

Cooking Basics: Kitchen Foundations — Workbook

This workbook turns the course into reps. Each section maps to one module, with exercises to practice at the cutting board and stove, worksheets to record what you learn, and checklists to make good habits automatic. Work through it with a knife in one hand and a tasting spoon in the other, because cooking is a skill you build by doing, not reading.

Setting Up a Working Kitchen

Audit your tools, build your salt program and pantry, and lock in a mise en place habit before you cook anything serious.

Exercise: The Tool Audit and One-Knife Test

Lay every kitchen tool you own on the counter. Sort them into Core (used weekly), Occasional (used monthly), and Dead (dusty single-use gadgets). Then cook one full meal using only a chef's knife, a paring knife, a board, one skillet, and one pot to feel how few tools you truly need.

- Which three tools did you reach for most, and which gadget did you not miss at all?

- What single upgrade (a better chef's knife, a sheet pan, a thermometer) would change your cooking most?

- What can you donate or store out of sight to clear counter space?

Worksheet: Pantry and Salt Inventory

Walk your kitchen and fill in what you actually have in each category, then note the gaps to buy. Decide on your one house salt and confirm you know its weight per teaspoon.

House salt chosen (Diamond Crystal / Morton kosher / table / sea)

Grams of salt per teaspoon for my chosen salt

Fats on hand (neutral oil / olive oil / butter)

Acids on hand (lemon / red wine vinegar / sherry / rice vinegar)

Aromatics on hand (onion / garlic / ginger / dried chile)

Building blocks (canned tomatoes / pasta / rice / beans / stock)

Umami boosters (soy / fish sauce / Parmesan / tomato paste / anchovy)

Top 5 items to buy this week

Checklist: Mise en Place Pre-Cook Ritual

- Read the full recipe and note overlapping steps before starting
- Wash, dry, and cut all produce to the called-for sizes
- Measure salt, spices, and liquids into small bowls
- Arrange bowls left to right in cooking order
- Set out a clean towel and a garbage bowl
- Use a separate board for raw meat and sanitize it after

Knife Skills and Precision Cuts

Drill grip and the claw, practice the four core cuts to uniformity, and set up a honing and sharpening schedule.

Exercise: The Five-Pound Onion Drill

Buy five pounds of cheap onions and carrots. Practice the pinch grip and guiding claw while dicing them, focusing entirely on uniform size and a steady rocking motion rather than speed. Save the scraps in a freezer bag for stock.

- Are your dice pieces close to the same size, and where do they go ragged?

- Is your guide hand a proper tucked claw, or do your fingertips creep forward when you rush?

- Did the rocking motion feel smoother by the fifth onion, and did your speed rise on its own?

Worksheet: Four-Cut Practice Log

After practicing each of the four core cuts, record the target dimension and rate your consistency from 1 to 5. Repeat over several sessions and watch the scores climb.

Slice — target thickness and consistency rating (1-5)

Dice — target size (large/medium/small/brunoise) and consistency rating (1-5)

Julienne — target matchstick size and consistency rating (1-5)

Chiffonade — herb used and ribbon fineness rating (1-5)

Biggest issue this session (size / grip / board slipping / speed)

One thing to focus on next session

Checklist: Knife Care Schedule

- Hone the blade on a steel before most cooking sessions
- Sharpen on a whetstone every two to three months
- Hand-wash and dry the knife immediately after use
- Never cut on glass, granite, or ceramic surfaces
- Store on a magnetic strip or sheath, never loose in a drawer
- Run the paper test monthly to check sharpness

Heat, Fat, and the Science of Cooking

Calibrate your burners and pan preheat, match fats to heat, and practice browning, fond, and deglazing.

Exercise: The Sear Versus Steam Test

Cook two pieces of the same protein side by side. Pat one bone-dry and sear it in a properly preheated pan; place the other in wet and on lower heat. Compare the crust, color, and flavor to feel exactly why dry surface and high heat create browning.

- Which piece formed a crust, and how did the colors and flavors differ?

- Did the water-droplet test predict when the pan was hot enough to sear?

- What did the fond on the bottom of the good pan taste like once deglazed?

Worksheet: Fat and Smoke Point Reference Sheet

Fill in the smoke point and best use for each fat you cook with, then note which fat you will reach for at each heat level so the choice becomes automatic.

Avocado oil — smoke point and best use

Canola or grapeseed — smoke point and best use

Extra-virgin olive oil — smoke point and best use

Butter — smoke point and best use

Clarified butter or ghee — smoke point and best use

My go-to fat for high-heat searing

My go-to fat for medium sauteing and finishing

Checklist: Pan Sauce From Fond

- [] Sear the protein until a deep brown crust forms, then remove it
- [] Lower the heat and soften aromatics in the rendered fat
- [] Deglaze with about half a cup of wine or stock
- [] Scrape up all the fond with a wooden spoon
- [] Reduce the liquid by about half
- [] Swirl in cold butter off-heat and adjust salt and acid

Seasoning and Your 20-Recipe Repertoire

Train your palate to season by taste, build the foundational 20 recipes from memory, and set up a light weekly cooking flow.

Exercise: The Salt-and-Acid Blind Fix

Make a simple soup or pot of beans and taste it unsalted. Add salt a pinch at a time, tasting after each, until it pops. Then add a squeeze of lemon or splash of vinegar and taste again to feel how acid brightens a dish that salt alone could not fix.

- At what point did the dish go from flat to balanced as you added salt?

- What did the acid change that more salt could not?

- Could you now diagnose flat, heavy, or harsh in someone else's cooking?

Worksheet: Protein Doneness and Repertoire Tracker

Record the target internal temperature for each protein and check off the foundational recipes as you cook each one from memory without looking at a recipe.

Chicken target temp and date cooked from memory

Steak target temp (medium-rare) and date cooked from memory

Fish target temp and date cooked from memory

Eggs — which of the five styles I can do without a recipe

Grains and starches — which I can do without a recipe

Vegetables and salads — which I can do without a recipe

Sauces — vinaigrette, pan sauce, tomato sauce mastered (yes/no)

Exercise: The No-Recipe Plate

Open your fridge and pantry and build a balanced dinner using only the protein-starch-vegetable-bridge formula, with no written recipe at all. Time how long the active cooking takes and note what you reached for.

- Which protein, starch, vegetable, and bridge did you choose, and why?

- Where did you have to taste and correct the seasoning?

- What would make this even faster next time you improvise?

Checklist: Weekly Component Prep

- Cook one batch of a grain (rice, farro, or quinoa)
- Roast one full sheet pan of vegetables
- Make one sauce or vinaigrette for the week
- Season and store fast-cooking proteins ready to sear
- Store components in clear containers, dated
- Update a running grocery list organized by store layout

Your Action Plan

1. Week 1: Audit your tools, choose your house salt, and stock the pantry gaps from the inventory worksheet.
2. Week 1: Buy or sharpen one good chef's knife and set it on a magnetic strip or in a sheath.
3. Week 2: Run the five-pound onion drill until your dice is uniform and the rocking motion feels automatic.
4. Week 2: Practice all four core cuts and start the four-cut practice log to track consistency.
5. Week 3: Calibrate your burners with the sear-versus-steam test and fill out the fat and smoke point reference sheet.
6. Week 3: Make at least two pan sauces from fond to lock in browning, deglazing, and reduction.
7. Week 4: Run the salt-and-acid blind fix until you can diagnose flat, heavy, and harsh by taste.
8. Week 4: Cook five of the foundational 20 recipes from memory and mark them on the repertoire tracker.
9. Week 5: Build at least three no-recipe plates using the protein-starch-vegetable-bridge formula.
10. Ongoing: Do a weekly component prep (one grain, one tray of vegetables, one sauce) and keep honing your knife before each session.

