it turns into paste. The streaks in stage 4 are the smears left by fraisage — they should still be visible, not blended to a uniform colour.

> WHOLEMEAL, SPELT OR RYE
>
> These flours carry more bran, which cuts gluten strands short on its own, so the dough will feel shorter and more crumbly at the same water level. Add water a little more cautiously and expect a slightly rougher, more rustic finish — that is correct, not a failure.

Pâte sucrée and pâte sablée

Where brisée is rubbed in, the two sweet pastries are usually built the other way round: fat and sugar are creamed together first, and the flour is folded in last and briefly. This is the **creaming method**, and by hand it means working softened — not melted — butter against sugar with a wooden spoon or your

hand in a bowl until the mixture lightens in colour and turns fluffy, roughly two to three minutes of steady beating.

- **Pâte sucrée** ("sweet pastry") — 250 g flour, 125 g soft butter, 90 g icing sugar, one egg yolk, a pinch of salt. Cream butter and sugar, beat in the yolk, then fold in the flour with a spatula or your hand in loose scooping turns until it just comes together — do not knead it smooth. It rolls thin, holds crisp edges, and is the classical shell for fruit tarts.
- **Pâte sablée** ("sandy pastry") — the same ratio with slightly more butter and sugar, and the flour rubbed rather than folded in at the very end, giving a shorter, more biscuit-like crumb that suits small tartlets and shells that will not be filled with liquid.

Both rest in the same way as brisée — a flat disc, wrapped, chilled for at least 30 minutes — and both are more forgiving of over-handling than brisée, because the sugar is already competing with the flour for water before you begin. That said, "more forgiving" is not "infinitely forgiving": a sucrée dough beaten hard after the flour goes in will still turn tough and biscuit-hard rather than short.

> SOFT, NOT MELTED
>
> Butter for creaming should give slightly under a fingertip, at roughly 18–20°C. Melted or oily butter will not trap air when beaten, and the dough will be dense and greasy instead of light. If your butter has gone soft in a warm kitchen, five minutes in the fridge fixes it; ten seconds too long in a microwave does not.

Rolling without a pin, and lining a tin

A rolling pin is convenient, not essential. Its whole job is to apply even downward pressure while moving across the dough, and a chilled, straight-sided bottle does exactly that.

01 Prepare the surface and the dough

Dust the worktop and the dough itself lightly with flour — too much flour toughens the surface of the pastry as it rolls in. Let the disc sit at room temperature for five minutes if it has chilled hard; rolling cracked, fridge-cold dough only forces you to patch it.

02 Roll from the centre outward, turning often

Place the bottle across the middle of the disc and roll away from you, then back to centre and roll towards you, always starting from the middle rather than the edge. Give the dough a quarter turn every two or three passes so it doesn't stick and so it spreads into a circle rather than an oval.

CUE *If the dough resists and springs back, it hasn't rested enough — stop, chill it for ten minutes, and continue. Forcing it now just builds the gluten you spent an hour avoiding.*

03 Lift and line without stretching

Roll the sheet loosely around the bottle and unroll it over the tin — this is the traditional way to transfer pastry without tearing it, pin or no pin. Ease the pastry down into the corners with a small ball of dough offcut pressed gently, rather than pulling or stretching the sheet itself; stretched pastry always shrinks back in the oven.

Leave a small overhang, then trim it flush by running a rolling motion of the knife along the rim, blade angled outward, rather than sawing straight down.

CUE *The pastry should sit in the corners without visible tension — no white stretch-marks, no thin patches where it was pulled.*

04 Chill again before baking

Fifteen to twenty minutes in the fridge, or five in the freezer, lined and all. This second rest is what stops the sides slumping down the tin wall as the butter melts in the first minutes of the oven.

> THE WINE BOTTLE, SPECIFICALLY
>
> Chill it in the freezer for ten to fifteen minutes first — a cold bottle helps keep the butter firm as you roll, exactly as a marble or metal pin would. A straight-sided bottle rolls more evenly than a curved one; a Burgundy bottle's gentle shoulders work fine for small tartlets, but a Bordeaux bottle's long straight body is better for a full 25 cm tart.

Blind baking without ceramic beans

Cuire à blanc, "baking blind", means baking a pastry shell empty, weighted down so it keeps its shape and its base doesn't puff up into a dome. Ceramic baking beans are simply weight and nothing else — several honest substitutes weigh exactly as well.

WEIGHT	HOW TO USE IT	NOTES
Dried rice	Fill the lined, paper-covered shell to the brim	The classical home substitute; keep a jar of it aside forever as your dedicated "baking rice" — it is not fit to cook afterward
Dried pulses	Chickpeas, lentils or beans, same method	Slightly heavier than rice, so it presses the sides a little more firmly; equally reusable as a dedicated jar
Coins of dough	Roll pastry trimmings thin, cut into small discs, scatter over the paper	Genuinely traditional in provincial kitchens; bake them off alongside as a cook's treat, or crumble spent ones into breadcrumbs for a fruit crumble topping
A second, smaller tin	Nest a smaller metal tin or ramekin directly inside the lined shell	No paper needed; works well for a single large tart if you own a second tin close in size

01 **Line with paper, right into the corners**

Crumple a sheet of greaseproof paper into a ball first, then smooth it back out — this makes it pliable enough to press right into the corners of the tin without tearing, where a stiff flat sheet would bridge and leave the corners unsupported.

02 **Fill generously and bake covered**

Fill right to the top edge of the pastry — a shallow scattering of weight does not hold the sides up. Bake at 180°C (350°F) for 15–18 minutes, until the rim is pale gold and firm to the touch.

CUE *Lift a corner of the paper: the pastry beneath should look set and matte, not wet or shiny.*

03 **Uncover and finish**

Lift out the paper and its weight together, then return the shell to the oven uncovered for a further 8–10 minutes, until the base itself is pale gold rather than blond. This second, uncovered bake is what actually seals the base against a wet filling later; skipping it is the single most common cause of a soggy bottom.

Pâte à choux

Choux paste is the odd one in this family — cooked twice, beaten hard, and built to trap steam rather than avoid it. It is also, done by feel, one of the most forgiving pastries here, because the dough itself tells you when it is ready at every stage.

01 **Melt, then boil, precisely**

Bring 125 ml water, 125 ml milk, 100 g butter cut into pieces, a pinch of salt and a teaspoon of sugar to a full rolling boil in a saucepan, making sure the butter is fully melted before the boil arrives — if it boils while lumps of butter are still solid, too much water evaporates and the ratio goes wrong.

02 Tip in the flour, all at once, off the heat

Remove from the heat, tip in 150 g plain flour in one go, and beat hard and immediately with a wooden spoon. The mixture will look lumpy for a few seconds and then suddenly come together into a smooth, thick paste that pulls cleanly away from the sides of the pan.

CUE *A film of paste left on the base of the pan is normal and correct — it means the panade is dry enough.*

03 Dry it out over gentle heat

Return the pan to low heat and beat the paste continuously for one to two minutes more. This drying-out stage cooks the raw flour taste out and, more importantly, evaporates enough remaining moisture that the dough can accept its full quantity of egg without turning soupy.

CUE *The paste starts to squeak faintly against the pan and leaves a thin, dry film on the base each time you scrape it clear. It should also stop steaming quite so eagerly. Stop as soon as you notice this — a minute too long and the dough scorches.*

04 Cool slightly, then beat in the eggs — by feel, not by count

Tip the dough into a bowl and let it stand for two or three minutes, stirred occasionally, until it is only warm rather than hot — hot dough scrambles the first egg. Beat in 3–4 eggs (about 200 g), one at a time, beating hard after each until fully absorbed before adding the next. The dough will look like it's split for a moment on each addition; keep beating and it comes back together.

Stop adding egg by feel, not by the number in the recipe — flour brands and drying time both change how much a given batch will take. The classical check is the **V-test**: lift the spoon out of the dough and let it fall back in; the paste should drop slowly off the spoon in a smooth ribbon that folds into a soft V-shape and holds that shape for a second or two before settling, rather than pouring off in a runny stream or clinging in an unmoving lump.

CUE *The V holds its point for about a second, then slowly slumps. If it pours off instantly, you have added too much egg — there is no fixing this batch, only remembering for next time. If it clings stiffly and won't fall, beat in a further tablespoon of beaten egg and test again.*

05 Pipe without a piping bag

A sturdy freezer bag with one corner snipped off does everything a piping bag does for choux. Fill it no more than half full, twist the top closed, and push the paste down towards the cut corner as you pipe, squeezing from the top with one hand and steadying the tip with the other. For a completely bagless method, two dessert spoons work: scoop a rounded spoonful and use the second spoon to push it off onto the tray in one motion, smoothing the peak with a wet fingertip.

CUE *Pipe or spoon mounds about 3–4 cm across, leaving 5 cm between them — choux roughly doubles in the oven.*

06 Bake hot, then finish lower, and never open the door early

200°C (400°F) for the first 15 minutes to force a fast, hard rise on the outside steam, then down to 170°C (340°F) for a further 15–20 minutes to dry the inside walls through. Do not open the oven door before the first stage is complete — a rush of cold air collapses choux that hasn't yet set its crust, and there is no rescue once it has fallen.

CUE *Buns should be deep gold all over, hollow-sounding when tapped on the base, and firm enough to hold their shape when lifted.*

07 Vent them, always

The moment they come out, pierce each bun's base with a skewer or knife tip and return them to the switched-off, door-ajar oven for five minutes. This lets trapped steam escape instead of condensing back into the walls as they cool, which is the single most common reason a beautifully risen choux bun goes soft and damp twenty minutes later.

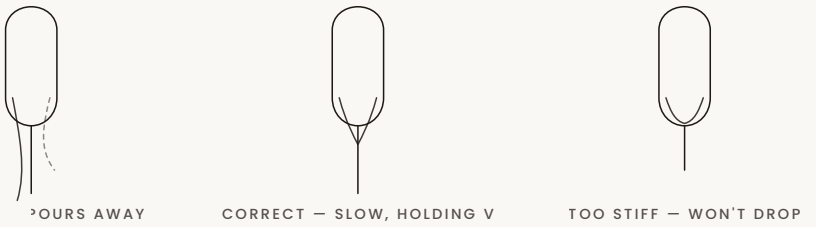


FIGURE 2 · THE V-TEST

Lift the spoon and watch how the paste falls. Only the middle spoon is ready to pipe; the other two need correcting before you touch the oven.

WHY CHOUX COLLAPSE

Almost always one of three causes: the door was opened before the crust had set, the buns came out before the inside had dried (the walls are still damp and cannot support themselves as steam condenses), or they weren't vented and steamed themselves soft from the inside while cooling. All three are timing failures, not recipe failures — the paste itself was very likely fine.

Pâte feuilletée, honestly

Classical *pâte feuilletée* — puff pastry — is built by wrapping a whole block of butter inside a plain dough, then rolling and folding the two together five or six times over several hours of resting, so that the finished dough contains roughly 730 alternating layers of dough and butter. In the oven each butter layer melts and turns to steam, and that steam has nowhere to go but up, forcing the dough layers apart and giving true puff pastry its enormous, shattering lift. It is real work, genuinely worth learning once for the satisfaction of it, and genuinely not necessary for most home cooking.

The honest shortcut is **rough puff**: instead of enclosing one neat block of butter, you cut cold butter roughly into the flour — deliberately leaving larger, messier lumps than you would for brisée — then fold and roll the whole mass several times. It builds fewer, thicker, less uniform layers than true puff, so the rise is good rather than spectacular, but it takes forty minutes instead of a day and uses nothing but a bowl, a knife and a bottle.

01 Cut butter roughly into flour

250 g flour, a pinch of salt, 200 g cold butter cut into 2 cm cubes — larger than for brisée, on purpose. Toss the cubes through the flour with a knife until each is coated, but do not rub them in. You want to still see distinct pieces of butter the size of a fingernail.

02 Bind with the least water possible

Add 120–140 ml ice water gradually, cutting it through with a knife rather than a hand, until the mixture just clumps into a rough, shaggy mass. It will look far too dry and ragged to hold together — that is correct. Press it gently into a rectangle.

03 Roll and fold — the letter fold

Roll the rectangle out to about three times its length on a floured surface. Fold the bottom third up and over the middle, then the top third down over both, as if folding a business letter — this single motion is called a *tour*, a "turn". Turn the folded parcel 90° so the closed fold now faces your left hand, and roll it out again the same way.

Repeat for a total of five or six turns, chilling the dough for 15–20 minutes wrapped whenever it becomes warm, sticky or elastic and starts resisting the bottle.

CUE *Streaks of butter should remain visible through each fold, running in ribbons through the dough, right up to the final turn.*

04 Rest fully before baking

Wrap and chill for at least an hour, ideally overnight, before rolling to final thickness and cutting. This lets the gluten built up across five turns of rolling relax completely, so the pastry doesn't twist or shrink unevenly in the oven's heat.

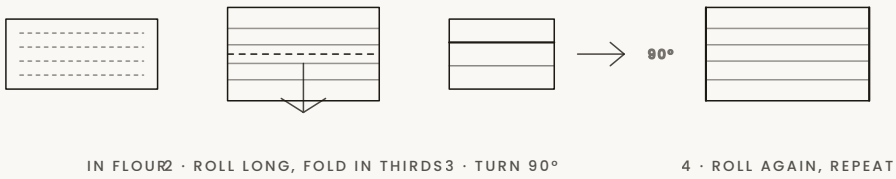


FIGURE 3 · ONE TURN, FOUR FRAMES

Six turns, each identical to this sequence, is what separates rough puff from a plain shortcrust. The 90° turn each time is what stops the layers building in only one direction.

IF YOU WANT TRUE PUFF ONE DAY

The classical method wraps a single 200 g slab of butter, beaten flat and square, inside a plain flour-water dough (a *détrempe*), then gives it six turns with a full hour's rest between each. It is not harder to execute than rough puff — only slower and more precise about temperature. Rough puff is the honest everyday answer; true puff is a weekend project worth doing once so you understand what it's built from.

Crème pâtissière, crème anglaise, and the nappe test

These two custards share a family and a single crucial technique — the *nappe*, "coating" — but pâtissière is thickened with flour or cornflour as well as egg, so it can be boiled and piped, while anglaise is thickened by egg alone and must never boil.

Crème pâtissière

500 ml milk, a vanilla pod split (or a good spoonful of vanilla paste), 100 g sugar, 4 egg yolks, 40 g cornflour or plain flour. Bring the milk to just below the boil with the vanilla. Whisk the yolks, sugar and flour together in a bowl until pale and thick. Pour a third of the hot milk over the yolks, whisking constantly to bring them up to temperature without scrambling them — this is called *tempering* — then pour the whole mixture back into the pan.

Return to medium heat and whisk continuously and vigorously; the custard will thicken suddenly and may look lumpy for a moment before smoothing out as you keep whisking. Let it come to a full boil for a minute, still whisking — unlike anglaise, this one needs to actually boil, because the flour must be properly cooked out or the finished cream tastes chalky. Pour into a shallow dish, press cling film directly onto the surface to stop a skin forming, and chill fully before using.

Crème anglaise

500 ml milk, a vanilla pod split, 100 g sugar, 5 egg yolks. Warm the milk and vanilla as above, temper the yolks and sugar the same way, then return the mixture to a low, gentle heat — lower than for pâtissière, since there is no flour here to protect the eggs from curdling.

Stir continuously with a wooden spoon in broad figure-of-eight strokes, scraping the base of the pan, until the custard thickens just enough to coat the back of the spoon. This is the **nappe test**: draw a fingertip across the coated spoon and if the line holds cleanly, without the custard running back in to fill it, the sauce is done. It usually takes eight to ten minutes over gentle heat and should never be rushed with higher heat — anglaise curdles the moment it approaches a simmer.

> THE RESCUE
>
> If the custard does begin to split — you will see tiny curds and a slightly grainy look — take it off the heat immediately and plunge the base of the pan into a bowl of cold water to stop the cooking. Then pour the sauce into a blender-free rescue: pass it through a fine sieve into a cold bowl, pressing firmly, and whisk in a tablespoon of very cold milk or cream. This will not undo severe curdling, but it saves a sauce caught in its first few seconds of splitting, which is most of them if you're watching closely.

Crème chantilly by hand whisk

Crème chantilly is simply whipped cream, sweetened and vanilla-scented, but the classical ratio and the hand-whisking method both matter more than people assume. Use 250 ml double or whipping cream — nothing below 35% fat

will hold air by hand — chilled well, with 25 g icing sugar and half a teaspoon of vanilla extract added once the cream has begun to thicken, not before.

Chill the bowl and whisk in the freezer for ten minutes first; cold cream and cold equipment both whip faster and more stably. Whisk in a wide, brisk figure-of-eight motion, lifting the whisk well clear of the cream on each stroke to fold in as much air as possible, rather than stirring within the surface. Watch the cream constantly in the last thirty seconds — by hand you feel the moment it stiffens through the resistance in your wrist, well before it looks overwhipped, and that warning is your real advantage over a machine, which cannot feel anything at all.

CUE *Ready when the whisk leaves distinct trails that hold their shape and a lifted whisk drops a soft peak that just folds over at the tip. Keep going a few seconds past this and it turns grainy, then, with no warning at all, to butter and buttermilk.*

The meringue family

All three classical meringues are egg white and sugar in different proportions, cooked in different ways, and only one of them needs a thermometer.

TYPE	METHOD	NEEDS A THERMOMETER?	USED FOR
French	Whisk egg whites to soft peaks, add sugar gradually, whisk to stiff, glossy peaks	No	Baked meringue shells, *dacquoise*, folded into soufflés
Swiss	Whisk egg whites and sugar together over a bain-marie until the sugar dissolves and the mixture is hot to the touch, then whisk off the heat until cool and glossy	No — go by touch (rub between fingers: no grit means the sugar has dissolved)	Piped decoration, buttercream base, marshmallow
Italian	Pour a boiling sugar syrup in a thin stream into whisking egg whites	Traditionally yes, to 118–121°C, but the cold-water thread test below replaces it	Mousses, soufflé glacé, the most stable meringue, safe to eat with no further cooking

French meringue is the one to learn first: it needs no thermometer and no cooking of the sugar at all, only steady whisking. Whisk whites alone first, to

the soft-peak stage — they hold a shape that gently droops at the tip when the whisk is lifted — then add caster sugar a tablespoon at a time, whisking hard between each addition, until the meringue is stiff, glossy and holds a peak that stands fully upright.

Italian meringue does traditionally want a thermometer for precision, but a hand test stands in perfectly well: drop a little of the boiling syrup into a cup of cold water; at the "soft-ball" stage, roughly the right point for meringue, it gathers into a soft, pliable ball you can flatten between wet fingers rather than dissolving or turning brittle.

Caramel by sight and smell

Sugar cooking is one of the few places in this kitchen where a thermometer is genuinely useful and genuinely dispensable at the same time — colour and smell tell you everything a number would, and they tell you sooner, because you are watching the pan rather than a dial.

Put 200 g caster sugar and 60 ml water in a heavy pan over medium heat, undisturbed until the sugar has fully dissolved — you can swirl the pan gently by its handle, but do not stir with a spoon once it starts to colour, or you will trigger crystallisation and end up with a grainy, sandy mess instead of clear caramel. Once dissolved, raise the heat and let it boil without touching it, watching the colour move through pale straw, to gold, to amber, to a deep mahogany brown, tipping the pan gently now and then to even out the colour.

CUE *Amber caramel smells faintly of toffee; the moment it turns properly nutty and slightly bitter in the nose, at deep mahogany, it is at its most flavourful point and seconds from burning. Pull it from the heat the instant you catch that smell.*

> SAFETY, WITHOUT EXCEPTION
>
> Caramel at working temperature is close to 170°C — hotter than boiling fat and far more dangerous, because it clings to skin rather than running off. Never taste it from the pan, never let a child near the hob while it's on, and if you are adding cream or butter to stop the cooking, add it off the heat, from arm's length, standing back — it will erupt in a violent bubble of steam the instant it meets the hot sugar. Have the vessel you're pouring into within reach before you start, so there is no scramble once the caramel is ready.

Key ratios, at a glance

Committed to memory, these six ratios let you scale any of the recipes above up or down without returning to this chapter.

PASTRY / CREAM	CORE RATIO	NOTES
Pâte brisée	2 flour : 1 fat, water to bind (≈20–25% of flour weight)	Rubbed in; rest at least 30 min
Pâte sucrée	2 flour : 1 fat : 0.7 sugar, 1 yolk per 250g flour	Creamed method; more forgiving than brisée
Pâte à choux	Equal water and milk : 1× butter (by volume, ⅘ of the liquid) : flour to match liquid weight : 3–4 eggs per 150g flour	Eggs added by feel — the V-test overrides any fixed count
Rough puff	5 flour : 4 fat (by weight), minimal ice water	Six turns; chill whenever it resists
Crème pâtissière	500ml milk : 4 yolks : 100g sugar : 40g starch	Must reach a full boil to cook out the starch
Crème anglaise	500ml milk : 5 yolks : 100g sugar, no starch	Never boils; stops at the nappe
Crème chantilly	250ml cream (35%+ fat) : 25g sugar	Cold cream, cold bowl, watch the last 30 seconds
Wet caramel	200g sugar : 60ml water	No stirring once it colours

When it goes wrong

> ***Pastry shrinks badly in the oven***
>
> The gluten wasn't given time to relax, or the dough was stretched while lining the tin.
>
> FIX Rest longer before and after lining — 30 minutes minimum each time — and always ease pastry into corners rather than pulling it.

Shortcrust is tough rather than short

Over-worked dough, warm butter, or too much water added too fast.

FIX Stop rubbing at the sand stage, add water in small increments with pauses, and keep everything — bowl, hands, butter — as cold as you reasonably can.

Choux buns collapse after baking

Removed before the walls dried through, or not vented, so trapped steam condenses back into the crumb.

FIX Bake to a deep, even gold, check for a hollow sound when tapped, and always pierce and dry them out for five minutes in a cooling oven.

Crème anglaise splits

Heat was too high or too fast, and the egg proteins seized before the custard thickened evenly.

FIX Off the heat immediately, cool the pan base in cold water, sieve, and whisk in a tablespoon of very cold cream — most early splitting can still be saved.

Caramel turns grainy instead of smooth

Stirred with a spoon after it began to colour, or a stray sugar crystal on the side of the pan seeded crystallisation.

FIX Brush the inside of the pan with a wet pastry brush before you start, and swirl rather than stir from the first sign of colour onward.

Blind-baked shell has a soggy base

Skipped or shortened the second, uncovered bake after removing the paper and weights.

FIX Always finish uncovered until the base itself is properly pale gold, not just set — this is what actually seals it against a wet filling.

Everything here is one lesson repeated: keep it cold, handle it briefly, and let it rest before you ask it to hold a shape.

END OF STAGE FOUR, LESSON ONE

PART SIX

THE TABLE

La Table

What to keep in the cupboard, and how to put a plate in front of somebody.

CHAPTER 16

The Larder

La Garde-Manger

A cook with a stocked larder can make dinner from nothing. A cook without one has to shop before they can even think.

Cook without shopping

The question that separates a cook from someone who follows recipes is not skill. It is whether they can open the cupboard at half past six on a Tuesday, see nothing that looks like dinner, and make dinner anyway.

That is what a larder is for. *Garde-manger* — literally "keep to eat" — was, in a large French kitchen, both a room and a station: the cool larder where meat, fish and cold preparations were held, and the cook whose job was to know exactly what was in it. The domestic version of that job is yours, and it is smaller than it sounds. A larder is not abundance. It is a short list of things that keep for months, plus a shorter list that keeps for a week, arranged so that most nights you already have what a decent dish needs.

The logic is always the same: an onion, a stock, a knob of butter and something acidic will rescue almost anything. If those four are always in the house, you are never more than twenty minutes from a real meal, whatever is or is not in the fridge.

A well-stocked larder is not about having everything. It is about never having nothing.

THE SECOND LAW OF THE SCHOOL

The store cupboard

Buy these once and replace them as they run low, not as a weekly shop. Everything here keeps for months unopened and most keep for months after opening too.

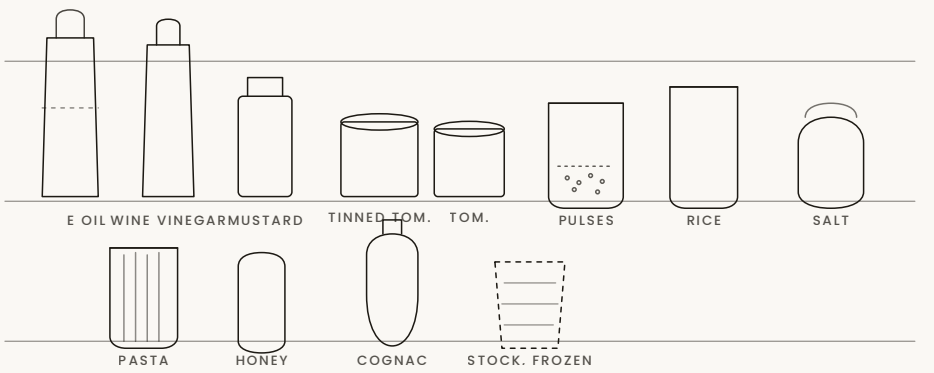


FIGURE 1 · A STOCKED SHELF

Nothing here is exotic. It is the ordinary contents of a French home cupboard, and it is enough to start most dishes in this school.

- **Salt.** Coarse sea salt (*gros sel*) for the pot and for finishing crusts; fine sea salt for seasoning as you cook. See Seasoning for how the two are used differently. Skip flavoured salts and smoked salts — they are a single-use gimmick that a good stock or a squeeze of lemon does better.
- **Peppercorns, whole, in a mill.** Pre-ground pepper loses its aromatic oils within weeks and tastes of dust. Buy whole black peppercorns and grind to order; white pepper for pale sauces where black flecks would show.
- **Oils.** A decent olive oil for dressing and low-heat cooking, a neutral oil (groundnut or sunflower) for anything that needs real heat, since good olive oil's flavour is wasted — and its smoke point exceeded — above a gentle

sizzle. One bottle of each is enough; skip the "cooking olive oil" tier, which tastes of very little either way.

- **Vinegars.** A red wine vinegar and a white wine vinegar cover almost everything; a sherry vinegar is worth adding for its depth in a vinaigrette. Skip balsamic as a everyday vinegar — it is a seasoning, not an acid, and too sweet to deglaze with.
- **Mustard — two kinds.** Smooth Dijon for emulsifying vinaigrettes and binding sauces (it is as much a stabiliser as a flavour); wholegrain *à l'ancienne* for the table and for finishing a pan sauce with texture. They are not interchangeable: Dijon disappears into a sauce, *à l'ancienne* announces itself.
- **Tinned tomatoes.** Whole plum tomatoes in juice, not chopped — chopped tins are often bulked with thickener and taste thinner. Crush them by hand as you add them; you control the texture, they do not.
- **Dried pulses.** *Lentilles vertes du Puy* — small, dark green, hold their shape when cooked, the only lentil worth using as a vegetable rather than a purée. Dried haricot or cannellini beans for cassoulet and winter soups, soaked overnight and cooked from cold. Tinned beans are an honest shortcut on a weeknight; keep a few tins for exactly that.
- **Rice.** A long-grain for pilaf and as a plain accompaniment; a short-grain (arborio or carnaroli) only if you cook risotto often — it is Italian, not French, but it earns its place.
- **Pasta and dried noodles** for the nights nothing else will do. Not a French staple, but every larder needs one meal that takes eight minutes.
- **Stock, in the freezer, not a cupboard.** Good stock does not come in a tin worth keeping. Freeze your own in usable portions — see Stocks — and treat a stock cube as an admission of defeat, useful only in genuine emergency and only in small quantity, since most are mainly salt.
- **Honey and sugar.** A plain runny honey for dressings and glazes; caster sugar for baking and for balancing a sauce; a little soft brown sugar for caramel work with more depth.
- **Cognac or brandy, and a dry white vermouth.** Both keep indefinitely once opened and both deglaze a pan a wine cannot: cognac for flaming and for finishing cream sauces, vermouth as a permanently-open substitute for white wine in a sauce, since an opened bottle of vermouth keeps for months in the fridge where an opened bottle of wine does not.

Flour, and the French T-numbers

French flour is graded by a *type* number (T45, T55, T65…) that states the ash content left after burning off a sample — in effect, how much of the bran and germ remain. A low number is a whiter, more refined flour; a high number is closer to wholemeal. This is a genuinely different system from the UK/US habit of grading by protein and use, and the two do not map exactly, but the table below gets you close enough to cook from any French recipe with what a British or American shop actually sells.

FRENCH	ASH CONTENT	NEAREST UK/US EQUIVALENT	USED FOR
T45	Very low	Plain/all-purpose flour, or "00" pasta flour	Choux, brioche, delicate pâtisserie, sauces
T55	Low	Plain/all-purpose flour	Pastry, bread, the general workhorse flour
T65	Moderate	Strong white bread flour	Rustic bread, pizza doughs
T80	Higher	"Wholemeal-blend" or high-extraction flour	Country loaves, more character and colour
T110–T150	High to very high	Wholemeal/wholewheat flour	Dense breads, rarely used in classical cooking

For everything in this school — a *roux*, a *beurre manié*, a pastry, a coating for *à l'anglaise* breading — plain flour (T55) is correct and is what every recipe here assumes unless it says otherwise. Buy a small bag of "00" or T45 only if you bake choux or brioche often; it is not essential.

> NO STAND MIXER, NO PROBLEM
>
> French flour grading assumes nothing about equipment. A T55 flour behaves the same worked by hand as worked by machine; what changes with hand-mixing is only your patience, not the result. See Pastry & Doughs for the hand method.

Wine, cognac, and the truth about "cooking wine"

The old rule holds: never cook with a wine you would not drink a glass of. This is not snobbery. Wine reduces as it cooks, which concentrates everything in the bottle — its faults included. A thin, sour, or oxidised wine gets thinner, more sour, and more oxidised as it reduces; a decent one gets rounder and deeper. You do not need an expensive bottle. You need an honest one.

Bottles sold specifically as "cooking wine" are, almost without exception, the worst possible choice: cheap wine adjusted with salt so it cannot legally be sold as a beverage, which means it can never balance out, however long you reduce it. Avoid them entirely. Instead, keep a modest, dependable dry white (a Muscadet or an unoaked Chablis-style wine is the classical choice for a fish or chicken sauce) and a modest dependable dry red for braises, bought at a price you are happy to also drink at.

Once opened, wine for cooking keeps four or five days refrigerated before it turns; a dry white vermouth, as above, keeps for months and is the better choice for a kitchen that does not get through a bottle a week.

> **REDUCTION CONCENTRATES FAULTS, NOT JUST FLAVOUR**
>
> Corked, oxidised, or simply flat wine will not improve in the pan. If a wine tastes wrong from the bottle, it will taste more wrong, not less, once it has lost half its volume to steam.

The fridge and its zones

A domestic fridge is not one temperature. Cold air sinks, the door is the warmest zone in the box, and putting things in the wrong place is a common, invisible cause of food spoiling early or, worse, of food-safety risk that has nothing to do with the sell-by date.

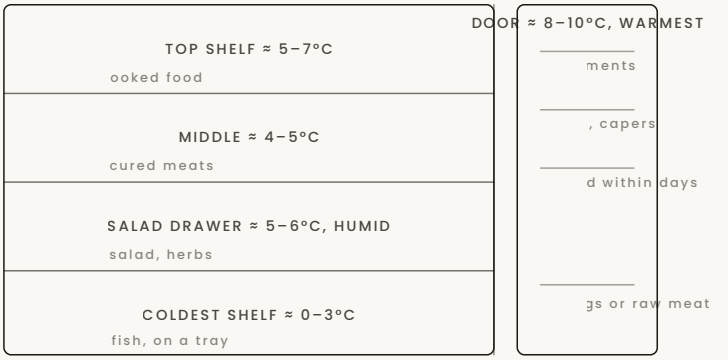


FIGURE 2 · FRIDGE ZONES

The back is colder than the front and the bottom is colder than the top, because cold air sinks and settles near the compressor. The door, opened dozens of times a day, is the least stable zone of all.

- **The coldest shelf (bottom, back)** is for raw meat and fish, always on a tray or plate so nothing drips onto food below.
- **The middle shelves** hold dairy, eggs, and cured meats — foods that need consistent cold but not the coldest point in the box.
- **The salad drawer** runs slightly warmer and more humid by design, which is exactly what vegetables and herbs want; a stalk of parsley on the coldest shelf will wilt faster than one in the drawer.
- **The door** swings several degrees warmer every time it opens and is the worst place in the fridge for anything genuinely perishable. It is where condiments, mustard, and capers belong — not milk, and not eggs, whatever the moulded door shelf suggests.

> A THERMOMETER COSTS LESS THAN A WASTED JOINT OF MEAT
>
> A cheap fridge thermometer left on the middle shelf for a day will tell you what your fridge actually runs at, which is very often warmer than the dial suggests. Aim for 4°C or below on the main shelves.

Butter, clarified and otherwise

Butter is not one ingredient in French cooking; it is several, and using the wrong one is a real fault, not a pedantry.

- **Unsalted (*beurre doux*) is the default** for cooking, because salt content in salted butter varies by brand and throws off seasoning you have not yet added. Keep unsalted for everything in a pan or a pastry.
- **Demi-sel (lightly salted, roughly 0.5–3% salt)** is the French table and finishing butter — spread on bread, melted over vegetables, or stirred into a sauce at the very end for a final polish, where its salt does useful, deliberate work.
- **Why French butter tastes different.** It is churned from cultured cream, and it typically carries a slightly higher fat content — 82% or more, against roughly 80–82% for standard British or American butter. The extra fat and the culturing both matter for pastry: they give a firmer, less watery butter that laminates better and browns with more nutty depth.
- **Cultured butter** is butter made from cream that has been fermented with live cultures before churning, which is what gives good French butter its faint tang. Use it as your everyday butter if you can find or afford it; the difference shows most in anything where butter is the main flavour — a beurre blanc, a slice of bread, a simple sauté.

Clarified butter, and how to make it

Whole butter is roughly 80% fat, 16–17% water, and a few per cent milk solids. The water makes it spit at high heat and the milk solids burn well below the temperature you need for a proper sear. Clarifying removes both, leaving pure butterfat that can be heated far higher and keeps, refrigerated, for months.

01 Melt gently

Melt butter in a small saucepan over the lowest heat. Do not stir. It will separate into a foam on top, clear golden fat in the middle, and milky solids at the bottom.

CUE *A layer of white foam rises within a few minutes and the liquid beneath turns from cloudy to clear.*

02 **Skim the foam**

Spoon the foam off the surface and discard it, or keep it — it is delicious stirred through mash.

03 **Pour off the clear fat**

Tip the pan gently and pour the clear golden liquid into a jar, stopping the moment the milky solids at the bottom start to move. Discard those solids, or keep them for the same reason — they are excellent stirred into rice.

RESULT *A jar of pure, shelf-stable-once-refrigerated fat that will not burn until well over 250°C, far above what any hob delivers.*

This is, in essence, home-made *beurre clarifié*, and it is the French cousin of ghee, which goes one step further and cooks the milk solids until nutty before straining. Use clarified butter for high-heat searing where you still want a buttery flavour; use whole butter everywhere else, since the milk solids are exactly what give a beurre noisette its flavour — see Heat & Fat.

Cream and its splits

The confusion between *crème fraîche*, double cream and single cream causes more sauce failures than any other single ingredient mix-up in a French kitchen.

CREAM	FAT CONTENT	SPLITS WHEN BOILED?	USE FOR
Single cream	~18%	Yes, readily	Pouring over fruit, lightening a soup off the heat
Double cream	~48%	No, tolerates a simmer well	Reducing into a sauce, whipping
Crème fraîche	~30–40%	No, its acidity and fat both stabilise it	Finishing sauces with a tang, dolloping onto soup, folding into a warm dish off the heat

The rule that avoids the classic failure — a sauce that suddenly looks like scrambled eggs floating in water — is simple: the higher the fat content, the more heat and acid a cream tolerates before its proteins seize and separate. Single cream, being mostly water with a little fat, has almost nothing protecting it and will split if boiled hard or added to something acidic while hot. Double cream's high fat content coats and protects its proteins, so it reduces beautifully into a pan sauce. *Crème fraîche* is cultured, which lowers its pH, and that acidity paradoxically makes it more heat-stable than an equivalent fresh cream, which is why it is the cream of choice to finish a sauce that already contains wine or lemon.

If a recipe calls for cream and says nothing else, assume double cream. If it needs to sit in a hot sauce for any length of time, reach for double or crème fraîche, never single.

Cheese for cooking

Keep a short list of cheeses that behave predictably under heat, separate from anything bought purely for the table.

- **Gruyère.** The classic melting cheese: nutty, stringy in the best way, the backbone of a *gratin dauphinois* or a croque-monsieur.
- **Comté.** A close relative of Gruyère with more depth and a longer finish; use it where Gruyère is called for and you want the dish to taste more expensive without more work.
- **Emmental.** Milder and more elastic than Gruyère, the cheese for a fondue base or where you want melt without much flavour competing with what is underneath.
- **Parmesan (or a French equivalent, Beaufort).** Grated fine for finishing pasta, gratins and salads; the rind, never thrown away, goes into a simmering soup or stock for depth and comes out before serving.
- **A soft goat's cheese** for salads, tarts, and stuffing vegetables — it holds its shape under gentle heat rather than melting into nothing.

A word on the cheese course: in a classical French meal, cheese is served after the main course and before dessert, never alongside it, on the theory that a savoury course should not compete with a sweet one and that wine drunk with

the main course finishes its arc with the cheese rather than the pudding. Three or four cheeses of contrasting texture — a hard, a soft, a blue, a goat's — with plain bread and nothing else is correct; crackers, chutney and grapes are an English habit, pleasant but not the tradition this school is teaching.

Eggs

Buy the best eggs you can afford and keep them at room temperature if you will use them within a few days — French kitchens rarely refrigerate eggs, since a fresh egg's shell is a genuinely effective barrier and refrigeration mainly causes condensation on the shell when it is brought back to room temperature, a route for bacteria in. If your fridge is where they are sold cold, keep them cold and consistent rather than moving them back and forth, and bring them out an hour before you need them for anything that depends on temperature, such as whisking egg whites. See Eggs for the full technique.

The aromatics you should always have

These seven are the entire foundation of French savoury cooking, and unlike most of this list, they are fresh, not stored, which means they need buying every week or two rather than once.

AROMATIC	ROLE
Onions	The base of nearly everything; buy a net and keep it somewhere dark and cool, never the fridge
Shallots	Finer, sweeter, for sauces and vinaigrettes where the onion flavour must not dominate
Garlic	Sliced, chopped or crushed to a paste — see Knife Skills
Carrots	Sweetness and colour in stocks, braises and *mirepoix*
Celery	The savoury, slightly bitter third of *mirepoix*
Leeks	A gentler onion-family note for stocks and soups, always split and washed of grit first

AROMATIC	ROLE
Thyme, bay, parsley	The *bouquet garni*, tied or wrapped, into every stock and braise — see Stocks

Herbs: which to buy fresh, which dried is acceptable

Drying concentrates some flavour compounds and destroys others entirely, which is why the rule is specific rather than general.

- **Dried is genuinely fine for: bay, thyme, and herbes de Provence** (a dried mix of thyme, rosemary, savory and oregano). All three have robust, largely oil-based flavour that survives drying well, and bay in particular is arguably better dried, since the fresh leaf can taste faintly medicinal.
- **Dried is not acceptable for: basil, parsley, chervil, and tarragon.** These are soft, water-heavy herbs whose flavour comes largely from volatile compounds that drying destroys almost entirely — dried basil tastes of hay, not basil. Buy these fresh or not at all, and buy them for the day you plan to use them.
- **Rosemary and sage** sit in the middle: acceptable dried in a long-cooked braise, poor anywhere their flavour needs to be bright.

The spice shelf

French classical cooking is restrained with spice compared with many cuisines, and a short shelf covers nearly everything in this school.

- **Nutmeg, whole, grated to order.** The single most-used spice in French cooking — béchamel, gratins, spinach — and it loses its aroma within weeks once ground, so buy whole and grate with a fine grater or the fine side of a box grater.
- **Cloves, whole.** Studded into an onion for béchamel infusion, a handful in a stock or a court-bouillon.
- **Bay leaves** — counted here as much a spice as a herb, and always present.
- **Juniper berries** for game, pork, and a classical *choucroute*.

- **Paprika, sweet, not smoked** — smoked paprika is Spanish, not French, and will read as out of place in most dishes in this school.
- **Cayenne pepper**, a small jar, for the faint heat a good sauce sometimes needs without announcing itself.
- **Vanilla pod**, kept in the sugar jar, which both flavours the sugar and keeps the pod usable for weeks.

That is close to the whole shelf. Resist the urge to buy a spice for a single recipe; it will still be in the cupboard, stale, in three years.

Buying meat

French butchery divides a carcass differently from British or American convention, which is a common source of confusion when following a French recipe with a British or American butcher's counter in front of you.

FRENCH CUT	NEAREST UK/US CUT	BEST FOR
Bavette	Flank steak	Fast, hot searing, sliced thin against the grain
Onglet	Hanger steak	Prized by chefs; grill or pan-sear rare, rest well
Paleron	Chuck / feather blade	Long, slow braising — *daube*, *pot-au-feu*
Queue de bœuf	Oxtail	Braising for depth and natural gelatine
Joue de bœuf	Beef cheek	Slow braising; extraordinarily tender when done properly
Filet	Fillet / tenderloin	Quick, high-heat cooking; leanest and most expensive
Entrecôte	Ribeye / entrecôte steak	Grilling and pan-searing, well marbled
Épaule d'agneau	Lamb shoulder	Slow-roasting or braising
Poitrine de porc	Pork belly	Slow roasting, confit, braising
Carré de porc	Pork loin / rack	Roasting

FRENCH CUT	NEAREST UK/US CUT	BEST FOR
Jarret	Shin / shank (beef, veal or pork)	Long braising — *osso buco* style dishes

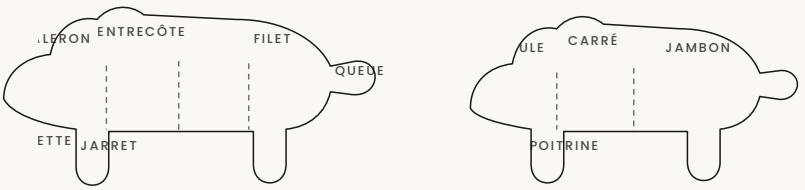


FIGURE 3 · CUT MAPS

French butchery follows the same animal but draws the lines differently; a paleron overlaps what a British butcher would sell as chuck and part of the blade.

What to ask a butcher

- Ask for the cut by what you intend to do with it — "something for a long slow braise, enough for four" — rather than a French name a British counter may not use. A good butcher will translate.
- Ask for bones. Ask specifically, and ask for them roasted-colour or raw depending on the stock you want; most butchers will give them away or sell them very cheaply, and they are the entire foundation of Stocks.
- Ask them to trim, but keep the trim — fat and sinew go in the stock pot, not the bin.

> WHY CHEAP CUTS ARE BETTER
>
> Not cheaper — better. A paleron or a shin has more connective tissue than a fillet, and connective tissue is collagen, which melts into gelatine under long, gentle heat and gives a braise a silkiness and depth no fillet can match. A fillet is tender because it does no work in the animal's life and therefore has almost no flavour-building connective tissue at all. Classical French cooking's great braises — *daube*, *bœuf bourguignon*, *pot-au-feu* — were built around the cheap cuts on purpose, not out of necessity. See Braising & Stewing.

Buying fish

- **Eyes clear and slightly bulging**, never sunken, cloudy or flat. A fish's eyes cloud within a day or two of death.
- **Gills bright red or pink**, never brown or grey — lift the flap and look; a fishmonger who minds you checking is not one to trust.
- **Flesh springs back** when pressed gently, leaving no dent.
- **Smell of the sea, not "fishy".** A strong, sour, ammonia-like smell means the fish is past its best; fresh fish barely smells at all.
- **Scales intact and tight**, skin glossy rather than dull or slimy.

Sustainable choices and why whole fish is better value

Ask what was landed locally and recently rather than fixing on one species; mackerel, sardines, coley, and megrim sole are consistently well-managed, inexpensive, and excellent, where cod and some tuna stocks are not. A fishmonger will tell you plainly what is in good supply that week.

Buying whole fish rather than fillets is very often cheaper per usable kilo, and it is never wasteful: the fishmonger will fillet it for you on request at no extra charge, and the head, bones and trim go straight into a *fumet* — fish stock — which is ready in twenty minutes, far faster than a meat stock, and freezes just as well. A whole fish you filleted yourself also lets you judge freshness directly, by the signs above, in a way a pre-cut fillet on ice does not allow.

Seasonal produce by month

Cooking with what is in season is not romanticism; seasonal produce is cheaper, has travelled less, and tastes of considerably more than the same vegetable forced or flown in out of season. This calendar is for the northern hemisphere.

MONTH	AT ITS BEST
January	Leeks, celeriac, cabbage, chicory, Jerusalem artichokes, blood oranges
February	Purple sprouting broccoli, forced rhubarb, leeks, swede, kale
March	Wild garlic, spring greens, new-season spinach, first rhubarb

MONTH	AT ITS BEST
April	Asparagus, morels, radishes, spring onions, new potatoes
May	Asparagus at its peak, peas, broad beans, elderflower, strawberries begin
June	Broad beans, peas, courgettes, cherries, first tomatoes, strawberries
July	Tomatoes, aubergines, peppers, sweetcorn, raspberries, apricots
August	Tomatoes at their peak, plums, sweetcorn, French beans, peaches
September	Ceps and wild mushrooms, damsons, early apples, figs, sweetcorn
October	Pumpkin and squash, apples, pears, game birds begin, quince
November	Chestnuts, celeriac, Jerusalem artichokes, game, cranberries
December	Brussels sprouts, red cabbage, parsnips, chestnuts, clementines

What goes in the fridge, and what is ruined by it

Tomatoes go mealy and lose flavour

Cold below about 12°C halts the enzymes that continue ripening flavour compounds, and the flesh's cell walls degrade unevenly.

FIX Keep tomatoes on the counter, out of direct sun, and only refrigerate if they are so ripe they will otherwise spoil within a day.

Potatoes and onions turn sweet, sprout, or soften

Cold converts a potato's starch to sugar, which browns unpleasantly when cooked; onions sprout and soften near the moisture of a fridge.

FIX Store both in a dark, cool, dry place — a cupboard, not the fridge — and never together, since onions release gases that make potatoes sprout faster.

Basil blackens overnight

Basil is a tropical plant and its cell walls rupture below about 10°C, releasing enzymes that turn the leaf black within hours.

FIX Stand a bunch in a glass of water on the counter like flowers, never in the fridge.

Bread goes stale faster

Refrigeration accelerates the starch recrystallisation that makes bread go stale — a fridge-stored loaf stales roughly three times faster than one left at room temperature.

FIX Keep bread in a bag or bin at room temperature; freeze what you will not eat within two days and refresh it from frozen in the oven.

Stone fruit stays hard and never sweetens

Peaches, plums and apricots continue ripening by ethylene exposure at room temperature; cold arrests that process for good, not just temporarily.

FIX Ripen on the counter until they give slightly to a gentle squeeze near the stalk, then refrigerate only the final day or two before eating, and bring back to room temperature before serving.

Keeping a bouillon of trimmings going

The habit that ties this whole page together: keep a bag or a lidded container in the freezer and add to it every time you cook. Onion skins and root ends, carrot peelings and tops, celery leaves and ends, leek trims (green tops especially, once washed of grit), mushroom stems, parsley stalks, the rind from a hard cheese, chicken carcasses, and the bones a butcher gave you all go straight in, raw, whenever they turn up.

Once the bag is full — usually every week or two in an active kitchen — tip the whole thing into a large pot, cover well with cold water, bring to the gentlest simmer, and let it run for two to three hours, skimming occasionally. Strain, cool, and freeze in usable portions. This is not a fixed recipe so much as a discipline: a rolling *bouillon* made entirely from what would otherwise be waste, which is the clearest expression of the larder's whole purpose. Full method and ratios at Stocks.

NO STOCKPOT, NO PROBLEM

The largest pot you own is a stockpot. There is no dedicated equipment here — only cold water, low heat, time, and the habit of not throwing trimmings away.

Buy well, once. After that, the larder feeds you back for months.

END OF STAGE ONE, LESSON TWO

CHAPTER 17

Plating & Service

Le Dressage et le Service

Plating is the last five per cent of a dish. It never rescues a badly cooked one, and it costs nothing but attention — which is exactly why it is worth doing properly.

The honest position

A beautifully arranged plate of badly cooked food is still badly cooked food. Nothing in this chapter will fix a grey steak, a split sauce, or a soggy pastry base — and any school that suggests otherwise is selling you the wrong thing.

What plating *can* do is change how the same well-cooked food tastes, because taste is not only what happens on the tongue. Temperature, aroma reaching the nose before the fork arrives, the first visual impression that tells the brain what to expect, the sound of a crisp surface — all of this arrives before flavour does, and all of it can be got right or wrong for free. *Le dressage*, the plating, is not decoration bolted onto cooking. It is the last stage of cooking, using different tools: a spoon instead of a whisk, negative space instead of seasoning.

So the order of priorities in this chapter, and in this school, is fixed: cook it right first. Then, for the five minutes between the pan and the table, do these few things, because they are free and because — done badly — they can undo minutes of careful work in seconds. A cold plate can turn a hot, glossy sauce

into a dull, thickened smear before the first mouthful is taken. That is not a plating failure in the decorative sense; it is a genuine, tastable loss, and it is the first thing to fix.

Plating is not lying about the cooking. It is telling the truth about it a few seconds sooner.

THE FIRST RULE OF THE PASS

Heat: the plate matters as much as the pan

A domestic kitchen rarely has a warming drawer, and does not need one. Heat retention is what you are after, and there are three ways to get it without a gadget.

- **The oven at its lowest.** Stack the plates in an oven set to 60–80°C (its lowest setting, door slightly ajar if it runs hot) for twenty minutes before service. This is the best method because the heat is even across the whole plate, not just the centre.
- **Hot tap water.** Fill each plate with the hottest water your tap gives, leave it a minute, tip it out, and wipe dry with a clean cloth immediately before serving. Crude, fast, and entirely adequate for a weeknight.
- **On top of the pot.** If something is simmering — potatoes, a sauce reducing — rest the plates on top, stacked, with a folded cloth between the top plate and your hand when you lift them. Steam rising through the stack warms them gently over ten minutes.

A plate that is merely room temperature, set under a dish that arrives at 70°C, will pull heat out of that dish for the first two or three minutes on the table — precisely the minutes in which most of it gets eaten. A sauce loses its shine, fat that should be liquid begins to set, and a crisp skin softens in its own condensation. None of this is visible on the plate as it leaves the kitchen; all of it is tasted at the table. Warm the plate and you have solved a problem the eye cannot even see coming.

> HOW HOT IS TOO HOT
>
> A plate you cannot comfortably hold bare-handed for two seconds is hot enough — anything hotter risks the diner's fingers and can shock a delicate garnish (herbs, a quenelle of cold crème fraîche) into wilting or melting before service. Warm, not scalding, is the target. For cold dishes — terrines, salads, oysters — chill the plate in the freezer for ten minutes instead; the same logic runs in the other direction.

The rules that actually hold

Most plating advice is fashion dressed as principle. A handful of rules, though, hold up because they are really about how the eye reads a plate before the fork touches it, and they translate to a home table exactly as well as to a restaurant pass.

- **One focal point.** The eye wants somewhere to land first. Usually this is the protein, or the tallest element. A plate with three things all shouting for attention reads as clutter even if each element is excellent.
- **Negative space is not empty space.** A plate with food pushed right to the rim looks like a plate that ran out of plate. Leave visible rim — a third of the plate bare is a reasonable minimum — and the food you did put down reads as generous rather than crowded.
- **Odd numbers.** Three spears of asparagus, five potatoes, one quenelle. Even numbers of small items arrange themselves into a grid, which the eye reads as mechanical; odd numbers force an asymmetric, more natural cluster.
- **Height without towers.** Lean one element against another rather than stacking flat things flat. A fish fillet resting at an angle against a mound of purée, rather than laid flat beside it, reads as considered rather than assembled. Do not build a tower that will fall over before it reaches the table — nothing looks worse than a garnish sliding off a slope in transit.
- **Sauce under or beside a crisp surface, never over it.** Sauce poured over crackling, a seared skin, or a pastry lid steams it soft within a minute. Pool the sauce first and set the crisp element on or beside it, or serve the sauce in a small jug alongside and let the diner pour it themselves.

- **Wipe the rim.** A single smear, a fingerprint in sauce, or a drip from the ladle on the white border of the plate undoes every other rule at once, because it is the first thing the eye catches. A clean, damp cloth folded to a corner, run once around the rim before the plate leaves the kitchen, takes four seconds.

> NO GADGETS REQUIRED
>
> Restaurants use squeeze bottles, tweezers, ring moulds and offset palette knives. None of it is necessary. A spoon does everything a squeeze bottle does, more honestly; two spoons shape a quenelle as well as any machine; your fingers place a herb leaf more accurately than tweezers ever will, once you have washed them.

Portioning — how much is enough

A plate that looks generous is not necessarily a plate with a lot of food on it; it is a plate where the amount of food matches the size and shape of the plate. As a working guide for a main course on a standard 27–28 cm dinner plate: 120–180 g of protein, 150–200 g of vegetables and starch combined, and 30–60 ml of sauce. A smaller plate — 22–24 cm — makes the same amount of food look considerably more abundant, which is the oldest trick in the trade and a genuinely useful one at home, where plates are often larger than a restaurant's.

Err towards less on the plate and more available at the table. A slightly restrained main course with a jug of extra sauce and a bowl of extra vegetables passed round reads as hospitality; an overloaded plate reads as trying too hard, and is harder to eat elegantly besides.

Classical and modern arrangement

French service developed two distinct habits of arranging a plate, and both are still current. Neither is wrong; they suit different food.

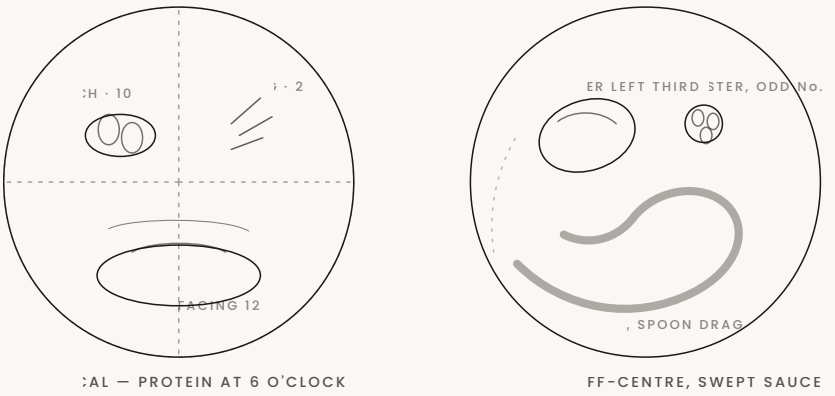


FIGURE 1 · TWO GRAMMARS

Classical: the plate read as a clock face, protein anchored at six with starch at ten and vegetable at two, everything facing the diner. Modern: the composition sits off-centre in one third of the plate, the sauce swept rather than pooled, more negative space left around the whole.

The classical arrangement

Picture the plate as a clock face. The protein — the largest, most important element — sits at six o'clock, nearest the diner, and is angled to face twelve, as though presenting itself. The starch goes at ten o'clock, the vegetable at two. Sauce is spooned under or around the protein, never obscuring it. This layout is old, symmetrical, calm, and extremely legible: a diner glancing down knows instantly what they are eating and in what order to eat it. It suits braises, roasts, and anything where the protein is genuinely the point of the dish — see Braising & Stewing and Searing & Roasting.

The modern arrangement

Developed largely from the 1970s onward alongside *nouvelle cuisine*, this arrangement abandons the clock in favour of asymmetry: the composition sits in one third of the plate rather than the centre, sauce is swept across the base with the back of a spoon rather than pooled, and far more negative space is left bare. It suits delicate or composed dishes — a piece of fish with three or four considered garnishes, a plated dessert — where the point is the relationship between small elements rather than one dominant one. It is harder to do well

precisely because there is no clock to follow; every placement is a decision. Start with the classical arrangement until it is second nature, then loosen it.

> WHICH TO USE TONIGHT
>
> If in doubt, use the classical layout. It is nearly impossible to get wrong, it suits the great majority of home cooking — a roast chicken, a braise, a piece of grilled fish — and it communicates confidence rather than effort. Save the modern layout for the one dish a menu is actually built around.

Sauce work on the plate

This section is about placing sauce, not making it — for the method, ratios and mother sauces themselves, see Sauce Making and the full reference at The Sauce Tree. Four moves cover almost everything a home table needs.

- **The spoon drag.** Spoon a small pool of sauce onto the plate, then draw the back of the spoon through it in one continuous stroke, thinning it to a tapered comma. Use it to lay a bed under a protein or fish.
- **The pool.** Simply spoon sauce into a shallow, roughly circular pool and set the food on or beside it. The oldest, plainest, and most reliable move — the one the classical layout uses.
- **The dot-and-drag.** Small dots of a second sauce or purée, placed with a teaspoon around the plate, each dragged into a short comma with the tip of the spoon. Used for a contrasting colour — a herb oil against a pale sauce, a red pepper coulis against a green one.
- **The quenelle.** A neat, three-sided oval shape given to a soft purée, mousse, or ice cream using two spoons, without any mould.

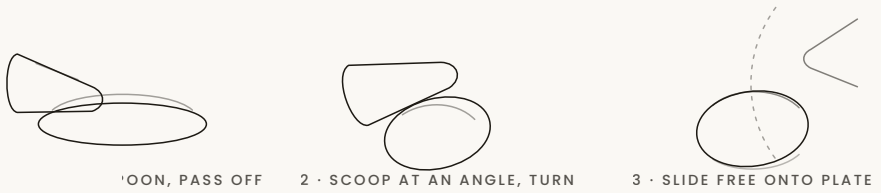


FIGURE 2 · THE TWO-SPOON QUENELLE

Two dessert spoons of the same size, dipped in hot water and wiped between passes so the purée releases cleanly. Load one spoon generously. Draw the second spoon's bowl across the first at a shallow angle, scooping the purée up and over into the second spoon — this single rolling pass is what gives the three-sided oval shape. Repeat the pass back into the first spoon if the shape is uneven. Slide the finished quenelle onto the plate by tipping the spoon almost flat and letting it drop rather than scraping it off.

01 Warm the spoons

Dip both dessert spoons in a jug of hot water and wipe them dry. A warm spoon lets a chilled purée or ice cream release without sticking; a cold spoon tears it.

02 Load and scoop

Draw the loaded spoon across the surface of the purée at a shallow angle, filling its bowl generously. Then draw the second spoon across the first, scooping the mixture up and over in a single rolling motion — this is what shapes the three flat sides.

CUE *The purée should turn over cleanly with each pass, not smear. If it smears, warm the spoons again.*

03 Release onto the plate

Tip the loaded spoon nearly flat over its landing spot and let the quenelle drop under its own weight rather than scraping it off, which flattens one side. One or two passes back and forth between the spoons is usually enough; more than that and the purée warms and softens.

Garnish that earns its place

The test for any garnish is simple: would the dish be worse without it? If the honest answer is no, it is decoration, and decoration you cannot eat with pleasure does not belong on a plate of food. This is the parsley sprig problem — a single curly sprig, laid on for colour, that virtually no diner has ever eaten, because it was never chosen to be eaten. It exists to signal "this plate has been finished" while contributing nothing.

A garnish earns its place when it does at least one of: adds a flavour the dish needs (a wedge of lemon for fish, a few capers for a meunière), adds a texture the dish lacks (a scatter of toasted nuts on a soft purée, fried shallots on a braise), or adds a genuine visual cue to what is actually in the dish (a herb that is also an ingredient of the sauce, laid whole rather than as an afterthought). Chopped flat-leaf parsley scattered with intent, tasted and seasoned like any other ingredient, is a real garnish. An untouched curly sprig balanced on the rim is not.

> THE RULE WITH NO EXCEPTIONS
>
> Everything on the plate is edible and relevant. Not "technically edible if forced" — actually meant to be eaten, and meant to improve the mouthful it sits beside. A twist of citrus peel that is only there for colour, a flower with no flavour, a cocktail umbrella of a garnish: all of it undermines a diner's trust that the rest of the plate was considered as carefully.

Colour, texture, temperature

A plate of entirely brown food — a braise, mash, and gravy — can taste completely correct and still look unfinished, because the eye has learned to read colour variety as a rough proxy for nutritional and flavour variety. A single green vegetable, even a simple one, does real work here: buttered spinach, a few blanched green beans, a scatter of chopped herbs. You do not need three colours on every plate — one considered green or bright element against a brown dish is usually enough, and a genuinely monochrome dish (a plate of white fish, cauliflower purée, beurre blanc) can be striking precisely because it is deliberate rather than accidental.

Texture matters as much as colour and is easier to get wrong, because a kitchen under pressure tends to produce plates that are uniformly soft: a braise, a purée, a soft-cooked vegetable, a smooth sauce. Somewhere on that plate put something with resistance — a few toasted, crushed hazelnuts, a scattering of fried breadcrumbs, a crisp-skinned piece of the protein itself. One crunch per plate lifts the whole thing.

Serve each element at the temperature it actually wants to be at, not the temperature that is convenient to plate. Hot food hot, cold food properly cold, and do not let a dish sit "resting" so long under foil that it slides into lukewarm — see Searing & Roasting for correct resting times. As a rule of thumb: soups and sauces arrive close to boiling and are eaten within a minute or two of that; a main course arrives hot enough that the plate itself is warm to the touch; a salad or terrine arrives properly chilled, not merely "not warm"; and a cheese course is the one exception that wants to come *up* to room temperature before it is eaten — see below.

COURSE	SERVING TEMPERATURE	WHY
Consommé, soup	Near boiling, in a warmed bowl	Aroma is volatile and is lost fast as it cools
Fish, poultry, meat	Just cooked, on a warmed plate	Fat sets and texture toughens as it cools
Sauces	Hot, poured or spooned last	An emulsified sauce can split as it cools; see Emulsions
Salad, terrine, pâté	Cold, plate chilled if possible	Fat should be firm, leaves crisp, not limp
Cheese	Room temperature	Flavour and texture are suppressed cold — take it out an hour ahead
Dessert (hot)	Straight from oven or pan	A soufflé or tart loses its point within minutes
Dessert (cold)	Properly chilled, not merely cool	Set creams and ices need real cold to hold shape

The French service sequence

A full French dinner has a shape, and every course in it has a job beyond simply being the next thing to eat. A home dinner rarely runs all six stages, but knowing what each is for lets you borrow the ones that suit the occasion.

- **Mise en bouche** — literally "into the mouth". One or two bites, no more, served with the first drink before anyone has sat down to eat properly. Its job is to say welcome and to wake the palate up, not to fill anyone.
- **Entrée** — the opening course proper. In French service this is the first seated course, not (confusingly, to English speakers) the main course. Something light, appetite-sharpening: a soup, a terrine, a light salad.
- **Poisson** — the fish course, traditionally served between the entrée and the meat course, on the logic that fish is lighter and should come before something heavier. Optional on a home menu; fold it into the entrée or the main if you are cooking three courses rather than five.
- **Plat** — the main course, the *plat principal*. The heaviest, most substantial dish of the meal, and traditionally the one the whole menu is built to lead up to.
- **Fromage** — the cheese course, served before dessert in French tradition (the reverse of British habit), on the logic that the last of the red wine is better finished with cheese than with something sweet. See below.
- **Dessert** — the sweet course proper.
- **Mignardises** — tiny sweets served with coffee at the very end: a square of chocolate, a small macaron, a sliver of nougat. Optional, and easy to make a day ahead.

For a home dinner of six, three courses — entrée, plat, dessert — with an optional cheese course between plat and dessert if you have a good cheeseboard to hand, covers the sequence honestly without exhausting a home kitchen or a home evening.

Timing a dinner for six

The single hardest part of hosting is not any one dish; it is making three courses land, correctly hot or cold, from one oven and four burners, while you are also meant to be a guest at your own table. The fix is entirely about sequencing, not speed — decide, in writing, what happens on which burner and when, days before the day itself.



FIGURE 3 · ONE KITCHEN, THREE COURSES

Read left to right as a single evening. The oven and hob are never asked to do two urgent things at once: the oven's one long unattended job is the roast; the hob's short, watched jobs cluster in the last thirty minutes.

01

T-24h to T-4h — everything that only improves by waiting

Dessert made and chilled or frozen. Stock made if you are making it from scratch (see Stocks) and reduced to a base for the main sauce. A terrine, if that is the entrée, is at its best a full day after it is pressed. This block should leave you, by T-4h, with nothing left to cook that cannot wait.

02 T-4h to T-2h — the entrée and the prep for everything else

Portion and plate a cold or room-temperature entrée now, covered, into the fridge. Do all the knife work for the main and the vegetables in this window too — everything measured, trimmed, in bowls — so that from T-2h onward you are cooking, not chopping. See Knife Skills.

03 T-2h to T-1h — the oven goes to work

The roast or braise for the main goes into the oven. This is deliberately the one long, unattended cooking job of the evening — it needs almost nothing from you for the next hour beyond a glance and, if roasting, a baste. Use this hour to dress, greet guests, and pour the first drink; it is the calmest hour of the evening precisely because the oven is doing the work.

04 T-30m — the hob wakes up

The main comes out to rest (see Searing & Roasting for resting times by cut). The pan sauce is built in the same pan while the meat rests — deglaze, reduce, mount with butter. Vegetables, already blanched ahead, go into a wide pan with a little butter and water to reheat and glaze in four or five minutes flat.

05 T-10m to service — plates only

Warm the dinner plates now if you have not already. Carve or portion the main, plate everything in the order set out under Classical and modern arrangement above, sauce last, rim wiped. Bring the entrée out of the fridge only once everyone is seated, so it never sits at room temperature longer than it must.

What can be made a day ahead

COURSE	FULLY AHEAD (24H+)	SAME DAY ONLY
Entrée	Terrine, pâté, soup base, vinaigrette, cured or pickled elements	Dressing a leaf salad, searing anything meant to be warm
Plat	Braises actually improve overnight; stock and sauce base	Roasting, searing, final sauce mounting, any pan sauce

COURSE	FULLY AHEAD (24H+)	SAME DAY ONLY
Vegetables	Blanching, peeling, cutting, purées (reheat gently)	The final glazing or sautéing step
Cheese	Buying and storing; comes to room temperature same day	—
Dessert	Almost everything: bakes, sets, ices, poached fruit	Soufflés, anything meant to be served warm from the oven

Notice the pattern: a braise is a better dinner-party dish than a roast for exactly this reason — it not only tolerates being made ahead, it improves. A whole chicken or a piece of fish, by contrast, wants to be cooked close to service. Choose your main course with your own evening in mind, not only your appetite.

Laying a table simply

A correctly laid table is read from the outside in — cutlery for the first course is laid furthest from the plate, the last course's nearest, because a course arrives and its matching implement is simply picked up next, working inward. This is the whole logic; the rest is detail.

- **Forks left, knives and spoons right**, blade edges facing the plate. For a soup entrée, main, and dessert: soup spoon and main-course knife on the right in that outside-to-in order; entrée fork and main fork on the left, entrée fork outermost.
- **Dessert cutlery above the plate**, spoon handle to the right, fork handle to the left, or brought in fresh with the dessert itself — either is correct, and bringing it fresh is easier for a home cook mid-service.
- **Glasses above the knife**, largest (water) leftmost, then white wine, then red, roughly in the order they will be used, angled slightly rather than in a rigid line.
- **Bread plate above the forks** on the left, with its own small knife laid across it.

- **Napkin on the plate or to the left of the forks**, folded simply — a rectangle or a loose roll does more for a table than an elaborate fold, which reads as fussy rather than considered.

> THE HOME VERSION
>
> You do not need five pieces of cutlery per setting for a three-course dinner. Lay what each course actually needs and change it between courses instead — it is less intimidating for guests, easier to lay correctly, and, done briskly while clearing, becomes part of the rhythm of the evening rather than an interruption to it.

The cheese course

A cheeseboard is not an assortment; it is a small, considered set. Three to five cheeses is the right range for a home table — enough for real variety, not so many that each becomes a sliver. Choose across families rather than within one: something soft and bloomy (a Brie or Camembert), something hard and aged (a Comté or a mature Cheddar), something blue (a Roquefort or Stilton), and, if you want a fourth or fifth, a goat's cheese and something washed-rind and pungent.

Arrange them on the board mildest to strongest, reading left to right or in a clock pattern, and serve them in that order so the palate is not blown out by the blue before it reaches the delicate goat's cheese. Buy roughly 100–120 g of cheese per person across the whole board for a course that follows a full three-course dinner, more like 150–200 g per person if cheese is the centrepiece of a simpler evening. Take it out of the fridge a full hour before serving — cold cheese tastes of little beyond salt and fat; at room temperature its actual character opens up.

- A separate small knife for each cheese, or at minimum for the blue, so flavours do not bleed across the board.
- Something plain alongside: a dense fruit loaf or plain crackers rather than anything sweetened or flavoured, which competes rather than supports.
- A little honey, a few walnuts, or a spoon of good chutney are genuine additions — a garnish that earns its place, in the terms set out above — not decoration.

Bread and butter

Bread served at the start of a meal is there to be eaten with butter and, later, to mop a sauce — not to be filled up on before the entrée arrives, so keep the basket modest and let it be refilled rather than piled high from the start. Slice it at the table or just before, not hours ahead, so the cut face has not dried. Good unsalted butter, a small dish per two or three guests rather than one large block for the table, softened at room temperature for the last half hour so it spreads rather than tears the bread.

Wine service

The two rules that actually matter more than any pairing chart: serve wine at the right temperature, and serve honestly rather than dogmatically. Beyond that, a few working principles cover a home table without turning the evening into a test.

- **Temperature.** Whites, rosés, and sparkling wines: 8–12°C, meaning genuinely cold from the fridge for lighter whites and fizz, ten minutes out of the fridge for a fuller white. Light reds (Pinot Noir, Beaujolais): 13–15°C, which is cellar-cool, not room temperature — a British "room temperature" from central heating is too warm for any red. Full reds: 16–18°C.
- **Order.** Light before full-bodied, dry before sweet, young before old, white generally before red — though a rich fish course can honestly precede a light red, and the entrée wine should be lighter than the wine served with the plat.
- **Quantity.** A standard 75 cl bottle pours roughly five to six glasses at a generous 125–150 ml. For a three-course dinner for six with wine throughout, plan on one bottle per two guests as a comfortable working figure, more if the evening runs long.
- **Decanting.** A young, tannic red benefits from thirty minutes to an hour of air before serving — pour it into any wide, clean vessel, a jug is entirely honest. An older red (a decade or more) is decanted instead to separate it from its sediment, gently, in one continuous pour, stopping the moment sediment reaches the neck. Most white wine gains nothing from decanting.

- **Pairing, honestly.** Forget rigid rules about fish and meat. Match weight to weight — a delicate dish wants a delicate wine, a rich one wants a wine with enough acidity or tannin to cut through it — and match a dish's dominant flavour (the sauce, usually, more than the protein) rather than the protein alone. A rich beurre blanc on fish wants a fuller white than the fish would suggest on its own; a tomato-based sauce on chicken behaves, for wine purposes, more like a tomato dish than a chicken one. If you like a wine with a dish, that is the pairing working.

> SERVING TOO COLD HIDES EVERYTHING
>
> A white wine served straight from the back of an over-cold fridge, or a red poured moments out of a cool cellar in winter, will taste of almost nothing but acid or tannin — the aromatics that make a wine worth drinking are suppressed by cold. If a wine tastes flat and simple, the first thing to check is not the bottle but the temperature; let it sit a few minutes and taste again.

When it goes wrong

The sauce looks dull and thickened by the time it is eaten

The plate was cold, or the sauce sat plated for more than a minute or two before service.

FIX Warm every plate without exception, and sauce the plate last, in the final seconds before it leaves the kitchen.

The plate looks crowded even though the portions are correct

No negative space was left; food is pushed out towards the rim.

FIX Pull everything a centimetre or two back towards the centre-third of the plate and leave the outer rim genuinely bare.

Garnish looks like an afterthought

It was added at the very end with no relationship to the dish's own flavours — the parsley sprig problem.

FIX Choose a garnish that is already an ingredient in the dish — a herb from the sauce, a nut that echoes a crust — and place it with the same care as the protein.

Three courses are all ready at once and nothing else is

No written timeline; everything was mentally scheduled around "when it's done" rather than fixed clock times.

FIX Write the timeline out the day before, as in Figure 3, working backwards from the service time you actually want.

The quenelle keeps collapsing or smearing

Cold spoons, a purée that is too soft, or scraping rather than dropping it onto the plate.

FIX Warm the spoons in hot water, chill the purée slightly firmer than seems necessary, and always release by tipping, never by scraping.

The cheese tastes of almost nothing

Served straight from the fridge.

FIX Take it out a full hour before the course is served, uncovered, at room temperature.

Being a host who actually sits down

The best-plated, best-timed dinner still fails if the person who cooked it never sits at their own table. Everything above exists to buy back time at service — the day-ahead dessert, the braise that only improves overnight, the vegetables blanched hours before and reheated in five minutes — precisely so that the last thirty minutes are calm enough for you to plate quickly, sit down, and eat the entrée at the same moment as your guests. A host circling the table refilling water while everyone else eats is not generosity; it is a timeline that did not leave room for the host. Plan for your own seat as deliberately as you plan the menu, and the whole evening reads as easy — which is, after all, the entire point of everything in this chapter.

The last five per cent is still five per cent. Spend it, but never mistake it for the other ninety-five.

END OF THE PLATING AND SERVICE PAGE

PART SEVEN

THE RECIPES

Les Recettes

Eighty-five classical dishes, easiest first, every one cookable with the kit in Chapter Two.

CHAPTER 18

Egg Recipes

Les Œufs

Nine dishes, easiest first, that between them use every method a French kitchen asks an egg to perform — and every one of them is on the table tonight.

The egg, understood

An egg is the most patient teacher in a kitchen. It will not lie to you: too much heat and it turns rubbery in seconds; too little care and it weeps water onto the plate. Everything below is one argument, told nine ways — control the heat, and the egg does the rest.

These nine dishes are ordered deliberately, from the one you can cook half-asleep to the one that asks you to trust your own nerve. *Œufs brouillés* — French scrambled eggs — need nothing but a saucepan, a wooden spoon and the patience to keep the heat low. By the end of this chapter you are separating soufflé batter into a mould and watching it rise in the oven without opening the door. The egg itself has not changed. What has changed is how much heat, how much air, and how much time you are asking it to hold.

Three ideas carry the whole page. First, **egg protein sets fast and irreversibly** — there is no "medium" the way there is with meat; the window between silken and rubbery is a matter of degrees and seconds, which is why so many of the steps below name a cue rather than a clock. Second, **the yolk is an emulsifier**; it holds fat and water together in mayonnaise, in a quiche custard, in a

soufflé base, and understanding that is what lets you fix a dish that has started to split. Third, **whipped egg white is trapped air, not magic** — it collapses the moment it is treated roughly, so every technique that folds in whites is really a technique for handling air gently.

If you have not yet read Eggs in the Techniques section, do that first: it covers buying, storing, separating, and the doneness ladder in more depth than a recipe page has room for. This chapter assumes you can already crack an egg cleanly and tell a fresh one from a stale one by how it sits in water.

> NO GADGETS REQUIRED
>
> Classical recipes for mayonnaise and soufflé often assume a stand mixer or an electric whisk. None of the nine dishes below need one. A balloon whisk and a relaxed forearm will emulsify mayonnaise and whip egg whites to stiff peaks; it takes three or four minutes longer than a machine and the result is, if anything, more stable, because you can feel the exact moment it is ready.



FIGURE 1 · THE DONENESS LADDER

Egg white and yolk set at different temperatures, which is why a dish can hold a runny yolk inside a fully firm white. Past about 76°C the proteins over-tighten, squeeze out water, and the texture turns from silk to rubber. This is the whole physics behind every cue in this chapter.

A word on eggs themselves: buy the best you can, because in dishes this plain the egg is the whole dish. A deep orange yolk is not necessarily fresher, only from a hen fed more carotenoids, but freshness itself matters enormously for poaching and for anything served softly set — a fresh egg holds its white in a tight clutch around the yolk; a fortnight-old egg spreads thin and wispy in the water. Size matters too: every recipe below assumes a "large" egg, roughly 60 g in shell, about 50 g out of it, split roughly 60/40 between white and yolk.

There is no dish in this school with fewer ingredients and less room to hide. An egg cooked with attention is a small luxury; the same egg cooked carelessly is a reproach.

ON THE WHOLE FAMILY OF EGG DISHES

Œufs Brouillés — French Scrambled Eggs

The easiest recipe in this chapter and, cooked properly, one of the most seductive things an egg can become: not curds in a hot pan but a slow, spoonable custard, cooked entirely below the boil.

Œufs Brouillés

French scrambled eggs

Cooked over the gentlest possible heat, stirred constantly, and pulled from the pan while still visibly loose, so residual heat finishes the set on the plate rather than in the pan.

SERVES	ACTIVE TIME	DIFFICULTY
2	8 min	Easiest

INGREDIENTS

5 large eggs, cold from the fridge

30 g cold butter, cut in small cubes, divided

2 tbsp crème fraîche or double cream

— fine salt, white pepper

— a few chives, snipped, to finish

METHOD

1. Crack the eggs into a bowl and break them up with a fork — not a whisk, which incorporates too much air for this dish — just enough to marry yolk and white. Do not season yet: salt added before cooking draws water out of the egg and gives you a wetter curd.
2. Set a saucepan directly on the lowest possible flame, or if your hob will not go low enough, set it over a heat diffuser or a second pan of barely simmering

water. Add half the butter. There is no rush: this dish takes eight to ten unhurried minutes and is worse for being cooked faster.

3. When the butter has melted, add the eggs and begin stirring at once with a wooden spoon, scraping the whole base of the pan continuously, in figures of eight. Do not stop stirring at any point from here to the plate.

   CUE *Nothing happens for what feels like a long time. Trust the low heat; this is correct.*

4. After four or five minutes the eggs begin to thicken into small, glistening curds, closer to custard than to what a hot pan produces. Keep stirring and keep the heat low enough that you never hear a sizzle — a sizzle means the pan is too hot and the curds will turn dry and grainy.

5. The moment the mixture coats the back of the spoon in a loose, custardy layer but is still visibly wet — a good ten per cent looser than you think is done — pull the pan off the heat entirely. Stir in the remaining cold butter and the cream; both stop the cooking dead and add gloss.

   CUE *The eggs should fall from the spoon in soft, slow ribbons, never in a solid clump.*

6. Season now, with salt and white pepper, and spoon at once onto warm plates or into a hollowed brioche. The residual heat finishes the set in the seconds it takes to serve. Scatter chives and eat immediately.

WHY IT WORKS

Egg protein begins to set around 63°C and turns rubbery well before boiling point. Cooking below a simmer the whole way, off the direct heat of a hot pan, keeps every part of the mixture inside that narrow silken window instead of racing through it.

TO SERVE

On buttered toast, inside a warm brioche bun, or as the base of pipérade. A shaving of black truffle in season needs nothing else.

THE ONE MISTAKE THAT RUINS THIS DISH

High heat. A hot pan sets the outside of each curd instantly while the inside stays raw, then squeezes water out as it catches up — the grainy, weeping scramble everyone has eaten and no one has enjoyed. If you only take one thing from this chapter, take this: scrambled eggs cooked in the French style are never, at any point, cooked quickly.

Omelette aux Fines Herbes

Where scrambled eggs are slow, the omelette is fast — the two techniques sit at opposite ends of the same ingredient, and mastering both teaches you the full range of what heat does to an egg in a pan.

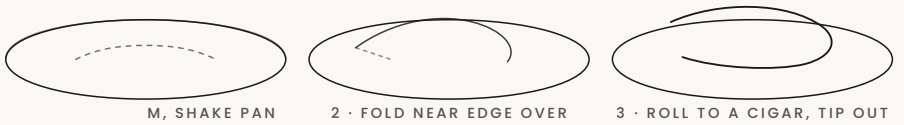


FIGURE 2 · THE ROLL

The pan tilts away from you throughout, so the omelette rolls itself down the slope towards the far lip and out onto the plate, seam underneath.

Omelette aux Fines Herbes

Herb omelette

Made in under a minute of actual cooking, in a hot pan with constant motion, and rolled — never folded in half like a diner omelette.

SERVES	ACTIVE TIME	DIFFICULTY
1	2 min	Easy

INGREDIENTS

- **3** large eggs
- **1 tbsp** water (not milk — it toughens the set)
- **15 g** butter
- **1 tbsp** mixed soft herbs, finely chopped — parsley, chervil, chives, tarragon
- — fine salt, pepper

METHOD

1. Break the eggs into a bowl, add the water, season, and beat briskly with a fork for fifteen seconds — enough to blend fully and lighten the mixture with a little air, not enough to build a froth. Stir in the herbs.

2. Heat a heavy frying pan, ideally 20–22 cm, over medium-high heat until a drop of water skitters and vanishes. Add the butter; it should foam vigorously without browning.

   CUE *Butter that browns means the pan is too hot — wipe it out, lower the heat, and start the butter again.*

3. Pour in the eggs all at once. Immediately begin dragging a wooden spoon or a fork flat across the base in wide circles, while shaking the pan gently with your other hand, so the whole surface sets in loose, small curds rather than one solid sheet.

4. After about twenty seconds most of the egg is softly set with a little visible liquid still pooling on top. Stop stirring, tilt the pan away from you, and let the last of the liquid run to the far side and finish setting for a few seconds.

   CUE *The surface should still look faintly moist and glossy, not dry — it keeps cooking as it rolls.*

5. Using the spoon, fold the near third of the omelette over onto the middle third. Tilt the pan steeply and, with a firm tap of your wrist against the handle, roll the whole thing over on itself towards the far lip until it sits as a plump cigar with the seam underneath.

6. Tip it out directly onto a warm plate, seam-side down. It should be pale gold outside, not a fleck of brown, and still faintly runny at the very centre.

WHY IT WORKS

Constant motion in a hot pan sets many small curds instead of one thick sheet, so the omelette rolls without cracking and stays tender because no single point of it spends long enough at heat to overcook.

VARIATIONS

Grated Gruyère scattered just before folding gives *omelette au fromage*. Sautéed mushrooms or a spoonful of ratatouille do the same for a fuller lunch.

Practise this one until the roll is unconscious — see the rock chop and push cut in Knife Skills for the same idea applied to a blade: technique that has become reflex frees your attention for everything else on the stove.

Œufs Mayonnaise

A bistro classic built from two techniques you now half-know: a properly hard-boiled egg, and an emulsion built by hand. Get both right and this becomes far more than the sum of its parts.

Œufs Mayonnaise

Hard-boiled eggs, hand-made mayonnaise

Precisely timed eggs, shocked in cold water to stop the yolk turning grey at the edge, under a mayonnaise built entirely by wrist and whisk.

SERVES	ACTIVE TIME	DIFFICULTY
4	20 min	Easy

INGREDIENTS

- **8** large eggs, at room temperature
- **1** egg yolk, for the mayonnaise
- **1 tsp** Dijon mustard
- **200 ml** neutral oil (grapeseed or sunflower)
- **1 tsp** white wine vinegar
- — salt, white pepper
- — a little paprika and chopped parsley, to finish

METHOD

1. Bring a pot of water to a full boil. Lower the eggs in gently on a spoon, one at a time, and return to a steady simmer. Cook for exactly nine minutes for a fully set yolk with no grey ring, or ten if your kitchen is at altitude.
2. Lift the eggs straight into a bowl of iced water and leave them a full five minutes. This halts the cooking instantly and, just as importantly, shrinks the white away from the shell, which is what makes peeling clean rather than pitted.

   CUE *Tap and roll each egg on the board to craze the whole shell before peeling under a thin stream of water.*
3. For the mayonnaise: whisk the raw yolk, mustard, and a pinch of salt in a mixing bowl set on a damp cloth so it cannot slide. Begin adding the oil *drop by drop*, whisking continuously, for the first quarter of the volume. This is the stage that actually builds the emulsion; rushing it is the single most common cause of a split sauce.
4. Once the mixture has visibly thickened and gone pale, the emulsion is established and you can add the remaining oil in a thin, steady, unbroken stream, whisking throughout. Finish with the vinegar, whisked in, which loosens the mayonnaise to a spoonable consistency and brightens it.

   CUE *A ribbon of mayonnaise should sit on the surface for a second before sinking in.*

5. Halve the peeled eggs lengthways with a wet knife wiped between cuts. Arrange cut-side up on a plate, nap generously with mayonnaise, and finish with a dusting of paprika and parsley.

WHY IT WORKS

Mayonnaise is an emulsion of oil suspended in tiny droplets through egg yolk and water. The slow start forces those first droplets to be small; once there are enough of them the mixture itself keeps new oil broken up, so you can pour faster without it collapsing.

IF IT SPLITS

Start a fresh bowl with one more yolk and a teaspoon of water, whisk to combine, then dribble in the split mixture as if it were the oil. It rebuilds every time.

NO GADGETS REQUIRED

A stick blender makes mayonnaise foolproof but changes the texture — it is denser and less silky than the whisked version. By hand, in a bowl on a damp cloth, four minutes of steady whisking gets you the classical texture and teaches you to feel the emulsion form, which is a skill worth having for every other emulsified sauce in this school.

Œufs en Cocotte

The gentlest cooked-egg dish in French cuisine and, not coincidentally, one of the most forgiving to a beginner: the egg is protected from direct heat by cream, by a dish, and by a water bath all at once.

Œufs en Cocotte

Baked eggs in cream

Individual eggs baked gently in a water bath inside buttered ramekins, cushioned in cream, so the white sets to a soft curtain around a yolk that stays liquid.

SERVES	ACTIVE TIME	OVEN
4	6 min	180°C / 350°F

INGREDIENTS

4 large eggs, very fresh

120 ml double cream

20 g butter, softened, for the dishes

— salt, white pepper, a scrape of nutmeg

— chives or tarragon, chopped, to finish

METHOD

1. Heat the oven to 180°C (350°F). Butter four ramekins generously, right up to the rim — this is what stops the egg sticking as it sets.
2. Set the ramekins in a roasting tin and pour boiling water into the tin until it comes roughly halfway up their sides. This *bain-marie* — water bath — is what keeps the heat around the eggs gentle and even; without it the outer edge of the white turns rubbery long before the centre sets.
3. Warm the cream in a small saucepan until just steaming, not boiling. Pour a tablespoon into the base of each buttered ramekin.
4. Crack one egg into each ramekin directly on top of the warm cream. Season each lightly and spoon another tablespoon of cream over the top to cover the yolk — this protects it from the direct heat of the oven above and is what keeps it liquid.
5. Bake for 9–11 minutes, turning the tin once. The white should be fully opaque and just set at the very centre; the yolk beneath should still move as a distinct liquid dome when the ramekin is tilted.

   CUE *Give the ramekin the gentlest nudge — a set white barely trembles; a still-loose one visibly ripples.*
6. Lift the ramekins from the water with a cloth, scatter with herbs, and serve at once with thin fingers of toasted bread for dipping — *mouillettes*.

WHY IT WORKS

The water bath never exceeds 100°C and, more importantly, transfers heat to the ramekin slowly and evenly, so the egg approaches its setting point gradually from all sides instead of scorching against direct oven heat on one face.

VARIATIONS

A spoonful of sautéed spinach, a few strands of ham, or grated Gruyère under the egg turn this into a fuller starter without changing the method at all.

Œufs Pochés Bourguignonne

Poaching in water alone is a knife-edge skill; poaching in red wine is, oddly, more forgiving, because the wine's acidity and colour hide the small imperfections that show up starkly white against white. It also happens to taste extraordinary with the sauce it produces.

Œufs Pochés en Meurette

Eggs poached in red wine, Burgundy style

Eggs poached directly in a simmering red wine and shallot reduction, the poaching liquid then thickened into the sauce that dresses them.

SERVES	ACTIVE TIME	DIFFICULTY
4	30 min	Moderate

INGREDIENTS

- **8** very fresh large eggs
- **750 ml** robust red wine, a young Burgundy or similar
- **150 g** smoked bacon lardons
- **2** shallots, finely sliced
- **1** small carrot, finely diced
- **1** garlic clove, crushed
- **1** bouquet garni (thyme, bay, parsley stalks)
- **30 g** butter, softened, kneaded with 20 g flour (*beurre manié*)
- **8** slices baguette, fried in butter, for croûtes
- **1** garlic clove, halved, for rubbing the croûtes

METHOD

1. In a heavy pan, render the lardons over medium heat until golden and crisp, then lift them out with a slotted spoon and set aside. In the rendered fat, soften the shallots and carrot for five minutes until translucent, not browned.
2. Add the garlic, bouquet garni and the wine. Bring to a simmer and reduce by about a third, uncovered, 12–15 minutes, until the liquid coats the back of the spoon lightly and smells of cooked wine rather than raw alcohol.
3. Lower the heat until the wine barely trembles — a hard simmer will shred the whites. Crack each egg into a cup first, then slide it gently into the liquid;

poach in two batches of four, 3–4 minutes each, until the white is fully set and the yolk still yields to a light touch.

CUE *The white should hold a rough, cloud-like shape around the yolk; if it disperses into wisps the liquid is too hot or the egg was not fresh enough.*

4. Lift each egg out with a slotted spoon onto a clean cloth to drain, and trim any ragged trailing threads of white with kitchen scissors or the tip of a knife.
5. Strain the poaching wine through a sieve into a clean saucepan, pressing the vegetables to extract their juice, then discard the solids and bouquet garni. Bring back to a simmer and whisk in the beurre manié a small piece at a time until the sauce lightly coats a spoon.
6. Rub the fried croûtes with the cut garlic clove. Set two croûtes per plate, top with a poached egg, scatter the reserved lardons over, and spoon the wine sauce generously across.

WHY IT WORKS

A *beurre manié* — raw butter and flour worked together — thickens a hot liquid the instant it is whisked in, without the lumps a dry flour would cause and without the extra step of a separate roux.

NOTHING WASTED

The strained-out shallot and carrot pulp, forced through the sieve rather than discarded, will thicken a simple soup — see Soups.

ONLY EVER WITH A VERY FRESH EGG

Any poached-egg dish depends on the tight, clutching white of a fresh egg. An older egg's white has thinned and spreads into ragged streamers the instant it touches hot liquid, wine or water alike, and no technique below fixes that after the fact. If in doubt, test one egg in a cup of water first: a fresh one holds together as a discrete mass near the bottom.

Pipérade

A dish from the Basque country rather than the eggs-as-centrepiece tradition further north — here the egg is folded through a stew of peppers and tomato rather than the other way round, which makes it an excellent bridge towards the vegetable cookery in Vegetables.

Pipérade

Basque peppers, tomato and egg

Peppers and onion cooked down slowly until sweet, tomato added to finish, and beaten eggs stirred through off the heat at the very last moment.

SERVES	ACTIVE TIME	DIFFICULTY
4	35 min	Moderate

INGREDIENTS

- **3** red peppers, deseeded, sliced into strips
- **1** green pepper, deseeded, sliced into strips
- **2** onions, sliced with the grain
- **3** garlic cloves, sliced thin
- **4** ripe tomatoes, peeled, deseeded, chopped
- **3 tbsp** olive oil
- **1** bay leaf
- **1/2 tsp** piment d'Espelette or mild chilli flakes
- **6** large eggs, beaten with a fork
- **80 g** Bayonne ham or prosciutto, torn, optional

METHOD

1. Warm the oil in a heavy pan over low-medium heat. Add the onions and a pinch of salt and sweat, covered, for ten minutes, stirring now and then, until soft and translucent but not coloured.
2. Add the peppers, garlic, bay leaf and piment d'Espelette. Cover and cook gently for 20 minutes, stirring occasionally, until the peppers have collapsed to a soft, jammy mass — this slowness is what removes all bitterness from the pepper skins.

   CUE *A wooden spoon dragged across the base should leave a brief clear trail before the mixture settles back.*
3. Add the tomatoes, raise the heat slightly, and cook uncovered for a further 10 minutes until most of the free liquid has evaporated and the mixture holds together on a spoon. Taste and adjust salt.
4. Lower the heat right down. Pour in the beaten eggs and stir slowly and continuously with a wooden spoon, exactly as for œufs brouillés, until the eggs form soft curds through the vegetables and are still visibly moist. Pull from the heat a moment before you think it is ready.

5. Fold through the torn ham if using, off the heat, and serve at once with crusty bread.

WHY IT WORKS

The same low-and-slow logic as scrambled eggs applies here: the vegetables are already fully cooked and merely warm, so the pan's residual heat is exactly enough to set the eggs softly without needing direct high heat at all.

NOTHING WASTED

Pepper cores and tomato skins go straight to the stock bowl; see Stocks.

Quiche Lorraine

The recipe that proves eggs can be a structural material as much as a food: baked inside a custard, they set into something you can slice cleanly with a knife, which is a different physics entirely from anything above.

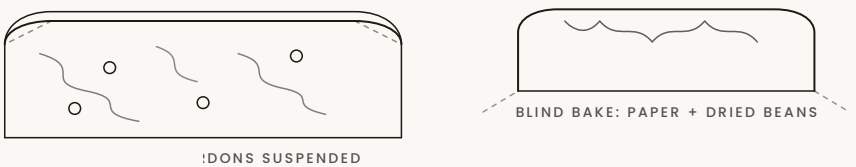


FIGURE 3 · CUSTARD AS STRUCTURE

Blind-baking sets the pastry walls before the wet custard goes in, so the base stays crisp instead of turning soggy under a slow-baked filling.

Quiche Lorraine

Egg and lardon tart in hand-made pastry

A short pastry made entirely by hand, blind-baked, then filled with a cream custard and smoked lardons and baked slowly until barely set.

SERVES	ACTIVE TIME	OVEN
6	40 min	200°C, then 160°C

INGREDIENTS

200 g plain flour, plus extra for dusting

100 g cold butter, cubed

1 egg yolk

3–4 tbsp iced water

1/2 tsp salt

200 g smoked bacon lardons

3 large eggs

250 ml double cream

100 ml whole milk

— salt, white pepper, nutmeg

METHOD

1. **The pastry, by hand.** Tip the flour and salt into a mixing bowl. Add the cold butter and, using only your fingertips, rub it into the flour, lifting the mixture to aerate it, until it resembles coarse breadcrumbs with a few pea-sized lumps left. Work quickly — warm hands melt the butter and toughen the pastry.

2. Make a well in the centre, add the yolk and most of the water, and bring it together with a knife in short cutting strokes, adding water a teaspoon at a time only as needed, until it just clumps. Turn onto the board and press into a disc with the heel of your hand two or three times — do not knead. Wrap and chill for 30 minutes.

   CUE *The dough should look slightly streaky with butter, not smooth. Smooth means overworked.*

3. Heat the oven to 200°C (400°F). Roll the pastry on a floured board to about 3 mm thick and line a 24 cm tart tin, pressing well into the corners and leaving a slight overhang. Prick the base all over with a fork, line with baking paper and fill with dried beans or rice as weights.

4. Blind-bake 15 minutes, then remove the paper and beans and bake a further 8–10 minutes until the base looks dry and very pale gold, not raw. Trim the overhanging edge flush with a knife. Lower the oven to 160°C (320°F).

5. Meanwhile, fry the lardons in a dry pan over medium heat until golden and much of their fat has rendered, then drain on a cloth.
6. Whisk the eggs, cream, milk, a good pinch of salt, white pepper and a scrape of nutmeg together in a bowl until just combined — over-whisking builds bubbles that mar the finished surface.
7. Scatter the lardons over the baked case, set it on the oven shelf, and pour in the custard almost to the brim — filling it on the shelf avoids spilling on the walk to the oven.
8. Bake 30–35 minutes at 160°C until the custard is set at the edges but still shows a gentle, coherent wobble across the central third when the tin is nudged. Cool at least 15 minutes before slicing; it firms considerably as it cools.

   CUE *A knife inserted an inch from the centre should come out clean; the very centre stays a shade underset on purpose.*

WHY IT WORKS

A custard baked past around 85°C throughout curdles into a grainy, weeping texture — the same protein logic as the doneness ladder above, applied at tart scale. Pulling it while the centre still wobbles lets carry-over heat finish it without crossing that line.

NO FOOD PROCESSOR?

Good — this pastry is better by hand. A machine chops the butter into pieces so fine and even that the pastry loses the little pockets of fat that make it flake; fingertips leave it pleasingly uneven.

DISH	EGG STATE WANTED	CORE RISK	GUARD AGAINST IT
Brouillés	Silken, barely set curd	High heat toughens instantly	Lowest heat, constant stir, pull early
Omelette	Soft curds, moist centre	Overcooking while rolling	Twenty seconds of heat, roll off residual warmth
Mayonnaise	Raw yolk as emulsifier	Oil added too fast splits it	Drop by drop until thickened, then a steady stream
Cocotte	Set white, liquid yolk	Direct oven heat scorches the edge	Water bath, cream cushion over the yolk
Meurette	Tight poached shape	A weak simmer shreds the white	Very fresh eggs, liquid barely trembling

DISH	EGG STATE WANTED	CORE RISK	GUARD AGAINST IT
Quiche custard	Set at 85°C, not beyond	Overbaking curdles the custard	Pull while the centre still wobbles
Soufflé	Set structure around trapped air	Opened oven door collapses the rise	No peeking until the last few minutes

Œufs Mimosa

A stuffed-egg dish so simple it is almost a knife-work exercise dressed as a starter, and a useful lesson in how a sieve turns a boiled yolk into something with an entirely new texture.

Œufs Mimosa

Stuffed eggs with sieved yolk

Hard-boiled eggs halved, the yolks sieved to a fine, sunny crumb and mixed with mayonnaise, then piped or spooned back into the whites.

SERVES	ACTIVE TIME	DIFFICULTY
4	20 min	Easy

INGREDIENTS

8 large eggs, hard-boiled as in Œufs Mayonnaise above

4 tbsp mayonnaise, hand-made as above

1 tsp Dijon mustard

1 tsp snipped chives

— salt, white pepper, cayenne

— a few extra chives or cress, to finish

METHOD

1. Halve the peeled, hard-boiled eggs lengthways with a sharp, wet knife. Scoop the yolks into a bowl with a teaspoon and set the whites aside on a plate, cavity up.
2. Push the yolks through a sieve set over the bowl, using the back of a wooden spoon in small circular strokes. This is the whole trick of the dish: sieving

breaks the yolk into a fine, even, almost fluffy crumb that no amount of forking or mashing will match.

CUE *The yolk should fall through as loose, separate granules, not a paste — if it clogs the mesh, the sieve holes are too fine or you are pressing too hard.*

3. Fold in the mayonnaise, mustard and chives with a fork until just combined and season to taste. Do not overmix — you want to keep some of the crumbly texture the sieve gave you.
4. Spoon or pipe the mixture back into the egg-white halves, mounding it slightly above the rim. Dust with a pinch of cayenne and finish with a few extra chives.

WHY IT WORKS

A boiled yolk is dry and crumbly on its own; forcing it through a sieve multiplies its surface area many times over, so the mayonnaise binds it into a light, cohesive filling instead of a dense paste.

TO SERVE

As a first course with a green salad dressed simply, or as one plate among several for an aperitif spread.

> ONE SIEVE, MANY JOBS
>
> The same fine sieve that rices a boiled yolk here will also strain a consommé, dust a cake with sugar, and rinse rice. It is one of the few genuinely universal tools in this kitchen — see The Honest Kitchen for the full case against single-purpose gadgets.

Soufflé au Fromage

The closing recipe, and the hardest, because it asks you to trust a process you cannot check halfway through: once the oven door shuts, you do not open it again until the final minutes, and everything that happened earlier — the roux, the beaten whites, the fold — has already decided the outcome.

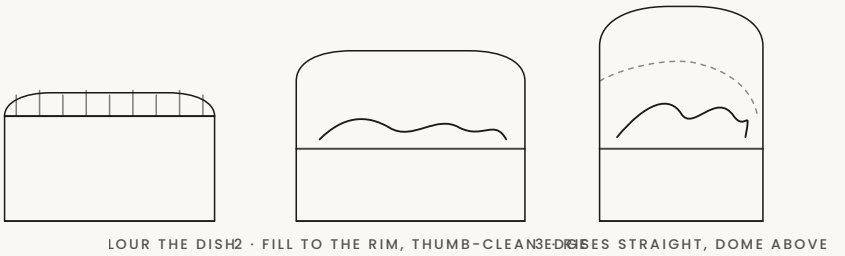


FIGURE 4 · DISH TO DOME

A buttered-and-floured wall gives the batter something to grip as it climbs; a thumb wiped round the inside rim of the filled dish stops the rise catching and leaning.

Soufflé au Fromage

Cheese soufflé

A thick cheese-enriched roux base folded with stiffly whipped egg whites and baked in a prepared dish until risen tall and barely set at the centre.

SERVES	ACTIVE TIME	OVEN
4	35 min	190°C / 375°F

INGREDIENTS

40 g butter, plus extra softened for the dish

2 tbsp fine dried breadcrumbs or grated Parmesan, for the dish

40 g plain flour

300 ml whole milk, warmed

5 large egg yolks

6 large egg whites

120 g Gruyère, finely grated

1/4 tsp cream of tartar or a few drops of lemon juice, optional

— salt, white pepper, nutmeg, cayenne

METHOD

1. Heat the oven to 190°C (375°F) with a shelf set low. Butter a 1.5-litre soufflé dish thoroughly with upward strokes — the direction matters, as it helps the batter climb — then coat the inside evenly with the breadcrumbs or Parmesan, tipping out the excess. This gritty wall gives the soufflé something to grip as it rises.

2. Melt the butter in a saucepan over medium heat, stir in the flour, and cook the resulting *roux*, stirring constantly, for two minutes until it smells faintly biscuity and no longer of raw flour, without letting it colour.

3. Off the heat, whisk in the warm milk in three additions, beating out any lumps after each. Return to the heat and cook, whisking continuously, until it thickens to a very thick, heavy paste that pulls cleanly from the sides of the pan — thicker than an ordinary béchamel, because it must still carry the weight of the whites.

4. Off the heat, beat in the yolks one at a time, then the Gruyère, and season generously with salt, white pepper, nutmeg and a pinch of cayenne — the base should taste slightly over-seasoned, since the whites will dilute it. Spread the base out in a wide bowl to cool to just warm.

5. In a large, scrupulously clean and dry bowl, whisk the egg whites with the cream of tartar, if using, starting slowly and building speed, until they hold stiff, glossy peaks that stand upright when the whisk is lifted straight out.

   CUE *Tip the bowl right over your head. Properly whipped whites do not move. (Do this over a sink the first few times.)*

6. Stir a third of the whites into the still-warm base to loosen it — this sacrificial addition is beaten in firmly, not folded, and its only job is to bring the two mixtures to a similar consistency.

7. Tip the lightened base back over the remaining whites. Fold with a large metal spoon or spatula in broad strokes — down through the centre, along the base, and up the side of the bowl, turning the bowl a quarter turn between strokes — stopping the instant no dry streaks of white remain. Every stroke beyond that loses you air and height.

8. Pour into the prepared dish; it should come close to the rim. Run your thumb around the inside edge, wiping away a thin channel of batter — this stops the mixture catching on the rim as it climbs and rising unevenly.

9. Bake 25–28 minutes without opening the door. It is ready when it has risen well clear of the rim, the top is deep golden, and a gentle sideways nudge of the dish sets it wobbling only very slightly at the centre.

   CUE *Resist checking before 22 minutes; the structure is still fragile and a draft of cold air can fell it.*

10. Carry it to the table at once. A soufflé does not wait for its guests — they wait for it, and it falls gracefully rather than suddenly within a few minutes of leaving the oven, which is simply the trapped air cooling and contracting.

WHY IT WORKS

The soufflé's height is nothing but heated, expanding air trapped inside a network of set egg protein. The base gives that network flavour and enough body to hold its

shape once the air begins to cool; the whipped whites are the only source of the air itself.

NO STAND MIXER?

A large balloon whisk and a wide bowl, held at an angle so more air reaches the whites with each stroke, will reach stiff peaks in four to five minutes of steady work. Rest between bursts if your arm tires — the whites will not deflate from a short pause.

FAT IS THE ENEMY OF WHIPPED WHITE

A single trace of yolk, or a smear of butter left in the bowl, stops egg whites from whipping to full volume at all — fat coats the proteins and prevents them trapping air. Separate eggs one at a time into a small cup before adding each to the main bowl, so one broken yolk costs you one egg, not the whole batch, and wash the whisk and bowl in hot water with nothing but soap beforehand.

When it goes wrong

Scrambled eggs turn grainy and weep water

The pan was too hot, or the eggs were left on the heat past the point of visible looseness.

FIX Lower the heat further next time and pull the pan while the eggs still look ten per cent underdone; the residual heat finishes them.

Mayonnaise splits

The oil was added too quickly before the emulsion was established, or the ingredients were too cold.

FIX Whisk a fresh yolk with a teaspoon of water in a clean bowl and dribble the split mixture back in slowly, as though it were the oil.

Poached eggs shred into wisps

The egg was not fresh, or the poaching liquid was at a hard boil rather than a bare simmer.

FIX Test freshness in a cup of water first, and keep the liquid at the gentlest tremble, never a rolling boil.

Quiche or cocotte custard turns grainy

Baked or cooked past roughly 85°C, so the egg proteins over-tightened and squeezed out liquid.

FIX Pull it from the oven while the centre still shows a slow, coherent wobble; carry-over heat completes the set.

Soufflé will not rise, or rises then collapses at once

Whites under-whipped or over-folded, a greasy bowl, or the oven door opened too early.

FIX Whip to true stiff peaks in a scrupulously clean bowl, fold only until no streaks remain, and do not open the door before 22 minutes.

Hard-boiled yolks show a grey-green ring

Overcooked, or cooled too slowly, allowing iron in the yolk to react with sulphur in the white.

FIX Nine minutes at a simmer, then straight into iced water for a full five minutes.

Cooked in this order, these nine dishes take you from a saucepan you can barely get wrong to a soufflé that asks for real nerve — and every stage of that path uses the same handful of tools. The next stop in the kitchen is the pot and the sieve at proper scale: see Soups, where the same principle of gentle, watched heat governs everything from a purée to a consommé.

Master the egg and you have, in miniature, mastered heat itself — the whole argument of this school, boiled down to something you can hold in one hand.

CLOSING NOTE, LES ŒUFS

CHAPTER 19

Soups

Les Soupes et Potages

Four families, nine recipes, and one pot: soup is where a cook first learns to build flavour in layers rather than reach for it in a jar.

The four families

French soup is not one dish wearing different vegetables. It is four distinct techniques, each with its own logic, and knowing which family you are in tells you exactly what to do next without needing to be told.

The nine recipes below are ordered easiest first, and they also happen to walk through all four families in a sensible teaching order: a rustic gratinée to start, three purée-family *potages* to build confidence, a rustic *soupe* and a proper *velouté* in the middle, and a fish soup and a clarified consommé to finish, because a consommé is, of the four families, the one that forgives nothing.

- ***Le potage* — the puréed vegetable soup.** Vegetables simmered in stock or water until soft, then crushed or forced through a sieve to a smooth body. It needs no cream and no roux; the vegetable itself, given enough starch, is the thickener. Parmentier and pistou both live here.
- ***Le velouté* — the thickened, enriched soup.** Built the way a sauce is built: a roux or a starch base thickens a stock, and the finished soup is enriched at

the very end with cream, butter, or an egg-yolk *liaison*. Richer and silkier than a potage, and less forgiving of high heat once the enrichment goes in.

- ***Le consommé* — the clarified soup.** A stock stripped of every trace of fat and cloudiness until it runs perfectly clear, using nothing but egg white, patience, and controlled heat. It is the purest test of a cook's discipline in this chapter, and the technique that closes it.
- ***La soupe* — the rustic, unrefined soup.** Vegetables, sometimes meat, left in recognisable pieces rather than puréed or clarified. Garbure and pistou both sit partly here: hearty, peasant in origin, and meant to be a meal rather than a course.

What unites all four is the same principle you met at the knife board: even pieces cook evenly, and the same is true at soup scale — even simmering, not boiling, is what keeps a vegetable's starch working for you rather than breaking it down into grit. A soup that is allowed to boil hard, uncovered and unwatched, is a soup that has been cooked by neglect rather than by a cook.

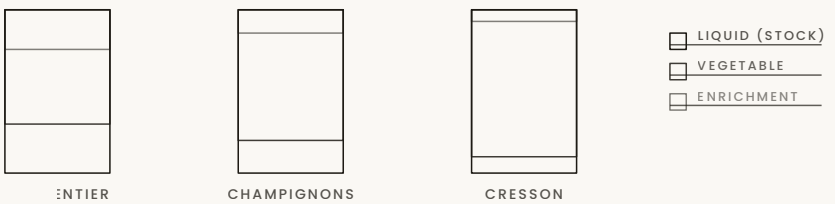


FIGURE 1 · HOW MUCH OF EACH

Three purée soups in this chapter, drawn to their approximate ratio of liquid to vegetable to final enrichment. The watercress soup carries the least enrichment because the leaf itself brings colour and brightness that cream would blur.

SOUP	VEGETABLE : LIQUID	ENRICHMENT	FAMILY
Parmentier	1 : 2 by weight	Butter, swirled in off heat	Potage
Vichyssoise	1 : 2, loosened with cream	Double cream, chilled	Potage, served cold
Champignons	1 : 3, roux-thickened	Cream and egg yolk liaison	Velouté

SOUP	VEGETABLE : LIQUID	ENRICHMENT	FAMILY
Cresson	1 : 2.5	A little cream, kept light	Potage
Consommé	Minced meat as clarifier, not bulk	None — clarity is the point	Consommé

> NO GADGETS REQUIRED
>
> Every classical potage and velouté below is finished silky-smooth without a blender. The method is the *moulin* way: cook the vegetable until it collapses at the touch of a spoon, then force it through a sieve with the back of a wooden spoon or a ladle, working in batches. It takes longer than a blender and produces a finer, less aerated purée — genuinely the better result, not just the old-fashioned one.

A soup is a stock that has decided what it wants to be. Everything after that decision is technique, not invention.

THE FIRST LAW OF THE SOUP POT

Soupe à l'Oignon Gratinée

The easiest recipe here in terms of ingredients, and the hardest to rush: the entire dish depends on cooking the onions for far longer than instinct suggests, until sugar rather than water is what remains.

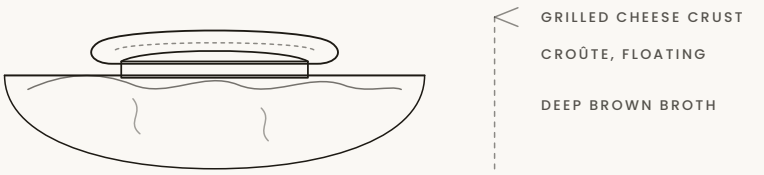


FIGURE 2 · THE GRATINÉE

A single toasted croûte floats at the surface, holds the melted cheese cap, and stops it sinking into the broth as it browns under the grill.

Soupe à l'Oignon Gratinée

Onion soup with a cheese-crusted croûte

Onions cooked down for the better part of an hour into a deep, sweet-bitter *confit*, deglazed and simmered with stock, then finished under the grill with bread and cheese.

SERVES	ACTIVE TIME	DIFFICULTY
4	1 hr 15	Easiest

INGREDIENTS

1 kg onions, sliced thin with the grain

50 g butter

1 tbsp olive oil

1 tsp sugar

1/2 tsp salt, plus more to taste

2 tbsp plain flour

150 ml dry white wine

1.2 litres brown beef or chicken stock, hot

1 bay leaf, a sprig of thyme

8 slices baguette, toasted or dried in the oven

150 g Gruyère or Comté, grated

METHOD

1. Melt the butter with the oil in a heavy pot over medium heat. Add the onions, sugar and the half-teaspoon of salt; the salt draws out water early and speeds the whole process. Stir to coat.

2. Cook uncovered, stirring every few minutes, for 45–50 minutes total. For the first 15 minutes they will soften and turn translucent; for the next 30 they will slowly collapse and colour, first pale gold, then a deep, even mahogany. Lower the heat if they threaten to catch, and scrape up any browning from the base each time — that browning is flavour, not a mistake.

   CUE *The onions should smell sweet, not sharp, and reduce to perhaps a fifth of their raw volume. Do not stop at pale gold; the real flavour is in the last fifteen minutes.*

3. Sprinkle the flour over and stir for two minutes to cook out the raw taste and lightly thicken. Pour in the wine, scraping the base hard to lift every last brown fleck, and let it bubble down by half.

4. Add the hot stock, bay and thyme. Bring to a simmer, partially cover, and cook gently for 25 minutes. Taste and season — the onions carry most of the salt already, so add it cautiously.

5. Heat the grill. Ladle the soup into flameproof bowls, float a slice or two of dried baguette on top of each, and heap the cheese generously over the bread, letting a little fall into the broth at the edges.

6. Grill until the cheese is fully melted and blistered dark in patches, 3–5 minutes, watching throughout. Serve at once — the bowls will be very hot.

WHY IT WORKS

Long, slow cooking breaks the onion's cell walls and converts its starches to sugar, which then caramelises — the whole depth of this soup is built before the stock is even added. A rushed twenty-minute version tastes thin because that chemistry never had time to happen.

NOTHING WASTED

Onion skins and trimmings, and the herb stems, go straight into the stock pot next time — see Stocks.

DO NOT RUSH THE ONIONS

Turning the heat up to hurry this stage does not shorten it — it browns the surface of the onions while the inside stays raw and starchy, and the burnt edges turn the whole pot bitter. If you are short on time, make the onion base a day ahead; it keeps well and only deepens overnight.

Potage Parmentier

The founding potage, named for the man who spent a career persuading eighteenth-century France that the potato was not poisonous. It is also the gateway to the next recipe: chilled and enriched, this same soup becomes vichyssoise.

Potage Parmentier

Leek and potato soup

Leek and potato simmered together in stock or water until fully soft, then sieved to a smooth body and finished with a swirl of butter.

SERVES	ACTIVE TIME	DIFFICULTY
4	40 min	Easiest

INGREDIENTS

500 g leeks, white and pale green only, split, washed and sliced

400 g floury potatoes, peeled and diced

40 g butter

1 small onion, sliced

1 litre light chicken stock or water

— salt, white pepper

— chives, chopped, to finish

METHOD

1. Melt the butter in a pot over low heat. Add the leeks and onion with a pinch of salt and sweat, covered, for 10 minutes, stirring once or twice, until soft and glassy but not coloured — any browning here will muddy the soup's clean, pale colour.
2. Add the potatoes and stock. Bring to a simmer, partially cover, and cook gently for 25 minutes until the potato collapses when pressed against the side of the pot with a spoon.

   CUE *A gentle simmer only — a hard boil breaks the potato's starch cells too violently and the soup turns gluey rather than silky.*
3. Purée by forcing the solids and enough liquid through a sieve, working in batches, using the back of a ladle or wooden spoon to push through everything but the toughest fibre. Stir the purée back into the remaining liquid.

4. Return to a low heat, thin with a little more stock or water if it is thicker than a light cream, and season carefully — potato absorbs salt readily. Ladle into bowls and finish with chives.

WHY IT WORKS

Potato starch is the only thickener this soup needs; sieving breaks the cooked cells open just enough to release it into the liquid without the raw, pasty texture a blender's high-speed blades can cause by over-processing the starch.

ONWARD

Chill this exact soup, loosen with cream, and it becomes vichyssoise below.

Vichyssoise

Not a French invention by strict history — it was devised by a French chef working in New York — but built entirely from French technique, and it belongs here as the cold face of the potage family: the same soup, served at the opposite temperature, asking something different of the same ingredients.

Vichyssoise

Chilled leek and potato soup

Potage Parmentier enriched with cream, chilled thoroughly, and finished with chives — the cold variant of the recipe above.

SERVES	ACTIVE TIME	DIFFICULTY
4	40 min + chilling	Easy

INGREDIENTS

1 batch Potage Parmentier, above, made without the final butter swirl

150 ml double cream, plus a little extra to finish

— a squeeze of lemon juice

— salt, white pepper

— chives, finely snipped, to finish

METHOD

1. Make the Potage Parmentier through to the sieving stage, using a slightly higher proportion of stock so the base is a shade thinner than you would serve it hot — chilling and cream both thicken it further.

2. While the soup is still warm, stir in the cream and a squeeze of lemon juice; the acid brightens what cold temperatures otherwise mute. Taste and season — cold food needs noticeably more salt than the same dish served hot, since chilling dulls the palate's sense of it.
3. Cool to room temperature, then cover and chill for at least four hours, ideally overnight. Do not add hot soup directly to the fridge; cool it in a wide bowl set inside a larger bowl of iced water first, stirring occasionally, so it does not sit at a dangerous temperature for long nor warm the fridge around it.
4. Taste again once fully cold and adjust the seasoning a final time. Serve in chilled bowls, with a thread of cream swirled across the top and a scatter of chives.

   CUE *It should taste distinctly savoury and bright on its own, cold — under-seasoned soup tastes flat once chilled, however well it seasoned when hot.*

WHY IT WORKS

Cold suppresses the perception of both salt and fat, so a soup that tasted perfectly balanced warm will taste underseasoned once chilled. Seasoning it a final time at serving temperature, not cooking temperature, is the step most home versions skip.

NO BLENDER?

None needed — the sieve gives a finer, silkier result than a blender here too, and avoids the faint grey-green tinge overprocessing can give a leek soup.

> SERVING COLD SOUP WELL
>
> Chill the bowls themselves in the fridge for twenty minutes before serving. A cold soup ladled into a room-temperature bowl warms from the edges inward within minutes, which defeats the entire point of the dish.

Soupe au Pistou

A Provençal *soupe* in the truest rustic sense: vegetables left in honest pieces, not puréed, carried by a good stock, and lifted at the very end by a garlic-and-basil paste stirred in raw. It has more in common with minestrone than with the smooth potages above, and it is the recipe in this chapter most forgiving of substitution by whatever vegetables are good that week.

Soupe au Pistou

Provençal vegetable soup with basil-garlic paste

A rustic vegetable and bean soup, left chunky rather than puréed, finished at the table with a raw pistou of basil, garlic and olive oil pounded to a paste.

SERVES	ACTIVE TIME	DIFFICULTY
6	55 min	Easy

INGREDIENTS

- **2** carrots, diced
- **2** courgettes, diced
- **2** potatoes, diced
- **150 g** green beans, cut into short lengths
- **1** onion, diced
- **2** tomatoes, peeled and chopped
- **400 g** tinned white haricot beans, drained
- **80 g** small dried pasta, such as vermicelli broken up
- **1.5 litres** water or light stock
- **2 tbsp** olive oil
- **2** garlic cloves
- **1 large bunch** basil leaves, about 40 g
- **60 g** Gruyère or Parmesan, grated, plus more to serve
- **4 tbsp** olive oil, for the pistou

METHOD

1. Warm the two tablespoons of oil in a pot over medium heat. Add the onion and carrots and cook for 5 minutes until starting to soften. Add the potatoes, courgettes and tomatoes and stir a further two minutes.
2. Pour in the water or stock, bring to a simmer, and cook gently for 20 minutes until the vegetables are tender but still holding their shape — this is a soup you eat with a fork as much as a spoon.
3. Add the green beans, the tinned haricots and the pasta. Simmer a further 10–12 minutes until the pasta is cooked and the beans are heated through. Season with salt and pepper.

   CUE *The vegetables should still show distinct edges, not have collapsed into the broth.*
4. Meanwhile make the pistou. Crush the garlic to a paste with a pinch of coarse salt using the flat of a knife blade, as in Knife Skills. Chop the basil very fine, then work it with the garlic paste in a bowl using the back of a wooden spoon,

gradually adding the four tablespoons of olive oil and the cheese, until it becomes a thick, fragrant, spoonable paste.

5. Ladle the soup into bowls and let each diner stir a generous spoonful of pistou through their own bowl at the table — this is traditional, and it keeps the basil's aroma vivid rather than dulled by cooking.

WHY IT WORKS

Pistou is never cooked — heat destroys basil's volatile aromatics within seconds, which is exactly why it is stirred in raw at the table rather than into the pot. This is the same logic that governs herb handling generally: see Herbs and chiffonade.

NO FOOD PROCESSOR?

A bowl and a wooden spoon, or better, a mortar and pestle if you own one, gives a coarser, more fragrant pistou than a machine, which purées the basil so finely it can turn faintly bitter and grey.

Velouté de Champignons

The first true *velouté* in this chapter: a roux-thickened stock enriched at the end with cream and, in the classical finish, an egg yolk liaison — the same idea that runs through sauce making, scaled up into a soup.

Velouté de Champignons

Cream of mushroom soup, classically thickened

Mushrooms sweated and simmered in a roux-thickened chicken velouté, sieved smooth, and finished with a cream and egg-yolk liaison off the heat.

SERVES	ACTIVE TIME	DIFFICULTY
4	45 min	Moderate

INGREDIENTS

- **500 g** button or chestnut mushrooms, sliced
- **1** small onion, finely chopped
- **50 g** butter
- **40 g** plain flour
- **900 ml** light chicken stock, hot
- **100 ml** double cream

2 egg yolks

1 squeeze of lemon juice

— salt, white pepper

METHOD

1. Melt half the butter in a heavy pot over medium heat. Sweat the onion for 5 minutes until soft, then add the mushrooms and a pinch of salt and cook, stirring occasionally, for 8–10 minutes until they have released their liquid and it has mostly boiled away, leaving them deeply savoury and slightly caramelised at the edges.
2. Push the mushrooms to one side, add the remaining butter to the cleared space, and once melted stir in the flour to make a roux with the fat. Cook for two minutes, stirring, until it smells nutty rather than raw, then work the mushrooms back through it.
3. Off the heat, whisk in the hot stock gradually, a ladle at a time, beating out lumps after each addition, until fully smooth. Return to the heat and simmer gently, stirring often, for 15 minutes until lightly thickened.

   CUE *The soup should coat the back of a spoon in a thin, even film.*
4. Reserve a few slices of the best-looking mushroom for garnish, then purée the rest by pushing it through a sieve with the back of a ladle, in batches, back into a clean pot.
5. Make the liaison: whisk the cream and egg yolks together in a bowl. Ladle a little of the hot soup into this mixture, whisking constantly, to warm it gradually — this is called *tempering* and stops the yolks scrambling. Repeat with a second ladle, then pour the warmed mixture back into the pot.
6. Set over the lowest possible heat and stir constantly with a wooden spoon for 3–4 minutes until the soup visibly thickens a shade more and coats the spoon more heavily. Do not let it approach a simmer from this point — a liaison-thickened soup curdles at close to the same temperature an egg does.

   CUE *Draw a finger across the back of the spoon; the trail should hold its edge rather than flood back in.*
7. Add the lemon juice, adjust seasoning, and serve at once with the reserved mushroom slices scattered on top.

WHY IT WORKS

A *liaison* of egg yolk and cream thickens by the same protein-setting logic as a custard, so it must be tempered gradually and never allowed near a boil once added — precisely the discipline taught in Egg Recipes.

NOTHING WASTED

Mushroom stalks too woody to slice go into the next batch of stock; see Stocks.

> NEVER BOIL A LIAISON-FINISHED SOUP
>
> Once egg yolk has gone in, the soup is a custard in all but name. A hard simmer will curdle it into fine grains within seconds, and there is no rescue once it has happened — only starting the liaison again in a fresh bowl and stirring the split soup back in very gradually, off the heat.

Crème de Cresson

A potage rather than a true velouté despite the name — "crème" here refers to the pale, silky colour rather than a cream-and-egg enrichment — and the fastest of the purée family, because watercress needs only minutes of cooking to keep its colour and peppery lift.

Crème de Cresson

Watercress soup

A quick potato base carries watercress added at the last moment and cooked only briefly, then sieved at once to keep its colour bright and its peppery character intact.

SERVES	ACTIVE TIME	DIFFICULTY
4	30 min	Moderate

INGREDIENTS

- **2** bunches watercress, about 200 g, tough stalks removed
- **200 g** potato, peeled and diced small
- **1** small onion, sliced
- **30 g** butter
- **800 ml** light chicken stock
- **80 ml** double cream, plus a little extra to finish
- — salt, white pepper, a scrape of nutmeg

METHOD

1. Melt the butter in a pot over low heat, add the onion and sweat 5 minutes until soft and translucent. Add the potato and stock, bring to a simmer, and cook 15 minutes until the potato is fully tender.

2. Reserve a small handful of the best watercress leaves for garnish. Add the rest to the pot and cook for exactly 2 minutes, no longer — just until it wilts and turns a deep, glossy green.

   CUE *Pull it the instant the leaves collapse. Any longer and the chlorophyll breaks down, the colour turns khaki, and the peppery edge dulls to bitterness.*

3. Purée at once by forcing everything through a sieve, working quickly while it is hot, back into a clean pot. Stir in the cream and season with salt, white pepper and a scrape of nutmeg.

4. Warm through gently without boiling, ladle into bowls, and finish with the reserved raw leaves and a thread of cream.

WHY IT WORKS

Green vegetables lose their bright colour to heat and acid alike; keeping the cooking time brief and sieving immediately is what preserves both the colour and the fresh, sharp flavour that long cooking would boil away.

VARIATION

Sorrel or wild garlic leaves, treated identically, make close cousins of this soup in spring.

Garbure

A soup from Gascony hearty enough to be a whole meal, and the clearest example in this chapter of the rustic *soupe* family: everything stays in generous pieces, nothing is puréed, and the dish is finished by simmering long after the vegetables are already cooked, simply to let the flavours marry.

Garbure

Gascon cabbage, bean and confit duck soup

A substantial, chunky soup of cabbage, beans and root vegetables simmered with confit duck or ham, traditionally finished by pouring wine into the last spoonful of broth — the *chabrot*.

SERVES	ACTIVE TIME	DIFFICULTY
6	1 hr 30	Moderate

INGREDIENTS

4confit duck legs, or a 400 g piece of smoked ham hock

1/2 Savoy cabbage, cored and cut into wide ribbons

400 g tinned white beans, drained

3 potatoes, cut into large chunks

3 carrots, cut paysanne-style, as in Knife Skills

2 turnips, cut into chunks

1 onion, studded with 2 cloves

2 garlic cloves, crushed

1 bouquet garni

1.8 litres water or light stock

— salt, black pepper

— slices of dense country bread, to serve

METHOD

1. If using ham hock, put it in the pot with the water, bring to the boil, skim the grey foam that rises for the first few minutes, then lower to a simmer. If using confit duck, add it later at step 3, since it is already cooked.
2. Add the studded onion, garlic and bouquet garni to the ham-hock pot and simmer gently, covered, for 45 minutes.
3. Add the potatoes, carrots and turnips, and the confit duck if using instead of hock. Simmer a further 20 minutes until the vegetables are tender but still hold their shape.
4. Add the cabbage and beans and simmer a final 15 minutes, uncovered, until the cabbage is tender but not disintegrating. If using ham hock, lift it out, shred the meat off the bone discarding skin and fat, and return the meat to the pot.

   CUE *The broth should taste of the meat throughout, not just where the meat sits — that is the sign it has simmered long enough to marry.*
5. Season with pepper and salt cautiously, since ham or duck confit both carry salt already. Serve very hot, ladled over a slice of dense bread in the bowl.

WHY IT WORKS

Long, gentle simmering after the vegetables are already cooked is not wasted time — it lets fat and gelatine from the meat migrate slowly through the broth and root vegetables, which is what makes a rustic soupe taste like more than the sum of its parts.

TRADITION

The *chabrot*: pour a splash of red wine into the last few spoonfuls of broth left in the bowl and drink it directly. It is not obligatory, but it is authentic.

Soupe de Poisson

A Mediterranean fish soup built almost entirely from bones, heads and small whole fish that would otherwise go to waste — the clearest possible statement of the "nothing wasted" principle applied to the fishmonger's counter rather than the vegetable board.

Soupe de Poisson

Mediterranean fish soup with rouille and croûtes

Small whole fish and bones simmered with tomato, fennel and saffron, forced entirely through a sieve, and served with garlicky rouille on toasted croûtes.

SERVES	ACTIVE TIME	DIFFICULTY
6	1 hr	Advanced

INGREDIENTS

- **1.2 kg** small whole fish and fish bones — gurnard, mullet, whiting, snapper heads and frames
- **1** onion, chopped
- **1** fennel bulb, chopped
- **2** leeks, white part, chopped
- **4** garlic cloves, crushed
- **4** ripe tomatoes, chopped, or 400 g tinned
- **1 pinch** saffron threads
- **1** strip orange zest
- **1** bay leaf, a sprig of thyme
- **80 ml** olive oil
- **100 ml** dry white wine
- **1.8 litres** water
- — salt, cayenne
- **1** egg yolk
- **150 ml** neutral oil, for the rouille
- **1** garlic clove, extra, and a small boiled potato, for the rouille
- — baguette slices, dried or toasted, and grated Gruyère, to serve

METHOD

1. Warm the olive oil in a large pot over medium heat. Add the onion, fennel and leeks and cook, stirring, for 8 minutes until softened but not coloured. Add the garlic and cook a further minute.
2. Add the fish and bones and cook, turning and breaking them up roughly with the wooden spoon, for 5 minutes — this step, cooking the fish briefly before it stews, builds far more flavour than adding everything raw to the water at once.
3. Add the tomatoes, saffron, orange zest, bay and thyme, then the wine, and let it bubble for a minute. Pour in the water, bring to a simmer, and cook uncovered for 30 minutes, breaking up the fish further with the spoon as it softens, until the bones give easily and the liquid is deeply flavoured.
4. This is the crucial step: pass the entire contents of the pot — bones, heads and all — through a coarse sieve set over a clean pot, pressing very firmly with the back of a ladle to extract every drop of flavour and as much of the softened flesh as will pass through. Discard what remains in the sieve.

   CUE *Press until only dry, spent bone and skin is left in the sieve — the soup should be considerably thicker and more opaque than the clear liquid you started pressing.*
5. Return the strained soup to a gentle simmer, taste, and season with salt and a pinch of cayenne. It should be assertive — this is a soup meant to carry the rouille, not disappear beneath it.
6. Make the rouille: crush the extra garlic clove to a paste with salt, mash in the boiled potato, then whisk in the egg yolk. Build an emulsion exactly as for mayonnaise in Egg Recipes — oil added drop by drop at first, then in a thin stream — until thick, and season with cayenne.
7. Serve the soup very hot, with the croûtes spread thickly with rouille, floated on top or offered alongside, and grated Gruyère to scatter over.

WHY IT WORKS

Forcing the whole cooked fish and bones through a sieve, rather than merely straining the liquid off them, is what gives this soup its body — the sieve captures the flesh and the gelatine cooked out of the bones while leaving behind only bone and skin too tough to pass.

NO BLENDER?

None used here at all — the coarse sieve does the whole job, and does it without the risk of bone splinters a blender's blade can create.

ASK YOUR FISHMONGER

Heads, frames and small whole fish unsuited to filleting are usually the cheapest thing at the counter, and many fishmongers will set them aside if asked the day before. This soup exists because someone refused to waste them.

Consommé de Bœuf

The closing recipe, and the hardest test of discipline in this chapter. A consommé asks you to take a good, cloudy stock and make it run perfectly clear using nothing but minced meat, egg white, and controlled heat — no filter, no gadget, nothing but patience and a steady hand with the ladle.

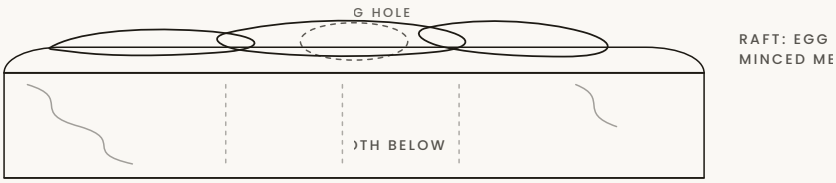


FIGURE 3 · THE RAFT

Egg white and minced meat set into a floating crust that traps every particle of cloudiness rising through it. A small hole ladled open at one side lets you baste the raft and draw off clear broth without breaking it apart.

Consommé de Bœuf

Clarified beef broth

A rich beef stock clarified with a raft of minced meat and whipped egg white, which rises, sets, and filters the liquid clear as it simmers beneath, undisturbed.

SERVES	ACTIVE TIME	DIFFICULTY
6	1 hr 30	Hardest

INGREDIENTS

2 litres good, well-flavoured brown beef stock, cold and fully de-fatted

400 g lean beef mince, very cold

4 egg whites

1 carrot, finely diced

1 celery stick, finely diced

1 leek, white part, finely diced

1 small onion, finely diced, plus one extra half, unpeeled

2 tomatoes, chopped

1 bouquet garni

1 tbsp tomato purée

— salt

METHOD

1. Char the cut face of the unpeeled onion half hard in a dry heavy pan until near-black — this alone will deepen the consommé's colour to a proper amber without a drop of caramel or colouring added.
2. In a large bowl, combine the cold mince, egg whites, diced carrot, celery, leek, onion and tomatoes, the tomato purée and the bouquet garni. Mix thoroughly with your hand or a wooden spoon until well combined — this whole mixture is the *clarification*, or, once it sets, the raft.
3. Pour the cold stock into a wide, heavy pot. Add the clarification mixture and the charred onion, and stir once to distribute evenly through the liquid while it is still cold — this is the only stirring the pot receives for the rest of the recipe.
4. Set over medium heat and bring to a bare simmer slowly, stirring gently and occasionally only until you feel the mixture beginning to set — this takes 10–15 minutes. The moment it starts to form solid clumps, stop stirring entirely and do not touch it again.

   CUE *You will feel the spoon meet resistance as the egg white and mince begin to coagulate into a mass. That is your signal to withdraw the spoon for good.*
5. As it continues to heat, the clarification mixture will rise to the surface as a solid raft, cracking slightly as it does. Lower the heat immediately to the barest possible simmer — a single lazy bubble breaking the surface every few seconds — and use the back of a ladle to open a small hole at one edge of the raft, about the size of a coin.
6. Simmer undisturbed for 45 minutes, basting the raft occasionally through the hole by ladling a little of the clear broth from below back over its top — this keeps the raft moist and working. Resist any urge to stir or push it down.

   CUE *Peer through the ladling hole: the broth beneath should turn from cloudy to fully transparent, like dark tea, over the course of the simmer.*
7. Line a large sieve with a clean, damp cloth and set it over a clean bowl or pot. Very gently, using two ladles, lift the raft aside — do not stir or press it — and

ladle the clear broth beneath, one careful ladleful at a time, through the cloth-lined sieve. Discard the raft, which has given everything it has.

8. Taste the strained consommé and season with salt only — it needs almost nothing else if the stock and the raft were both good. Warm gently to serve; it should be crystal clear enough to read fine print through.

WHY IT WORKS

Egg white proteins coagulate as they heat and, in doing so, trap the tiny particles of fat and protein that make an ordinary stock cloudy — exactly as they trap air in a soufflé. The raft is, in effect, a living filter that builds and works itself, provided the liquid beneath it never rises past the gentlest simmer.

IF IT NEVER CLARIFIES

The most common cause is too fierce a simmer, which breaks the raft apart and lets cloudy liquid churn back through the very filter meant to catch it. There is no fixing a broken batch mid-cook; note the heat and try again with fresh clarification next time.

ONCE THE RAFT HAS FORMED, DO NOT TOUCH IT

Every consommé that fails, fails because someone stirred, pressed, or let it boil after the raft set. A hard simmer breaks the raft apart from underneath and drives fat and cloudiness straight back through the gap. If you must leave the kitchen during the 45-minute simmer, turn the heat lower than you think necessary before you go.

When it goes wrong

A purée soup tastes gluey rather than silky

Boiled hard rather than simmered, which ruptures the vegetable's starch cells too violently, or blended at high speed for too long.

FIX Keep future batches at a gentle simmer, and sieve rather than blend where the recipe allows it.

Onion soup tastes thin despite an hour on the stove

The onions were pulled at pale gold rather than carried through to deep, even browning.

FIX Judge by colour and smell, not the clock — the last fifteen minutes of caramelisation carry most of the flavour.

A *cream-and-egg soup curdles into fine grains*

Boiled after the liaison went in, or the yolks were not tempered gradually enough.

FIX Warm the yolk mixture with hot soup a ladle at a time before combining, and never let the finished soup approach a simmer again.

Chilled soup tastes flat and underseasoned

Seasoned to taste while hot, then never tasted again once cold — cold mutes both salt and fat.

FIX Always taste and adjust the seasoning a final time at the temperature you will actually serve it.

A *consommé stays cloudy*

The liquid boiled after the raft formed, breaking it, or the mixture was stirred once it had begun to set.

FIX Keep the simmer down to a single occasional bubble, and once the raft is set, touch it only to baste through the ladling hole.

Fish soup tastes thin despite a full pot of bones

The liquid was merely strained rather than pressed hard through the sieve, leaving flavour and gelatine behind in the discarded bones.

FIX Press firmly with the back of a ladle until only dry bone and skin remain in the sieve.

These nine soups run from a pot you can leave half-tended to one that asks for your full attention for the better part of an hour and rewards it with something no shop-bought stock cube has ever managed. From here, the same sieve and the same gentle heat carry straight through to the vegetable cookery in Vegetables, where much of what this chapter taught about starch, colour and timing applies again at a slightly larger scale.

A good soup asks for almost nothing rare and almost no equipment at all. It asks only that you actually watch the pot.

CLOSING NOTE, LES SOUPES ET POTAGES

CHAPTER 20

Vegetable Dishes

Les Légumes

Eleven recipes, easiest first, that prove the vegetable garnish is never an afterthought in a French kitchen — it is where technique shows most plainly, because there is nowhere to hide.

The vegetable is not a side

Ask a French cook what separates a good kitchen from an indifferent one, and the honest answer is rarely the meat. It is what sits beside it — whether the beans are the same green they were raw, whether the potato gratin holds its layers when the spoon goes in, whether someone actually reduced the vinaigrette's mustard properly instead of just whisking oil into it.

This chapter collects eleven of the vegetable dishes every French cook learns early, arranged from the easiest — a pan of green beans finished in nut-brown butter — to the one that asks the most of your knife and your patience, a whole artichoke braised down to nothing but its own goodness. Work through them in order if you are starting from nothing; each one either introduces a technique or repeats one from a recipe before it, so that by the last page you are not learning eleven separate things but three or four, applied eleven times.

Three techniques do almost all the work here. *Blanchir* — blanching, a fast boil in generously salted water followed by an immediate cold bath — sets col-

our and stops cooking exactly where you want it, and it underpins the beans, the leeks and the ratatouille below. *Suer* — sweating, a slow cook in fat with no colour taken — is the whole method behind the duxelles and the ratatouille's sauce. And braising — a long, low, moist cook under a lid — is what turns the toughest vegetables in this chapter, endive and artichoke, into something you would happily eat with a spoon. Learn to recognise which of the three a recipe is asking for and half your questions answer themselves before you open the method.

If your knife work is still finding its feet, spend twenty minutes with Knife Skills first — nearly every recipe below opens with a cut that recipe assumes you already own. And where a recipe leans on stock, real stock from Stocks will improve it more than any other single change you could make.

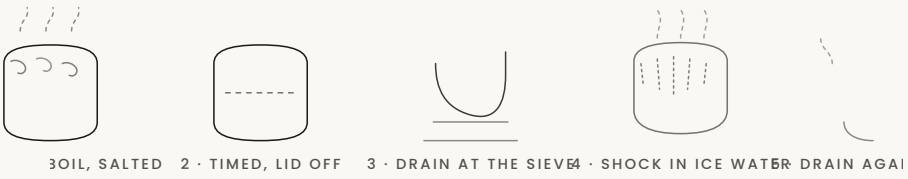


FIGURE 1 · BLANCH AND REFRESH

Colour is set the moment the vegetable leaves the boiling water — every second after that is the ice bath's job, not the pot's. Drain twice, or the second bath waters everything down.

> NO GADGETS REQUIRED
>
> Nothing in this chapter needs a blender, a ricer, a mandoline, or a thermometer. Purée is finished by hand through a sieve or with a wooden spoon and elbow grease; potatoes are sliced by knife; doneness is read by a skewer, a knife tip, or the colour of butter in the pan. Where the classical method genuinely assumes a machine, the note beside that recipe tells you exactly what changes without one.

Haricots Verts à l'Anglaise

Haricots Verts à l'Anglaise

Green beans, English style, with brown butter

Called "English" because boiling a vegetable plainly, rather than braising or frying it, once struck the French as a foreign habit. It remains the best way to taste a good bean, and the beurre noisette at the end is what makes it a French plate rather than a boiled one.

SERVES	ACTIVE	TOTAL	DIFFICULTY
4	10 min	15 min	Easiest

INGREDIENTS

500g Fine green beans
topped, tailed by hand

60g Unsalted butter

— Coarse salt, for the water

— Fine salt and black pepper

½ Lemon
optional

METHOD

1. Bring a large pot of water to a full rolling boil and salt it until it tastes distinctly of the sea — this is the one pot in the kitchen you salt hard, because the bean is in it briefly and takes very little in.
2. Drop in the beans and boil uncovered, lid off, so the volatile acids that dull green vegetables can escape into the air rather than fall back as condensation.
3. Test from four minutes: lift one out and bite it.

   CUE *Tender with the faintest resistance at the centre — never a squeak, never soft throughout.*
4. Drain at once into a sieve and, if not serving immediately, plunge into a bowl of iced water to stop the cooking and fix the colour, then drain again thoroughly. This is the *blanchir* method described above.
5. Melt the butter in a wide pan over medium heat. Let it foam, then go quiet, then turn a light hazelnut brown, swirling constantly.

   CUE *A nutty smell and a colour like pale caramel — go one moment further and it is bitter, not nutty.*

6. Tip the beans into the brown butter, toss to coat over the heat for thirty seconds to warm through, season with salt and a generous grind of pepper, and serve at once with a squeeze of lemon if you like.

ON THE SIDE

Sits beside Poulet Rôti or any roasted meat. If serving warm rather than immediately, blanch ahead and reheat only in the butter — never leave beans standing hot in their cooking water.

Two things separate a good pan of beans from a merely adequate one: salting the water properly, and stopping exactly on time. Everything else is decoration.

Poireaux Vinaigrette

Poireaux Vinaigrette

Leeks, braised and served cold in mustard vinaigrette

A bistro starter that asks almost nothing of you except patience and a properly washed leek — the whole dish stands or falls on grit in the layers and on a vinaigrette whose mustard has actually been given time to bind.

SERVES	ACTIVE	TOTAL	DIFFICULTY
4	15 min	40 min, plus cooling	Easiest

INGREDIENTS

- **8** Small-medium leeks, *white and pale green only*
- **1 tbsp** Dijon mustard
- **1 tbsp** White wine vinegar
- **3 tbsp** Neutral or mild olive oil
- **1** Small shallot, *very finely diced*
- **1 tbsp** Flat-leaf parsley, *chopped*
- **1** Hard-boiled egg, *chopped, optional*
- — Salt and pepper

METHOD

1. Trim the roots and the tough dark green tops from the leeks. Split each lengthways almost to the root, leaving the base intact so the layers stay together, and rinse thoroughly under running water, fanning the leaves apart — grit hides deep between the layers and no dish forgives it.
2. Tie the leeks loosely into a bundle with kitchen string, or simply lay them flat, and simmer in generously salted water at a gentle bubble, uncovered, until a knife tip meets no resistance at the thickest point.

   CUE *15–20 minutes; the white should be fully tender, not al dente — this is not a bean.*
3. Lift out, drain thoroughly on a folded cloth or in a sieve pressed gently to remove excess water, and let cool to room temperature. A leek that is still wet dilutes its own dressing.
4. Make the vinaigrette while the leeks cool: whisk the mustard and vinegar together first, alone, until they turn pale and slightly thick — this is the step everyone skips and the reason most vinaigrettes split. Only then add the oil in a thin stream, whisking constantly, until it emulsifies into a coating dressing. Stir in the shallot and season.
5. Lay the cooled leeks on a plate, spoon the vinaigrette generously over while they are still just warm-to-cool (they take a dressing far better than fully cold), and scatter with parsley and chopped egg.

WASTE NOTHING

The dark green tops go straight to the stock bowl — see Stocks. For the full logic of a stable vinaigrette, read Emulsions.

MUSTARD FIRST, ALWAYS

Whisking mustard and vinegar together before the oil is not a stylistic habit — mustard contains its own natural emulsifiers, and giving them a few seconds alone with the acid before the oil arrives is what keeps the vinaigrette from separating on the plate. The same principle runs right through Emulsions.

Salade de Betteraves

Salade de Betteraves

Beetroot salad with a mustard vinaigrette

Beetroot needs almost no help once it is properly cooked, and the classical treatment proves it: a sharp mustard dressing, a little sharpness from shallot, and nothing to fight the beet's own sweetness.

SERVES	ACTIVE	TOTAL	DIFFICULTY
4	15 min	1½ hr, largely unattended	Easy

INGREDIENTS

- **800g** Beetroot
  medium, unpeeled, greens trimmed
- **1 tsp** Dijon mustard
- **1 tbsp** Red wine vinegar
- **3 tbsp** Olive oil
- **1** Small shallot
  finely diced
- **1 tbsp** Chives or parsley
  chopped
- — Salt and pepper

METHOD

1. Leave an inch of stalk and the whole root tail on the beetroot, and do not peel — cut skin bleeds colour and flavour straight into the water. Scrub only.
2. Cover generously with cold water in the large pot, salt lightly, bring to a simmer and cook gently, lid ajar, until a knife slides to the centre with no resistance.

   CUE *45 minutes to over an hour depending on size — small beets are done far sooner than fist-sized ones, so test each.*
3. Drain and let cool just until they can be handled. Slip the skins off under a thin stream of cool water using your thumbs — they should come away easily, like a peach. Trim the top and root.
4. Cut into wedges or rounds while still warm, which is when they take dressing best.

5. Whisk the mustard and vinegar together, then the oil in a stream as in the leek recipe above, and fold through the warm beetroot with the shallot. Season, scatter with herbs, and serve warm or at room temperature.

A NOTE ON COLOUR

Wear an apron and expect your board to stain pink for a wash or two — it is only pigment, not damage. Do this one on a board you have earmarked for it if you have two.

Carottes Vichy

Carottes Vichy

Glazed carrots

Named for the mineral-rich water of Vichy, once thought to give the carrots their particular sweetness — plain tap water, sugar, butter and patience do the same job. It teaches the single most useful stovetop skill in this chapter: building a glaze by letting a shallow braising liquid reduce around the vegetable rather than around a sauce.

SERVES	ACTIVE	TOTAL	DIFFICULTY
4	10 min	25 min	Easy

INGREDIENTS

600g Carrots
peeled, sliced into 3–4 mm rounds on the bias

40g Unsalted butter

1½ tbsp Sugar

— Water, to just cover

— Salt

1 tbsp Parsley or chervil
chopped

METHOD

1. Put the carrots in a single wide layer in the saucepan or a wide sauté pan — crowding them into a deep, narrow pot is the single most common reason this dish fails to glaze in time.
2. Add the butter, sugar, a good pinch of salt, and just enough cold water to come level with the top of the carrots, no higher.

3. Bring to a simmer uncovered and cook, shaking the pan occasionally rather than stirring, until the water has reduced to a few tablespoons of syrupy liquid at the same moment the carrots turn tender.

   CUE *A knife tip meets almost no resistance, and the liquid coats the back of a spoon rather than pooling thin.*

4. If the carrots are tender before the liquid has reduced enough, lift them out with a slotted spoon, boil the liquid hard for a minute or two to concentrate it, then return them and toss to coat in the glaze.

5. Finish with the herbs and taste for salt — the sugar will have muted it more than you expect.

THE PRINCIPLE BEHIND THE GLAZE

Butter, a little sugar, and a liquid timed to vanish exactly as the vegetable finishes cooking is a technique, not a recipe — the same idea glazes turnips, pearl onions and radishes.

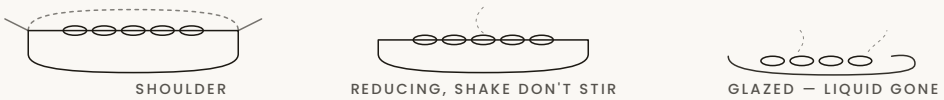


FIGURE 2 · BUILDING A GLAZE

Water level with the top of the vegetable, never higher. If it reduces to nothing before the vegetable is tender, add a splash more; if the vegetable is tender first, boil the liquid down hard.

Champignons à la Duxelles

Champignons à la Duxelles

Finely chopped mushrooms, cooked dry

The base of a hundred other dishes — stuffed vegetables, sauces, the lining of a beef Wellington — and a lesson in its own right on how much water sits inside a mushroom, and what happens once you drive it out.

MAKES	ACTIVE	TOTAL	DIFFICULTY
About 300g	15 min	25 min	Easy

INGREDIENTS

500g Button or chestnut mushrooms
very finely chopped

1 Small shallot
very finely chopped

30g Butter

1 tbsp Dry white wine
optional

— Salt, pepper, a scrape of nutmeg

1 tbsp Parsley
chopped

METHOD

1. Chop the mushrooms as finely as your knife allows — a rock chop over and over, gathering the pile back together between passes, until they are almost a paste. This is patient knife work with no shortcut; a food processor would tear the cells and make a wet mush rather than distinct fine crumbs.
2. Once chopped, gather the mushrooms into a clean cloth and wring firmly over the sink to press out as much of their water as you can. It is remarkable how much comes out, and it must go before cooking starts, not during it.
3. Melt the butter in a wide pan over low-medium heat and sweat the shallot gently until soft and translucent, with no colour, about 3 minutes.
4. Add the wrung mushrooms and cook, stirring often, until every trace of remaining moisture has cooked away and the mixture turns from wet crumbs to a dark, dry, faintly glistening paste that holds together when pressed with the spoon.

   CUE *The pan goes from hissing and wet-sounding to a quieter, drier sizzle — that change in sound is the water finally gone.*

5. Deglaze with the wine if using, cook off, season with salt, pepper and nutmeg, and finish with parsley.

WHERE IT GOES

Spread inside a rolled omelette, spooned into braised endive or artichoke hearts, or stirred into a sauce off the heat as a thickener with flavour attached. Stalks and trimmings go to the stock bowl.

THE GADGET YOU ARE TOLD YOU NEED

A food processor chops mushrooms in seconds but crushes their cells instead of slicing them, releasing water faster than you can drive it off and leaving you with a wet mince that never quite dries out properly. The knife, slower as it is, gives a better duxelles.

Purée de Pommes de Terre

Purée de Pommes de Terre

Mashed potato, the hand method

Joël Robuchon's version runs on a drum sieve and a ricer and takes nearly equal weights of butter to potato; this is the honest domestic version, made with a sieve, a wooden spoon, and considerably less butter, that still teaches the one rule that actually matters: never let a potato ricer or a food processor near a cooked potato with starch in it.

SERVES	ACTIVE	TOTAL	DIFFICULTY
4	15 min	35 min	Easy

INGREDIENTS

1kg Floury potatoes
Maris Piper or similar, peeled, evenly cut

120g Unsalted butter
cold, cubed

150–200ml Whole milk
warmed

— Salt, white pepper, nutmeg

METHOD

1. Cut the potatoes into even 4cm pieces so they cook at the same rate, and put them into cold, generously salted water in the large pot — starting them in cold water lets the heat reach the centre before the outside overcooks.
2. Bring to a simmer and cook until a knife slides in with no resistance at all.

   CUE *15–18 minutes; the potato should feel like it might fall apart if you lifted it carelessly.*
3. Drain thoroughly in the sieve and return the potatoes to the hot, dry pot for thirty seconds over low heat, shaking gently, to steam off surface water — this step alone makes the difference between a wet purée and a proper one.
4. Working in batches, press the hot potato through the sieve back into the pot using the back of the wooden spoon, or a large spoon, so it falls in fine ribbons. This is the ricer's job done by hand; it takes longer and is worth it, because it breaks no cells and leaves no gluey streaks.
5. Set the pot over the lowest possible heat and beat in the cold butter a few cubes at a time with the wooden spoon, letting each addition melt in before the next.
6. Beat in the warm milk gradually until the purée is as loose as you like it — it should fall heavily off the spoon rather than pour. Season with salt, white pepper and a scrape of nutmeg, and serve at once; it does not wait well.

NEVER IN THE FOOD PROCESSOR

Blitzing a cooked potato ruptures its starch cells and releases the starch as a glue, turning a light purée into wallpaper paste within seconds. A sieve or ricer works the potato through fine holes without crushing the cells; a blade does not.

ONCE IT GOES GLUEY, IT DOES NOT COME BACK

There is no fix for an over-worked potato — no amount of extra butter or milk restores the texture once the starch has been beaten or blitzed into gelatinous strands. Work it only as much as it takes to pass through the sieve, and beat the butter and milk in gently, not vigorously.

Pommes de Terre Sautées à la Sarladaise

Pommes de Terre Sautées à la Sarladaise

Potatoes sautéed in duck fat with garlic and parsley

From Sarlat, in the Dordogne, where duck fat is a pantry staple rather than a luxury. The technique — parboil, then colour hard in fat too hot to be polite about it — is what gives a crust no amount of raw sautéing can match.

SERVES	ACTIVE	TOTAL	DIFFICULTY
4	20 min	40 min	Moderate

INGREDIENTS

- **900g** Waxy potatoes, *peeled, cut into 1cm rounds*
- **80g** Duck fat, *or goose fat*
- **4** Garlic cloves, *thinly sliced*
- **3 tbsp** Flat-leaf parsley, *chopped*
- — Salt and pepper

METHOD

1. Parboil the potato rounds in salted water for about 5 minutes — they should hold their shape but no longer be raw at the centre.

   CUE *A knife tip enters with slight resistance, not none — full cooking happens in the pan.*

2. Drain thoroughly and spread on a cloth to dry completely; wet potato will not brown, it will steam.

3. Heat the duck fat in the heavy pan until it shimmers and a potato slice dropped in sizzles immediately and hard.

4. Add the potatoes in a single layer, working in two batches if the pan is crowded — crowding is the enemy of colour here as everywhere. Leave them undisturbed for 3–4 minutes before the first turn.

5. Turn only occasionally, letting a proper crust form each time before disturbing again, until deep golden-brown and crisp on most faces, about 12–15 minutes total.

CUE *A crust that holds together when lifted with the spoon, not one that flakes off in fragments.*

6. In the last two minutes, add the garlic and toss through — any earlier and it will burn before the potatoes finish. Season generously, stir through the parsley off the heat, and serve immediately while the crust is still audible.

IF YOU HAVE NO DUCK FAT

Clarified butter or a neutral oil with a knob of butter added at the end both work; you lose some of the particular savour but keep the crust, which is the point of the dish.

A vegetable that has been rushed tastes rushed. Give it the whole of its cooking time and none of yours.

KITCHEN PROVERB, ATTRIBUTED TO NO ONE IN PARTICULAR

Gratin Dauphinois

Gratin Dauphinois

Potatoes baked slowly in cream and garlic

The authentic Dauphinois carries no cheese and no egg — cream, garlic, nutmeg, and the potato's own starch are what bind it as it bakes. Cheese belongs to its cousin, the gratin savoyard; keep the two apart and you have kept faith with both.

SERVES	ACTIVE	TOTAL	DIFFICULTY
6	20 min	2 hr	Moderate

INGREDIENTS

1.2kg Waxy potatoes
peeled, sliced 3mm thin

500ml Double cream

150ml Whole milk

2 Garlic cloves
one crushed, one halved

— Butter, for the dish

— Salt, white pepper, nutmeg

METHOD

1. Heat the oven to 150°C (300°F). Rub a gratin or baking dish hard with the cut garlic clove, then butter it generously.
2. Slice the potatoes evenly by knife — 3mm is thin enough to layer and cook through without a mandoline, thick enough not to disintegrate. Do not rinse the slices: the surface starch is what thickens the cream as it bakes.
3. Warm the cream, milk, crushed garlic, a generous pinch of salt, white pepper and nutmeg together in the saucepan until it just steams — do not let it boil hard, which can split the cream.
4. Layer the potato slices in the dish, overlapping slightly, seasoning very lightly between layers (the cream itself is already seasoned). Pour the warm cream over so it comes to just below the top layer of potato — see the figure below for the level that works.
5. Press the top layer down gently with the back of the spoon so it sits just under the surface of the liquid, which stops it drying and browning too fast before the base is cooked.
6. Bake uncovered for 1½–1¾ hours, until deeply golden on top and a knife slides through every layer with no resistance.

   CUE *The cream should have thickened into the potato rather than sitting as a separate pool — tip the dish slightly to check.*
7. Rest 10 minutes before serving; it cuts into clean layers once the cream has settled and will fall apart if served the instant it leaves the oven.

IF IT BROWNS TOO FAST

Lay a sheet of foil loosely over the top for the last twenty minutes and remove it to finish browning in the last five.

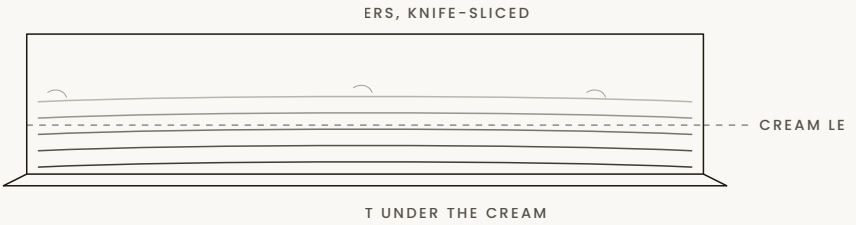


FIGURE 3 · THE CREAM LEVEL

Too little cream and the top layer scorches before the base cooks; too much and it never reduces into the starch. Just below the top of the potato is the level that works.

Endives Braisées au Jambon

Endives Braisées au Jambon

Chicory braised and wrapped in ham, under a light cheese sauce

A Belgian-leaning classic long since adopted into the French winter repertoire, and a proper introduction to braising: chicory's bitterness needs slow, moist heat to round out into something closer to sweetness, and a lid is doing most of the work.

SERVES	ACTIVE	TOTAL	DIFFICULTY
4	20 min	1 hr	Moderate

INGREDIENTS

8 Heads chicory (endive)
trimmed

40g Butter

1 Lemon
juiced

8 Thin slices cooked ham

30g Butter
for the sauce

30g Flour

400ml Whole milk
warmed

60g Gruyère
grated

— Salt, pepper, nutmeg

METHOD

1. Trim the base of each chicory head and cut a shallow cone out of the core with the tip of the knife — the core is what carries most of the bitterness, and hollowing it lets the heat reach it faster.
2. Melt the butter in the heavy pan, lay the chicory in one layer, add the lemon juice and enough water to come a third of the way up the heads, salt lightly, cover, and simmer gently for 25–30 minutes, turning once halfway.

   CUE *A knife slides through with no resistance and the heads have turned translucent gold rather than pale white.*
3. Lift out, press each gently between two plates to release excess water, and let cool enough to handle.
4. Heat the oven to 200°C (400°F). Wrap each chicory head in a slice of ham and lay side by side in a buttered gratin dish.
5. Make a béchamel: melt the butter for the sauce in the saucepan, whisk in the flour, and cook the pale *roux* for a minute, stirring, until it smells faintly of biscuit. Off the heat, whisk in the warm milk gradually, a splash at a time at first, until smooth, then return to a gentle simmer, whisking, until it thickens enough to coat the back of the spoon.
6. Season with salt, pepper and nutmeg, stir in half the Gruyère, and pour over the wrapped chicory. Scatter the remaining cheese on top.
7. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and golden in patches.

   CUE *The sauce should be blistered gold at the high points and still creamy beneath.*

FOR THE FULL SAUCE LOGIC

See Sauce Making for the béchamel family in depth, and Braising & Stewing for why a lid and low heat round out bitterness that high heat only sharpens.

VEGETABLE	CLASSICAL CUT / PREP	RIGHT VESSEL	READS AS DONE WHEN
Green beans	Left whole, topped and tailed	Large pot, rolling boil	Tender with the faintest bite at the centre
Leeks	Split, washed, left whole	Saucepan, gentle simmer	Fully soft; a knife meets no resistance

VEGETABLE	CLASSICAL CUT / PREP	RIGHT VESSEL	READS AS DONE WHEN
Beetroot	Whole, unpeeled	Large pot, gentle simmer	Knife slides to the centre freely
Carrots	Bias-sliced rounds	Wide saucepan, shallow liquid	Liquid reduced to a glaze as carrots turn tender
Mushrooms	Very fine chop, wrung dry	Wide pan, dry sweat	All visible moisture cooked away; paste holds shape
Potatoes, mash	Even 4cm pieces	Pot, then sieve, then pot	Falls apart at a knife tip before pressing
Potatoes, sautéed	1cm rounds, parboiled	Heavy pan, hot fat	Deep crust that holds together when lifted
Potatoes, gratin	3mm knife slices, unrinsed	Baking dish, low oven	Knife slides through every layer; cream thickened in
Chicory	Whole, cored	Heavy pan, covered, then oven	Translucent gold; no resistance to a knife
Ratatouille vegetables	Cut, cooked separately	Pan per vegetable, combined last	Each vegetable holds its own shape and colour
Artichoke	Trimmed to the heart	Heavy pan, covered braise	A skewer passes through the heart with no resistance

Ratatouille

Ratatouille

Provençal vegetable stew, cooked in stages

Most ratatouille sold as such is a single pot of everything thrown in together, and it stews into a uniform, faintly grey mush. The real Provençal method — the one Escoffier records and the one every good Niçoise cook still keeps to — cooks each vegetable separately in its own oil before they meet, so every one keeps its own shape, colour and flavour to the end.

SERVES	ACTIVE	TOTAL	DIFFICULTY
6	40 min	1½ hr	Moderate–Hard

INGREDIENTS

- **2** Aubergines — *2cm dice*
- **3** Courgettes — *2cm dice*
- **2** Red peppers — *2cm dice*
- **1** Onion — *sliced*
- **4** Garlic cloves — *chopped*
- **700g** Ripe tomatoes — *peeled, seeded, chopped — or good tinned*
- **150ml** Olive oil — *in total, used in stages*
- **1** Bouquet garni — *thyme, bay, parsley stalks*
- **1 tbsp** Basil — *torn, to finish*
- — Salt and pepper

METHOD

1. Salt the diced aubergine in a colander or bowl and leave 20–30 minutes to draw out its bitter water, then pat thoroughly dry — a wet aubergine steams instead of colouring.

2. Heat a slick of oil in the heavy pan until it shimmers and sauté the aubergine in batches over fairly high heat until golden at the edges and just tender, not collapsed. Lift out to a bowl and set aside. Aubergine drinks oil fast; add a little more between batches rather than flooding the pan.
3. Repeat separately for the courgettes — a shorter, hotter sauté, just until golden and still holding shape — and set aside in their own bowl.
4. Repeat again for the peppers, cooking a little longer until softened with light colour at the edges, and set aside.
5. In the same pan with fresh oil, soften the onion over medium-low heat until translucent, about 8 minutes, then add the garlic for the last minute.
6. Add the tomatoes and bouquet garni, season, and simmer uncovered for 15–20 minutes until the sauce has thickened and lost its raw, watery edge.

   CUE *The sauce holds its shape briefly on the spoon rather than running straight off.*
7. Fold the aubergine, courgette and pepper back in gently, off any high heat, just to warm through and combine — a minute or two, no more, so each vegetable keeps the shape and bite it was cooked to.
8. Remove the bouquet garni, taste for salt, and finish with torn basil. Ratatouille is, unusually among the dishes in this chapter, better the next day once the flavours have settled — reheat it gently rather than at a boil.

THE ONE-POT SHORTCUT, AND WHY IT FAILS

Cooking everything together saves one washing-up but loses the entire point: aubergine, courgette and pepper cook at different rates and by the time the slowest is done the fastest has disintegrated into the sauce.

DO NOT SKIP THE SALTING

Modern aubergine varieties are less bitter than they once were, but the salting step still matters for a second reason: it draws out water that would otherwise stop the flesh from browning. An unsalted, wet aubergine goes grey and spongy in the pan no matter how hot the oil.

Artichauts à la Barigoule

Artichauts à la Barigoule

Artichokes braised whole in white wine, with carrot, onion and bacon

The hardest recipe in this chapter, and rightly the last: a whole artichoke, trimmed by hand down to the parts worth eating, then braised low and slow until it surrenders completely. Everything you have practised above — knife discipline, braising, patience with a lid — comes together here.

SERVES	ACTIVE	TOTAL	DIFFICULTY
4	30 min	1½ hr	Hardest

INGREDIENTS

- **8** Small-medium globe artichokes
- **1** Lemon, *halved*
- **100ml** Olive oil
- **100g** Bacon lardons, *or diced pancetta*
- **1** Onion, *diced*
- **2** Carrots, *diced*
- **4** Garlic cloves, *whole, crushed once*
- **250ml** Dry white wine
- **200ml** Water or light stock
- **1** Bouquet garni, *thyme, bay, parsley stalks*
- — Salt and pepper

METHOD

1. Fill a large bowl with cold water and squeeze in the lemon halves, dropping the spent halves in too — this is your acidulated water, and every trimmed artichoke goes straight into it, because cut artichoke flesh browns within minutes of meeting air.
2. Working one artichoke at a time: snap off the tough outer leaves by bending them back until they break at the base, leaving the pale, tender inner cone.

Trim the stem to about 3cm and peel its fibrous outer layer with the knife, back to pale flesh.

3. Cut the top third off the remaining cone of leaves with one clean knife stroke, straight across. Trim the dark green fibrous base with the knife, turning the artichoke as you go, until only pale, tender flesh remains all round — this is the same rotating paring motion as the tourné.
4. Halve the artichoke top to bottom and scoop out the hairy choke and any spiky purple inner leaves with a small spoon or the tip of the knife, leaving the smooth heart. Drop each finished half straight into the lemon water.
5. Heat the olive oil in the heavy pan or a wide pot with a lid and render the bacon over medium heat until lightly golden. Add the onion and carrot and sweat gently until softened, about 8 minutes, with no real colour.
6. Add the garlic, then drain the artichoke halves and add them to the pot along with the wine. Bring to a simmer and let it bubble hard for a minute to cook off the raw alcohol.
7. Add the water or stock and the bouquet garni — the liquid should come about halfway up the artichokes, not cover them. Season lightly, cover, and simmer gently for 35–45 minutes.
8. Test with a skewer or the tip of the knife through the thickest part of the heart.

   CUE *No resistance at all — an underdone artichoke heart is unpleasantly fibrous and there is no fixing it at the table, only back on the heat.*
9. Uncover for the last 10 minutes if the liquid is still generous, to let it reduce slightly around the vegetables. Remove the bouquet garni, taste for seasoning, and serve warm or at room temperature, spooning the braising vegetables and juices over.

NOTHING IS WASTED

The snapped outer leaves make a good, if labour-intensive, purée if simmered separately and scraped between the teeth for their flesh — or simply add them to the stock bowl, where they lend a faint sweetness to a vegetable stock.

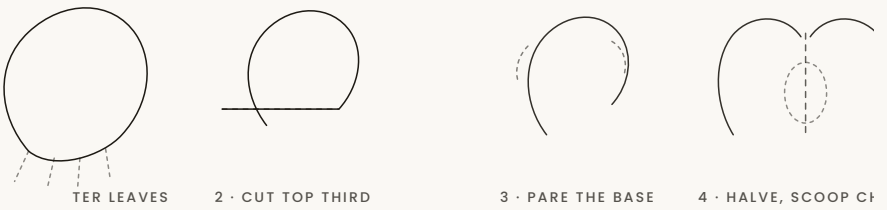


FIGURE 4 · TRIMMING AN ARTICHOKE

Work quickly and keep the lemon water close — every cut surface begins browning within minutes of meeting the air.

When it goes wrong

Green vegetables turn khaki, not green

The lid was on during boiling, trapping acids that dull chlorophyll, or the vegetable sat too long before its ice bath.

FIX Boil green vegetables uncovered, always, and shock in ice water the instant they are drained.

Vinaigrette separates on the plate

The oil was added before the mustard and vinegar had a chance to bind, or it was poured in too fast.

FIX Whisk mustard and vinegar alone first until pale and slightly thick, then add oil in a thin, steady stream. See Emulsions.

Mashed potato turns gluey

The potato was blitzed, riced too many times, or beaten hard once the starch had already broken down.

FIX There is no rescue. Pass hot potato through a sieve once, gently, and beat in fat and liquid with a light hand next time.

Gratin dauphinois splits or stays watery

Slices were rinsed (washing away the starch that thickens the cream), or the oven ran too hot and split the cream before the potato cooked through.

FIX Never rinse the slices, and keep the oven at 150°C — patience over heat every time with this dish.

Ratatouille turns to grey mush

Everything went into one pot together, so the fastest-cooking vegetable disintegrated long before the slowest was ready.

FIX Cook each vegetable separately as in the recipe above, and fold together only at the very end, briefly.

Artichoke heart still fibrous at the centre

Under-braised, or the pieces were cut too large for the liquid and time given.

FIX Return to a gentle simmer, covered, and test every five minutes with a skewer — there is no shortcut once it is on the plate.

Learn these eleven in order and you have, without noticing, learned to blanch, to sweat, to braise, to build a glaze, and to trust a knife with something delicate. That is most of French cooking already.

CLOSING NOTE, VEGETABLE DISHES

CHAPTER 21

Chicken

La Volaille

Ten recipes, easiest first, built around one whole bird bought once and used completely — roasted, sautéed, braised, poached and even confited, with nothing wasted.

Buy the whole bird

A packet of boneless breasts is the most expensive way to buy a chicken, and also the least interesting. A whole bird gives you white meat and dark meat, a carcass for stock, trimmings for the pan, and the chance to cook ten genuinely different dishes from one shopping decision.

If you have not broken down a chicken by hand, the full method — legs off, thighs from drumsticks, wings off, breasts lifted whole from the crown — is taught step by step in Knife Skills, and it is worth doing once with that page open beside you before you start on the recipes here. Several of the dishes below use the bird whole, some want it jointed into eight, and one wants only the breasts; knowing how to move between those forms without waste is the whole argument for buying a chicken rather than parts of one.

Buy the best bird your budget allows. A slower-grown, properly fed chicken has firmer flesh, a deeper flavour, and enough fat under the skin to render and baste itself — all of which matter more to the finished dish than any technique

in this list. A cheap, fast-grown bird can still make a fair *poulet sauté*; it will never make a roast chicken worth talking about.

The recipes below run from the easiest — a bird trussed, rubbed with butter and put in the oven — to whole-bird classics that ask you to poach, then reduce, then bind a sauce by hand. Work through them in order and by the end you will have roasted, sautéed, braised, poached and confited chicken, which is most of what French technique asks of any protein.

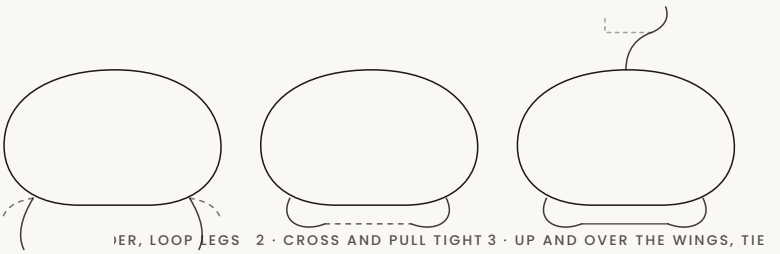


FIGURE 1 · TRUSSING IN THREE MOVES

The string does one job: hold the legs against the body so the breast doesn't dry out before the thighs finish cooking. A single knot at the neck end, pulled snug, is all it takes.

NO GADGETS REQUIRED

None of the ten recipes below needs a meat thermometer, a stand mixer, or a roasting rack. Doneness is read by the give of the thigh joint, the colour and run of the juices, and a skewer pushed to the bone — all described at each step. A wire rack helps air circulate under a roasting bird but an upturned trivet of vegetable trimmings does the same job.

Poulet Rôti

Poulet Rôti

Roast chicken, trussed, with pan juices

The definitive French roast bird, and the anchor recipe of the whole page. Trussed tight, seasoned inside and out, and roasted breast-up on a bed of its own trimmings, it needs nothing else — the pan juices, deglazed with a splash of water, are the only sauce it has ever wanted.

SERVES	ACTIVE	TOTAL	DIFFICULTY
4	15 min	1½ hr, plus resting	Easiest

INGREDIENTS

1 Whole chicken
1.6–1.8kg, at room temperature

60g Butter
softened

1 Lemon
halved

1 Head garlic
halved crossways

Few sprigs Thyme

1 Onion, 2 carrots
roughly chopped, for the trivet

150ml Water or light stock

— Salt and pepper

METHOD

1. Take the chicken out of the refrigerator a good hour before cooking — a bird that goes into the oven cold cooks unevenly, tightening the outside before the centre has begun. Heat the oven to 220°C (425°F).
2. Pat the bird thoroughly dry, inside and out, with kitchen paper. A dry skin is the single biggest factor in whether it crisps or steams.
3. Season the cavity generously with salt and pepper and stuff in the lemon halves, garlic and thyme.
4. Truss the bird: tuck the wing tips under the body, then run a length of string under the tail, cross it over and around each drumstick, pull the legs firmly together and up against the breast, and tie off tightly at the neck end. This

holds the legs close to the body so the thighs cook through at close to the same rate as the breast, rather than splaying open and drying out early.

5. Rub the softened butter all over the skin, working it in with your fingers, and season generously with salt and pepper.
6. Scatter the chopped onion and carrot in the base of a roasting tin as a rough trivet, and set the chicken on top, breast up.
7. Roast at 220°C for 20 minutes to colour the skin, then lower the oven to 190°C (375°F) and continue roasting, basting once or twice with the pan juices, for a further 50–60 minutes.
8. Test doneness at the thigh: push a skewer into the thickest part where it meets the body.

   CUE *Juices run clear with no trace of pink, and the leg gives easily when you wiggle it in its socket — it should feel loose, almost ready to come away.*
9. Lift the chicken to a warm plate, tent loosely with foil, and rest 15–20 minutes before carving — this is not optional; the juices need that time to settle back into the meat rather than run out onto the board.
10. While it rests, tip off most of the fat from the tin, set it over medium heat on the hob, and deglaze with the water or stock, scraping up every browned fragment with the wooden spoon. Simmer a minute, strain if you like, and season — this is the whole sauce, and it is enough.

THE CARCASS IS THE POINT

Once carved, the carcass, skin scraps and any bones go straight into a pot for stock — see Stocks. A single roast chicken, treated properly, gives you dinner tonight and the base of three more dishes this week.

A whole roast chicken asks for almost nothing from you except patience with the oven and the good sense to let it rest. Everything that goes wrong with it goes wrong from impatience.

ON THE DEFINITIVE BIRD

Poulet à l'Estragon

Poulet à l'Estragon

Chicken with tarragon and cream

Tarragon and chicken is one of the great fixed pairings of French cooking — the herb's faint aniseed note needs the richness of cream and butter to show properly, and a whole jointed bird braised gently is the classic way to give it time to infuse.

SERVES	ACTIVE	TOTAL	DIFFICULTY
4	20 min	1 hr	Easy

INGREDIENTS

1 Chicken
jointed into 8 pieces

30g Butter

1 tbsp Oil

1 Shallot
finely diced

150ml Dry white wine

250ml Chicken stock

150ml Double cream

4 tbsp Tarragon
leaves, roughly chopped, plus whole sprigs

— Salt and pepper

METHOD

1. Pat the chicken pieces dry and season well. Heat the butter and oil in the heavy pan over medium-high heat and brown the pieces in batches, skin side down first, until deep golden all over — do not crowd the pan. Set aside.
2. Lower the heat, add the shallot to the fat left in the pan, and soften for 2–3 minutes.
3. Pour in the wine, scraping up the browned bits from the base of the pan with the wooden spoon, and let it bubble for a minute to cook off the raw alcohol.
4. Return the chicken to the pan, add the stock and a couple of whole tarragon sprigs, cover, and simmer gently for 30–35 minutes until the thigh pieces are cooked through.

CUE *Juices run clear when the thickest thigh piece is pierced; the meat has begun to loosen slightly from the bone.*

5. Lift the chicken out onto a warm plate. Discard the spent tarragon sprigs, raise the heat under the pan and boil the liquid hard for a few minutes to reduce it by about a third.
6. Stir in the cream and simmer gently until the sauce coats the back of the spoon. Off the heat, stir in the chopped tarragon, taste for seasoning, and return the chicken to the pan to warm through in the sauce before serving.

ADD TARRAGON TWICE

Whole sprigs cooked into the braise give a background note; fresh chopped leaves stirred in at the end give the dish its aroma. Using only one or the other leaves it either flat or overpowering.

Suprême de Volaille à la Crème

Suprême de Volaille à la Crème

Chicken breast in a white wine and cream sauce

"Suprême" in classical French service means a breast still carrying its first wing joint, gently poached rather than seared, so the flesh stays pale and moist rather than browned. This is the technique that turns a chicken breast — the part most home cooks routinely overcook — into something genuinely delicate.

SERVES	ACTIVE	TOTAL	DIFFICULTY
4	15 min	35 min	Easy

INGREDIENTS

4 Chicken breasts
skin on, lifted whole from the crown

30g Butter

1 Shallot
finely diced

150ml Dry white wine

200ml Chicken stock

150ml Double cream

1 tsp Lemon juice

1 tbsp Chives or parsley

chopped

—Salt and white pepper

METHOD

1. Season the breasts. Melt the butter in the heavy pan over medium heat and lay the breasts in skin side down, without letting the butter brown — this is a gentle poach-and-baste, not a hard sear, so keep the heat moderate throughout.
2. Cook 3–4 minutes on the skin side until pale gold, then turn and add the shallot around the breasts. Cook a further 2 minutes.
3. Pour in the wine and stock so the liquid comes about halfway up the breasts, bring to a gentle simmer, cover, and poach for 12–15 minutes, turning once, until just cooked through.

   CUE *The thickest point yields to light pressure and the juices run clear; do not let it boil, or the flesh will toughen.*
4. Lift the breasts out to a warm plate and rest, covered loosely.
5. Raise the heat and reduce the poaching liquid by half, until it thickens slightly and tastes concentrated rather than watery.
6. Stir in the cream, simmer gently 3–4 minutes until it coats the spoon, add the lemon juice, and season with salt and white pepper. Return the breasts briefly to warm through, scatter with herbs, and serve.

WHY POACH RATHER THAN SEAR

A hard sear on a boneless breast dries the outer flesh well before the centre is cooked. Poaching in a shallow, gently simmering liquid cooks the whole piece at close to the same rate — the same logic behind Poaching & Steaming.

SAVE THE TRIMMED WING JOINT

If you lift your own suprêmes from a whole crown, the small wing bone still attached, trimmed of its tip, is the classical mark of a true suprême, giving the diner something to hold. If yours came without it, the dish is no less good for the omission — just less formal.

Poulet Sauté Chasseur

Poulet Sauté Chasseur

Hunter's-style chicken with mushrooms and tomato

A *sauté* in the classical sense: coloured hard in a pan, finished in its own reduced sauce, no braising liquid to speak of. Mushroom, shallot, white wine and tomato make it the workhorse weeknight dish of the whole bistro repertoire.

SERVES	ACTIVE	TOTAL	DIFFICULTY
4	20 min	50 min	Easy–Moderate

INGREDIENTS

- **1** Chicken
  jointed into 8 pieces
- **2 tbsp** Oil, plus butter
- **1** Shallot
  finely diced
- **250g** Button mushrooms
  sliced
- **150ml** Dry white wine
- **300g** Ripe tomatoes
  peeled, seeded, chopped — or tinned
- **200ml** Chicken stock
- **1 tbsp** Tomato purée
- **2 tbsp** Tarragon and parsley
  chopped, mixed
- — Salt and pepper

METHOD

1. Season the chicken pieces well. Heat the oil in the heavy pan over medium-high heat and brown in batches, skin side down first, until deep golden all over. Set aside.
2. Add a knob of butter to the pan, lower the heat slightly, and sauté the mushrooms until they release their water and it cooks away, turning golden at the edges — the same principle as Champignons à la Duxelles, taken less far. Add the shallot for the last two minutes.
3. Pour in the wine, scraping up the base of the pan, and let it bubble for a minute.

4. Stir in the tomatoes, tomato purée and stock, return the chicken pieces to the pan, bring to a simmer, cover, and cook gently for 30–35 minutes.

   CUE *Thigh juices run clear and the sauce has thickened to a loose, coating consistency, not a thin soup.*

5. If the sauce is still thin once the chicken is done, lift the pieces out, boil the sauce hard for a few minutes to concentrate it, then return the chicken to warm through.

6. Taste for seasoning, stir through the herbs, and serve.

THE FAMILY OF SAUTÉS

Change the garnish and you have a different dish under the same technique: chasseur is mushroom and tomato; *chasseur* without tomato and heavier on mushroom becomes closer to a *fricassée*. The base method — colour, sauté the garnish, deglaze, braise briefly — carries all of them.

Poulet Basquaise

Poulet Basquaise

Chicken braised with peppers, tomato and Bayonne ham

From the French Basque country, where sweet peppers, tomato and cured ham are the constants of the pantry. It shares the sauté-then-braise method of chasseur but leans on the sweetness of long-cooked peppers rather than mushroom for its body.

SERVES	ACTIVE	TOTAL	DIFFICULTY
4	25 min	1 hr	Moderate

INGREDIENTS

1 Chicken
jointed into 8 pieces

2 tbsp Olive oil

100g Bayonne ham or prosciutto
sliced into strips

1 Onion
sliced

3 Red and yellow peppers
sliced

3Garlic cloves
chopped

400g Tomatoes
peeled, chopped — or tinned

150ml Dry white wine

1Bay leaf

1 tsp Piment d'Espelette or mild chilli flakes

—Salt and pepper

METHOD

1. Season the chicken and brown in the olive oil in the heavy pan, skin side down first, in batches, until deep golden all over. Set aside.
2. In the same fat, crisp the ham strips for a minute until lightly coloured, then lift out and set aside with the chicken.
3. Add the onion and peppers to the pan and sauté over medium heat until softened and beginning to colour at the edges, 10–12 minutes. Add the garlic for the last minute.
4. Pour in the wine, scrape up the base of the pan, and let it bubble for a minute.
5. Add the tomatoes, bay leaf and piment d'Espelette, return the chicken and ham to the pan, season, cover, and simmer gently for 35–40 minutes.

   CUE *Thigh juices run clear, the peppers have collapsed to a soft, jammy tangle, and the sauce clings rather than pools.*
6. Uncover for the last 10 minutes if the sauce needs thickening. Remove the bay leaf, taste for seasoning, and serve.

IF YOU HAVE NO PIMENT D'ESPELETTE

A pinch of sweet paprika with a very small pinch of cayenne approximates its gentle heat and deep red colour well enough for home cooking.

CUT / METHOD	TYPICAL TIME	INTERNAL CUE	TEXTURE CUE
Whole bird, roasted	1¼–1½ hr at 190–220°C	Juices run clear at the thigh	Leg wiggles loose in its socket
Jointed thigh/drumstick, braised	30–45 min, covered simmer	Juices run clear when pierced	Meat begins to loosen from the bone

CUT / METHOD	TYPICAL TIME	INTERNAL CUE	TEXTURE CUE
Breast, poached whole (suprême)	12–15 min, gentle simmer	Juices run clear	Yields to light pressure, still springy
Breast, seared for chasseur-style	6–8 min total in a hot pan	No pink at the thickest point	Firm but not rigid to the touch
Whole bird, poached (poule au pot)	1½–2 hr, barely simmering	Leg pulls away with light tension	Flesh yields to a fork with no resistance
Duck leg, confit	2½–3 hr at 130–140°C in fat	Meat pulls cleanly from the bone	No resistance; skin still intact, not shredded
Old bird / coq, braised	1¾–2¼ hr, covered simmer	A skewer meets no resistance at the thigh	Falls from the bone without pulling

Poulet en Cocotte Grand-Mère

Poulet en Cocotte Grand-Mère

Whole chicken pot-roasted with bacon, pearl onions and mushrooms

"Grandmother's style" means exactly what it says: a whole bird, lidded and gently cooked in its own steam and juices with the humble garnish of any French larder. It is roasting and braising at once, and it teaches how a lidded pot behaves differently from an open tin.

SERVES	ACTIVE	TOTAL	DIFFICULTY
4	25 min	1¾ hr	Moderate

INGREDIENTS

1 Whole chicken
1.6–1.8kg, trussed as in Poulet Rôti

30g Butter, plus 1 tbsp oil

150g Lardons or diced bacon

200g Small pearl onions or shallots
peeled whole

300g Small potatoes
halved if larger than a walnut

200g Button mushrooms
halved

150ml White wine or chicken stock

1 Bouquet garni

— Salt and pepper

METHOD

1. Heat the oven to 190°C (375°F). Season and dry the chicken as in Poulet Rôti above.
2. Heat the butter and oil in a heavy lidded pot (a *cocotte*) large enough to hold the bird, and brown the chicken all over, turning carefully with two spoons, until deep gold on every side, 8–10 minutes. Lift out.
3. In the same fat, render the lardons until lightly golden, then add the pearl onions and potatoes and colour them for a few minutes, turning often.
4. Nestle the chicken back into the pot among the vegetables, add the mushrooms, pour in the wine or stock, and tuck in the bouquet garni. Season lightly.
5. Cover with the lid and transfer to the oven. Cook 1–1¼ hours, basting once or twice if convenient.

   CUE *A skewer into the thigh meets no resistance and the juices run clear; the vegetables are tender to a knife tip.*
6. Lift the chicken out to rest 10 minutes under foil. If the juices in the pot are thin, set the pot on the hob and reduce briefly over medium heat while the bird rests.
7. Carve at the table over the pot of vegetables, or joint in the kitchen and serve everything together with the pan juices spooned over.

WHY THE LID MATTERS

A covered pot traps steam that bastes the bird continuously from the inside of the lid, which is why this method keeps a whole chicken moist for longer in the oven than an open roasting tin. See the figure below.

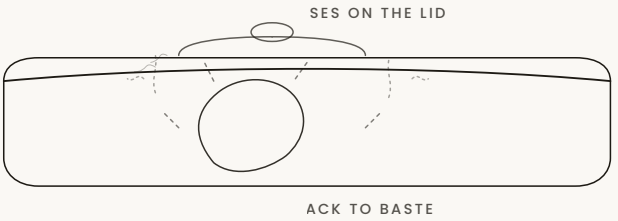


FIGURE 2 · THE COCOTTE'S OWN WEATHER

A tight lid turns the pot into a closed cycle: rising steam meets the cool lid, condenses, and drips back down over the bird — continuous basting with no hand required.

Blanquette de Volaille

Blanquette de Volaille

Chicken in a white velouté sauce with cream and egg yolk

The chicken version of the classical veal blanquette: the meat is poached rather than browned, so the sauce stays pale, and it is finished with a *liaison* of cream and egg yolk — a technique that thickens without a trace of flour taste and teaches real control over heat, since a sauce with egg yolk in it can curdle in seconds if rushed.

SERVES	ACTIVE	TOTAL	DIFFICULTY
4	25 min	1 hr	Moderate–Hard

INGREDIENTS

1 Chicken
jointed into 8 pieces, skin removed

1 Onion
studded with 2 cloves

2 Carrots
halved

1 Bouquet garni

1 L Chicken stock or water
to cover

200 g Button mushrooms
halved

12 Pearl onions
peeled whole

40g Butter

40g Flour

2 Egg yolks

100ml Double cream

1 Lemon
juiced

— Salt and white pepper

METHOD

1. Put the chicken pieces in the large pot with the studded onion, carrots and bouquet garni. Cover with stock or water, bring to a bare simmer — the surface should barely shiver, no rolling bubbles — skimming any scum that rises.
2. Poach gently, uncovered, for 30–35 minutes.

   CUE *Thigh meat yields easily to a fork and the juices run clear.*
3. Lift the chicken out and set aside, covered. Strain the poaching liquid and reserve 700ml; discard the vegetables, whose work is done.
4. In the same pot, simmer the pearl onions and mushrooms in a ladle of the reserved liquid for 8–10 minutes until tender, then lift out with a slotted spoon and set aside with the chicken.
5. Melt the butter in the saucepan, whisk in the flour, and cook the pale *roux* gently for a minute without letting it colour. Off the heat, whisk in the hot poaching liquid gradually until smooth, then return to a gentle simmer, whisking, for 8–10 minutes until it thickens to a light, coating velouté.
6. Whisk the egg yolks and cream together in the bowl. Off the heat, whisk a ladleful of the hot sauce into the yolk mixture to warm it gradually — this is the *liaison*, and doing it slowly is what stops the yolks scrambling.
7. Pour the warmed yolk mixture back into the sauce, whisking constantly, and set over the lowest possible heat. Stir gently and continuously until the sauce thickens very slightly further and coats the spoon.

   WARN *Never let it boil once the yolks are in — it will split and there is no rescue.*
8. Stir in the lemon juice, season with salt and white pepper, and return the chicken, onions and mushrooms to the pan to warm through gently in the sauce before serving.

IF THE SAUCE SPLITS ANYWAY

Take it off the heat at once. Whisk a fresh egg yolk in a clean bowl and gradually whisk the split sauce into it off the heat, as though building a fresh liaison — this rescues a mild split, though a hard-boiled curdle cannot be brought back.

> **EGG YOLK AND HEAT DO NOT FORGIVE HASTE**
>
> An egg yolk begins to set at a lower temperature than a simmering sauce. Always temper it first with a ladle of hot liquid whisked in gradually, and once it is in the pan, keep the heat low and stir without stopping — a sauce with yolk in it is never left unattended.

Coq au Vin

Coq au Vin

Chicken braised in red wine with bacon, mushrooms and pearl onions

Traditionally made with an old rooster (*coq*), whose tough flesh needed hours of slow braising in wine to become edible at all. A modern, well-reared chicken does not need nearly that long — the honest thing to say is that you are borrowing the rooster's sauce, not its cooking time, so treat this as a properly good braise rather than an endurance test.

SERVES	ACTIVE	TOTAL	DIFFICULTY
4	35 min	1¾ hr	Hard

INGREDIENTS

- **1** Chicken
  jointed into 8 pieces
- **750ml** Robust red wine
  Burgundy if you have it
- **1** Onion
  quartered
- **2** Carrots
  roughly chopped
- **2** Garlic cloves
  crushed
- **1** Bouquet garni
- **150g** Lardons or diced bacon
- **2 tbsp** Oil
- **2 tbsp** Flour
- **300ml** Chicken stock
- **200g** Button mushrooms
  halved

12 Pearl onions
peeled whole

15g Butter, plus more to finish

— Salt and pepper

METHOD

1. The evening before, or at least a few hours ahead, marinate the chicken pieces in the wine with the quartered onion, carrots, garlic and bouquet garni, covered, in the coolest part of the kitchen or the refrigerator.
2. Lift the chicken out and pat thoroughly dry, reserving the wine and vegetables separately. A wet piece of chicken will not brown.
3. Render the lardons in the heavy pan or a cocotte until golden, then lift out. Brown the chicken pieces in the rendered fat, adding the oil if needed, in batches, until deep gold all over. Set aside with the bacon.
4. Add the reserved marinated vegetables to the pan and sauté for a few minutes until lightly softened. Sprinkle over the flour and stir for a minute to cook it into the fat.
5. Pour in the reserved wine gradually, stirring to work out any lumps, then add the stock. Bring to a simmer, scraping up the base of the pan.
6. Return the chicken and bacon to the pan, tuck in a fresh bouquet garni if the first has spent itself, season lightly, cover, and simmer gently — on the hob at a bare bubble, or in a 160°C (325°F) oven — for 45–60 minutes.

   CUE *A skewer meets no resistance at the thigh and the sauce has taken on real body, coating the back of the spoon.*
7. Meanwhile, melt the butter in a small pan and sauté the pearl onions and mushrooms separately until golden, about 8 minutes.
8. Once the chicken is done, lift it out. Strain the sauce if it has any coarse vegetable fragments, return it to the pan, and boil hard for a few minutes to concentrate it if it still tastes thin. Whisk in a final knob of cold butter off the heat for gloss.
9. Return the chicken, mushrooms and pearl onions to the sauce, warm through gently, and serve.

ON THE HONEST MODERN VERSION

A genuinely old rooster is close to impossible to buy today, and would need three or four hours' braising even then. Use the best chicken you can find, do not stretch its cooking time trying to imitate a bird it is not, and let the wine and the bacon carry the depth instead.

Poule au Pot

Poule au Pot

Whole chicken poached with root vegetables, broth and bird served together

Said to be the dish Henri IV wished for every peasant family's Sunday table, and the plainest possible use of a whole bird: poached gently in water with vegetables until both broth and flesh are worth eating, then served as two courses from one pot — the soup first, the chicken and vegetables after.

SERVES	ACTIVE	TOTAL	DIFFICULTY
6	20 min	2¼ hr	Moderate

INGREDIENTS

- **1** Whole chicken
  1.8–2kg, trussed
- **2** Onions
  one studded with 2 cloves
- **4** Carrots
  peeled, halved
- **4** Leeks
  white and pale green, split, washed
- **2** Turnips
  peeled, halved
- **2** Celery stalks
- **1** Bouquet garni
- **1 tsp** Black peppercorns
- — Coarse salt
- — Cornichons, mustard and coarse sea salt
  to serve

METHOD

1. Set the trussed chicken breast-up in the large pot and add cold water to cover generously, by a good 5cm. Starting cold, as with a stock, draws impurities out gently rather than sealing them in.
2. Bring slowly to a simmer over medium heat, skimming the grey foam that rises with a spoon as it appears — this is the single habit that separates a clear broth from a cloudy one.

3. Once clean and at a bare simmer, add the studded onion, peppercorns and bouquet garni, and salt lightly. Partially cover and poach very gently — the surface should shiver, never boil — for 1 hour.
4. Add the carrots, turnips, celery and the plain onion and continue poaching gently for 45 minutes.
5. Add the leeks for the final 20–25 minutes, so they do not disintegrate.

   CUE *A leg pulls away from the body with only light tension, and a knife into the thigh meets no resistance; the vegetables yield fully to a knife tip.*
6. Lift the chicken onto a board and rest 10 minutes. Taste the broth and adjust the salt — it will need more than you expect, since nothing has been reduced or concentrated beyond gentle poaching.
7. Serve the broth first, on its own or with a little of the diced vegetable in it, and follow with the chicken jointed into pieces and the remaining vegetables, with cornichons, mustard and coarse salt on the table.

THE CARCASS, AGAIN

Whatever broth and vegetable are left over make the beginning of a fine potage the next day — barely any of this dish is ever truly finished the first evening.

Confit de Canard, Sans Pot

Confit de Canard, Sans Pot de Confit

Duck leg confit, done in the oven without a confit pot

Classically the legs are salted, then submerged and cooked for hours in a wide earthenware confit pot, then stored under their own set fat for months. A domestic oven and a lidded, ovenproof pan do the cooking just as well — what you lose is the long storage, and for a cook eating the duck within a few days, that costs nothing at all.

SERVES	ACTIVE	TOTAL	DIFFICULTY
4	15 min	3–3½ hr, plus salting overnight	Moderate

INGREDIENTS

4 Duck legs

40 g Coarse salt

3 Garlic cloves

crushed

2 Bay leaves

4 Sprigs thyme

1 tsp Black peppercorns
crushed

600–800g Duck or goose fat
enough to submerge the legs — rendered trimmings work too

METHOD

1. Rub the duck legs all over with the coarse salt, garlic, bay, thyme and crushed pepper. Lay them in a dish, cover, and refrigerate 12–24 hours — this is a short cure, drawing out moisture and firming the flesh, not a long preservation salt.
2. Rinse the legs thoroughly under cold water to remove the surface salt and cure, and pat completely dry.
3. Heat the oven to its lowest setting, ideally 130–140°C (265–285°F); if your oven cannot hold that low, prop the door slightly ajar with a folded cloth to bring the temperature down, and check more often.
4. Melt the fat gently in a heavy, lidded ovenproof pan or a small pot over low heat until fully liquid. Lower the duck legs in so they are fully submerged, skin side down — the fat, not the pan, must cover them completely; top up with more melted fat or a little oil if it falls short.
5. Cover and set in the oven. Cook undisturbed for 2½–3 hours.

   CUE *The meat has pulled back from the end of the drumstick bone and a skewer slides through with absolutely no resistance, the leg almost falling apart at a touch.*
6. Lift the legs out carefully — they are fragile once cooked — and let rest a few minutes. Strain and reserve the fat; it can be used again for this dish, for the potatoes sarladaise on Vegetable Dishes, or for roasting.
7. To serve, crisp the skin: place the legs skin side down in the heavy pan over medium-high heat for a few minutes until the skin crackles and turns deep golden-brown, or finish under a hot grill briefly, watching closely.

WHAT CHANGES WITHOUT A CONFIT POT

A traditional earthenware confit pot is wide and shallow, letting several legs sit in a thin layer of fat; a domestic lidded pan or small pot does the same job with a taller stack, so long as every leg is genuinely submerged. Long-term storage under a fat seal in a cool larder is the one thing this method does not attempt — cook it to eat within the week, refrigerated, and it needs no such storage.

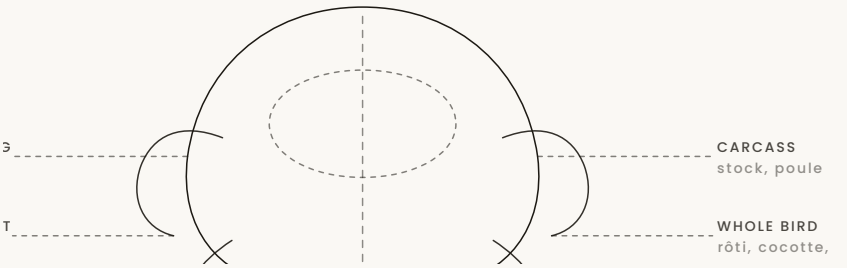


FIGURE 3 · ONE BIRD, EVERY DISH

Breast wants gentle, brief heat; leg meat wants long, slow heat; the carcass wants water and time. Almost every recipe in this chapter follows from that one distinction.

Cooking times and cues

The table above collects the internal and textural cues for each cut and method; the constant underneath all of them is that white meat (breast, wing) cooks fastest and toughens soonest under high heat, while dark meat (thigh, drumstick) carries more connective tissue and wants longer, gentler cooking to become tender rather than merely cooked. This is why a whole roast bird is always something of a compromise — timed for the thigh, the breast is done a little earlier and must be protected by the trussing and the resting time described in Poulet Rôti above — and why jointing a bird before cooking, as in chasseur, basquaise or coq au vin, lets each cut go into the pan for exactly as long as it needs.

> NO THERMOMETER REQUIRED
>
> Every cue above is visual or tactile: the colour and clarity of juices, the give of a joint, the resistance of a skewer or knife tip. These are the same cues French cooks relied on for centuries before an instant-read thermometer existed, and they remain more informative than a single number, because they tell you about texture as well as temperature.

When it goes wrong

Roast chicken breast is dry, legs still pink

The bird went in cold, was not trussed, or was roasted at too high a heat throughout.

FIX Bring to room temperature first, truss tightly so the legs sit close to the body, and use the two-stage heat in Poulet Rôti — hot to colour, then moderate to finish.

Sautéed chicken skin never crisps

The pieces were wet when they went into the pan, or the pan was crowded and steamed instead of browned.

FIX Pat thoroughly dry, brown in batches with space between pieces, and resist moving them until a crust has formed.

Cream sauce curdles or looks grainy

It was boiled hard after the cream (or worse, the egg yolk) went in.

FIX Once cream or a yolk liaison is in the pan, keep it at a bare simmer or lower, and never leave it unattended.

Poule au pot broth is cloudy

The pot was brought to a boil rather than a gentle simmer, or the rising foam was not skimmed early.

FIX Start in cold water, bring up slowly, and skim every trace of grey foam the moment it appears, before adding any vegetables.

Confit duck legs are tough, not falling apart

The oven ran too hot, so the fat simmered rather than held at a bare, silent tremor, and the connective tissue never fully broke down.

FIX Lower the heat, prop the door if needed, and judge doneness by how easily the meat pulls from the bone, not by the clock.

Coq au vin sauce tastes thin and sharp

The wine was not reduced enough before or during cooking, or the sauce was not finished with a final reduction and butter.

FIX Lift the chicken out at the end and boil the sauce hard on its own until it coats a spoon, then finish with a knob of cold butter off the heat.

Ten dishes, one bird, bought once. That is not economy for its own sake — it is what happens when you actually understand every part of what you are cooking.

CLOSING NOTE, CHICKEN

CHAPTER 22

Meat

Les Viandes

Eleven recipes, easiest first: from a steak in a hot pan to a pot simmered all afternoon for the whole table. Nothing here needs more than a knife, a pan and a pot — and the cheaper the cut, the more technique matters.

Choosing a cut

The most expensive cut on the animal — the fillet — is also the least interesting to cook and, cooked plainly, one of the least interesting to eat. Everything this chapter is built on works the other way round: cheap cuts, cooked with patience, taste of more.

An animal is not uniform. Muscles that do constant, low-grade work — the shoulder, the neck, the shin, the flank — are dense with connective tissue, collagen, and flavour, and they are tough if you cook them fast. Muscles that barely work at all — the fillet, sitting protected under the spine — are tender from the day the animal is killed and correspondingly bland; their whole reputation rests on tenderness, not taste. The steaks in this chapter use cuts with enough marbling and structure to reward a hot pan in minutes. Everything after them uses the tough, cheap, flavourful cuts, cooked low and slow until the same collagen that made them tough melts into the sauce and makes them succulent. See Braising & Stewing for the technique in full, and The Larder for

what else is worth stocking alongside a piece of meat — good stock, a decent red wine you would also drink, mustard, and butter.

Two pieces of shopping advice sit underneath everything below. First, ask your butcher what they would braise this week and buy that, rather than naming a cut yourself — prices and quality on secondary cuts move with fashion and season, and a good butcher will steer you towards whatever is cheap because it is currently unfashionable. Second, buy meat on the bone wherever a recipe allows it. Bone adds gelatine and flavour to a braising liquid for nothing, and a bone-in chop or shank costs less per kilo than the boned equivalent.

A tough cut is not a lesser cut. It is a cut that has not yet met enough time.

ON BRAISING

Cooking to a cue

Two families of doneness run through this chapter, and they work by opposite logic. Quick-cooked steaks and chops are judged by internal temperature and touch, the same instant every time. Braises are judged by resistance to a fork, which arrives on its own schedule and cannot be rushed by turning up the heat — more heat on a braise just toughens the meat further before it has a chance to soften.



FIGURE 1 · READING THE CENTRE

A cut steak, seen in cross-section, at four points of doneness. The line between grey exterior and pink centre should be sharp, not a slow gradient — a slow gradient means the pan was too gentle for too long.

DONE-NESS	CORE TEM-PERATURE	TOUCH TEST	APPEARANCE WHEN CUT	REST
Bleu	46–49°C	Feels like the fleshy pad below your thumb, hand relaxed	Cool red centre, barely warmed	3–4 min
Saignant	50–54°C	Same pad, thumb and forefinger touching lightly	Red centre, warm, gives freely	4–5 min
À point	55–60°C	Thumb and middle finger touching	Pink band through the centre	5 min
Bien cuit	65°C and above	Thumb and little finger touching; pad is firm	Grey-brown throughout, little juice	5 min, little be-nefit

Without a thermometer, the hand test above is the honest classical method: touch the fleshy pad at the base of your thumb with your hand relaxed, note how it yields, then press your fingertip into the centre of the meat and compare. It takes a dozen steaks to trust it, and it is worth learning, because a thermometer tells you the temperature of one point while your thumb, with practice, reads the whole piece. Whichever method you use, always rest the meat off the heat, loosely covered, before cutting — the fibres relax and the juices redistribute instead of running out onto the board. See Searing & Roasting for the full method behind a seared crust.

> NO THERMOMETER REQUIRED
>
> A meat thermometer is useful and nobody needs to own one. The hand test above, learned properly, is what French kitchens used for two centuries before instant-read probes existed, and it works on a chop, a joint, or a whole leg of lamb equally well.

Braising cuts by animal

The braises in this chapter draw on a short list of cuts that repeat across every animal: hard-working muscle, well marbled, cheap, and best bought with the butcher's advice rather than a shopping list memorised in advance.

ANIMAL	CUT (FRENCH)	ENGLISH EQUIVALENT	GOOD FOR
Beef	Paleron, macreuse	Chuck, blade	Bourguignon, daube, pot-au-feu
Beef	Gîte, jarret	Shin	Pot-au-feu, long daube, stock
Beef	Joue de boeuf	Cheek	Daube — the most forgiving braising cut there is
Pork	Échine, côtes	Collar, chop	Charcutière, petit salé
Pork	Poitrine salée	Salt belly, bacon	Petit salé, the base of most braises
Lamb	Épaule, collier	Shoulder, neck	Navarin, long-roast gigot substitute
Lamb	Gigot	Leg	Roast whole; braise if bone-in and cheap
Veal	Épaule, poitrine, jarret	Shoulder, breast, shin	Blanquette — needs a pale, gentle cut

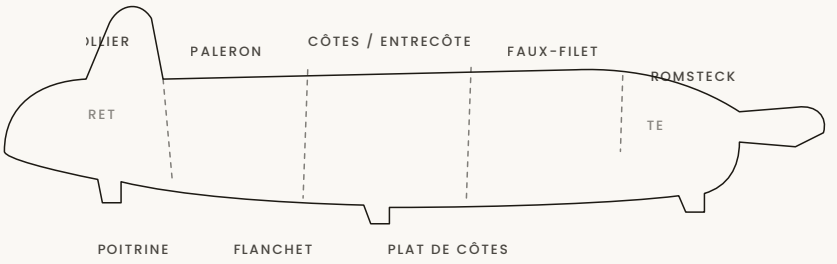


FIGURE 2 · THE MAP OF THE ANIMAL

Dashed lines mark the rough boundaries between primal cuts. Everything forward and below the shoulder, and everything around the shin, is a braising muscle; the loin along the top is where steaks come from.

ON THE POT ITSELF

Every braise below wants a heavy pot with a tight lid — cast iron is ideal but any thick-based pot will do — sized so the meat sits snugly rather than swimming. A pot too large lets the liquid evaporate faster than the meat softens; a pot too small stews the meat in too little liquid to become a sauce.

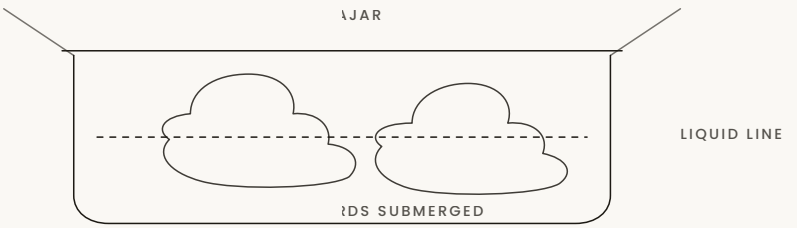


FIGURE 3 · THE BRAISE, IN SECTION

Liquid should come no more than two-thirds up the meat. The uncovered top steams rather than boils, which is what keeps the surface from turning grey and stringy.

Steak Frites

The everyday steak of every French bistro, and the right place to begin. It teaches the entire logic of a pan sauce in one dish: sear, rest, deglaze, mount with butter. Master this and Steak au Poivre and Entrecôte Marchand de Vin below are the same recipe with different flavourings.

Steak Frites

Pan-Seared Steak, Chips, and a Pan Sauce

A hot pan and a rested steak will always beat a grill for flavour, because everything that browns off the meat stays in the pan to become the sauce.

SERVES	ACTIVE	LEVEL
2	35 min	Easy

INGREDIENTS

2 sirloin or rib-eye steaks, 2.5 cm thick, at room temperature

4 large floury potatoes
peeled, cut to 1 cm bâtonnet

To fry enough beef dripping or oil to shallow-fry, 2 cm deep

1 tbsp neutral oil, for the pan

2 shallots, finely diced

100 ml red wine

150 ml beef or brown chicken stock

30 g cold butter, cubed

To taste sea salt and black pepper

METHOD

1. Soak the cut potatoes in cold water for twenty minutes to wash out surface starch, then dry them thoroughly on a cloth — wet potatoes spit violently in hot fat.
2. Blanch the chips in fat heated to about 140°C (a cube of bread browns slowly, in around 90 seconds) for six to seven minutes until pale and soft but not coloured. Lift out, drain, and rest at least ten minutes; this can be done well ahead.
3. Salt the steaks generously on both sides and leave uncovered at room temperature while you finish the chips. Pat dry again just before cooking — a dry surface is what browns.

4. Get a heavy pan properly hot: a drop of water should skitter and vanish in under a second. Add the oil, lay the steaks away from you, and do not move them.

   CUE *A steak releases itself when the crust is set. If it sticks and tears, it isn't ready to turn.*

5. Sear 2–3 minutes a side for a 2.5 cm steak to reach saignant, turning once. Add nothing to the pan yet. Transfer the steaks to a warm plate, tent loosely with foil, and rest for five minutes — see the doneness table above.

6. While the steaks rest, raise the fat to around 190°C (a bread cube browns in 20–30 seconds) and fry the chips a second time, two to three minutes, until deep gold and crisp. Drain, salt at once.

7. Tip most of the fat from the steak pan, leaving a thin film and all the browned residue. Add the shallots and cook gently until soft, about three minutes, scraping the base with a wooden spoon.

8. Pour in the wine, raise the heat, and let it bubble hard until reduced by half — this is *déglacer*, deglazing. Add the stock and reduce again by roughly half, to a light, glossy consistency that coats the spoon.

   CUE *Drag the spoon across the base of the pan; the sauce should hold the line for a second before flowing back.*

9. Off the heat, whisk in the cold butter a cube at a time until the sauce turns glossy and slightly thickened — this is *monter au beurre*, mounting with butter. Do not return it to strong heat or it will split. Add any juices pooled under the resting steaks.

10. Season the sauce, plate the steaks whole or sliced against the grain, spoon over the sauce, and serve with the chips at once.

WINE

A simple Côtes du Rhône or a young Burgundy — something with enough acid to cut the butter.

NOTHING WASTED

Potato peelings and trim go to stock; the fat strained from frying keeps a month in the fridge for the next batch.

READING A PAN SAUCE

Every pan sauce in this chapter follows the same three beats: deglaze with liquid to lift the fond (the browned residue), reduce to concentrate flavour, then mount with cold butter off the heat to bind it glossy. Learn that sequence once and you can build a sauce from almost anything left in a pan.

Steak au Poivre

The same steak, made assertive with a crust of cracked pepper and a cream-and-cognac sauce. The pepper must be cracked, never ground — pre-ground pepper loses its aromatic oils in days and turns to dust rather than crust in the pan.

Steak au Poivre

Peppercorn Steak with Cognac Cream Sauce

Cracked, not ground, pepper forms a proper crust and survives the sear without scorching bitter.

SERVES	ACTIVE	LEVEL
2	20 min	Easy

INGREDIENTS

- **2** sirloin steaks, 2.5 cm thick, at room temperature
- **2 tbsp** black peppercorns
- **1 tbsp** neutral oil
- **1 tbsp** butter
- **1** small shallot, finely diced
- **60 ml** cognac or brandy
- **120 ml** double cream
- **1 tsp** Dijon mustard
- **To taste** sea salt

METHOD

1. Crack the peppercorns coarsely: sit the flat of your chef's knife over them and rock the heel of your hand down onto it once or twice, or crush with the base of a saucepan. You want split, not powdered, pepper.
2. Salt the steaks, then press both sides firmly into the crushed pepper until well coated. Leave to sit ten minutes.
3. Heat the oil in a heavy pan until nearly smoking. Sear the steaks 2–3 minutes a side for saignant, then rest on a warm plate, tented, while you make the sauce.

   CUE *The pepper crust should look toasted, not blackened. If it smokes bitter, the pan was too hot — lower it slightly for the second side.*

4. Off the heat, away from any flame, add the cognac to the pan. Return to low heat and let it warm and reduce by half, scraping up the fond — it will bubble hard but should not need to be set alight to cook off; thirty seconds of simmering does the same job safely.
5. Add the butter and shallot, soften gently for two minutes, then stir in the cream and mustard. Simmer until it coats the back of the spoon, three to four minutes.

   CUE *Draw a finger across the coated spoon; the line should hold cleanly.*
6. Season with salt, return any resting juices to the sauce, and pour over the steaks to serve.

SUBSTITUTION

No cognac: use a splash more stock and a squeeze of lemon in its place. The sauce loses depth but not sense.

SERVING

Frites again, or simply boiled new potatoes and a green salad dressed sharp.

Entrecôte Marchand de Vin

The classical wine-merchant's sauce: a rib steak, seared, with a bordelaise-style reduction of shallot, red wine and marrow or butter. It is the most elegant of the three steaks and the one most worth practising your reduction on, because there is nowhere for a thin sauce to hide.

Entrecôte Marchand de Vin

Rib Steak with Red Wine and Shallot Sauce

A proper reduction of good red wine and shallot is one of the oldest sauces in the French repertoire, and one of the most instructive to get right.

SERVES	ACTIVE	LEVEL
2	30 min	Easy–medium

INGREDIENTS

2 rib-eye or entrecôte steaks, 2.5 cm thick

1 tbsp neutral oil

3 shallots, finely diced

1 small garlic clove, chopped

250 ml robust red wine

150 ml beef stock

1 thyme sprig

40 g cold butter, cubed

1 tbsp chopped parsley

METHOD

1. Salt the steaks and bring to room temperature. Sear in hot oil, 2–3 minutes a side for saignant, then rest tented on a warm plate.
2. Pour off excess fat, keeping the fond. Soften the shallots and garlic in the residual fat over low heat, three to four minutes, without colouring.
3. Add the wine and thyme, raise the heat, and reduce hard until almost syrupy — by about three-quarters, roughly ten minutes. This concentration is what separates the sauce from a thin gravy.

   CUE *The bubbles slow and thicken visibly; the smell shifts from raw alcohol to a deep, jammy wine scent.*
4. Add the stock and reduce again until it coats a spoon lightly, five minutes more. Discard the thyme sprig.
5. Off the heat, whisk in the butter a piece at a time until glossy. Stir in the parsley and any resting juices, and check the seasoning — good wine needs little salt but usually wants some.
6. Slice the steaks against the grain, spoon the sauce generously over, and serve immediately while the sauce is still glossy.

THE CLASSICAL EXTRA

Where marrow bone is available, poach a length of it in salted water for eight minutes, scoop the marrow out, and stir it into the sauce with the butter for real depth.

WINE

Cook with a wine you would happily drink alongside it; the sauce cannot improve on a poor bottle.

Côtes de Porc Charcutière

A pork chop finished in the style of the pork butcher's wife: a mustard-and-gherkin sauce built the same way as the steak sauces above, adapted to pork's milder flavour and greater need for full cooking.

Côtes de Porc Charcutière

Pork Chops, Charcutière Sauce

Mustard and gherkin cut through pork's fat exactly the way a Dijon vinaigrette cuts through a rich terrine — the whole point of the sauce.

SERVES	ACTIVE	LEVEL
2	30 min	Medium

INGREDIENTS

- **2** bone-in pork chops, 2.5 cm thick
- **1 tbsp** neutral oil
- **1** onion, finely diced
- **200 ml** dry white wine
- **200 ml** chicken or pork stock
- **2 tbsp** Dijon mustard
- **4** gherkins, cut into thin batons
- **1 tbsp** butter
- **To taste** sea salt and black pepper

METHOD

1. Salt the chops well and bring to room temperature. Sear in hot oil, about four minutes a side, until deeply golden and the internal temperature reaches roughly 63°C at the bone. Rest, tented, ten minutes — pork carries over more than beef.

   CUE *Juices run clear with the faintest blush of pink when pressed. Fully clear juice usually means overcooked.*

2. Pour off most of the fat, leaving the fond. Soften the onion in what remains, five minutes, until translucent.
3. Add the wine, raise the heat, and reduce by half, scraping the base of the pan.
4. Add the stock and simmer to reduce by about a third, until lightly thickened, roughly eight minutes.

5. Off the heat, whisk in the mustard — do not let mustard boil hard, or it turns bitter and loses its bite. Stir in the gherkins and butter, season, and return the chops to the sauce for a minute to warm through.
6. Serve with the sauce spooned over, and mashed potato or braised lentils (see Petit Salé, below) alongside.

FAULT TO AVOID

Boiling the sauce hard once the mustard is in. Keep it at a bare simmer from that point on.

SUBSTITUTION

No gherkins: a tablespoon of drained capers, roughly chopped, gives the same sharp counterpoint.

> PORK NEEDS FULL COOKING, NOT OVERCOOKING
>
> Modern pork does not need the grey, dry treatment it was given a generation ago — a chop cooked to around 63°C at the bone and rested is safe, juicy and faintly pink at the centre. But it does need to reach that temperature throughout, unlike a beef steak, which can stay red in the middle: pork's texture only turns tender past a certain point of protein change, so undercooked pork is genuinely chewy, not merely rare.

Petit Salé aux Lentilles

Salt pork, gently poached rather than braised, served over green lentils cooked in its own broth. It is the simplest of the long-cooked dishes in this chapter — closer to a poach than a true braise — and a natural bridge from the pan work above to the pot work below.

Petit Salé aux Lentilles

Salt Pork with Green Lentils

Salting and slow poaching turn an ordinary cut of pork into something dense and savoury, and season the lentils for free.

SERVES	ACTIVE	TOTAL
4	30 min	2.5 hrs, plus salting

INGREDIENTS

- **1 kg** pork belly or collar, in one piece
- **40 g** coarse salt
  for dry-salting, or use ready-salted pork
- **1** onion, studded with 2 cloves
- **2** carrots, halved
- **1** bouquet garni
- **300 g** green (Puy) lentils
- **1** onion, finely diced
- **1** carrot, finely diced
- **1** garlic clove, chopped
- **1 tbsp** butter

METHOD

1. If starting raw, rub the pork all over with the coarse salt, wrap and refrigerate for 24 hours; this is the traditional *petit salé*, "lightly salted." Rinse well before cooking. Ready-salted pork or a piece of unsmoked bacon joint can be used as it is.
2. Place the pork in a large pot, cover generously with cold water, and bring slowly to a simmer, skimming the grey foam that rises in the first ten minutes.

   WHY *Starting from cold and skimming is what keeps the broth clear rather than cloudy — the same principle as a stock.*
3. Add the studded onion, halved carrots and bouquet garni. Cover, leaving the lid slightly ajar, and simmer gently — the surface should barely tremble — for about two hours, until a knife slides into the pork with almost no resistance.
4. Forty minutes before the pork is ready, ladle out about a litre of its poaching broth into a saucepan. Add the lentils and simmer, uncovered, thirty minutes, until tender but still holding their shape — lentils do not need soaking.

   CUE *Bite one; it should be creamy through with no chalky centre.*

5. Meanwhile soften the diced onion, carrot and garlic in the butter in a separate pan, eight minutes, and stir this into the cooked lentils along with a ladle more broth if they look dry.
6. Lift the pork out, slice thickly, and serve on the lentils with a little broth spooned over. Season the lentils at the end, not before — the broth is already salty.

NOTHING WASTED

The remaining broth is a fine base for soup the next day, or freeze it to start a future braise.

KIT NOTE

No gadgets: this whole dish is a pot, a knife and patience.

Gigot d'Agneau Rôti aux Flageolets

A whole roast leg of lamb, the Sunday centrepiece of French home cooking, served with flageolet beans — the two are so traditionally paired the beans are sometimes simply called "gigot beans." A roast asks less technique than a braise but more attention to timing and rest.

Gigot d'Agneau Rôti aux Flageolets

Roast Leg of Lamb with Flageolet Beans

Garlic pushed deep into the meat scents it from the inside, and a long rest afterwards matters more here than in any other recipe in this chapter.

SERVES	ACTIVE	TOTAL
6	25 min	2 hrs, plus rest

INGREDIENTS

1 leg of lamb, bone-in, about 2.2 kg

6 garlic cloves
4 slivered, 2 whole

Several rosemary sprigs

3 tbsp olive oil

2 onions, quartered

2 carrots, halved

200 ml white wine

300 g dried flageolet beans
soaked overnight

1 bouquet garni

To taste sea salt and black pepper

METHOD

1. The day before or morning of, drain the soaked beans, cover with fresh water in the pot, add the bouquet garni and the two whole garlic cloves, and simmer gently, uncovered, for 45–60 minutes until tender but not collapsing. Salt only in the last ten minutes — early salt toughens the skins. Set aside in their liquid.
2. Heat the oven to 220°C. With the tip of a paring knife, cut small deep slits over the lamb and push a garlic sliver and a small rosemary tip into each. Rub the whole leg with olive oil, salt and pepper.
3. Scatter the onions and carrots in a roasting tray to form a rough bed, and sit the lamb on top — this keeps the underside from stewing in fat and flavours the vegetables at the same time.
4. Roast at 220°C for 20 minutes to colour the surface, then lower to 180°C and continue roasting: about 15 minutes per 500 g for pink (rosé), or 20 minutes per 500 g for well done, using the doneness table above as your guide — a 2.2 kg leg wants roughly 65–90 minutes total past the initial sear.

   CUE *Juices from a skewer inserted at the thickest point run pink for rosé, clear for well done.*
5. Lift the lamb onto a board, tent loosely with foil, and rest a full 20 minutes — a leg this size needs it more than any steak. Do not skip this; a leg carved too early loses far more juice than the extra ten minutes of visible steam suggests.
6. Tip the tray juices and vegetables into a saucepan, add the wine, and simmer hard for five minutes, mashing the vegetables lightly to thicken. Strain if you want it smooth, or leave rustic.
7. Reheat the beans in their liquid, drain, and toss with a little olive oil and chopped parsley if you have it. Carve the lamb in thin slices against the grain and serve with the beans and the pan juices.

SUBSTITUTION

No dried flageolets: tinned cannellini or haricot beans, warmed through with garlic and a splash of the roasting juices, are a fair stand-in.

NOTHING WASTED

Save the bone for stock once carved — a lamb bone stock underlies a good navarin (below).

Boeuf Bourguignon

The great Burgundian braise: beef, red wine, bacon, small onions and mushrooms, cooked until the sauce and the meat are the same dark, glossy thing. It rewards being made a day ahead — the flavour deepens overnight and the fat is easier to lift once chilled.

Boeuf Bourguignon

Beef Braised in Red Wine, Bacon, Onions and Mushrooms

Every element is added separately and finished separately, then brought together at the end — the discipline that keeps a Bourguignon from tasting muddy.

SERVES	ACTIVE	TOTAL
6	50 min	3.5–4 hrs

INGREDIENTS

- **1.3 kg** beef chuck or shin, cut into 5 cm chunks
- **200 g** smoked bacon lardons
- **2 tbsp** flour
- **2 tbsp** neutral oil
- **2** carrots, sliced thick
- **1** large onion, sliced
- **2** garlic cloves, chopped
- **750 ml** young, robust red Burgundy or similar
- **400 ml** beef stock
  enough to just cover
- **2 tbsp** tomato purée
- **1** bouquet garni
- **20** baby onions or shallots, peeled
- **250 g** button mushrooms, halved if large
- **30 g** butter

METHOD

1. Heat the oven to 150°C. Dry the beef chunks thoroughly with a cloth — wet meat steams instead of browning. Fry the lardons in the oil in a heavy pot until golden and their fat has rendered; lift out and set aside.

2. Brown the beef in the same fat, in batches so the pot is never crowded, until deeply coloured on all sides. Do not rush this stage — it is most of the flavour of the finished dish. Set the beef aside with the bacon.

   CUE *A proper crust, dark brown not grey, and the fond building up thick on the base of the pot.*

3. In the same pot, soften the sliced carrots and onion for eight minutes, then add the garlic for a final minute. Stir in the flour and cook for a minute to lose its raw taste.

4. Return the beef and bacon to the pot. Pour in the wine, scraping up every scrap of fond, then add enough stock to just cover the meat. Stir in the tomato purée and bouquet garni.

5. Bring to a bare simmer on the hob, cover with the lid ajar, and transfer to the oven. Cook 2.5–3 hours, checking after two hours.

   CUE *A fork slides into the meat and twists free with almost no resistance. If it still resists, it is not ready — more time, not more heat.*

6. Meanwhile, brown the baby onions whole in a little butter in a separate pan until glazed, then add a splash of water, cover, and cook gently until tender, about fifteen minutes. Sauté the mushrooms hard in the remaining butter until golden — do this in a pan too hot rather than too crowded, or they will stew grey instead of browning.

7. When the beef is done, stir the glazed onions and mushrooms through the braise. If the sauce is thin, lift the meat out, reduce the liquid on the hob until it coats a spoon, then return everything to the pot.

8. Rest ten minutes before serving, or better, cool and refrigerate overnight and reheat gently the next day — the flavour is noticeably rounder.

WINE

Cook with the same bottle, or one step down, from what you plan to drink. A Bourguignon made with thin wine tastes thin.

SERVING

Boiled potatoes, buttered egg noodles, or good bread to catch the sauce.

Daube Provençale

The Provençal cousin of the Bourguignon, marinated first, built with orange peel, olives and a splash of brandy instead of bacon and baby onions.

Traditionally cooked in a *daubière*, an earthenware pot with a dished lid that holds water to seal in steam — any heavy lidded pot does the job.

Daube Provençale

Provençal Beef Braise with Orange and Olives

An overnight marinade in wine begins the tenderising before the pot ever gets involved, and orange peel gives the dish its whole character.

SERVES	ACTIVE	TOTAL
6	40 min	4 hrs, plus overnight

INGREDIENTS

- **1.3 kg** beef cheek or chuck, cut into 5 cm chunks
- **750 ml** red wine, such as a southern Rhône
- **2** carrots, sliced thick
- **1** onion, sliced
- **3** garlic cloves, crushed
- **1** strip orange peel, pith removed
- **1** bouquet garni with a bay leaf and thyme
- **2 tbsp** olive oil
- **150 g** smoked bacon or pancetta, diced
- **2 tbsp** tomato purée
- **60 ml** brandy
- **100 g** black olives, pitted

METHOD

1. The night before, combine the beef, wine, carrots, onion, garlic, orange peel and bouquet garni in a bowl. Cover and refrigerate at least eight hours, or overnight.
2. The next day, drain the beef and vegetables, reserving the marinade liquid separately. Dry the beef pieces thoroughly.
3. Heat the oven to 150°C. In a heavy pot, render the bacon in the olive oil until golden, then lift out. Brown the beef in batches in the same fat until well coloured; set aside with the bacon.
4. Add the reserved vegetables to the pot and soften for eight minutes. Stir in the tomato purée, cook a minute, then return the beef and bacon.

5. Pour in the brandy and let it bubble for thirty seconds, then add the reserved marinade liquid, orange peel and bouquet garni. Bring to a simmer, cover with the lid ajar, and transfer to the oven for three hours.

   CUE *The meat yields to a fork with no resistance and the sauce has darkened to a deep garnet.*

6. Stir in the olives for the final twenty minutes of cooking, just long enough to warm through and season the sauce. Remove the orange peel and bouquet garni before serving.

7. Rest ten minutes, skim any surface fat with a spoon, and serve with plain boiled potatoes, rice, or wide pasta.

SUBSTITUTION

No orange: a strip of lemon peel gives a different but still bright note. Do not omit citrus entirely — it is what separates a daube from a plain beef stew.

NOTHING WASTED

Leftover marinade vegetables, once strained from the sauce, are soft enough to purée into a soup base rather than discard.

Blanquette de Veau

The palest of the classical braises: veal poached gently in white stock, finished with a *liaison* of egg yolk and cream rather than browned at any point. Nothing here is seared — the whole dish depends on staying pale, which means gentle heat throughout and a careful hand at the very end.

Blanquette de Veau

Veal in White Sauce with Egg-Yolk Liaison

A liaison of egg yolk and cream must never boil once added, or it splits into scrambled egg floating in broth — the one moment in this chapter demanding real attention.

SERVES	ACTIVE	TOTAL
4	45 min	2 hrs

INGREDIENTS

1.2 kg veal shoulder or breast, cut into 5 cm chunks

1 onion, studded with a clove

2 carrots, halved

1 leek, halved and washed

1 bouquet garni

200 g button mushrooms, quartered

16 baby onions, peeled

40 g butter

40 g flour

2 egg yolks

100 ml double cream

1 lemon, juiced

To taste sea salt and white pepper

METHOD

1. Put the veal in a pot, cover with cold water, and bring slowly to a bare simmer, skimming the grey foam carefully for the first ten minutes — thorough skimming here is what keeps a blanquette pale rather than cloudy.
2. Add the studded onion, carrots, leek and bouquet garni. Cover with the lid ajar and simmer very gently — barely a tremor, never a rolling boil, or the veal turns stringy — for about 1.5 hours, until tender.
3. Meanwhile, glaze the baby onions in half the butter with a splash of water, covered, over low heat until tender, about fifteen minutes, without letting them colour. Sauté the mushrooms briefly in a dry pan with a squeeze of lemon juice to keep them pale.
4. When the veal is tender, lift the meat out and set aside, tented. Strain the poaching liquid, discarding the vegetables and bouquet garni, and measure out 700 ml — top up with water or reduce if needed.
5. In a clean saucepan, melt the remaining butter and stir in the flour to make a pale *roux*; cook gently for two minutes without colouring. Off the heat, whisk in the hot poaching liquid gradually to avoid lumps, then return to the heat and simmer, whisking, until it thickens to a light coating sauce, about eight minutes — this is a *velouté*.

   CUE *The sauce should coat a spoon in a thin, even film with no floury taste when tasted.*
6. Return the veal, baby onions and mushrooms to the sauce and warm through gently over low heat.
7. In a bowl, whisk the egg yolks with the cream. Ladle a little of the hot sauce into the bowl, whisking constantly, to warm the yolks without cooking them — this is *tempering*. Repeat with another ladleful, then stir the warmed mixture back into the pot off the heat.

8. Return the pot to the very lowest heat and stir constantly until the sauce visibly thickens and clings to the spoon, three to four minutes. It must never boil past this point, or the yolks will scramble.

   CUE *Run a finger across the back of the coated spoon; the line should stay clean and sharp.*

9. Finish with a squeeze of lemon juice and season with salt and white pepper — black pepper would speckle the pale sauce. Serve with plain rice or boiled potatoes.

IF IT SPLITS

Pour the sauce through a sieve into a cold bowl at once and whisk hard; a mild split can sometimes be brought back. A bad split cannot — start the liaison again with fresh yolks off the heat.

SUBSTITUTION

No veal: chicken thigh makes a fair, if less classical, blanquette using the same method.

> NO BLENDER FOR THE SAUCE
>
> A stand mixer or blender is sometimes used to guarantee a perfectly smooth velouté. It is not needed: a patient hand with a whisk, adding the hot liquid to the roux in a thin, steady stream, gives the same result.

Navarin d'Agneau Printanier

Lamb braised with the first vegetables of spring — small turnips, new carrots, baby onions and peas — each cooked separately to the point of tenderness and added back at the end, so nothing turns to mush. It is the most component-heavy recipe in this chapter and the best rehearsal for restaurant-style timing at home.

Navarin d'Agneau Printanier

Spring Lamb Stew with New Vegetables

The braise itself is straightforward; the discipline is holding each vegetable back until it can be added at exactly the right moment.

SERVES	ACTIVE	TOTAL
4–6	1 hr	2.5 hrs

INGREDIENTS

- **1.3 kg** lamb shoulder, cut into 5 cm chunks
- **2 tbsp** neutral oil
- **1 tbsp** flour
- **2 tbsp** tomato purée
- **700 ml** lamb or beef stock
- **1** garlic head, halved crossways
- **1** bouquet garni
- **12** baby turnips, peeled, tops trimmed
- **12** baby carrots, peeled
- **16** baby onions, peeled
- **150 g** shelled peas, fresh or frozen
- **1 tbsp** sugar
- **1 tbsp** chopped parsley

METHOD

1. Heat the oven to 160°C. Dry the lamb well and brown it in the oil in a heavy pot, in batches, until well coloured on all sides.
2. Return all the lamb to the pot, sprinkle over the flour, and stir over the heat for a minute to cook it out. Stir in the tomato purée.
3. Pour in the stock, scraping the base of the pot, and add the garlic head and bouquet garni. Bring to a simmer, cover with the lid ajar, and braise in the oven for 1.5 hours, until the lamb is nearly tender.
4. While it braises, glaze the turnips and carrots separately: for each, melt a knob of butter in a pan with a pinch of sugar and enough water to come halfway up the vegetables, cover, and simmer until tender and the liquid has reduced to a glaze, about fifteen minutes each. Glaze the baby onions the same way.

   CUE *The last of the liquid should coat the vegetables in a thin, shiny film rather than sit as a puddle.*

5. When the lamb is nearly tender, lift it from the pot with a slotted spoon, strain the braising liquid to remove the garlic and bouquet garni, and skim any fat from the surface. Return the lamb and the liquid to the pot.
6. Add the glazed turnips, carrots and onions to the pot and simmer together, uncovered, for ten minutes to marry the flavours.
7. Add the peas in the final four minutes — just long enough to cook through and keep their colour. Stir through the parsley, check the seasoning, and serve straight from the pot.

NOTHING WASTED

Turnip tops and pea pods, if using fresh peas, make a fine addition to the next stock pot.

SERVING

Needs nothing beside it but bread — the vegetables are the starch and the vegetable course at once.

Pot-au-Feu

The oldest dish in this chapter and the one that closes it: a mixed pot of beef cuts and marrow bone, simmered for hours with root vegetables, served as two courses from one pot — the broth first, with coarse salt and cornichons, then the meat and vegetables together. It is built to feed a table, not a plate, and it is the dish every other braise in this chapter ultimately descends from.

Pot-au-Feu

The Boiled Beef Dinner

A mix of cuts — some for richness, one for gelatine, one for lean, sliceable meat — gives a broth and a plate of meat neither could achieve alone.

SERVES	ACTIVE	TOTAL
6–8	30 min	4 hrs

INGREDIENTS

1 kg beef shin (gîte or jarret), in one or two pieces

1 kg beef chuck (paleron), tied if loose

2 marrow bones, tied in muslin or cloth to hold the marrow in

2 onions
1 halved and charred, 1 whole and studded with a clove

4 carrots, halved

2 leeks, halved and washed, tied in a bundle

2 turnips, halved

2 celery stalks

1 bouquet garni

1 tbsp black peppercorns

Coarse salt, mustard and cornichons to serve

METHOD

1. Put the shin and chuck in a very large pot, cover generously with cold water, and bring slowly to a simmer. Skim the grey foam thoroughly for the first fifteen minutes — this single step decides whether the broth ends up clear or cloudy.

   CUE *Once the foam stops rising and the surface stays clean under a bare simmer, you are done skimming.*

2. Meanwhile, char the halved onion, cut side down, directly in a dry hot pan until nearly black — this old trick colours and deepens the broth the way roasted bones would in a stock. Add it to the pot along with the whole studded onion.

3. Add the peppercorns and bouquet garni. Cover, leaving the lid well ajar, and simmer at the gentlest possible bubble for two hours, topping up with a little boiling water if the meat becomes exposed.

4. Add the carrots, turnips, celery and leek bundle, along with the marrow bones. Continue simmering gently for a further 1.5–2 hours, until the chuck is meltingly tender and the shin's connective tissue has softened.

   CUE *The chuck yields to a fork with no resistance, and the broth tastes rich and clean, not greasy — skim the fat from the surface once or twice through the cook if it collects.*

5. Lift out the meat, bones and vegetables carefully, keeping them warm, and strain the broth through a sieve into a clean pot, discarding the spent onion and bouquet garni.

6. Serve in two courses from the same pot: first the hot broth alone, with coarse salt to season it at the table; then the sliced meat, vegetables, and marrow spread on toast, with mustard and cornichons alongside.

NOTHING WASTED

Leftover broth is the finest stock in the house — freeze it. Leftover meat, chopped and bound with a little broth and mustard, makes an excellent hash the next day.

THE WHOLE POINT

This is a dish for a full table and a slow afternoon — everything in this chapter prepares you to cook it.

When it goes wrong

A braise is still tough after the recipe's stated time

Connective tissue has not yet had enough time or gentle enough heat to convert to gelatine — this varies with the exact cut and the animal's age, so times are a guide, not a guarantee.

FIX Keep it at a bare simmer and give it another 30–45 minutes, checking every fifteen. It will not toughen further; it can only improve.

The braising liquid is thin and watery

Too much liquid for the pot, or the lid was fully sealed, trapping steam that never reduced.

FIX Lift the meat out, reduce the liquid hard on the hob until it coats a spoon, then return the meat to warm through.

A steak's crust is pale and grey, not browned

The meat was wet, the pan was not hot enough, or the pan was crowded and the steam had nowhere to escape.

FIX Pat meat bone-dry before it meets the pan, use a heavy pan heated properly, and never cook more than the pan can hold with space around each piece.

A cream or egg-based sauce has split

The sauce boiled hard after cream, egg yolk or mustard was added.

FIX Take it off the heat immediately and whisk in a splash of cold liquid. Prevention matters more than rescue here — keep the heat low from the moment these go in.

Vegetables added to a braise have turned to mush

They went in at the start and cooked for the meat's full time rather than their own, much shorter one.

FIX Cook delicate vegetables separately and stir them through only in the final ten to fifteen minutes, as in the navarin above.

A *roast leg carves dry despite looking pink when cut*

It was carved straight from the oven, before the juices had a chance to redistribute through the fibres.

FIX Rest a leg of this size a full 20 minutes, tented loosely, before the first cut — no exceptions.

The best cooks in France did not learn on fillet steak. They learned on the shoulder, the shin, and a pot that had all afternoon.

ON THE CASE FOR CHEAP CUTS

CHAPTER 23

Fish & Shellfish

Les Poissons et Coquillages

Ten recipes, easiest first: from a pot of mussels in twelve minutes to an honest home bouillabaisse. Fish rewards a plain hand and punishes a slow one — buy well, cut cleanly, and cook briefly.

Buying fish, buying trust

Fish has no forgiveness window the way a braise does. A day too old cannot be cooked back into freshness, so the whole discipline of this chapter begins at the counter, before a knife is ever picked up.

Freshness shows in four places: the eyes should be clear and slightly domed, not sunken or cloudy; the gills, lifted with a finger, should be bright red or pink, not brown or grey; the flesh should spring back when pressed, leaving no dent; and the smell should be of the sea — clean, mineral, faintly sweet — never sharply "fishy," which is the smell of decay, not fish. Whole fish keep these signs where fillets hide them, which is one good reason to buy whole and cut it yourself, alongside the fact that a whole fish is reliably cheaper per kilo and leaves you a frame for stock.

The second argument in this chapter is for cheaper, less fashionable species. Mackerel, sardines, coley, pollock, whiting, gurnard and megrim all cook by exactly the methods below and taste of the sea just as truly as sole or turbot; they are cheap because they have fallen out of fashion, not because they are inferior.

Ask your fishmonger what came in that morning and what they would take home themselves — that question, more than any species name, is the one worth asking. See The Larder for what to keep alongside fish, and Poaching & Steaming for the gentle-heat methods that suit fish best.

Buy the fish that looks like it just left the water, not the fish whose name you already knew.

ON THE FISH COUNTER

Filleting by hand

A flexible boning or fillet knife makes this easier, but a 20 cm chef's knife, kept properly sharp, will fillet both a round fish (mackerel, trout, sea bass) and a flat fish (sole, plaice, megrim) perfectly well. What matters is following the bones with the blade, not forcing a straight line through the flesh.

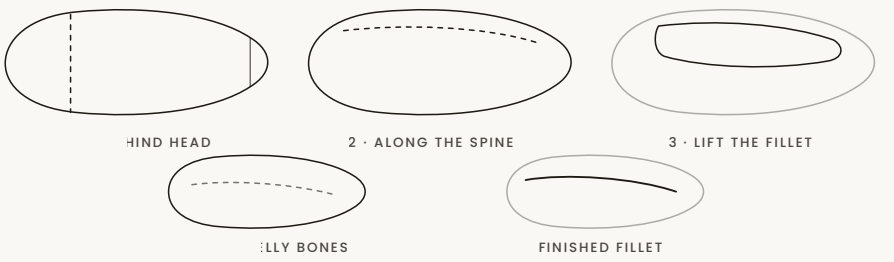


FIGURE 1 · FILLETING A ROUND FISH

The knife travels along the top of the backbone, never through it. The belly bones — the pin bones and rib cage — are trimmed away last with a shallow angled cut, or lifted individually with fingertips.

Round fish — trout, mackerel, sea bass

- **Scale and gut first.** Scrape scales from tail to head with the back of the knife under running water, then slit the belly from vent to gills and pull out the innards, rinsing the cavity well.
- **Cut behind the head.** Angle the knife down behind the gills to the backbone, not through it, then turn the blade flat.
- **Run the blade along the spine.** Long, shallow strokes from head to tail, riding the flat of the blade over the rib bones, letting the fillet fall away as you go. Turn the fish and repeat for the second fillet.
- **Trim the belly bones.** A thin V-shaped cut removes the rib cage; pin bones, if any remain, are pulled with clean fingertips or a small pair of pliers, felt for by running a finger against the grain.

Flat fish — sole, plaice, megrim

- **Find the lateral line.** A flat fish has a faint line running head to tail down the centre of both sides — this sits directly over the backbone and is where the first cut goes.
- **Cut down to the bone along the line,** from head to tail, then angle the knife outward and work from the centre line to the edge, keeping the blade flat against the rib bones, to free one quarter-fillet. Flat fish give four fillets, not two.
- **Turn the fish and repeat** for the remaining three quarter-fillets, always working from the centre line outward.
- **The skin** can be left on and crisped in the pan, or removed by laying the fillet skin-down, gripping the tail end, and running the blade flat against the skin at a shallow angle while pulling the skin taut.

> NO FILLET KNIFE REQUIRED
>
> A flexible fillet knife makes the belly-bone trim slightly easier because it bends along the ribs, but a sharp, rigid chef's knife does every cut above perfectly well — it simply asks a little more care on the angle. What actually matters is a properly sharp edge; see Knife Skills.

Cooking time by thickness

Fish cooks by thickness, not by weight or species, and it cooks fast — the single most common fault in home cooking is leaving it a minute too long. As a rule of thumb, measure the fillet or steak at its thickest point and allow roughly the times below per method.

THICK-NESS	PAN-FRIED (PER SIDE)	STEAMED / POACHED	PAPILLOTE (OVEN)
1 cm	1–1.5 min	3–4 min	8–10 min
2 cm	2–2.5 min	5–6 min	12–14 min
3 cm	3–4 min	7–9 min	16–18 min
4+ cm	4–5 min, finish covered off heat	10–12 min	20–22 min

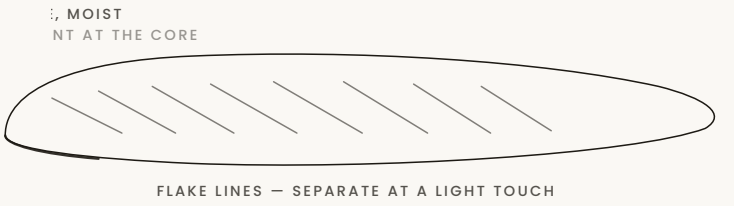


FIGURE 2 · READING DONENESS

Cooked fish separates cleanly along its natural seams — the flake lines — under the gentlest pressure from a fork. Raw or undercooked fish resists and looks glassy or translucent at the centre; overcooked fish is chalky and the flakes fall apart on their own before you touch them.

CALLED FOR	SUBSTITUTE	NOTES
Sole	Megrim, plaice, lemon sole	All flat fish; treat identically
Turbot	Brill, halibut off-cuts	Firmer flesh; add a minute to poaching times
Brochet (pike)	Whiting, haddock	For quenelles — needs a very lean, mild white fish

CALLED FOR	SUBSTITUTE	NOTES
Rascasse, congre	Gurnard, conger eel, monk-fish, red mullet	For bouillabaisse — mix at least three textures
Cabillaud (cod)	Coley, pollock, haddock	Nearly interchangeable in all methods below

Moules Marinière

Mussels in white wine, shallot and parsley, ready from stove to bowl in twelve minutes, and the honest place to start this chapter: the technique is nothing more than steaming shellfish open in an aromatic liquid, which every other bivalve dish below reuses.



FIGURE 3 · SORTING THE MUSSELS

Tap any open shell against the side of the bowl; a live mussel closes within a few seconds. One that stays open, or feels unusually heavy with silt, is dead or full of grit and must be thrown out.

Moules Marinière

Mussels in White Wine, Shallot and Parsley

Steam, not boil — the mussels open in the rising liquid and season it with their own juice as they go.

SERVES	ACTIVE	LEVEL
2	20 min	Easy

INGREDIENTS

1.2 kg live mussels

30 g butter
2 shallots, finely diced
1 garlic clove, chopped
200 ml dry white wine
Handful parsley, chopped
To taste black pepper

METHOD

1. Scrub the mussels under cold running water, pulling away the wiry "beard" from the hinge of each. Discard any that stay open when tapped, and any with cracked shells (see the diagram above).
2. Melt the butter in a large pot over medium heat and soften the shallots and garlic for three minutes, without colouring.
3. Raise the heat, add the wine, and bring to a boil. Tip in the mussels, cover with a tight lid, and cook, shaking the pot occasionally, for four to five minutes.

   CUE *Every shell has opened wide. Discard any that remain shut — they were dead before cooking.*
4. Lift the mussels into warm bowls with a slotted spoon. Stir the parsley and a good grind of pepper into the pot liquid and pour it over.

SERVING

Bread for the broth, and an empty bowl on the table for the shells.

NOTHING WASTED

Leftover broth, strained, makes an excellent base for a fish soup the next day.

> THE RULE FOR ALL SHELLFISH
>
> Bought live, cooked the same day. Store mussels and clams loosely in the fridge under a damp cloth, never sealed in plastic or sitting in water — both suffocate them.

Truite Meunière

A whole trout, dusted in flour and pan-fried in butter until the butter itself turns nutty and brown — the sauce is the cooking medium. *Meunière* means "in the style of the miller's wife," a nod to the flour coating, and it is the single most useful pan technique for fish in this chapter.

Truite Meunière

Pan-Fried Trout, Brown Butter and Lemon

A thin, even flour coating protects the delicate flesh and gives the butter something to catch and colour against.

SERVES	ACTIVE	LEVEL
2	15 min	Easy

INGREDIENTS

- **2** whole trout, gutted and scaled
- **3 tbsp** plain flour, seasoned
- **1 tbsp** neutral oil
- **60 g** butter
- **1** lemon
  half juiced, half in wedges
- **1 tbsp** chopped parsley

METHOD

1. Pat the trout completely dry, inside and out. Dust both sides and the cavity lightly with seasoned flour, shaking off the excess — a thick coat turns gummy, not crisp.
2. Heat the oil with half the butter in a pan large enough to hold both fish without crowding, until the foam from the butter subsides.
3. Lay the trout in and cook undisturbed, about four minutes a side depending on size, until the skin is deeply golden and the flesh at the backbone flakes easily.

   CUE *Lift a corner near the head; the fillet should separate from the bone in clean flakes, not resist or look glassy.*
4. Lift the fish to warm plates. Wipe the pan, add the remaining butter, and cook over medium heat, swirling constantly, until it turns a deep hazelnut brown and smells nutty, thirty to ninety seconds.

   CUE *Watch the colour, not the clock — it goes from golden to burnt in seconds once it turns.*
5. Immediately add the lemon juice — it will spit and foam, stopping the butter cooking further — then the parsley, and pour straight over the fish.

SUBSTITUTION

Any small whole round fish — mackerel, small sea bass, red mullet — takes this treatment equally well.

SERVING

New potatoes and something green; the brown butter is rich enough on its own.

BEURRE NOISETTE, NOT BEURRE NOIR

Nutty hazelnut-brown is the goal; black, acrid butter has gone too far and cannot be saved. Once it colours, it moves fast — have the lemon juice ready in your hand before the butter starts to turn.

Sole Meunière

The same method as the trout above, applied to a whole flat fish, and traditionally the most celebrated dish of this family. It asks a little more care in the pan because the fillets are thin and delicate.

Sole Meunière

Whole Dover Sole, Brown Butter and Lemon

A whole flat fish holds its shape and moisture far better than a loose fillet, and the bone carries flavour through to the plate.

SERVES	ACTIVE	LEVEL
2	15 min	Easy

INGREDIENTS

- **2** whole Dover sole or megrim, skinned on the dark side
- **3 tbsp** plain flour, seasoned
- **1 tbsp** neutral oil
- **70 g** butter
- **1** lemon
  half juiced, half in wedges
- **1 tbsp** chopped parsley

METHOD

1. Ask the fishmonger to skin the dark (top) side, or do it yourself: nick the skin at the tail, grip it with a cloth for purchase, and pull it away towards the head in one motion. Leave the white underside skin on — it holds the fish together in the pan.

2. Pat dry and dust both sides lightly with seasoned flour, shaking off the excess.
3. Heat the oil with a third of the butter in a pan large enough for the fish to lie flat. Lay the sole in dark-side down first and cook undisturbed, four to five minutes, until golden, then turn carefully with a wide spatula.
4. Cook the second side three to four minutes more.

   CUE *Slide a knife tip to the bone at the thickest point, behind the head; the flesh should lift away in a clean flake.*
5. Lift the sole to warm plates. Wipe the pan, melt the remaining butter over medium heat, swirling, until deep hazelnut brown, then add the lemon juice at once to arrest it.
6. Scatter with parsley and pour the butter over the fish immediately, while it is still foaming.

KIT NOTE

Turning a whole flat fish is the only tricky moment; a fish slice or the widest spatula you own, sliding fully under the fish before lifting, prevents it breaking.

NOTHING WASTED

Ask for the skin, head and bones if the fishmonger hasn't kept them — they make a fine, quick fish stock, or *fumet*.

Maquereau au Vin Blanc

Mackerel — cheap, oily and sustainable — cooked cold in a spiced white wine court-bouillon, a classical way of serving an assertive fish that also happens to be a fine make-ahead dish for a warm day.

Maquereau au Vin Blanc

Mackerel Poached in Spiced White Wine, Served Cold

Mackerel's richness stands up to the acidity of the wine and vinegar in a way a delicate white fish never could.

SERVES	ACTIVE	TOTAL
4	15 min	40 min, plus chilling

INGREDIENTS

4 small mackerel, filleted, pin bones removed

300 ml dry white wine
200 ml water
2 tbsp white wine vinegar
1 carrot, thinly sliced
1 onion, thinly sliced
1 bay leaf, a few thyme sprigs
1 tsp black peppercorns
1 tsp coriander seeds
1 tsp sea salt

METHOD

1. Combine the wine, water, vinegar, carrot, onion, herbs, peppercorns, coriander seeds and salt in a wide saucepan. Bring to a simmer and cook ten minutes to soften the vegetables and infuse the liquid.
2. Lay the mackerel fillets flat in the pan, skin side up, in a single layer — use two pans or cook in batches if needed. Bring back to the barest simmer.
3. Poach gently for three to four minutes, until the flesh just turns opaque and flakes at a light touch. Do not let the liquid boil, or the fillets will break apart.

   CUE *The thickest part of the fillet flakes cleanly when pressed with a fork; it should look moist, not glassy.*
4. Lift the fillets carefully into a shallow dish and pour the hot liquid, vegetables and all, over the top.
5. Cool to room temperature, then cover and refrigerate at least four hours, ideally overnight, before serving cold or at cool room temperature with some of the pickled vegetables spooned alongside.

STORAGE

Keeps well, submerged in its liquid, for up to three days refrigerated — the flavour deepens by the second day.

SERVING

Crusty bread and butter, or a simple potato salad.

Poisson en Papillote

Fish sealed in a parcel and baked, so it steams in its own juice with whatever aromatics you enclose it with — one of the gentlest methods there is, and a

natural next step once the pan work above feels comfortable, since the oven does the discipline for you.

Poisson en Papillote

Fish Baked in a Sealed Parchment Parcel

A well-sealed parcel traps steam entirely, so the fish poaches in its own juices and whatever you add, and nothing dries out.

SERVES	ACTIVE	LEVEL
2	15 min	Easy

INGREDIENTS

2 white fish fillets, about 2 cm thick, skin on

1 courgette, very thinly sliced

1 tomato, thinly sliced

1 lemon
half sliced thin, half juiced

2 thyme sprigs

2 tbsp olive oil

60 ml white wine or water

To taste sea salt and black pepper

METHOD

1. Heat the oven to 200°C. Cut two large squares of baking parchment, roughly 40 cm across.
2. Lay a bed of courgette and tomato slices in the centre of each square, slightly larger than the fish itself. Season lightly, then set a fillet on top, skin side up.
3. Scatter over the lemon slices, thyme, a drizzle of olive oil, a splash of wine, and salt and pepper.
4. Bring the two opposite edges of the parchment up over the fish and fold together in a series of tight overlapping folds, working along the seam, then twist the ends closed like a sweet wrapper so the parcel is fully sealed and holds its own steam.

   CUE *Lift the parcel; nothing should leak. A gap lets steam escape and the fish will dry out.*
5. Bake for 12–14 minutes for a 2 cm fillet, using the thickness table above as a guide for other sizes.

6. Transfer the sealed parcels straight to plates and let diners open their own — the burst of steam and aroma is part of the dish.

SUBSTITUTION

Almost any firm white fish, or salmon; adjust time by thickness rather than species.

KIT NOTE

No parchment: well-oiled foil, folded the same way, works identically, though it will not brown the vegetables at all.

Cabillaud à la Vapeur, Beurre Blanc

Steamed cod with a classical beurre blanc — an emulsified butter sauce built from a shallot-and-vinegar reduction, the single most useful cold-emulsion sauce for fish in the whole repertoire.

Cabillaud à la Vapeur, Beurre Blanc

Steamed Cod with White Butter Sauce

A sieve set over a pot of simmering water is a perfectly good steamer, and beurre blanc needs nothing but a whisk, cold butter and a steady hand.

SERVES	ACTIVE	LEVEL
2	25 min	Medium

INGREDIENTS

- **2** cod fillets, about 2.5 cm thick, skin removed
- **2** shallots, very finely diced
- **80 ml** white wine vinegar
- **80 ml** dry white wine
- **150 g** cold butter, cubed
- **1 tbsp** double cream
  optional, stabilises the sauce
- **To taste** sea salt and white pepper

METHOD

1. Combine the shallots, vinegar and wine in a small saucepan. Simmer until reduced to about two tablespoons of thick, syrupy liquid, eight to ten minutes.

CUE *The shallots look almost dry, glazed rather than swimming.*

2. If using, stir in the cream and bring back to a bare simmer — this gives the sauce a wider margin for error and a slightly rounder finish, at a small cost to purity.
3. Set the pan over the lowest possible heat. Whisk in the cold butter two or three cubes at a time, letting each addition melt into a thick, glossy emulsion before adding more, never letting the sauce approach a simmer.

   CUE *The sauce should look pale, thick and opaque — like a loose mayonnaise — never oily or separated.*
4. Season and keep warm off the heat, over a pan of warm — not hot — water, while you steam the fish; it will not hold longer than about twenty minutes before it starts to separate.
5. Bring 4 cm of water to a simmer in a pot. Set a metal sieve or colander over the top without touching the water, lay the cod in it, season, and cover with a lid or foil.
6. Steam 8–9 minutes for a 2.5 cm fillet, using the thickness table above for other sizes, until it flakes cleanly at the thickest point.
7. Plate the cod and spoon the beurre blanc over and around, not on top of, the fish, so the pale sauce and white flesh sit as a single dish.

IF IT SPLITS

Off the heat, whisk in a tablespoon of cold water or cream — this often brings it back. Prevention is easier: keep the heat very low throughout.

KIT NOTE

A sieve or colander over a pot is a full steamer; no bamboo basket is needed.

> NO STEAMER BASKET NEEDED
>
> A metal colander or a wide sieve, set over a pot of simmering water and covered with a lid or a domed sheet of foil, steams exactly as well as a purpose-built basket. What matters is that the food sits above the water, not in it.

Coquilles Saint-Jacques Provençale

Seared scallops with garlic, tomato and herbs — a dish that depends entirely on searing hard and fast, then stopping.

Coquilles Saint-Jacques Provençale

Seared Scallops with Garlic, Tomato and Herbs

Scallops go from translucent to rubbery in under a minute of overcooking; a very hot pan and total attention are the whole recipe.

SERVES	ACTIVE	LEVEL
2	15 min	Medium

INGREDIENTS

10–12 large scallops, roe on or off, side muscle removed

2 tbsp olive oil

1 garlic clove, finely chopped

2 ripe tomatoes, peeled, seeded and diced

1 tbsp butter

1 tbsp chopped parsley or basil

Squeeze of lemon

To taste sea salt and black pepper

METHOD

1. Pat the scallops completely dry with a cloth — any surface moisture will steam rather than sear them — and season just before cooking.
2. Heat a heavy pan until very hot, almost smoking, and add half the oil. Lay the scallops in without crowding, leaving space around each.
3. Sear undisturbed for 60–90 seconds, until a deep golden crust forms on the base, then turn and sear the second side for 45–60 seconds. Lift out at once — they continue cooking briefly from residual heat.

   CUE *The centre should still look faintly translucent when lifted; it firms to opaque within a minute off the heat. A fully opaque scallop straight from the pan is already overcooked.*
4. Wipe the pan, add the remaining oil, and soften the garlic for thirty seconds without colouring. Add the tomato and cook briskly for two minutes until just softened, not collapsed.
5. Off the heat, stir in the butter, herbs and lemon juice. Season, spoon over the scallops, and serve at once.

BUYING

Ask for "dry" scallops — never treated with a phosphate solution — which sear properly instead of weeping water into the pan.

SERVING

Little more than crusty bread; anything heavier competes with the scallops.

Sole Bonne Femme

Fillets of sole poached in white wine and fish stock over mushrooms and shallot, the poaching liquid then reduced and finished into a velouté-style sauce and glazed back over the fish — a full demonstration of building a sauce from a poaching liquid rather than a separate pan.

Sole Bonne Femme

Sole Fillets Poached with Mushroom and White Wine Sauce

The fish's own poaching liquid becomes the sauce, reduced and enriched, so nothing of its flavour is left behind in the pan.

SERVES	ACTIVE	LEVEL
2	35 min	Medium

INGREDIENTS

- **4** sole fillets, skinned
- **2** shallots, finely diced
- **150 g** button mushrooms, thinly sliced
- **200 ml** fish stock or light chicken stock
- **150 ml** dry white wine
- **30 g** butter
- **30 g** flour
- **80 ml** double cream
- **1 tbsp** chopped parsley

METHOD

1. Heat the oven to 180°C. Butter a wide, shallow ovenproof dish and scatter the shallots and mushrooms over the base.
2. Fold each sole fillet gently in half, skinned side inward, and lay them over the mushrooms. Pour in the stock and wine — it should come roughly halfway up the fish.

3. Cover with buttered parchment, pressed down onto the fish, and bake for 12–15 minutes, until the fish flakes easily and looks opaque.

   CUE *Lift a fold with a fork; it should separate cleanly with no resistance.*

4. Carefully pour the poaching liquid into a saucepan, keeping the fish and mushrooms warm in the covered dish. Simmer the liquid hard until reduced by about half, eight minutes.

5. In a separate small pan, melt the butter and stir in the flour to make a pale roux; cook two minutes without colouring. Off the heat, whisk in the reduced poaching liquid gradually until smooth, then return to the heat and simmer, whisking, until it coats a spoon, five minutes.

6. Stir in the cream and simmer a further two minutes. Taste and adjust seasoning — the stock and wine already carry salt.

7. Pour the sauce back over the fish and mushrooms, scatter with parsley, and serve directly from the dish, or flash briefly under a hot grill to glaze the top if you like colour on the sauce.

SUBSTITUTION

Megrim or plaice fillets, folded the same way, work just as well as sole.

KIT NOTE

No grill for glazing: skip it — the dish is complete without a browned top.

Quenelles de Brochet

Pike dumplings bound with a stiff choux-style panade and poached until they swell — technically the most demanding recipe in this chapter, and included honestly as such. Traditionally made with a food processor to purée the fish fine and a piping bag to shape them; both are replaceable, but the hand method takes real patience and a fair amount of forearm.

Quenelles de Brochet

Poached Pike Dumplings, Hand-Made

A properly worked panade and a very fine hand-chopped fish paste are what let a quenelle hold together and still swell light in the poaching water.

SERVES	ACTIVE	LEVEL
4	1 hr	Advanced

INGREDIENTS

400 g skinned pike or whiting fillet, very cold, all bones removed

125 ml water

60 g butter

75 g plain flour

3 eggs

150 ml double cream, well chilled

Pinch grated nutmeg

To taste sea salt and white pepper

For the sauce use the beurre blanc or Sole Bonne Femme sauce above

METHOD

1. Make the panade first: bring the water and butter to a boil in a saucepan. Off the heat, tip in the flour all at once and beat hard with a wooden spoon until it forms a smooth ball that pulls cleanly from the sides of the pan.
2. Return to low heat and beat for a minute to dry it slightly, then transfer to a bowl and beat in the eggs one at a time, fully incorporating each before adding the next — this is exactly the choux paste method. Cool completely; it must be cold before the fish is added.
3. Chop the fish as finely as possible: cut into small pieces, then use the rock-chop motion (see Knife Skills) continuously for eight to ten minutes, gathering and re-chopping, until it is closer to a paste than a mince. This is the single most laborious step and there is no shortcut with a knife alone; a food processor does it in seconds if you have one, but is not required.
4. Push the chopped fish through a sieve with the back of a wooden spoon into a bowl set over ice, to remove the last sinew and lighten the texture. Work it against the mesh in small batches — this takes patience but is what gives a quenelle its characteristic fineness.
5. Beat the sieved fish into the cold panade until fully combined, season with salt, pepper and nutmeg, then beat in the chilled cream gradually, a little at a time,

until the mixture is smooth, pale and holds together softly. Chill at least 30 minutes — a warm mixture will not hold its shape.

6. Bring a wide pot of well-salted water to the gentlest simmer, well below a boil. Using two dessertspoons dipped in warm water, shape the mixture into ovals, passing it from spoon to spoon, and slide each gently into the water.

   CUE *The water should shiver, not bubble. A rolling boil breaks quenelles apart.*

7. Poach in batches, without crowding, for 12–15 minutes, turning once halfway, until they have roughly doubled in size and feel firm but light when pressed.

   CUE *A quenelle that floats and holds its shape, springy rather than dense, is done.*

8. Lift out with a slotted spoon, drain briefly on a cloth, and serve at once with a beurre blanc or the mushroom sauce from Sole Bonne Femme, above.

HONESTLY

This is a genuinely difficult recipe by hand. Expect the first batch to be denser than a restaurant's; the technique improves fast with a second attempt.

KIT NOTE

A food processor purées the fish in seconds and a piping bag shapes neater ovals — real conveniences here, not affectations. The hand method above works, but ask more of you.

Bouillabaisse

The great fish stew of Marseille, built honestly for a home kitchen: a saffron-and-fennel broth made from cheap fish and their bones, then a mixture of fish and shellfish poached briefly in it, served with rouille — a garlicky, saffron mayonnaise — spread on toasted bread. A restaurant bouillabaisse uses a dozen Mediterranean species not sold outside Marseille; this version uses what a good fishmonger anywhere can actually supply, and it is closer to how bouillabaisse is cooked at home in France than the version served in restaurants.

Bouillabaisse

Provençal Fish Stew with Rouille

The broth is built from bones and trimmings first, so the fish itself only needs a few minutes at the very end — the same order of operations as any good stock-based sauce.

SERVES	ACTIVE	TOTAL
4–6	1 hr	2 hrs

INGREDIENTS

1 kg mixed white fish bones and heads, gills removed

1.2 kg mixed fish and shellfish for the pot
e.g. monkfish, red mullet, gurnard, mussels, whole prawns

4 tbsp olive oil

1 onion, sliced

1 fennel bulb, sliced
fronds reserved

2 leeks, sliced and washed

3 garlic cloves, chopped

4 tomatoes, roughly chopped
or 400g tinned

1 strip orange peel

Pinch saffron threads

1 bouquet garni with bay and thyme

2 tbsp Pernod or pastis
optional

For the rouille 1 egg yolk, 1 garlic clove crushed, pinch saffron, 150ml olive oil, 1 small boiled potato, cayenne to taste

To serve baguette, sliced and toasted

METHOD

1. Heat half the olive oil in a large pot and sweat the onion, fennel and leek for eight minutes until soft but not coloured. Add the garlic for a final minute.
2. Add the fish bones and heads, tomatoes, orange peel, saffron and bouquet garni. Cover generously with cold water — about 2 litres — and bring to a boil, then reduce to a lively simmer for 30–40 minutes.
3. Crush the contents against the side of the pot with the back of a wooden spoon to release more flavour from the bones, then strain firmly through a sieve into

a clean pot, pressing hard to extract every drop. Discard the solids. This is the base broth.

CUE *The strained broth should taste concentrated and faintly sweet from the fennel and orange — season it properly with salt now, since everything after this only dilutes it briefly before serving.*

4. While the broth simmers, make the rouille: mash the boiled potato smooth, then whisk in the egg yolk, crushed garlic, saffron and a pinch of cayenne. Whisking constantly, add the olive oil in a very thin stream, exactly as for a mayonnaise, until thick and glossy. Season with salt.
5. Return the strained broth to a simmer and add the Pernod if using. Add the firmest, longest-cooking fish first — monkfish or gurnard chunks — and poach for three minutes.
6. Add the remaining fish and shellfish — red mullet, mussels, prawns — and simmer gently for a further four to five minutes, until the mussels have opened and the fish flakes easily.

   CUE *Every mussel open, every piece of fish opaque through. Discard any mussel that stays shut.*
7. Ladle the broth into bowls first, with toasted bread spread thickly with rouille floated on top, in the traditional two-course style — then serve the fish and shellfish separately or together, with more rouille alongside.

SUBSTITUTION

Use whatever mix of firm and delicate, white and shellfish your fishmonger has that day — the method, not the species list, is what makes it bouillabaisse.

KIT NOTE

No blender for the rouille: a bowl and a steady whisking hand, exactly as for a handmade mayonnaise, works completely.

When it goes wrong

Fish sticks and tears when you try to turn it

The pan wasn't hot enough, or the fish was moved before a crust had formed to release it naturally.

FIX Wait for the fish to lift itself away from the pan with gentle pressure from a fish slice; if it resists, give it another thirty seconds.

The fillet is dry and chalky

Simple overcooking — fish carries very little forgiveness once the flake lines fall apart on their own.

FIX Use the thickness table as a starting point, not a fixed rule, and pull the fish off the heat the moment it flakes at a light touch — it keeps cooking briefly from residual heat.

A butter or cream sauce has split into an oily mess

The heat was too high, or the butter was added too fast without time to emulsify.

FIX Off the heat, whisk in a spoonful of cold liquid — water, cream or stock — vigorously; this often re-forms the emulsion. Keep the heat very low from the start next time.

Mussels stayed shut after cooking

They were dead before they went into the pot — a live mussel closes when tapped and opens readily under heat.

FIX Discard them; do not force them open or eat them. Sort more carefully before cooking next time.

Quenelles fall apart in the poaching water

The panade was too warm when the fish and cream were added, or the water was boiling rather than barely trembling.

FIX Chill the mixture properly before shaping, and keep the poaching water at a bare shiver throughout — never a rolling boil.

A papillote parcel comes out dry

Steam escaped through a poorly sealed fold, so the fish roasted in dry oven air instead of steaming in its own juice.

FIX Fold and twist the parchment edges tightly, checking for gaps before it goes in the oven — a properly sealed parcel should puff slightly as it bakes.

Cook fish the way you would treat something borrowed: briefly, carefully, and give it back better than you found it.

THE RULE OF THIS WHOLE PAGE

CHAPTER 24

Sauce Recipes

Les Sauces

The working recipes behind the theory. Thirteen sauces, arranged easiest first, that will carry almost every plate you cook for the rest of your life.

The order, and why

A sauce is not a garnish. It is the argument the dish makes for itself, and almost every argument a French kitchen has ever made comes down to one of the recipes in this chapter.

They are given here easiest first, and that ordering is deliberate. A vinaigrette asks nothing of you but a steady hand and a clean jar; a soufflé of a sauce like hollandaise asks for real attention to heat and timing. Cook them in this order over a few weeks and each one teaches something the next one needs: the vinaigrette teaches emulsion by shaking; the mayonnaise teaches emulsion by whisking, which is what hollandaise and béarnaise need under heat; the béchamel teaches the roux that the velouté and the sauce chasseur both lean on; the beurre blanc teaches controlled reduction and cold-butter emulsion, which is the hardest single skill in this chapter and the one hollandaise's cousins all draw from.

This chapter is the working set — quantities, method, cues. For why an emulsion holds or breaks, why a roux needs to cook before the liquid goes in,

and how the five mother sauces relate to one another, read Sauce Making and Emulsions first if you have not already. Everything here assumes you have.

> *A sauce is a small, controlled decision made about a large amount of heat. Everything that follows is just learning to make that decision on purpose.*
>
> ON WHY SAUCES COME BEFORE MENUS

Vinaigrette Classique

The first sauce anyone should own, and the one most people make worst, because they never stop to notice that it is an emulsion at all. Get the ratio right and a bowl of plain leaves becomes a dish.

Vinaigrette Classique

Classic French Dressing

A temporary emulsion of oil and vinegar, held together by mustard, that you remake at the table in seconds. It should taste of the oil first, the vinegar second, and never announce the mustard at all.

YIELD	KEEPS	TIME
150 ml	2 weeks, jar	5 minutes

INGREDIENTS

1 tsp Dijon mustard

1 tbsp red or white wine vinegar

3 tbsp olive oil, or a neutral oil for a milder dressing
the classic ratio is 3 parts oil to 1 part vinegar

– fine salt and a turn of pepper

1 tsp finely minced shallot, optional

METHOD

1. In a small bowl or a screw-top jar, whisk or shake the mustard with the vinegar and a good pinch of salt until the salt has dissolved and the mustard has loosened into the vinegar.
2. Add the oil in a thin, steady stream while whisking hard, or simply screw the lid on the jar and shake it vigorously for ten seconds. The mustard's lecithin holds the two liquids together as tiny droplets, so the mixture turns cloudy and slightly thick.
3. Taste on a leaf, not off a spoon — dressing tastes very different once it coats something. Adjust salt, then adjust the balance: more vinegar for sharpness, more oil to soften it. Stir in the shallot if using.

SERVE WITH

Any green salad, boiled leeks, warm potatoes, cold poached fish.

KEEPING

A jar keeps two weeks unrefrigerated if it contains no fresh shallot or garlic; with them, a week in the fridge. Shake before use — it separates on standing, which is the sign of a genuine emulsion rather than a stabilised bottled one.

> THE RATIO, NOT THE RECIPE
>
> Three parts oil to one part acid is the classical baseline. A very sharp vinegar or a squeeze of lemon can go closer to 2:1; a delicate walnut or hazelnut oil wants 4:1 so the oil is not drowned. Learn the ratio and you never need to look at a recipe for this again.

Beurre Maître d'Hôtel

Not a sauce in the saucepan sense at all — a compound butter, which is the fastest route in the whole of French cooking from a plain grilled or fried thing to a finished plate. Make a log of it and keep it in the freezer; a coin sliced off and laid on a hot steak or piece of fish melts into an instant sauce.

Beurre Maître d'Hôtel

Parsley and Lemon Butter

Softened butter beaten with parsley, lemon and salt, rolled into a log and chilled hard. The oldest and simplest "sauce" in the repertoire, and still one of the best.

YIELD	KEEPS	TIME
125 g	2 weeks fridge, 3 months frozen	10 minutes

INGREDIENTS

- **125 g** unsalted butter, fully softened at room temperature
- **2 tbsp** flat-leaf parsley, chopped fine — see Knife Skills
- **1** lemon, finely grated zest and 1 tsp juice
- – fine salt, a little white pepper

METHOD

1. Beat the soft butter against the side of the bowl with a wooden spoon until it is smooth and slightly pale — this is doing by hand what a paddle attachment does in a machine, and it works just as well with a little patience.
2. Beat in the parsley, lemon zest, lemon juice, a good pinch of salt and the pepper until evenly distributed.
3. Turn the butter out onto a sheet of greaseproof paper, shape it roughly into a log with a spoon, then roll the paper around it and twist the ends like a sweet wrapper to tighten it into a neat cylinder.
4. Chill until firm, at least an hour. Slice into coins to serve.

SERVE WITH

Grilled or pan-fried steak, poached or grilled fish, boiled new potatoes, steamed asparagus.

VARIATIONS

Swap the parsley for tarragon and add a little Dijon for a béarnaise-adjacent butter; add crushed garlic and it becomes a snail butter for mushrooms.

Beurre Noisette

Browned butter, and the simplest possible demonstration that heat is a flavour on its own. Butter is milk solids suspended in fat; cooked past melting, those

solids toast, and the whole thing turns from bland to nutty in under two minutes if you watch it.

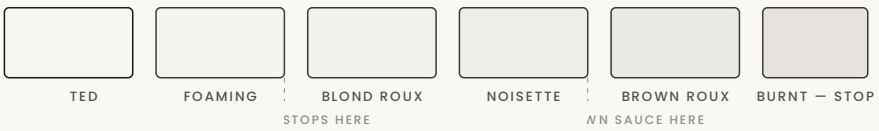


FIGURE 1 · THE COLOUR LADDER

Butter and roux both run along the same scale from pale to dark. Béchamel wants a roux barely past foaming; a brown sauce base and beurre noisette both want it well into hazelnut brown. One stage further is bitter and unusable.

Beurre Noisette

Brown Butter

Butter cooked until the milk solids toast to the colour of a hazelnut, then stopped with a squeeze of lemon or a splash of vinegar. Poured hot over fish or vegetables, it is a whole sauce made from one ingredient.

YIELD	KEEPS	TIME
100 g	Serve at once	4 minutes

INGREDIENTS

100 g unsalted butter

1 tsp lemon juice or white wine vinegar

– a few capers or a little chopped parsley, optional

METHOD

1. Melt the butter in a light-coloured saucepan over medium heat — a pale pan lets you see the colour change; a dark one hides it until too late.
2. It will foam as the water in the butter boils off. Swirl the pan gently and keep watching through the foam.
3. As the foam subsides, the milk solids at the bottom turn from white to gold to a deep hazelnut brown, and the smell turns nutty and toasted. This happens fast in the last thirty seconds.

CUE *The instant the smell turns from "melted butter" to "toasted nuts", and the flecks at the bottom are the colour of a hazelnut shell, take it off the heat.*

4. Off the heat, immediately add the lemon juice or vinegar — it will hiss and the butter stops cooking at once, arresting it at exactly the colour you want. Pour straight over the dish.

SERVE WITH

Skate wing, sole, trout, cauliflower, green beans, ravioli or gnocchi.

KEEPING

None — it is a hot sauce made and used in the same minute. Reheating scorches it.

> THE TEN SECONDS BETWEEN RIGHT AND RUINED
>
> Beurre noisette burns to bitterness almost exactly when it smells perfect, so do not step away from the pan once foaming begins. If the flecks turn from brown to black, or the smell turns acrid rather than nutty, throw it out and start again. There is no rescue.

Mayonnaise à la Main

The permanent emulsion that the vinaigrette only fakes: egg yolk, oil, and patience. Made entirely by hand with a bowl and a whisk, it takes about four minutes and teaches the exact motor skill that hollandaise and béarnaise will ask for later, minus the risk of scrambling anything.

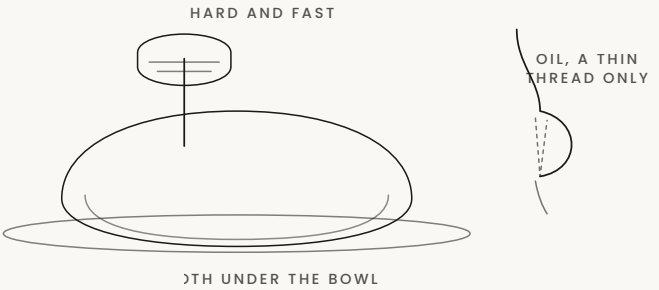


FIGURE 2 · THE EMULSION BY HAND

A damp cloth under the bowl stops it spinning while one hand whisks continuously and the other pours. The oil must arrive slower than the whisk can absorb it, especially in the first minute.

Mayonnaise à la Main

Hand-Whisked Mayonnaise

Egg yolk, mustard and salt, worked into a stable emulsion with oil added in a slow thread. No machine involved or needed — the whole point is a wrist that keeps moving.

YIELD	KEEPS	TIME
250 ml	3 days, fridge	6 minutes

INGREDIENTS

1 large egg yolk, at room temperature

1 tsp Dijon mustard

1 tsp white wine vinegar, divided

200 ml neutral oil (sunflower or a mild olive oil)

– fine salt, a little lemon juice to finish

METHOD

1. Set the mixing bowl on a damp cloth to anchor it. Whisk the yolk, mustard, half the vinegar and a pinch of salt together for thirty seconds until it lightens slightly in colour — this is the base the emulsion will form around.
2. Begin adding the oil, drop by drop from a teaspoon, whisking constantly and vigorously. Do not rush this first stage: the emulsion is at its most fragile until roughly a third of the oil is in.

   CUE *The mixture visibly thickens and turns paler after the first few tablespoons of oil — that is the emulsion taking hold.*

3. Once it is thick and holding, switch to pouring the oil in a thin, steady thread rather than drops, whisking throughout. If it ever looks like it is thinning or the oil is pooling on top, stop pouring and whisk hard until it re-thickens before adding more.
4. When all the oil is worked in, whisk in the remaining vinegar and a squeeze of lemon juice to taste, and check the salt.

SERVE WITH

Cold poached fish, boiled eggs, chips, crudités; the base for tartare sauce and rémoulade.

IF IT SPLITS

Start a fresh yolk in a clean bowl and whisk the split mixture into it a spoonful at a time, as though it were the oil. It will re-emulsify completely.

> NO STAND MIXER, NO PROBLEM
>
> A machine only does what your wrist does, faster and without judgement. Working by hand means you feel the exact moment the emulsion catches and the exact moment it starts to thin, which is information a machine throws away. Four minutes of steady whisking is genuinely all this takes.

Aïoli

Provençal garlic mayonnaise, and historically made without any egg at all — pounded garlic alone can hold an emulsion of oil, though it is temperamental. The version below uses a yolk as insurance, which is how most good kitchens actually make it.

Aïoli

Garlic Mayonnaise

Garlic pounded to a paste with salt, then built into an emulsion exactly as for mayonnaise. Strong enough to season a whole platter of vegetables and fish on its own.

YIELD	KEEPS	TIME
250 ml	3 days, fridge	8 minutes

INGREDIENTS

2–3 garlic cloves

– coarse salt

1 large egg yolk

200 ml olive oil, mild rather than peppery

1 tsp lemon juice

METHOD

1. Chop the garlic coarsely, add a pinch of coarse salt, and work the flat of the knife back and forth across the pile at a shallow angle until it becomes a smooth paste — see Knife Skills for the method.
2. Whisk the garlic paste into the egg yolk in a bowl set on a damp cloth.
3. Add the oil exactly as for mayonnaise: drop by drop at first, whisking constantly, then in a thin thread once the emulsion has taken hold.
4. Finish with the lemon juice and taste for salt — the garlic will have brought some sharpness already.

SERVE WITH

Poached salt cod, boiled potatoes and vegetables (a *grand aïoli*), grilled fish, snails.

KEEPING

Three days covered in the fridge; the garlic sharpens with time, which most people prefer.

Sauce Béchamel et Sauce Mornay

The mother sauce of the white family, and the first place a roux appears in this chapter. Everything from a gratin to a soufflé base begins here, and it is genu-

inely one of the easiest sauces to get right, provided you respect two things: cook the roux before the milk goes in, and add the milk gradually.

Sauce Béchamel

White Sauce

Milk thickened with a pale, barely-cooked butter-and-flour roux, seasoned simply. The base of gratins, soufflés, and the sauce below it, Mornay.

YIELD	KEEPS	TIME
500 ml	3 days, fridge	20 minutes

INGREDIENTS

- **40 g** butter
- **40 g** plain flour
- **500 ml** whole milk, warmed
- **1** small onion, peeled and left whole, stuck with 1 clove, optional
- **1** bay leaf
- – salt, white pepper, a scrape of nutmeg

METHOD

1. If using the onion and bay, warm the milk in a saucepan with them over low heat for ten minutes without boiling, then strain and discard them, keeping the milk warm.
2. Melt the butter in a clean saucepan over low heat. Stir in the flour with a wooden spoon and cook, stirring constantly, for two minutes — no longer. It should smell of pastry, not of raw flour, and stay pale, barely past foaming. See Figure 1 above.

   CUE *The roux loosens and starts to smell like the inside of a biscuit rather than raw flour. Stop cooking it there.*
3. Off the heat, add the warm milk gradually — a ladle at a time — whisking hard after each addition until fully smooth before adding the next. This prevents lumps far more reliably than adding it all at once.
4. Return to low heat and cook, stirring constantly with the wooden spoon and scraping the base and corners of the pan, for eight to ten minutes, until it coats the back of the spoon thickly — see the nappe test below.
5. Season with salt, white pepper and a little nutmeg. Press a piece of buttered paper directly onto the surface if not using at once, to stop a skin forming.

SERVE WITH

Cauliflower cheese, lasagne, croque-monsieur, the base of a soufflé — see Desserts for the sweet side of the same technique.

FOR SAUCE MORNAY

Off the heat, whisk in 60 g grated Gruyère and 20 g grated Parmesan until melted. Do not boil again once the cheese is in, or it can turn grainy.

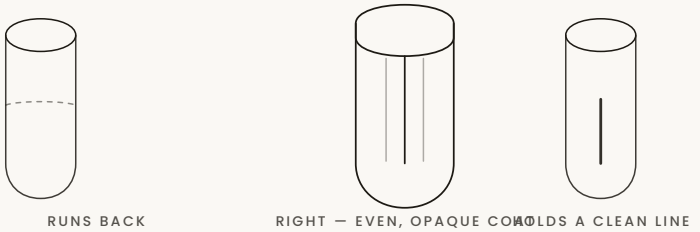


FIGURE 3 · THE NAPPE TEST

Nappe means "to coat": a sauce is ready when it clings evenly to the back of a wooden spoon and a finger drawn across leaves a clean track that does not immediately flood back in.

Sauce Velouté et Sauce Suprême

The same roux technique as béchamel, but built on stock instead of milk — the second mother sauce, and the base for a whole family of pan sauces built from the roasting or poaching liquid of whatever you have just cooked.

Sauce Velouté

Stock-Based White Sauce

A blond roux — cooked a shade further than for béchamel — thinned with hot stock and simmered until silken. Named for its texture: *velouté* means velvety.

YIELD	KEEPS	TIME
500 ml	3 days, fridge	25 minutes

INGREDIENTS

40 g butter

40 g plain flour

600 ml chicken, veal or fish stock, hot — see Stocks

– salt, white pepper

1 tsp lemon juice, optional

METHOD

1. Melt the butter over low heat, stir in the flour, and cook for three minutes, stirring, until it turns a shade past pale — the very palest gold, blond rather than white.
2. Off the heat, whisk in the hot stock gradually, a ladle at a time, beating out lumps before each addition.
3. Return to low heat and simmer gently for fifteen to twenty minutes, skimming any froth from the surface with a large spoon and stirring often, until reduced by roughly a fifth and coating the spoon in a full nappe.

   CUE *The raw-flour taste disappears entirely somewhere past the ten-minute mark. Taste it; if flour still shows, keep simmering.*
4. Season with salt, pepper and, for a fish or chicken velouté, a squeeze of lemon.

SERVE WITH

Poached chicken and fish, vol-au-vents, blanquette de veau.

FOR SAUCE SUPRÊME

Off the heat, whisk in 100 ml double cream and a squeeze of lemon. Warm gently without boiling; it should turn pale ivory and glossy.

ONE ROUX, FOUR SAUCES

Béchamel, velouté and the classical brown sauce are the same starting technique — butter and flour cooked together — stopped at three different colours and finished with three different liquids. Learn the roux once at Figure 1's pale stage and you already know how to begin three of the five mother sauces.

Sauce Tomate

The one mother sauce that owes nothing to a roux, and the most forgiving recipe in this chapter — it improves with a slightly heavy hand and a long, slow simmer.

Sauce Tomate

Classic Tomato Sauce

Tomatoes cooked down slowly with aromatics until sweet and concentrated, then sieved to a smooth sauce with no machine at all.

YIELD	KEEPS	TIME
700 ml	5 days fridge, 3 months frozen	1 hour

INGREDIENTS

2 tbsp olive oil or 30 g butter

1 onion, finely diced

1 carrot, finely diced

2 garlic cloves, chopped

1.2 kg ripe tomatoes, roughly chopped, or 2 × 400 g tins whole plum tomatoes

1 bay leaf, a sprig of thyme

1 tsp sugar, if the tomatoes are sharp

– salt, pepper

METHOD

1. Warm the oil or butter in a heavy pan over low-medium heat. Add the onion and carrot with a pinch of salt and cook gently, stirring, for eight to ten minutes until soft and translucent but not coloured.
2. Add the garlic and cook thirty seconds, until fragrant — no longer, or it turns bitter.
3. Add the tomatoes, bay and thyme. If using tinned, crush the whole tomatoes against the side of the pan with the wooden spoon. Bring to a gentle simmer.
4. Simmer uncovered, stirring occasionally, for 35–45 minutes, until the sauce has visibly reduced and thickened and the oil separates slightly at the edges.

   CUE *Draw the spoon across the base of the pan: the sauce should not flood straight back over the track.*
5. Remove the bay and thyme stalk. Push the sauce through a sieve set over a bowl, working it with the back of the wooden spoon to extract everything but the skins and seeds. Return to the pan, taste, and adjust salt, pepper, and sugar.

SERVE WITH

Pasta, poached eggs, grilled fish, or as the base for sauce chasseur below.

NO BLENDER NEEDED

The sieve does everything a blender would, and produces a finer, seedless result besides. It is slower by about three minutes and worth it.

Sauce Chasseur

"Hunter's sauce" — a brown, mushroom-and-shallot pan sauce built on a reduction and finished with tomato, classically served with sautéed chicken or rabbit deglazed in the same pan it was cooked in.

Sauce Chasseur

Hunter's Sauce

Shallots and mushrooms sautéed hard, deglazed with white wine, and finished with stock, tomato and tarragon. Built in the very pan that browned the meat it accompanies.

YIELD	KEEPS	TIME
Sauce for 4	2 days, fridge	20 minutes

INGREDIENTS

- **20 g** butter
- **200 g** button mushrooms, sliced
- **2** shallots, finely chopped
- **120 ml** dry white wine
- **200 ml** chicken or veal stock
- **150 ml** sauce tomate (above), or 2 tomatoes, peeled, seeded and chopped
- **1 tsp** tarragon, chopped; 1 tsp parsley, chopped

METHOD

1. In the same heavy pan the meat was sautéed and removed from, add the butter and mushrooms over fairly high heat. Cook without stirring for the first minute so they take colour, then toss and continue until browned all over — mushrooms release water first and only brown once it has cooked away.

   CUE *The pan goes quiet again and the mushrooms turn golden at the edges — that is the water gone.*

2. Add the shallots and cook two minutes until softened.

3. Pour in the wine and scrape up every brown deposit on the base of the pan with the wooden spoon — this is the fond, and it is most of the sauce's flavour. Simmer until reduced by half.
4. Add the stock and sauce tomate. Simmer eight to ten minutes until it coats the spoon lightly. Stir in the tarragon and parsley off the heat, and check the seasoning.

SERVE WITH

Sautéed chicken thighs or breast, pork chops, rabbit.

NOTHING WASTED

Mushroom trimmings and stalks go straight to the stock bowl for next time — see Stocks.

Beurre Blanc

A reduction of shallot, vinegar and wine, emulsified with cold butter whisked in off the heat — no egg, no oil, held together by nothing but temperature control and a moving whisk. It is the hardest technique in this chapter and the one that teaches the emulsion skill hollandaise needs, without an egg to scramble if you get the heat wrong.

Beurre Blanc

White Butter Sauce

Cold, diced butter whisked piece by piece into a hot shallot-and-vinegar reduction, off direct heat, until it turns into a pale, glossy, unctuous emulsion.

YIELD	KEEPS	TIME
200 ml	Serve at once	20 minutes

INGREDIENTS

- **3** shallots, very finely diced
- **100 ml** white wine vinegar
- **100 ml** dry white wine
- **200 g** cold unsalted butter, diced small
- **1 tbsp** double cream, optional — makes the emulsion more forgiving
- – fine salt, white pepper

METHOD

1. Put the shallots, vinegar and wine in a saucepan and simmer over medium heat until reduced to a wet, syrupy spoonful — about 2 tablespoons of liquid clinging to the shallots. Watch it in the last minute; it goes from wet to dry very quickly and must not catch.

   CUE *You can drag the spoon across the base and see it for a second before the liquid flows back — almost, but not quite, dry.*

2. If using cream, stir it in now and let it come back to a bare simmer; it widens the temperature window for the next step and makes the sauce noticeably harder to break.

3. Reduce the heat to its lowest setting, or take the pan off the heat entirely and work over residual warmth. Add the cold butter two or three cubes at a time, whisking constantly and briskly until each addition melts into a creamy, opaque sauce before adding the next.

4. Keep the pan moving on and off the heat as needed — if it looks like it is starting to look oily or thin, it is overheating and separating; take it fully off the heat and whisk hard, adding a cube of cold butter to bring the temperature down.

   CUE *Right: pale ivory, opaque, thick enough to hold a trail from the whisk for a second. Wrong: yellow, glossy, and pooling — that is the fat starting to split back out.*

5. Season with salt and white pepper. Do not strain — the shallot is meant to remain, soft and barely visible, through the sauce.

SERVE WITH

Poached or steamed white fish, asparagus, poached eggs.

KEEPING IT WARM

It cannot be reheated once made — the emulsion breaks. Hold it, at most, twenty minutes over the pilot warmth of a switched-off hob, away from direct heat, and serve promptly.

NO THERMOMETER, NO PROBLEM — AND NONE WOULD HELP HERE

Beurre blanc lives and dies by feel, not by a number: the reduction must be hot enough to melt the butter but never hot enough to fully liquefy it, and that window shifts constantly as cold butter goes in and cools the pan. A thermometer measures a single point; your eye and the whisk's resistance read the whole sauce at once. Trust the texture, not a device.

Hollandaise

Egg yolks whisked over gentle warmth until they thicken into a foam, then built into an emulsion with melted butter — the warm cousin of mayonnaise, and the base of eggs Benedict and of béarnaise below. It has a reputation for difficulty that is mostly about heat management, not skill.

Sauce Hollandaise

Hollandaise Sauce

Yolks whisked with a little water and lemon over a pan of barely-simmering water — a bain-marie improvised from a saucepan and a heatproof bowl — until they foam and thicken, then loosened with warm melted butter.

YIELD	KEEPS	TIME
300 ml	Serve within the hour	15 minutes

INGREDIENTS

- **3** large egg yolks
- **1 tbsp** cold water
- **200 g** unsalted butter, melted and kept warm (not hot)
- **1 tbsp** lemon juice
- – salt, a pinch of cayenne

METHOD

1. Set a heatproof mixing bowl over a saucepan of barely simmering water — the base of the bowl should not touch the water. This improvised bain-marie is the whole safety margin of the recipe: it means the eggs can never see direct, fierce heat.
2. Whisk the yolks and cold water together in the bowl over the warm water, briskly and continuously, for three to five minutes, until the mixture triples in volume, turns pale and foamy, and leaves a ribbon trail when the whisk is lifted.

   CUE *You can see the base of the bowl through the mixture for a second after each whisk stroke — that is the ribbon stage, and the point at which it is safe to add fat.*
3. Take the bowl off the heat. Add the warm melted butter in a very thin, slow stream, whisking constantly, exactly as for mayonnaise — the emulsion is fragile until roughly a third of the butter is in.
4. Whisk in the lemon juice, salt and cayenne. If it is too thick, loosen with a teaspoon of warm water.

SERVE WITH

Poached eggs (eggs Benedict), asparagus, artichokes, poached salmon.

IF IT SPLITS

Whisk a fresh yolk with a teaspoon of water in a clean bowl over the same warm water, then whisk the split sauce into it a spoonful at a time until it comes back together.

THE BAIN-MARIE IS YOUR THERMOMETER

Classical kitchens controlled hollandaise's heat with exactly this improvised double boiler, never a thermometer. Barely-simmering water below a bowl that never touches it caps the temperature the eggs can reach far more reliably than watching a number, because it removes the chance of a sudden scorching spike from direct flame.

Béarnaise

Hollandaise's sharper, herbal cousin: the acid comes from a reduction of vinegar, shallot and tarragon instead of plain lemon, and it is built exactly the same way once that reduction is ready.

Sauce Béarnaise

Béarnaise Sauce

A tarragon-vinegar-shallot reduction whisked into egg yolks over gentle heat, then built into a butter emulsion exactly as for hollandaise. The classic partner for grilled steak.

YIELD	KEEPS	TIME
300 ml	Serve within the hour	20 minutes

INGREDIENTS

- **3 tbsp** white wine vinegar
- **2** shallots, finely chopped
- **1 tbsp** tarragon, chopped, stalks reserved
- **3** large egg yolks
- **200 g** unsalted butter, melted and kept warm

1 tbsp chervil, chopped, optional

– salt, a pinch of cayenne

METHOD

1. Put the vinegar, shallots and tarragon stalks in a small saucepan and simmer until reduced to about a tablespoon of thick, syrupy liquid. Strain, pressing the solids to extract every drop, and let the reduction cool slightly.
2. Whisk the reduction with the egg yolks in a heatproof bowl set over barely-simmering water, exactly as for hollandaise, until pale, foamy and tripled in volume.
3. Off the heat, whisk in the warm butter in a slow, thin stream until fully emulsified.
4. Stir in the chopped tarragon, chervil if using, salt and cayenne.

SERVE WITH

Grilled or pan-fried steak, chips, poached eggs.

RELATED

Add a spoonful of sauce tomate and it becomes sauce Choron; add meat glaze and it becomes sauce Foyot.

Jus de Rôti — the Pan Sauce Method

Not a fixed recipe but a method, and arguably the single most useful sauce technique in this whole page, because it applies to almost any roasted or pan-fried meat with no extra shopping at all: the sauce comes from what is already stuck to the pan.

Jus de Rôti

Roasting Pan Sauce

The browned meat juices and fond left in a roasting tin or frying pan, deglazed with wine or stock, reduced, and finished with a little cold butter — a genuine sauce with almost no separate ingredients.

YIELD	KEEPS	TIME
Sauce for 4	Serve at once	10 minutes

INGREDIENTS

– the roasting tin or pan the meat was cooked in, with its fond

150 ml red or white wine, or stock, or a mix

200 ml stock, matching the meat

20 g cold butter, diced

– salt, pepper

METHOD

1. Lift the cooked meat onto a warm plate to rest. Pour off all but a thin film of fat from the pan, leaving the dark, sticky fond stuck to the base — that fond is the entire flavour of the sauce.
2. Set the pan over medium-high heat on the hob and pour in the wine or stock. It will bubble hard and steam; scrape the base firmly with the wooden spoon to lift every scrap of fond into the liquid. This is deglazing.
3. Let it bubble down by about half, then add the remaining stock and any juices that have collected under the resting meat. Simmer briskly for three to five minutes until it coats the spoon lightly.

   CUE *The bubbles slow from a rolling boil to fat, lazy ones as the liquid concentrates — that is the point to start checking the nappe.*
4. Strain through a sieve into a small saucepan if the fond has any burnt or gritty bits; otherwise leave as is for a rustic sauce. Off the heat, whisk in the cold butter a piece at a time until glossy — this is called *monter au beurre*, mounting with butter, and it is the same principle as beurre blanc used to finish rather than build a sauce.
5. Season and pour around, not over, the sliced meat.

SERVE WITH

Any roast chicken, beef, lamb or pork, and any pan-seared steak or chop.

NOTHING WASTED

This is the clearest expression of the school's whole rule about waste: what looks like burnt residue in the bottom of a pan is, in fact, most of the sauce.

When it goes wrong

Mayonnaise or hollandaise splits — thin, oily, pooling

Oil or butter added too fast for the yolk to absorb, or the base allowed to overheat and cook the yolk's proteins too far.

FIX Start a fresh yolk in a clean bowl (with a teaspoon of warm water for hollandaise) and whisk the split sauce back in a spoonful at a time.

Béchamel or velouté has lumps

Liquid added too quickly to the roux, or added cold and unwhisked between additions.

FIX Whisk hard and add liquid a ladle at a time, fully smoothing each addition before the next. A sauce already lumpy can be pushed through a sieve to save it.

Beurre blanc goes from creamy to oily and thin

The pan overheated and the butter's fat separated back out from the water it was emulsified into.

FIX Take it fully off the heat at once and whisk in a cube of cold butter hard; the drop in temperature can bring it back if caught early enough.

Vinaigrette will not stay mixed

No mustard, or too little relative to the volume of oil and vinegar.

FIX Increase the mustard slightly, or accept that it is a temporary emulsion and simply shake it again just before pouring — this is normal and not a failure.

Sauce tastes of raw flour

A roux-based sauce not cooked long enough, either at the roux stage or the simmer.

FIX Simmer longer, stirring often — ten to twenty minutes depending on the sauce — until the flour taste disappears entirely.

Pan sauce tastes thin and one-note

Not reduced enough, or made in a pan whose fond was washed away rather than deglazed.

FIX Keep it at a lively simmer until it visibly thickens; if the fond is gone, there is no fixing it this time — remember to pour off fat, not liquid, next time.

Yields and quantities

A rough guide to how far each sauce goes and what it wants alongside it, useful when scaling a recipe up for a table of six or eight.

Sauce	Yield given	Per person, main course	Best paired with
Vinaigrette	150 ml	15–20 ml	Green and composed salads
Beurre maître d'hôtel	125 g	1 coin, 10 g	Grilled meat and fish
Beurre noisette	100 g	25 g	Fish, vegetables, gnocchi
Mayonnaise	250 ml	30–40 ml	Cold fish, eggs, chips
Aïoli	250 ml	30–40 ml	Salt cod, boiled vegetables
Béchamel / Mornay	500 ml	100–125 ml	Gratins, lasagne
Velouté / suprême	500 ml	100–125 ml	Poached chicken and fish
Sauce tomate	700 ml	150–175 ml	Pasta, eggs, chasseur base
Sauce chasseur	Serves 4	~100 ml	Sautéed chicken, rabbit
Beurre blanc	200 ml	40–50 ml	Poached fish, asparagus
Hollandaise	300 ml	50–75 ml	Poached eggs, asparagus
Béarnaise	300 ml	50–75 ml	Grilled steak
Jus de rôti	Serves 4	50–75 ml	Any roast meat

SCALING UP

Vinaigrette, mayonnaise and aïoli scale linearly with no trouble at all. The roux sauces (béchamel, velouté) scale well too, provided the pan is wide enough to whisk properly. The emulsified butter sauces — beurre blanc, hollandaise, béarnaise — are the one place not to double a recipe carelessly: the ratio of yolk or reduction to butter is what holds the emulsion, and a very large single batch is harder to keep an even heat through than two batches made one after another.

Learn these thirteen and you can walk into almost any French menu and already know, before you taste it, roughly what it should taste like.

ON THE WORKING REPERTOIRE

CHAPTER 25

Desserts

Les Desserts

Twelve classical French desserts, easiest first, built entirely with a bowl, a whisk, a pan and an oven — no stand mixer, no blowtorch, no thermometer.

The order, and why

French pâtisserie has a reputation for requiring machinery this school does not believe in. Almost none of that reputation is deserved — a whisk, a bowl and a patient wrist replace nearly everything, and the results are, if anything, better judged by hand than by a machine that cannot feel the moment a mixture changes.

The twelve desserts below are ordered easiest first, and the order teaches as much as the recipes do. Crème Chantilly is whipped cream and nothing else — it teaches you what "soft peaks" and "stiff peaks" actually look like by eye, a judgement every custard and every mousse in this chapter depends on. Mousse au chocolat teaches folding, the single most important hand motion in pâtisserie: how to combine a light, airy mixture with a heavy one without losing the air that makes it light. The custard family — crème caramel, crème brûlée, îles flottantes — teaches you to read doneness in an egg-and-milk mixture by sight and touch rather than a thermometer's number, because a thermometer cannot tell you when a custard has set, only when it has reached a temperature that usually correlates with setting.

From there, pastry: clafoutis is a thick, forgiving batter baked in fruit; tarte Tatin and tarte aux pommes teach two different relationships between fruit, sugar and pastry; profiteroles teach choux pastry piped from nothing more exotic than a freezer bag with a corner snipped off; madeleines teach the rested batter that gives them their hump. The chapter closes on soufflé au chocolat, which asks you to combine almost everything learned above — a stable base, a properly whipped meringue, and confident folding — under real time pressure. It is the hardest recipe here and it is genuinely achievable once you have cooked your way up to it.

Pâtisserie has a reputation for exactness that machines are supposed to guarantee. In fact almost all of it can be judged by eye, if you have been taught what to look for.

ON DESSERT AND DISCIPLINE

Crème Chantilly

Sweetened whipped cream, and the single most useful thing a home cook can learn to do with a balloon whisk. Once you can read the stages of whipped cream by eye, every custard and mousse that follows becomes far easier to judge.

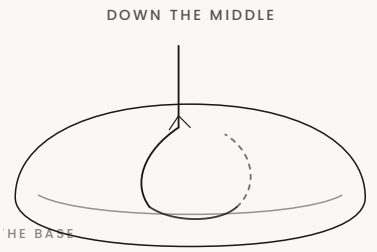


FIGURE 1 · THE FOLD

Cut straight down through the centre, sweep the whisk or spatula flat around the base of the bowl, then lift the mixture up and fold it back over the top. The bowl turns a quarter with each fold. Never stir in circles — that beats the air straight back out.

Crème Chantilly

Sweetened Whipped Cream

Cold double cream whipped by hand with a balloon whisk until it holds its shape, sweetened lightly and scented with vanilla. The base note under half the desserts in this chapter.

YIELD	KEEPS	TIME
400 ml	Same day, fridge	5 minutes

INGREDIENTS

250 ml double cream, well chilled

2 tbsp icing sugar, sifted

1/2 tsp vanilla extract, or the scraped seeds of half a pod

METHOD

1. Chill the bowl and whisk in the freezer for ten minutes if the kitchen is warm — cold cream and cold tools whip faster and hold better.
2. Pour the cream into the bowl and whisk briskly in a circular motion, keeping the whisk moving through the whole volume rather than just the surface.
3. At two minutes it will thicken and the whisk will start to leave trails. This is soft peak: lift the whisk and the cream forms a peak that folds gently over at the tip.

   CUE, SOFT PEAK *The peak droops like a wave breaking — right for folding into a mousse.*
4. Add the icing sugar and vanilla and continue whisking, checking every ten seconds now, until the peak stands upright with only the very tip curling.

   CUE, STIFF PEAK *The cream holds its shape on the whisk and does not slump when the bowl is tilted. Stop here.*

SERVE WITH

Any fruit tart, clafoutis, îles flottantes, or on its own with berries.

DO NOT OVERWHIP

Thirty seconds past stiff peak, cream turns grainy and starts to split into butter and buttermilk. If that happens, keep whisking deliberately and you have a rough butter — drain it and use it, rather than throwing it away.

> NO STAND MIXER, NO ELECTRIC BEATERS
>
> A balloon whisk beats more air into cream than most people expect, and a chilled bowl set at an angle on a folded cloth (so it does not slide) lets you work fast with one hand steadying it. Five minutes of brisk whisking, not effort, is what a machine actually saves you — and by hand you feel the exact moment it turns from soft to stiff, which a machine's timer cannot tell you.

Mousse au Chocolat

Dark chocolate, egg yolks for richness, whipped egg whites for lift — no cream needed, though a spoonful improves texture. The fold from Figure 1 above is the entire technique.

Mousse au Chocolat

Chocolate Mousse

Melted dark chocolate loosened with yolks, lightened with whisked egg whites folded in gently in three additions. Set in the fridge, needing no gelatine and no oven.

YIELD	KEEPS	TIME
Serves 6	2 days, fridge	25 minutes + 4 hours chilling

INGREDIENTS

- **200 g** dark chocolate (65–70% cocoa), chopped
- **50 g** unsalted butter
- **4** large eggs, separated
- **50 g** caster sugar
- – a small pinch of salt

METHOD

1. Set a heatproof bowl over a saucepan of barely-simmering water, base clear of the water. Melt the chocolate and butter together, stirring occasionally, until smooth. Take off the heat and let it cool for a few minutes so it will not cook the yolks.
2. Whisk the yolks into the warm chocolate one at a time, mixing each in fully before the next. The mixture will thicken and turn glossy.

3. In a clean, dry bowl, whisk the egg whites with the pinch of salt until they hold a soft peak, then add the sugar in three additions, whisking well between each, until the whites are glossy and hold a stiff peak that stands upright on the whisk.

   CUE *Tip the bowl: the whites should not move at all if they are properly stiff.*

4. Fold a third of the whites into the chocolate base to loosen it — beat this one in properly, it is meant to sacrifice some air to make the rest easier. Then fold in the remaining whites in two more additions, using the down-through-the-middle, round-the-base, up-and-over motion of Figure 1, turning the bowl a quarter turn with each fold.

   CUE *Stop folding the moment no streaks of white remain — a few seconds more than that and you lose the lift you worked for.*

5. Divide between six small bowls or glasses and chill at least four hours, ideally overnight, until fully set.

SERVE WITH

Crème Chantilly and a few raspberries, or plain with a langue de chat biscuit.

RAW EGG NOTE

This mousse contains raw egg white and yolk warmed only gently. Use the freshest eggs you can and serve to those comfortable eating them lightly cooked.

WHY THE SACRIFICIAL THIRD

Chocolate ganache is far denser than whipped egg white. Folding the whole lightened mixture into it at once means most of the air collapses before it is distributed. Beating in a third first — losing that portion's air deliberately — brings the base close enough in density to the remaining whites that the final two folds can be gentle and still succeed.

Crème Caramel

An egg custard baked over a layer of dry caramel, then turned out so the caramel becomes a glossy sauce running down the sides. The first of the three custards in this chapter, and the one with the least room for error, because it bakes rather than sets in a bowl.

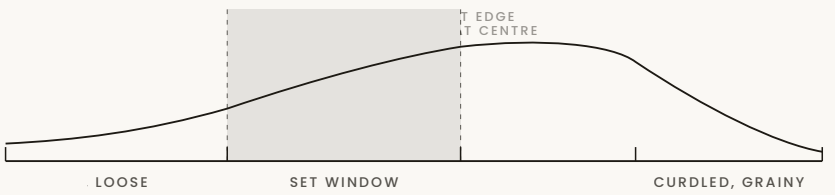


FIGURE 2 · THE NAPPE WINDOW FOR CUSTARD

Doneness is a range, not a point, which is exactly why a thermometer is less useful than it sounds: the set window (shaded) is wide enough to judge by touch — the custard should be firm right to the edge of the dish and still show a gentle, whole-mass wobble at the centre when nudged. Past the window the proteins seize and the custard weeps and grains.

Crème Caramel

Caramel Custard

A plain vanilla custard baked in a bain-marie over a hard, dark caramel that turns to sauce as the dessert cools and is unmoulded. Four ingredients, no thermometer, entirely judged by eye and touch.

YIELD	KEEPS	TIME
Serves 6	3 days, fridge	50 minutes + chilling

INGREDIENTS

150 g caster sugar, for the caramel

3 tbsp water

500 ml whole milk

4 large eggs, plus 2 yolks

70 g caster sugar, for the custard

1 tsp vanilla extract

METHOD

1. Heat the oven to 160°C (140°C fan). Put a kettle on to boil for the bain-marie.
2. Make the caramel: put the 150 g sugar and water in a saucepan over medium heat. Do not stir once it starts to bubble — swirl the pan gently instead, or the sugar will crystallise. Cook until it turns a deep amber, the colour of strong tea.

   CUE *The colour is the only test that matters. A shade past deep amber, the smell turns from sweet to bitter — take it off the instant it reaches deep amber, since it keeps darkening in the residual heat.*

3. Immediately and carefully divide the hot caramel between six small ramekins, tilting each to coat the base. It will harden within a minute — do not touch it.
4. Warm the milk in a saucepan until steaming but not boiling. Meanwhile whisk the eggs, yolks, sugar and vanilla together in a bowl just until combined — do not whisk in extra air, which causes bubbles in the finished custard.
5. Pour the warm milk slowly into the eggs, whisking gently and constantly. Strain through a sieve into a jug to remove any threads of cooked egg, then pour over the hardened caramel in each ramekin.
6. Set the ramekins in a deep roasting tin, put the tin in the oven, then pour boiling water from the kettle into the tin to come halfway up the ramekins' sides — this bain-marie shields the custard from the oven's direct heat.
7. Bake 30–35 minutes, until set at the edges and still showing a gentle wobble across the whole surface when the tin is nudged — see Figure 2. Lift out and let the ramekins cool in the water, then chill at least four hours.
8. To unmould, run a thin knife round the edge, invert a plate over the top, and turn both over together with a firm, confident motion. The caramel, now liquid, runs down as a sauce.

SERVE WITH

Nothing needed, though a few berries are welcome.

NO THERMOMETER NEEDED

Both the caramel's colour and the custard's set are judged more reliably by eye and touch than by a number — see Figure 2.

> NEVER STIR HOT CARAMEL
>
> Stirring sugar syrup once crystals have begun to form invites more crystallisation, turning the whole batch grainy and unusable. Swirl the pan by its handle instead. If sugar crystals do form on the side of the pan, brush them down with a wet pastry brush rather than a spoon.

Crème Brûlée

A denser, cream-based custard, baked soft and served with a shattering sugar crust made under a hot grill rather than a blowtorch — proof that the torch is a convenience, not a requirement.

Crème Brûlée

Burnt Cream

A rich cream-and-yolk custard baked to a very soft set, chilled, then topped with sugar and finished under a grill until it caramelises into a crackable crust.

YIELD	KEEPS	TIME
Serves 4	Custard 3 days; sugar the same day	40 minutes + chilling

INGREDIENTS

- **500 ml** double cream
- **1** vanilla pod, split, or 1 tsp vanilla extract
- **5** large egg yolks
- **50 g** caster sugar, plus extra for the tops

METHOD

1. Heat the oven to 150°C (130°C fan). Warm the cream with the split vanilla pod (scrape the seeds in first) in a saucepan until steaming, not boiling. Remove from the heat and let it infuse ten minutes, then remove the pod.
2. Whisk the yolks and sugar together in a bowl until just combined, without whisking in air. Pour the warm cream in slowly, whisking gently throughout.
3. Strain through a sieve into a jug, then divide between four shallow ramekins. Skim any surface bubbles with a spoon.
4. Set in a roasting tin, place in the oven, and pour boiling water into the tin to come halfway up the sides, as for crème caramel.
5. Bake 30–35 minutes, until the custard is set at the edges but still trembles as one piece at the centre when the tin is nudged — softer than crème caramel's set. Cool in the water bath, then chill at least three hours, ideally overnight.
6. To serve, heat the grill to its highest setting. Pat the custard surface completely dry with kitchen paper, then sprinkle an even, thin layer of sugar over each — about a teaspoon per ramekin, tilting to coat.
7. Set the ramekins on a tray as close to the grill element as the oven allows and watch constantly: the sugar will bubble and then darken to a deep amber in one to two minutes.

   CUE *An even, dark amber all across, not black in patches — rotate the tray if the grill heats unevenly. Let it sit thirty seconds off the heat to harden into a crisp sheet before serving.*

SERVE WITH

Nothing — the crust is the whole point, eaten within minutes of grilling before it softens.

NO BLOWTORCH NEEDED

A domestic grill run at full heat and watched closely does the same job as a torch; it is slightly less even, which is why constant attention and a possible rotation of the tray matter more than they would with a torch.

GRILL, NOT TORCH

A blowtorch caramelises from above in seconds and lets you work one ramekin at a time; a grill does the whole tray together but takes longer and needs watching, since the sugar nearest the element goes first. Dry the custard surface thoroughly before sugaring either way — any moisture stops the sugar from caramelising cleanly and gives a wet, uneven crust.

Îles Flottantes

"Floating islands": poached meringue clouds served on a pool of crème anglaise, the thin pouring custard that crème caramel's baked version is built from. This is the dessert that most rewards having practised whisking whites for the mousse above.

Îles Flottantes

Floating Islands

Whisked egg whites poached gently in barely-simmering milk, then set afloat on a pool of vanilla crème anglaise made from the yolks that whites left behind. Nothing is wasted between the two halves of one dish.

YIELD	KEEPS	TIME
Serves 4	Custard 2 days; islands same day	30 minutes

INGREDIENTS

- **600 ml** whole milk
- **1** vanilla pod, split, or 1 tsp extract
- **4** large eggs, separated

90 g caster sugar, divided

– a pinch of salt

2 tbsp caster sugar, for a dry caramel drizzle, optional

METHOD

1. Warm the milk with the vanilla pod and seeds in a wide, shallow pan until steaming, not boiling. Reduce to the lowest setting so the surface barely trembles.
2. Whisk the whites with the salt until they hold a soft peak, then add 40 g of the sugar gradually, whisking to stiff, glossy peaks — as for the mousse above.
3. Using two large spoons, shape an oval of meringue between them and slide it gently into the barely-simmering milk. Poach three or four islands at a time, without crowding, 90 seconds a side, turning once with a slotted spoon.

   CUE *The meringue puffs and turns matte white right through; it should feel springy, not wet, when pressed lightly.*
4. Lift the poached islands onto a clean tea towel to drain. Strain the poaching milk through a sieve and set aside — it is now vanilla-infused and ready for the custard.
5. Make the crème anglaise: whisk the yolks with the remaining 50 g sugar in a bowl until pale. Pour the warm milk in slowly, whisking. Return to the pan and cook over low heat, stirring constantly with a wooden spoon in a figure of eight, until it thickens enough to coat the spoon and hold a clean line when a finger is drawn across the back.

   CUE *Never let it boil — the moment it thickens to nappe, take it straight off the heat. A minute past that and it curdles.*
6. Strain the custard into a jug or bowl and chill, or serve just warm. Pour into shallow bowls and float the islands on top. For the optional caramel, melt the 2 tbsp sugar dry in a small pan until deep amber and drizzle thin threads over the islands at once, before it hardens.

SERVE WITH

Nothing further — the custard and meringue are the whole dessert.

NOTHING WASTED

The vanilla pod, once scraped and poached, can be rinsed, dried and buried in a jar of caster sugar to make vanilla sugar over the following weeks.

Clafoutis aux Cerises

A thick, eggy batter poured over whole cherries and baked until puffed and set — closer to a baked custard than a cake, and the easiest hot dessert in this chapter to get right on the first attempt.

Clafoutis aux Cerises

Cherry Clafoutis

A pouring batter of eggs, milk, sugar and a little flour, baked around whole cherries in a buttered dish until it puffs at the oven's heat and sets to a texture between custard and cake.

YIELD	KEEPS	TIME
Serves 6	Best warm, same day	45 minutes

INGREDIENTS

- **500 g** cherries, stalks removed, stoned or not — classically not, for flavour
- **20 g** butter, softened, for the dish
- **3** large eggs
- **80 g** caster sugar, plus 1 tbsp for the dish
- **60 g** plain flour
- **–** a pinch of salt
- **250 ml** whole milk
- **1 tsp** vanilla extract, or 1 tbsp kirsch
- **–** icing sugar, to finish

METHOD

1. Heat the oven to 180°C (160°C fan). Butter a shallow baking dish generously and dust with the tablespoon of sugar, tipping out the excess. Scatter the cherries evenly over the base.
2. Whisk the eggs and 80 g sugar together in a bowl until pale and a little thickened, about a minute by hand.
3. Whisk in the flour and salt until just smooth — do not overwork it, or the clafoutis toughens. Whisk in the milk gradually, then the vanilla or kirsch, to make a thin, pourable batter.

4. Pour the batter over the cherries and bake 30–35 minutes, until puffed, golden at the edges, and just set in the centre — a skewer inserted should come out clean, or with only a few moist crumbs.

   CUE *It will have risen visibly like a soufflé; it sinks a little as it cools, which is normal and not a fault.*

5. Dust with icing sugar and serve warm, ideally within thirty minutes of leaving the oven.

SERVE WITH

Crème Chantilly, or nothing at all.

ON THE STONES

Classical clafoutis leaves the stones in — they release a faint bitter-almond note into the batter as it bakes. Warn guests, or stone the cherries if serving children.

Tarte Tatin

Apples cooked in butter and sugar until deeply caramelised, then covered with pastry and baked, and finally turned out so the caramelised fruit sits on top. It is an upside-down tart born, famously, of an accident, and the assembly is the entire technique.

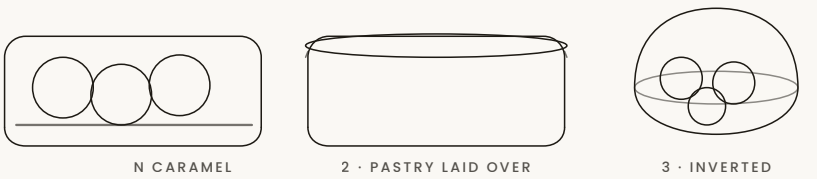


FIGURE 3 · TATIN IN THREE MOVES

The pan's contents become the tart's top once inverted, so everything must be arranged upside down from the start — the neatest apples go in first, cut side up, because they will end face-up on the plate.

Tarte Tatin

Upside-Down Caramel Apple Tart

Apple halves caramelised whole in a heavy pan on the hob, topped with a disc of pastry and finished in the oven, then boldly inverted onto a plate. A single heavy ovenproof frying pan does the whole job.

YIELD	KEEPS	TIME
Serves 6–8	Best the day made	1 hour 15 minutes

INGREDIENTS

8–9 firm eating apples (Braeburn or similar), peeled, halved and cored

120 g caster sugar

80 g unsalted butter, cubed

300 g shortcrust pastry (see tarte aux pommes, below, or bought)

METHOD

1. Heat the oven to 190°C (170°C fan). In a heavy, ovenproof frying pan (around 24 cm), scatter the sugar evenly over the base and set over medium heat. Do not stir; let it melt and turn deep amber, swirling the pan gently if it colours unevenly.

   CUE *Deep amber, like strong tea — the same cue as the caramel for crème caramel.*

2. Off the heat, dot the butter over the caramel — it will bubble and hiss. Swirl to combine into a smooth, glossy caramel.

3. Pack the apple halves into the pan, cut side up, tightly in a circular pattern, standing the last few on their sides to fill any gaps — they shrink as they cook. Return to medium heat and cook 15–20 minutes, until the apples have softened at the edges and the caramel has thickened and turned a shade darker around them.

4. Take off the heat and let cool for ten minutes — this matters, because pastry laid over hot fruit will slump and not crisp.

5. Roll the pastry into a circle about 2 cm wider than the pan. Lay it over the apples and tuck the excess down inside the edge of the pan, around the fruit, like tucking in a sheet.

6. Bake 25–30 minutes, until the pastry is deep golden and firm. Rest in the pan five minutes.

7. Invert: place a plate larger than the pan over the top, hold both firmly together with oven gloves, and turn the whole thing over in one confident motion. Lift the pan away — any apples that stuck to the pan can simply be lifted off and pressed back into place.

SERVE WITH

Crème Chantilly, or a spoonful of crème fraîche, while still warm.

THE RESTING PAUSE

Letting the caramel cool slightly before the pastry goes on, and letting the finished tart rest five minutes before inverting, are the two steps most often skipped and most responsible for a tart that falls apart on turning out.

Tarte aux Pommes

The other apple tart: thin pastry, hand-made, blind-baked, then layered with fanned apple slices the right way up and glazed. Where Tatin hides its technique in the pan, this one displays it on the plate.

Tarte aux Pommes

French Apple Tart

Hand-made pâte brisée, blind-baked, then fanned with thin apple slices and finished with an apricot glaze under the oven's heat. No food processor — the fat is rubbed in by hand.

YIELD	KEEPS	TIME
Serves 8	2 days, cool, uncovered	1 hour 30 minutes + chilling

INGREDIENTS

- **200 g** plain flour
- **100 g** cold unsalted butter, cubed
- **1** pinch salt; 1 tbsp caster sugar
- **3–4 tbsp** ice-cold water
- **5–6** eating apples, peeled, halved, cored and thinly sliced
- **30 g** caster sugar, for the apples
- **20 g** butter, melted
- **3 tbsp** apricot jam, for glazing

METHOD

1. Make the pâte brisée: put the flour, salt and sugar in a bowl. Add the cold butter and rub it into the flour with your fingertips, lifting and letting it fall to

keep it cool, until the mixture looks like coarse breadcrumbs with a few pea-sized lumps left.

2. Add the ice water a tablespoon at a time, cutting it in with a knife and then bringing it together with your hands, just until it forms a dough — do not knead. Flatten into a disc, wrap, and chill 30 minutes.

   CUE *The dough should look slightly streaky with butter, not smooth — that streakiness is what makes it flake.*

3. Heat the oven to 190°C (170°C fan). Roll the pastry out on a lightly floured surface to fit a 23 cm tart tin, easing it into the corners without stretching it. Trim the top edge, prick the base all over with a fork, and chill 15 minutes.

4. Line the pastry with baking paper and dried beans or rice as a weight, and blind-bake 15 minutes. Remove the paper and beans and bake a further 8–10 minutes, until pale gold and dry to the touch.

5. Arrange the apple slices in overlapping circles from the outside in, fanning each slice slightly. Sprinkle with the sugar and drizzle with the melted butter.

6. Bake 30–35 minutes, until the apples are tender and touched with colour at the tips and the pastry is deep golden.

7. Warm the apricot jam with a teaspoon of water in a small pan until loose, then sieve to remove lumps and brush over the warm tart to glaze.

SERVE WITH

Crème anglaise (see îles flottantes, above) or nothing at all.

NO FOOD PROCESSOR NEEDED

Rubbing butter into flour by hand takes about ninety seconds and gives you direct control over how far it goes — stop at coarse breadcrumbs with visible flecks of butter, which is exactly what gives the baked pastry its flake.

Poires Belle-Hélène

Poached pears, vanilla ice cream (bought, in this school's honest kitchen, since a churn is a specialist gadget) and hot chocolate sauce poured at the table — one of the simplest classical desserts to assemble and one of the most reliably loved.

Poires Belle-Hélène

Pears with Chocolate Sauce

Whole pears poached gently in vanilla sugar syrup, served cold or warm over ice cream with a hot dark chocolate sauce poured over at the last moment.

YIELD	KEEPS	TIME
Serves 4	Pears 3 days, fridge; sauce reheats	40 minutes

INGREDIENTS

4 firm ripe pears, peeled, stalks left on

700 ml water

150 g caster sugar

1 vanilla pod, split, or 1 tsp extract

1 strip lemon peel

150 g dark chocolate, chopped

100 ml double cream

1 tbsp golden syrup or honey

– good vanilla ice cream, to serve

METHOD

1. Put the water, sugar, vanilla pod and lemon peel in a pot large enough to hold the pears standing up. Bring to a simmer, stirring to dissolve the sugar.
2. Stand the pears in the syrup, cover with a piece of baking paper pressed onto the surface to keep them submerged, and poach at a gentle simmer 15–20 minutes, until a knife slides into the base with no resistance.

   CUE *Test at the base, near the core, which is the last part to soften — the flesh near the skin softens well before the centre does.*
3. Lift the pears out and let cool. They can be served warm, at room temperature, or chilled.
4. For the sauce, put the chocolate, cream and syrup in a heatproof bowl over a pan of barely-simmering water and melt gently, stirring until glossy and smooth. Keep warm, or reheat gently later, stirring, before serving.
5. To serve, put a scoop of ice cream in each bowl, stand a pear alongside or on top, and pour the hot sauce over at the table so it meets the cold ice cream.

SERVE WITH

Nothing more — the pear, ice cream and hot sauce are the whole architecture of the dish.

NO CHURN NEEDED

A domestic ice cream churn is one of the very few genuinely specialist machines this school allows buying good ice cream instead of, since hand-churning without one gives an icy, poor result.

Profiteroles

Choux pastry, which sounds difficult and is in fact one of the most forgiving doughs in French cooking, piped from a corner of a plain freezer bag rather than a proper piping bag, and filled with cream once baked and cooled.

Profiteroles

Choux Buns with Chocolate Sauce

Pâte à choux — a cooked paste of butter, water and flour beaten with eggs — piped into small mounds and baked until they puff hollow, then filled with Chantilly cream and topped with chocolate sauce.

YIELD	KEEPS	TIME
About 24 buns	Unfilled buns 2 days; fill same day	1 hour

INGREDIENTS

125 ml water
125 ml whole milk
100 g unsalted butter, cubed
1/2 tsp salt; 1 tsp caster sugar
140 g plain flour, sifted
4 large eggs, beaten, added gradually
1 quantity crème Chantilly (above), to fill
1 quantity chocolate sauce (as for poires Belle-Hélène, above)

METHOD

1. Heat the oven to 200°C (180°C fan) and line a baking tray with baking paper.
2. Put the water, milk, butter, salt and sugar in a saucepan and bring to a full rolling boil, making sure the butter has fully melted before it boils.

3. Take off the heat and tip in all the flour at once. Beat hard and immediately with a wooden spoon until it comes together into a smooth ball that pulls cleanly away from the sides of the pan.
4. Return the pan to low heat for one minute, beating constantly, to dry the paste slightly — it should film the base of the pan.
5. Tip the paste into a bowl and let it cool for five minutes, stirring occasionally, until only warm — hot paste will scramble the eggs. Beat in the beaten eggs a splash at a time, mixing thoroughly after each addition, until the paste is smooth, glossy, and drops reluctantly from the spoon in a soft peak — you may not need every drop of egg.

   CUE *Lift the spoon: the paste should fall in a slow, thick ribbon, not pour and not sit stiffly. That is the right consistency to pipe.*
6. Spoon the choux paste into a heavy freezer bag, push it down into one corner, and snip about 1.5 cm off that corner with scissors. Pipe small mounds, about 3 cm across, onto the tray, spaced well apart, twisting the bag as you finish each one to release cleanly.
7. Dampen a fingertip and smooth down any peaks so they do not scorch. Bake 20–25 minutes without opening the door, until deep golden and firm — opening the door early lets the steam escape and the buns collapse.
8. Take out, pierce a small hole in the base of each with a skewer to let steam escape, and return to the switched-off oven for five minutes to dry out inside. Cool completely on a rack.
9. To fill, split each bun and spoon or pipe in the Chantilly cream, or pierce the base and pipe cream in directly. Pile onto a plate and pour the warm chocolate sauce over just before serving.

SERVE WITH

Nothing further needed; this is the full *croquembouche* flavour in its simplest, everyday form.

NO PIPING BAG NEEDED

A sturdy freezer bag with a corner snipped off pipes just as accurately as a proper bag for mounds this size, and costs nothing extra.

WHY THE PASTE IS BEATEN SO HARD

Choux relies entirely on steam for its rise — there is no raising agent. Beating the flour into the boiling liquid hard and fast gelatinises the starch fully, which is what lets the paste later trap the steam generated in the oven as a strong, elastic wall rather than tearing open.

Madeleines

Small shell-shaped sponge cakes famous for the hump that rises on top — a hump that depends almost entirely on one step nobody expects: chilling the batter before it meets the oven's heat.

Madeleines

Shell Sponge Cakes

A simple whisked batter of eggs, sugar, flour and melted butter, rested cold, then baked in a hot oven so the shock of heat pushes up the characteristic hump.

YIELD	KEEPS	TIME
About 18	3 days, airtight tin	20 minutes + 2 hours chilling

INGREDIENTS

- **2** large eggs
- **100 g** caster sugar
- **1 tsp** vanilla extract or the zest of 1 lemon
- **100 g** plain flour
- **1 tsp** baking powder
- – a pinch of salt
- **100 g** unsalted butter, melted and cooled, plus extra for the tin

METHOD

1. Whisk the eggs, sugar and vanilla or zest together in a bowl for two to three minutes, until pale, thick and roughly doubled in volume — the mixture should fall from the whisk in a slow ribbon that sits briefly on the surface before sinking in.
2. Sift the flour, baking powder and salt over the top and fold in gently with a spatula or spoon, using the down-through-the-middle motion from Figure 1, until just combined.
3. Fold in the melted butter in two additions, again gently, until the batter is smooth, glossy and streak-free.
4. Cover and chill at least two hours, ideally overnight. This rest is what produces the hump: cold batter meeting a hot oven rises fast in the centre before the edges set.

5. Heat the oven to 220°C (200°C fan). Butter a madeleine tin thoroughly, including the ridges, and dust with a little flour, tapping out the excess.
6. Fill each mould two-thirds full with the cold batter — a teaspoon dipped in cold water helps release it cleanly. Bake 8–10 minutes, until well risen with a distinct hump and golden at the edges.

   CUE *The hump appears within the first four minutes if the oven is hot enough and the batter cold enough — watch through the door rather than opening it.*
7. Unmould immediately onto a rack by tapping the tin firmly — they stick fast once cooled in the mould.

SERVE WITH

Tea or coffee, still faintly warm, on the day of baking.

THE HUMP IS TEMPERATURE, NOT A TRICK

Cold batter into a hot oven, always — never let the batter come to room temperature before baking, and never bake at a lower temperature to be gentler with them. Both remove the shock that makes the hump.

Soufflé au Chocolat

The closing recipe, and deliberately the hardest: a chocolate custard base lightened with whipped egg whites and baked so it rises dramatically above the dish. Everything from the fold of Figure 1 to the whites of the mousse and the custard judgement of crème caramel comes together here, under real time pressure at the table.

Soufflé au Chocolat

Chocolate Soufflé

A thick chocolate béchamel-like base, folded with stiffly whisked egg whites and baked hot and fast so the trapped air and steam push the mixture well above the rim. Served the instant it leaves the oven.

YIELD	KEEPS	TIME
Serves 4	Serve immediately — does not wait	40 minutes

INGREDIENTS

15 g butter, softened, for the dishes

50 g caster sugar, plus extra for the dishes

150 g dark chocolate (65–70%), chopped

30 g unsalted butter

200 ml whole milk

20 g plain flour

3 large egg yolks

5 large egg whites

– a pinch of salt; 1 tbsp caster sugar for the whites

METHOD

1. Butter four individual soufflé dishes thoroughly with upward strokes (this helps the soufflé climb rather than stick), then coat with sugar, tipping out the excess. Chill while you make the base. Heat the oven to 200°C (180°C fan) with a heavy baking tray inside to heat up.
2. Melt the chocolate and 30 g butter together in a bowl over barely-simmering water, as for the mousse. Set aside, still warm.
3. Warm the milk in a saucepan until steaming. In a separate small saucepan, melt a knob of butter, stir in the flour and cook one minute over low heat, then whisk in the warm milk gradually off the heat, exactly as for béchamel — see Sauces. Return to low heat and stir until thick, two to three minutes.
4. Whisk the thickened milk mixture into the melted chocolate until smooth, then whisk in the egg yolks one at a time. This is the base, and it can sit, covered, at room temperature for up to an hour if needed.
5. Whisk the egg whites and salt to a soft peak, then add the tablespoon of sugar and continue to a stiff, glossy peak, as for the mousse above.
6. Warm the chocolate base gently if it has cooled and firmed — it should be loose and only just warm, not hot. Beat a third of the whites into it firmly to loosen, then fold in the rest in two more additions, using the fold from Figure 1, stopping the moment no streaks remain.
7. Divide the mixture between the prepared dishes, filling to just below the rim, and run a thumb around the inside edge of each rim to clean it — a clean rim helps the soufflé rise straight rather than catching and tilting.
8. Set the dishes on the hot baking tray (this gives them an immediate blast of heat from below) and bake 12–14 minutes, without opening the door, until well risen, cracked slightly on top, and still visibly soft-set when nudged.

   CUE *A good soufflé wobbles like a small, confident jelly at the centre when the tray is nudged — that softness is the point, not a fault.*
9. Carry straight to the table and serve at once; a soufflé begins to sink within two or three minutes of leaving the oven.

SERVE WITH

A jug of crème anglaise (see îles flottantes) poured in at the table through a hole broken in the top, or nothing at all.

THE WHOLE PAGE, IN ONE DISH

A soufflé asks for the whisking judgement of Chantilly, the fold of the mousse, the roux discipline of the base, and the custard-adjacent reading of doneness from the crèmes — cook the rest of this chapter first.

DO NOT OPEN THE OVEN DOOR EARLY

A soufflé rises on trapped steam and air; a draught of cooler air across the top before it has set enough structure will collapse it on the spot. Resist checking before the minimum time given, and when you do check, open the door only a crack and close it again quickly.

When it goes wrong

Whipped cream turns grainy or splits

Whisked past stiff peak into the early stages of butter.

FIX Stop checking every ten seconds once soft peak arrives, and next time whisk less vigorously as it approaches stiff. A split batch can be pushed further into rough butter and used differently, but cannot go back to cream.

Mousse or soufflé base sets lumpy or streaky after folding

Whites folded in with a stirring motion instead of the fold, or over-mixed until they collapsed.

FIX Use the down-through-the-middle, round-the-base, up-and-over motion of Figure 1, and stop folding the instant no streaks remain — a few strokes too many is worse than a few too few.

Custard curdles — grainy, watery, split

Cooked past the set window in Figure 2, usually because it was left on direct heat too long or the oven ran hot.

FIX For a stovetop custard, take it off the heat the instant it coats a spoon and keep whisking off the heat to arrest it. For a baked one, use a bain-marie faithfully and check early — better underdone by a minute than over by one.

Choux buns collapse after baking

Oven door opened during baking, or the buns taken out before they were properly dry and firm.

FIX Do not open the door until the minimum time is up. Pierce a hole in the base and leave them in the switched-off, still-warm oven a further five minutes to dry the inside fully.

Tarte Tatin sticks to the pan on turning out

The caramel was not fully melted around every apple, or the tart was inverted while still very hot and the caramel had re-hardened as it cooled unevenly.

FIX Rest the tart five minutes off the heat before turning it out — long enough to firm slightly but not to seize — and simply lift and replace any apple that sticks to the pan.

Madeleines bake flat with no hump

The batter was not properly chilled, or the oven was not hot enough when they went in.

FIX Chill the batter at least two hours and make sure the oven has fully reached 220°C before baking — an oven thermometer-free check is simply to let it preheat a further five minutes past when the indicator light goes off.

The custard family, by ratio

Four of the desserts in this chapter — crème anglaise (the pouring custard under îles flottantes), crème pâtissière (the thick pastry cream that fills choux and tarts, not made separately above but worth knowing), crème caramel, and crème Chantilly — are variations on one relationship between eggs, dairy and sugar. Seeing them side by side makes the family visible.

CUSTARD	DAIRY	EGGS, PER 500 ML DAIRY	SUGAR	COOKED HOW
Crème anglaise	Milk	4 yolks	50 g	Stovetop, stirred to nappe, never boiled
Crème pâtissière	Milk	2 whole eggs + 2 yolks	90 g + 40 g flour	Stovetop, whisked hard, boiled briefly to cook the starch
Crème caramel	Milk	4 whole eggs + 2 yolks	70 g	Baked in a bain-marie, no stirring once combined

CUSTARD	DAIRY	EGGS, PER 500 ML DAIRY	SUGAR	COOKED HOW
Crème brûlée	Cream	5 yolks only	50 g	Baked in a bain-marie, softer set than caramel
Crème Chantilly	Cream	No egg	To taste	Whipped raw, no heat at all

> READING THE TABLE
>
> More whole eggs and less yolk-only richness gives a custard that can be sliced, like crème caramel; more yolk and less white gives one that is meant to stay soft and spoonable, like crème brûlée or crème anglaise. Flour turns a custard into one that can be boiled without curdling — the starch protects the egg proteins — which is exactly why crème pâtissière, and only crème pâtissière among this table, can be brought fully to the boil.

Everything in this family is one question, asked with different proportions: how much egg does it take to hold this much liquid together, and how gently must you ask it to do so.

ON THE CUSTARD FAMILY

PART EIGHT

REFERENCE

Le Lexique

CHAPTER 26

Glossary

Le Lexique

Every French term a recipe in this school will ask of you, defined precisely and said out loud, so the language stops being a wall and starts being a set of instructions.

Why the French terms stay

A recipe that says "sweat the onions" and one that says "faites suer les oignons" are asking for exactly the same thing, done exactly the same way. The French word is kept in this book not for decoration, but because it names the technique precisely — and precision is the entire point of a technical vocabulary.

English borrows most of its own cooking terms from French already — sauté, purée, gratin, mousse — usually without the accent and often with the meaning slightly worn down. This glossary restores the sharper original sense. *Suer*, "to sweat", means something specific: cook gently, covered or nearly so, in fat, without colour, until soft and translucent. "Cook the onions" covers a hundred different results; *suer* covers exactly one. That is the case, term by term, for everything below.

Use this chapter as you would a dictionary, not a novel. Every technique and recipe page in this school links a French term the first time it uses it; when you meet one you don't know, come here, look it up, and go back to what you were reading. After a few months you will stop needing to.

NO EQUIPMENT NEEDED TO LEARN A LANGUAGE

Nothing here assumes a machine, a course, or an app. Say the words out loud while you cook — the sound and the action fuse together faster than reading ever will, and within a season the French terms will simply be the names of things you do.

Pronunciation basics for English speakers

French pronunciation looks harder than it is, because English spelling rules do not apply and the instinct is to guess from the letters. Five habits fix most of it.

01 Most final consonants are silent

Bouillon ends in a silent "n" sound turned into a nasal vowel, not a hard "n"; *chaud* loses its "d" entirely. As a rule, a final consonant is silent unless it is c, r, f or l — the traditional mnemonic is the English word "careful", which happens to contain all four survivors.

CUE *If a French word ends in a vowel followed by a single consonant, try dropping the consonant first and see if it sounds right.*

02 Nasal vowels have no English equivalent

The combinations *-on*, *-an/-en*, and *-in* are pushed partly through the nose rather than pronounced as a vowel plus "n". *Bain-marie* — "bain" is not "bane", it is a nasalised "ba" with the sound trailing off through the nose. Approximate it in speech and no French speaker will mind; the meaning still lands.

03 The French "r" sits at the back of the throat

It is closer to a soft gargle than the rolled or hard "r" of English. Do not force it — an English "r" pronounced softly is a perfectly usable approximation and is what most non-native speakers actually say.

04 Stress falls near the end, evenly

Unlike English, which stresses one syllable hard and drops the others, French gives its syllables close to equal weight, with the very slightest lift on the last one. Say *mirepoix* as "meer-pwah", each syllable roughly level, rather than punching "MEER".

05 Say it wrong before you say nothing

A confidently mispronounced *chiffonade* in your own kitchen teaches your hands the technique just as well as a perfect accent would. This glossary gives a rough, usable respelling for every term — not a phonetic transcription — precisely so you will actually say the words instead of avoiding them.

HOW TO READ THE PRONUNCIATION COLUMN

Respellings below are approximate English-reader phonetics, stressed syllable in capitals where it helps.

NH

marks a nasal vowel — say the vowel and let it trail off through the nose rather than closing on the "n". They are a memory aid, not a linguistics reference.

The twenty terms that matter most

If you learn only twenty words from this chapter, learn these. They cover more ground, more often, than the rest of the glossary combined.

Mise en place

meez ahn PLAHSS

Everything measured, cut, and set out in its place before the pan goes on the heat. The single habit that separates a calm cook from a panicked one.

Brunoise

*broon-*WAHZ

A dice of 3 mm cubes. The finest of the classical dice sizes and the standard unit of "small" in a French kitchen.

Sauter

soh-TAY

To cook quickly in a small amount of hot fat, tossing or turning the food, in a pan wide enough that nothing steams.

Suer

soo-AY

To cook gently in fat, without colour, until soft — the first step of most sauces, soups and braises.

Blanchir

blahn-SHEER

To plunge briefly into boiling water, then usually into iced water, to fix colour, loosen skin, or partly cook.

Braiser

bray-ZAY

To sear, then cook slowly, covered, in a small amount of liquid — the method behind almost every great French stew.

Déglacer

day-glah-SAY

To add liquid to a hot pan and scrape up the browned residue stuck to its base — the start of nearly every pan sauce.

Réduire

ray-DWEER

To simmer a liquid down so it loses volume and gains concentration and body.

Monter

mon-TAY

To finish a sauce by whisking in cold butter off the heat, which thickens it and gives it shine and body.

Roux

roo

Equal weights of fat and flour cooked together, the classical thickener behind béchamel, velouté and much else.

Liaison

lee-ay-ZON

Any thickening agent, or specifically the classical egg-yolk-and-cream mixture used to finish a sauce off the heat.

Fond

fon

The base stock of French cooking — bones, aromatics and water, simmered gently and long. The foundation everything else stands on.

Mirepoix

*meer-*PWAH

Roughly diced onion, carrot and celery, the aromatic base cooked into nearly every stock, sauce and braise.

Bouquet garni

*boo-*KAY *gar-*NEE

Herbs — usually thyme, bay and parsley stalks — tied or wrapped for easy removal, simmered in stock or a braise for flavour.

Confit

*kon-*FEE

To cook slowly, fully submerged in fat, at a low temperature — originally a preservation method, now prized for its texture.

Beurre noisette

*burr nwah-*ZET

Butter cooked until its milk solids turn nut-brown and it smells of toasted hazelnuts. A flavour, not just a technique.

Émulsion

*ay-mul-see-*ON

Two liquids that do not naturally mix, held together in tiny droplets — the principle behind mayonnaise, hollandaise, and vinaigrette.

Napper

*nah-*PAY

To coat the back of a spoon, or a piece of food, in a thin even layer of sauce — also the test for whether a sauce has thickened enough.

Assaisonner

*ah-say-zon-*NAY

To season — not a single pinch of salt at the end, but a habit of tasting and adjusting throughout cooking.

Dresser

*dreh-*SAY

To arrange food on the plate for service — see Plating & Service for the full method.

A–B

TERM	PRONUNCIATION	MEANING
Abaisser	ah-bess-AY	To roll pastry out to an even thickness with a rolling pin.
Aiguillette	ay-gwee-YET	A long, thin slice cut from a cooked poultry breast or fillet, on the diagonal.
À la nage	ah lah NAHZH	Shellfish or fish poached in, and served in, an aromatic broth — literally "swimming".
À l'anglaise	ah lahn-GLEZ	"English style" — usually the standard breading sequence of flour, beaten egg, breadcrumbs, or plain-boiled vegetables.
Appareil	ah-pah-RAY	A prepared mixture ready to be cooked, such as a soufflé base or a batter, before its final component is added.
Arroser	ah-roh-ZAY	To baste — spoon hot fat or cooking liquid repeatedly over food as it cooks, especially a roast.
Assaisonner	ah-say-zon-NAY	To season with salt, pepper and other seasoning, tasted and adjusted as cooking proceeds.
Bain-marie	banh mah-REE	A water bath: one vessel of gently hot or simmering water in which another vessel sits, for gentle, even, indirect heat.
Ballotine	bah-loh-TEEN	Boned meat or poultry, stuffed and rolled into a neat cylinder, then poached, braised or roasted.
Barder	bar-DAY	To bard — wrap lean meat in a thin sheet of pork fat or bacon before roasting, to baste it from the outside as it cooks.
Battre	BAH-truh	To beat, as with a whisk or fork, usually vigorously and with air incorporated.
Beurre blanc	burr BLAHNK	A warm emulsified sauce of reduced wine and vinegar whisked with cold butter — see Emulsions.

TERM	PRONUNCIATION	MEANING
Beurre manié	burr mahn-YAY	Equal parts soft butter and flour, worked into a paste and whisked into a simmering liquid to thicken it at the last moment.
Beurre noisette	burr nwah-ZET	Butter cooked until the milk solids brown and smell of toasted hazelnut — "hazelnut butter".
Bisque	beesk	A smooth, rich soup traditionally made from the shells of crustaceans, pounded, simmered and strained.
Blanchir	blahn-SHEER	To blanch — plunge briefly into boiling water, usually followed by iced water, to fix colour, loosen skin, or par-cook.
Bouillon	BOO-yon	A basic, unclarified savoury broth or stock.
Bouquet garni	boo-KAY gar-NEE	A bundle of herbs, usually thyme, bay and parsley stalks, tied or wrapped for easy removal after cooking.
Braiser	bray-ZAY	To braise — sear, then cook slowly and covered in a small amount of liquid, usually in the oven.
Brider	bree-DAY	To truss — tie poultry or a roast with string into a compact shape so it cooks evenly.
Brunoise	broon-WAHZ	A very fine dice, roughly 3 mm cubes — see Knife Skills.

C–D

TERM	PRONUNCIATION	MEANING
Canapé	kah-nah-PAY	A small piece of bread or pastry topped with a savoury garnish, served before a meal.
Caraméliser	kah-rah-may-lee-ZAY	To caramelise — cook sugar, or a food's own natural sugars, until it browns and develops depth of flavour.
Cartouche	kar-TOOSH	A round of baking paper cut to fit inside a pan, laid directly on the surface of a liquid to slow evaporation.

TERM	PRONUNCIATION	MEANING
Chapelure	shap-LUR	Dried breadcrumbs, used for coating and for topping gratins.
Chemiser	shuh-mee-ZAY	To line a mould with a thin layer of something — jelly, pastry, or a fine forcemeat — before filling it.
Chiffonade	shee-fon-AHD	Leaves stacked, rolled, and sliced across into fine ribbons — see Knife Skills.
Chinois	sheen-WAH	A fine, cone-shaped sieve used for straining stocks and sauces to a smooth, clear finish.
Ciseler	see-zuh-LAY	To finely dice or cut into thin strips, most often applied to shallots or leafy herbs.
Clarifier	klah-ree-fee-AY	To clarify — remove impurities from a liquid or fat, as in clarifying butter or a stock with egg white.
Cocotte	koh-KOT	A heavy lidded pot, usually cast iron or enamelled, used for braising and slow cooking.
Compote	kom-POHT	Fruit slowly cooked, usually with sugar, until soft, chunky and syrupy — not smooth like a purée.
Concasser	kon-kah-SAY	To chop roughly, most often used for tomatoes peeled, seeded and coarsely cut.
Confit	kon-FEE	Food, classically duck or goose, cooked slowly and fully submerged in fat at low temperature.
Coulis	koo-LEE	A smooth, pourable sauce made by puréeing and straining fruit or vegetables.
Court-bouillon	koor-boo-YON	A quick aromatic poaching liquid of water, wine or vinegar, vegetables and herbs, used chiefly for fish.
Crème anglaise	krem ahn-GLEZ	A pouring custard of egg yolks, sugar and milk or cream, cooked gently until it coats a spoon.
Crème pâtissière	krem pah-tee-see-AIR	Thick pastry cream, egg- and flour-thickened, used to fill tarts, éclairs and choux.
Croustade	kroo-STAHD	A crisp pastry or bread case, baked and hollowed, used to hold a savoury filling.

TERM	PRONUNCIATION	MEANING
Cuisson	kwee-SON	The cooking liquid a food is cooked in, especially when it is kept and used again, such as mushroom cooking liquor.
Daube	dohb	A slow-braised stew, classically beef, marinated in wine before cooking — the Provençal cousin of bœuf bourguignon.
Déglacer	day-glah-SAY	To deglaze — add liquid to a hot pan and scrape up the browned, flavourful residue stuck to its base.
Dégraisser	day-gray-SAY	To skim or remove fat from the surface of a stock, sauce or cooking liquid.
Dépouiller	day-poo-YAY	To skim a simmering stock or sauce repeatedly over a long cooking time, removing scum and fat as they rise.
Dés	day	Diced — cut into small cubes; the general word behind brunoise, macédoine and the rest.
Détrempe	day-TRAHMP	The basic flour-and-water dough that forms the base of a laminated pastry before butter is folded in.
Dorer	doh-RAY	To brush pastry with beaten egg before baking, so it browns and shines — an egg wash.
Duxelles	duk-SEL	Finely chopped mushrooms cooked slowly with shallot and butter until dry and concentrated.

E–G

TERM	PRONUNCIATION	MEANING
Ébarber	ay-bar-BAY	To trim the fins, bones or ragged edges from a fish before cooking.
Écumer	ay-koo-MAY	To skim foam or scum from the surface of a simmering liquid.

TERM	PRONUN-CIATION	MEANING
Émincer	ay-man-SAY	To slice thinly, most often applied to onions, mushrooms or fennel.
Émulsion	ay-mul-see-ON	Two liquids that do not naturally combine, held together as tiny suspended droplets — see Emulsions.
Entremets	ahn-truh-MAY	Originally a course served between the main dishes; today, generally a composed dessert.
Escalope	es-kah-LOP	A thin slice of meat, usually cut on the diagonal and often flattened further with a mallet or the flat of a knife.
Étuver	ay-too-VAY	To cook gently in a covered pan with little or no added liquid, in the food's own moisture and a little fat.
Farce	fars	A stuffing or forcemeat, typically of finely ground or chopped meat, fat and seasoning.
Flambé	flahm-BAY	To ignite alcohol, usually spirits, added to a hot pan, to burn off harshness and add flavour.
Fond	fon	Stock — the base liquid of French cooking, made from bones, aromatics and water, simmered gently.
Fondue	fon-DOO	Literally "melted"; a dish of melted cheese, or vegetables cooked down to a soft, jam-like consistency.
Fraiser	fray-ZAY	To smear pastry dough away from you across the work surface with the heel of the hand, to finish blending the fat and flour.
Frémir	fray-MEER	The lowest simmer, just below a boil, with the surface only trembling — the correct heat for poaching and most stocks.
Fumet	foo-MAY	A concentrated stock, most commonly made from fish bones, simmered relatively briefly.
Galantine	gah-lahn-TEEN	Boned poultry or meat, stuffed, rolled and poached, then chilled and served cold, often glazed with aspic.
Garniture	gar-nee-TOOR	The garnish or accompaniment that completes a dish and often gives it its formal name.
Gastrique	gas-TREEK	Caramelised sugar deglazed with vinegar, used as a sweet-sour base for sauces, especially with fruit.

TERM	PRONUN-CIATION	MEANING
Glacer	glah-SAY	To glaze — coat food in a shiny reduction, or cook vegetables in butter, sugar and a little liquid until glossy.
Gratiner	grah-tee-NAY	To brown the top of a dish under intense heat, usually with cheese, breadcrumbs or butter, until crusted.
Grillade	gree-YAHD	Meat or fish cooked directly over or under fierce, radiant heat — grilling.

H–L

TERM	PRONUNCI-ATION	MEANING
Hacher	ah-SHAY	To chop, usually finely, most commonly herbs, onion or garlic.
Hollandaise	oh-lahn-DEZ	A warm emulsified sauce of egg yolk and clarified butter, sharpened with lemon or vinegar.
Hors d'œuvre	or-DUHVR	A small dish served before the main courses of a meal, literally "outside the work".
Infuser	an-foo-ZAY	To steep an aromatic — a herb, a spice, a vanilla pod — in a hot liquid to draw out its flavour.
Jardinière	zhar-dee-nee-AIR	Mixed vegetables cut into small, uniform batons and cooked separately, then combined as a garnish.
Julienne	zhoo-lee-EN	A fine matchstick cut, roughly 2 × 2 × 50 mm — see Knife Skills.
Jus	zhoo	The natural, unthickened juices released by roasted meat, often served alongside it as a light sauce.
Jus lié	zhoo lee-AY	Jus lightly thickened, usually with a little cornflour or arrowroot slurry, for more body and shine.
Larder	lar-DAY	To lard — thread strips of fat through very lean meat with a larding needle, to baste it internally as it cooks.

TERM	PRONUNCIATION	MEANING
Lardons	lar-DON	Small strips or cubes of bacon or pork fat, rendered until crisp and used as a garnish or flavour base.
Levain	luh-VAN	A natural sourdough starter used to leaven bread without commercial yeast.
Liaison	lee-ay-ZON	Any thickening agent for a sauce, or specifically the classical mixture of egg yolk and cream stirred in off the heat.
Lier	lee-AY	To bind or thicken a sauce or liquid, with a roux, a liaison, or a beurre manié.
Lyonnaise, à la	ah lah lee-oh-NEZ	Cooked with onions — in the style of Lyon, a city famous for its onion cookery.

M–O

TERM	PRONUNCIATION	MEANING
Macédoine	mah-say-DWAHN	A dice of roughly 5 mm cubes, or a mix of small-diced vegetables or fruit served together.
Mariner	mah-ree-NAY	To marinate — steep raw food in a seasoned liquid to flavour it and, in some cases, tenderise it.
Marmite	mar-MEET	A tall, narrow stockpot, traditionally with two handles, used for long, gentle simmering.
Mignonette	meen-yoh-NET	Coarsely crushed peppercorns, or a small, dainty cut of meat, most often applied to pepper.
Mijoter	mee-zhoh-TAY	To simmer gently over a long period, the domestic term for a slow, patient stew.
Mirepoix	meer-PWAH	Roughly diced onion, carrot and celery, the classical aromatic base of stocks, sauces and braises.
Mise en place	meez ahn PLAHSS	Everything measured, prepared and set in position before cooking begins — "putting in place".

TERM	PRONUNCIATION	MEANING
Monder	mon-DAY	To peel a food, usually a tomato or almond, after briefly blanching it, so the skin slips off.
Monter	mon-TAY	To finish a sauce by whisking in cold butter off the heat, enriching, thickening and glossing it.
Mouiller	moo-YAY	To add liquid to a preparation, most often stock or water, to begin or continue cooking.
Nage	nahzh	The aromatic broth in which shellfish is poached — see *à la nage*.
Napper	nah-PAY	To coat a food, or the back of a spoon, evenly in sauce — also the classical test for correct sauce thickness.
Nappe	nap	The consistency at which a sauce coats the back of a spoon and holds a line drawn through it with a finger.
Nature	nah-TOOR	Plain, unadorned — served or cooked with nothing added.
Noisette	nwah-ZET	Literally "hazelnut" — a small round cut of meat, or the toasted colour and smell of hazelnut in browned butter.
Œuf	uhf	Egg — the base word behind œufs mollets, œufs en cocotte and much of the classical egg repertoire.
Oignon piqué	on-yon pee-KAY	An onion studded with cloves and a bay leaf, simmered in milk or stock to infuse it, then removed.

P–R

TERM	PRONUNCIATION	MEANING
Panade	pah-NAHD	A thick paste of bread, milk or flour, used to bind a forcemeat and keep it moist.
Paner	pah-NAY	To coat food in breadcrumbs before cooking, usually after flour and beaten egg — see *à l'anglaise*.

TERM	PRONUNCIATION	MEANING
Papillote	pah-pee-YOT	A paper or foil parcel in which food is sealed and cooked by its own steam, opened at the table.
Parer	pah-RAY	To trim away excess fat, sinew or ragged edges from meat, fish or vegetables before cooking.
Passer	pah-SAY	To pass a liquid through a sieve or fine strainer, for smoothness or clarity.
Pâton	pah-TON	A ball or block of prepared dough, ready to be rolled, laminated or shaped.
Paysanne	pay-ee-ZAHN	A rustic cut of thin flat squares or triangles, roughly 12 mm across — see Knife Skills.
Persillade	per-see-YAHD	A mixture of finely chopped parsley and garlic, added near the end of cooking for a fresh finish.
Piquer	pee-KAY	To insert small pieces of a flavouring, such as garlic slivers or clove, directly into a piece of meat.
Pocher	poh-SHAY	To poach — cook gently, fully or partly submerged, in liquid held just below a simmer.
Poêler	pwah-LAY	To pan-roast: cook covered in a pan with butter and aromatics, basting throughout, a method between sautéing and roasting.
Pointe	pwant	A very small quantity, literally "the point" of a knife — as in *une pointe de* cayenne.
Quadriller	kah-dree-YAY	To mark food, usually over a grill or ridged pan, with crossed diamond-pattern lines.
Quenelle	kuh-NEL	An oval dumpling shaped between two spoons, of a light forcemeat or purée, then poached.
Ragoût	rah-GOO	A general term for a stew of meat or vegetables in a thickened sauce.
Râper	rah-PAY	To grate, whether cheese, nutmeg, citrus zest or vegetables.
Réduire	ray-DWEER	To reduce — simmer a liquid to evaporate water and concentrate flavour and body.

TERM	PRONUNCIATION	MEANING
Rémoulade	ray-moo-LAHD	A cold mayonnaise-based sauce, classically flavoured with mustard, capers and herbs.
Réserver	ray-zair-VAY	To set aside a component, keeping it ready to add back or use later.
Revenir	ruh-vuh-NEER	To colour food briefly in hot fat at the start of cooking, before adding liquid — the sealing stage of a braise.
Rissoler	ree-soh-LAY	To brown food, usually potatoes or small pieces of meat, in hot fat until crisp and golden all over.
Roulade	roo-LAHD	Food rolled into a cylinder, whether a filled sponge, a stuffed meat, or a rolled soufflé.
Roux	roo	Equal weights of fat and flour, cooked together, the classical thickening base for béchamel and velouté.

S–T

TERM	PRONUNCIATION	MEANING
Sabayon	sah-bah-YON	Egg yolks whisked with sugar and usually wine over gentle heat until thick, pale and voluminous.
Sablage	sah-BLAHZH	Rubbing fat into flour with the fingertips until it resembles coarse sand — the pastry method that keeps a crust short.
Saisir	say-ZEER	To sear — cook the surface of food very quickly over fierce heat to brown it.
Salamandre	sah-lah-MAHNDR	An overhead grill used for browning or gratinating a dish's surface with intense direct heat.
Saler	sah-LAY	To salt.
Sauter	soh-TAY	To cook quickly in a little hot fat, tossing or turning the food, in a pan wide enough that nothing steams.
Singer	san-ZHAY	To dust food with flour partway through cooking, usually in a braise, to thicken the eventual sauce.

TERM	PRONUNCIATION	MEANING
Sonde	sond	A probe or skewer, used to test the doneness of meat or vegetables by feel or resistance.
Suer	soo-AY	To sweat — cook gently in fat, covered or nearly so, without colour, until soft and translucent.
Suprême	soo-PREM	A boneless poultry breast, often with the first wing joint left attached; also a rich, cream-finished velouté sauce.
Tamiser	tah-mee-ZAY	To sift, most often flour or icing sugar, to remove lumps and incorporate air.
Terrine	teh-REEN	A dish of coarsely or finely ground meat, fish or vegetables, cooked in a mould and served cold, sliced.
Tian	tee-AHN	A shallow baked dish of layered vegetables, named after the earthenware vessel it is traditionally cooked in.
Tomber	tom-BAY	To cook leafy vegetables gently in a little fat until they collapse and soften — literally "to fall".
Torchon	tor-SHON	A cloth, or a method of rolling food — classically foie gras — tightly in one to shape and firm it.
Tourner	toor-NAY	To turn a vegetable into a neat, seven-sided barrel shape with a paring knife — see Knife Skills.
Travailler	trah-vah-YAY	To work a mixture vigorously by hand or with a spoon, beating air or structure into it.
Tremper	trahm-PAY	To soak food in liquid, whether dried pulses in water or bread in milk.

U–Z

TERM	PRONUNCIATION	MEANING
Vanner	vah-NAY	To stir a sauce or custard gently and continuously as it cools, preventing a skin from forming on the surface.

TERM	PRONUN-CIATION	MEANING
Velouté	vuh-loo-TAY	A stock-based sauce thickened with a blond roux — one of the five mother sauces of classical French cooking.
Vider	vee-DAY	To gut or clean a fish or bird, removing its innards before cooking.
Vinaigrette	vee-nay-GRET	An emulsified dressing of oil and vinegar, classically in a ratio of roughly three to one, seasoned and often mustard-bound.
Vol-au-vent	vol-oh-VAHN	A hollow puff-pastry case, baked light and crisp, filled with a savoury ragoût or sauce — literally "flight of the wind".
Xérès	sheh-RESS	Sherry — as in *vinaigre de Xérès*, sherry vinegar, prized for a pan sauce's depth.
Zester	zess-TAY	To remove the coloured, aromatic outer skin of citrus fruit, leaving the bitter white pith behind.

TWO PAIRS EVERYONE CONFUSES

Braiser and *poêler* are not the same thing, though both use covered, gentle heat: a braise sits in liquid, a *poêlé* sits in butter and its own juices with almost no added liquid. And *réduire* is not *réserver* — the first concentrates a sauce on the heat, the second simply sets an ingredient aside. Mixing them up in a recipe note has ruined more than one sauce.

"Sauté" used for anything fried

Sauter specifically means a hot pan, a little fat, food kept moving, and no crowding — not simply "cooked in a pan".

FIX If the pan is crowded or the food sits still, you are frying, not sautéing. Use a wider pan or cook in batches.

"Braise" and "stew" treated as identical

A stew is fully submerged in liquid throughout; a braise starts with a sear and sits in liquid that only partly covers the food, finishing under a lid.

FIX For a proper braise, add liquid to come roughly a third to halfway up the food, not over the top — see Braising & Stewing.

Calling any dice "brunoise"

Brunoise is a specific 3 mm cube. A rougher, larger dice is a macédoine or simply "diced" — using brunoise loosely undersells the precision the word exists to convey.

FIX Check the size against the register in Knife Skills before naming a cut.

"Deglaze" used without naming what it removes

The point of déglacer is the browned residue — the *fond* stuck to the pan — not simply adding liquid to a hot pan.

FIX Scrape the base of the pan with a wooden spoon as the liquid bubbles, until the residue has fully lifted and dissolved.

"Reduce" and "thicken" used interchangeably

A liquid can reduce without ever thickening much — thin stock stays thin however far it reduces — and a sauce can thicken without reducing at all, via a liaison or roux.

FIX Name what actually changed: volume lost is a reduction; viscosity gained by an added agent is a liaison.

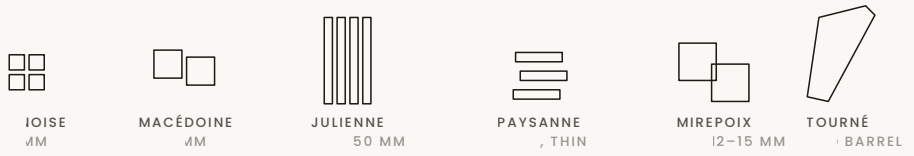


FIGURE 1 · THE CUT SIZES, KEYED TO THEIR NAMES

Every term in this register describes a size and a shape, not a mood — worth learning by eye so a recipe's instructions become instantly precise.

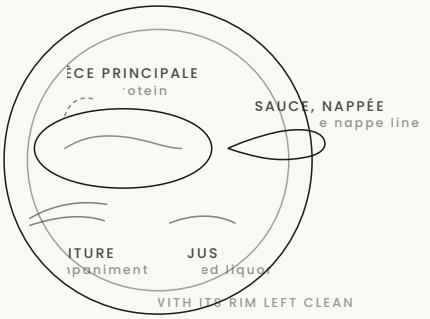


FIGURE 2 · A PLATE, NAMED

Every part of a classical plate has a French name of its own — the full method for arranging one is at Plating & Service.

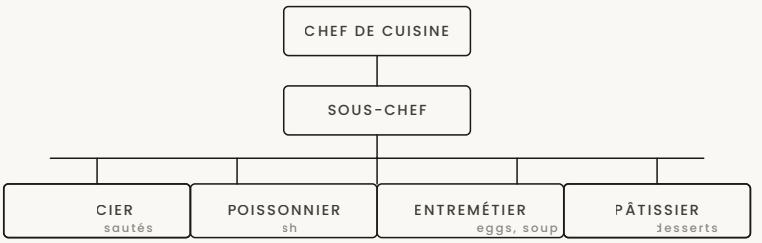


FIGURE 3 · THE BRIGADE DE CUISINE

Escoffier's station system, still the shape of most professional kitchens: each cook owns one function completely, and the word for their station is usually the clearest description of the job there is.

STATION	PRONUNCIATION	RESPONSIBLE FOR
Chef de cuisine	shef duh kwee-ZEEN	The head of the kitchen; sets the menu and answers for everything that leaves it.
Sous-chef	soo-shef	Second in command; runs the pass and stands in for the chef de cuisine.
Saucier	soh-see-AY	Sauces and sautéed dishes — traditionally the most senior and demanding station.

STATION	PRONUNCIATION	RESPONSIBLE FOR
Poissonnier	pwah-son-YAY	Fish, from preparation through sauce and garnish.
Entremétier	ahn-truh-may-tee-AY	Vegetables, eggs, soups and starches.
Pâtissier	pah-tee-see-AY	Pastry, bread and desserts.

Learn the word and the technique arrives with it, already precise. That is the whole use of a lexicon.

END OF STAGE ONE, LESSON THREE