

SIMPLY COOKING

SOME BEGINNER'S NOTES: FROM 2-MINUTE NOODLES TO KITCHEN WIZARD

The basic utensils you will need:

- Good frying pan of a decent size for omelettes, mince, etc. – ideally non-stick. Remember to clean with a cloth so you do not damage the non-stick surface.
- Small pot for boiling eggs, etc.
- Bigger pot for pastas, etc.
- Colander for draining pasta and defrosting peas in, etc.
- Egg timer. There are really nice ones available that you put in the water for perfectly timed eggs according to how you like them done.
- Cheese grater
- Good peeler for butternut, potato, etc.
- Spatula
- Soup ladle
- Special spoon with 'fingers' for dishing up spaghetti
- A large, sharp knife for chopping up butternut, etc.
- Smaller, serrated edge knife for dicing up tomatoes, etc.
- Tray for oven for grilling bacon and roasting butternut, etc.
- Smaller oven dish for doing egg frittatas or roasting chickpeas, etc.
- Clingfilm. This is indispensable if you buy chicken in bulk because you can then separate the pieces and freeze them individually. I also use it for instances when I have to wrap things like half an onion in, for putting back in the fridge.
- Foil. This is useful of course for braaing garlic and cheese large mushrooms or for the oven, when grilling bacon or roasting butternut, etc. You just lay it on the roasting tray and no mess, no fuss afterwards!
- Pestle and mortar. This is great for grinding up spices like whole coriander or cumin seeds, and for crushing nuts, etc. The process is also rather cathartic at the end of a long day!
- Pizza stone
- Blending stick so that you can make your own soups, chicken liver paté, etc.

Spice-wise and seasoning

- Black peppercorns
- Cajun/Portuguese chicken spice
- Cumin
- Dried Coriander seeds
- Italian herbs blend such as the Robertson's blend
- Spice for vegetable curry — simply ask your local Indian spice shop owner!
- Fish spice

Pastes and other essentials:

- Harissa paste. You will get this from an Indian spice shop. It is a spicy paste that is great for adding to curry sauces if you want to go extra spicy, or for adding to chicken livers with cream and passata. I also like to add a smidge to tuna to spice up tuna and mayo toasties, or when making chicken tortillas.
- Passata. This is basically a tomato sauce without all the sugar and salt. It can be used in spaghetti bolognese, or when making mince for tacos or tortillas. It also works wonderfully as the basting for pizza bases.
- Thai green/yellow curry paste. This little jar makes life so easy when you want to make a vegetable/beef/pork/chicken Thai curry. You just add coconut milk to this paste and presto!
- Tom yum paste. Again, a paste that will speed up cooking time! Add this to chicken stock and water with your rice noodles etc., and you have a delicious, quick and easy tom yum soup!
- Soya sauce
- Lemon juice
- Olive oil and seed oil blend
- Extra virgin olive oil for drizzling on salads, couscous, sweet potato and potato salad, etc.
- Salted butter
- Ina Paarman's sachets of fresh chicken stock
- Feta cheese
- Mozzarella for pizzas
- Cheddar for omelettes and mince tortillas, etc.
- Cream

- Onions. If you are only generally cooking for one, don't buy a lot. I usually cook with about half an onion in my recipes when cooking for two or three people.
- One bulb of garlic. The whole garlic cloves are ideal for roasted vegetables and chickens, etc.
- Small tub of pre-chopped garlic as this is more convenient when making pasta sauces and pizzas and lasts longer than fresh bulbs.
- Some fresh chillies. These you will use for pizzas or for chopping up in a bowl with some olive oil and putting on tortillas, penne arrabiatta, etc. Ideally, I would recommend simply buying a chilli plant... It will be eternally useful!
- Tins of tuna
- Tins of chickpeas
- Eggs — ideally free-range or organic
- Seed loaf kept in the fridge so that it lasts longer
- Mayonnaise for gourmet tuna toasties or to make toasties out of leftover chicken, etc. An additional tip is that a little bit of Hellman's mayonnaise spread on the bread for a toasted cheese sandwich really adds a creamy touch!
- Frozen peas
- Spaghetti
- Penne pasta
- Couscous
- Basmati rice. Buy in bulk from the Indian shops. Other brands of basmati can be quite pricy!
- Stale French loaf to slice and toast in the oven for 'cheesy dunkers' for soups
- Packet of tortillas which you can just freeze and take out as you need.
- Pizza bases from a reputable restaurant that sells them. I usually buy more than I need and then just freeze the rest for another time.
- Rice noodles
- Small box of Robertson dry white wine for cooking.
- 2 tins coconut milk
- Tub of plain Greek yogurt. This can be used to make tuna pasta/for making tzatziki for pitas, etc. It is also really nice just with nuts and honey for breakfast and a little bit of muesli if you like! Much better for you than that other flavoured sickeningly sweet nonsense!
- Pita breads you can freeze to take out and toast one at a time
- Tomato pasta sauce like a tomato and basil sauce or something for the days you are feeling too lazy to make one. The Ina Paarman range is a little pricier but rather delicious...Trust me!

Meats:

- 2 packs bacon
- Bulk deboned, de-skinned chicken breasts. Just separate pieces in clingfilm and freeze individually as you will not need more than one or two at a time
- Bulk mince meat. Don't freeze in smaller parcels as you will cook up a big batch of mince with passata, garlic and onion and then freeze this into smaller Tupperware containers.
- Packet of salami for the occasional sarmie or pizza
- Bulk marinated kebabs. Simply braai all at once and then whatever you don't eat, put aside for pizza as it is delicious with feta and avo and adds a smoky, sweetness to the pizza. Alternatively the braai meat be used in tortillas too.
- Wors
- Chicken livers. Like the wors, this is a cost effective staple to have in your deep freeze!
- Chicken pieces for putting in the oven or alternatively braaing. Get packs with thighs and legs as these cook quicker and dry out less than chicken breasts which are more difficult to cook with. Again if you want you can buy in bulk and freeze in packs of two pieces or whatever you like. Alternatively, if you want to braai the whole lot you can always make Thai chicken curry/chicken salad/tortillas/chicken sarmies with the leftovers.
- Minute steaks for putting on pizzas/in pitas/in stirfries, etc.

Besides the meat that you might want to buy in bulk, the fresher things like mushrooms or tomatoes you can always just get on the day! Just remember unripe avocados need to be bought in advance and are much cheaper than ready-ripe!

Ok, then let's get to the recipe ideas:

Chicken Penne Polo

Fry up the onions on a medium until they are relatively soft and translucent, adding some diced mushrooms to them along the way. Once the mushrooms and onions are cooked, add garlic and fry on a lower heat for a couple of minutes. Then add a third of a glass of white wine. Once the wine has reduced a little, add half a 250ml tub to a tub of cream to the pan depending on how saucy you want it. Add diced up deboned chicken and let it all simmer on a low heat adding black pepper and fish spice. Boil up some penne pasta until the pasta is *al dente* and when drained, add your chicken and creamy mushroom sauce.

Tortillas with Chicken, Feta, Avocado, Tomato & Peas

This one is pretty self-explanatory. Just remember to cook chicken first as it takes longer than the other ingredients. Then you can throw in the other ingredients adding the peas last as they are nicer when a little less cooked. With the frozen peas, always just put them in a colander and run under some warm water, leaving them to drain and defrost. Then add them to whatever you're cooking at the last moment.

Mince tortillas

Try prepare the mince in bulk beforehand, returning it to single-serving Tupperwares you can put back into the freezer afterwards. Basically you will simply fry up your onion on a higher heat. Then on a lower heat, you will cook your garlic. After this, you will add the mince and passata to the pan with a sprinkling of Italian Herbs. A little bit of brown sugar also sweetens the mince quite nicely. On the night you decide you feel like a tortilla, you can simply defrost the single-serving container and warm it up to add to with cheese, avocado and freshly chopped chilli. If it is the beginning of the month and you are still rather flush, a little sour cream never goes amiss either!

Tom Yum-Inspired Chicken Soup

Add Ina Paarman's chicken stock to a pot of hot water. The ratio is usually one sachet per 250ml of water. Add the tom yum paste, to your tasting and depending on how spicy you would like it to be. Add a bit of soya sauce. Fry up mushrooms in soya sauce and add garlic once you have lowered the initial heat. Then, into the pot of stock and tom yum water boiling on the stove, throw in your rice noodles, deboned and diced chicken and your mushrooms. You can throw in defrosted peas once the chicken pieces and noodles have cooked through.

Spaghetti Bolognese

Make a tomato sauce with garlic, onion, passata and Italian herbs. Alternatively, you can use the ready-made tomato-based pasta sauce that you have for such an occasion in your store cupboard. Defrost your pre-cooked mince. Then throw into pan with sauce. Add the sauce and mince to the spaghetti once the spaghetti is *al dente* and has been drained. Grate cheddar cheese over it. If you like, you can also add a little cream to the sauce while cooking.

Mayo Tuna, Guerkin and Feta Toasties on Low-GI Seed Loaf

Again this is pretty self-explanatory but very yummy if you're feeling lazy! Adding a teaspoon of Harissa paste to the mayo tuna will give it a little kick if you enjoy a bit of heat!

Butternut and Chickpea Curry with Nutty Couscous

Roast the butternut with some ground up cumin and coriander. This is where your pestle and mortar comes in! Next you cook it up with coconut milk and drained tinned chickpeas in the pan, adding the vegetable spice mix you have sourced from an Indian shop. Alternatively, yellow Thai curry paste works a treat with this meal!

To make couscous:

Remember that as much flavour as you add, the tastier the couscous will be. So the rule is generally one part liquid to one part couscous, so a cup of liquid to a cup of couscous. You do not need to prepare the couscous on the stove. I would rather recommend making it in a dish you can microwave.

First you boil water, and add chicken/vegetable stock to it. Pour this liquid stock onto the couscous and use a fork to keep fluffing it up. Add a few 'blobs' of salted butter and a drizzling of extra virgin olive oil. Add salt and pepper. Then throw in your diced-up nuts like pecan nuts or cashews or pistachio nuts. Whatever you like. If you are a little strapped for cash, then leave the nuts! It's simply a nice addition! If the couscous is not absorbing the water well, put it in the microwave for a minute or two, then take out and continue fluffing it up with a fork. Repeat this if you need to. If all the liquid has been absorbed and the couscous is still too chewy for you, add a little more boiling water. Don't worry if you make too much couscous. You can roast vegetables like baby marrows and mushrooms and butternut and add feta to make a salad with it later. It is also delicious with a little soya sauce, lemon juice, roasted chickpeas and tuna, a couscous salad to enjoy hot or cold!

Thai Chicken Curry.

This can be as effortless or as involved as you like. The easy option is to boil up some basmati rice and then cook diced up chicken in coconut milk and Thai curry paste. You can fry up garlic and onion first if you like, before adding chicken and coconut milk. A sachet or two of chicken stock will also add flavour to the coconut milk sauce. Otherwise, if you are having company and you have the time, slow roast a chicken in an oven container you can close. Make 'pockets' in the flesh of the chicken with a sharp knife and then stuff with lemon or lime wedges, lemongrass and garlic. Once the chicken is succulently slow-roasted and ready to fall off the bone, allow to cool. After this, you will separate the meat from the bones of the chicken, tear into smaller pieces with your washed hands, and add to the coconut milk and Thai paste mixture on the stove.

Pizzas!

Here you can let your imagination run wild and experiment with different flavour combinations! Some of my personal favourites are the following:

- bacon avocado and feta. Just crisp up the bacon first and then chop into smaller pieces and add to toppings as the pizza will only take a few minutes, five at the most, and that will not be enough time for the bacon to cook nicely.
- salami, feta and fresh slices of chilli
- chicken kebab pieces, avocado and feta
- balsamic roasted cherry tomatoes, goat's cheese and lemon-drizzled rocket
- sliced tinned pear, gorgonzola, roasted pine nuts and rocket

Also, if you are using a pizza stone, remember it must always go in the oven the second the oven starts heating up! Otherwise it can crack. Also remember you do not clean a pizza stone. You can merely scrape off where you need to with a spatula or something, or wipe on the evening with a damp cloth once it is not too hot to touch.

Butternut, Bacon and Feta Frittata

This is basically an omelette that goes in the oven. So for this, whisk up eggs and cream in a bowl. Roast butternut in some olive oil, salt and pepper. Grill the bacon. If you like, start roasting the butternut at about 180 degrees. Then after you can poke it with a fork and it is soft, place the bacon on top of it and turn the oven on to grill to get the bacon nice and crispy. Just remember to keep an eye on it so it doesn't burn. Then dice up the bacon afterwards and add the roasted butternut cubes, bacon and feta into a little oven dish with the egg mixture. Place this in the oven at around 180, until you can see the egg mixture has risen a little and is cooked properly.

Chicken livers and Couscous

Make a sauce with cream, passata, peri peri sauce or harissa paste and then add your chicken livers. If you like you can also fry up onion and garlic in the pan first. Admittedly, I like my chicken livers with LOTS of onion and garlic! Then make your couscous as per my instructions above. No nuts are needed for this one of course. Not only cost effective but time effective as the chicken livers will cook quickly and the couscous won't take you longer than 5-10 minutes!

Potato and Sweet Potato Salad with Fresh coriander and Feta Cheese

This is an absolutely effortless dish my grandmother stole from Jamie Oliver and I've been using it for braais, etc., ever since she did! If you don't mind the skins, you don't even need to peel the potatoes. I only usually peel the bits that are bad and leave the rest where it looks 'presentable'. Chop them up into smaller pieces. Then throw them in to a decent microwavable dish with a lid with holes in it. Microwave for about 15 minutes or until the potato and sweet potato is cooked and soft. While it is still steaming from coming out of the microwave, crumble feta over and add chopped-up, rinsed fresh coriander leaves, salt, black pepper and a drizzling of extra virgin olive oil. Mix it all together with a wooden spoon and it's as simple as that!

Omelette with Bacon, Mushrooms and Cheddar

Crisp up the bacon in oven. Dice up once cooled. Fry up mushrooms in oil and a drizzling of soya sauce. Whisk the eggs and milk in a bowl. Then pour the egg mixture in the pan once bacon and mushrooms are ready, cooking egg mixture on a low-ish heat. Grate cheese so long. Once egg mixture is looking like it is cooking around the sides and bottom – while still runny on the top surface – add the bacon, mushrooms and cheese. Leave for a few minutes then fold the one side over with a spatula. Leave for another minute or so, and your omelette should be cooked through and ready to eat! A useful tip is to place a large plate over the top of the frying pan to speed up the cooking process and ensure that you don't get a burnt bottom with runny egg on the surface.

Penne Arrabiata

Make a nice tomato sauce with passata, garlic, onion and Italian herbs. You can also add a little bit of cream if you like. Add fresh chopped chilli while cooking to make it wonderfully warming on a winter's night. Meanwhile grill bacon in the oven to dice up and add later. Boil penne until *al dente*. Drain the pasta in your colander and throw back into the pasta pot. Add the sauce and bacon. Sometimes I like to put this into an oven dish, add feta on top and put under the grill for a minute to melt the cheese. If you alternatively don't feel like making a sauce, use the ready-made tomato pasta sauce you have bought for such occasions.

Pitas

Now this is one of my favourite things in the world! Make some tzatziki. For this, you mix some plain Greek yoghurt in a bowl with finely chopped up cucumber and raw chopped up garlic. Add lemon juice, salt and black pepper. This will go inside your pita with lettuce and

diced-up tomatoes. Chop up some fresh chillies and add this too if you want to give it a little kick. The heat of the chillies is complimented nicely by the cool freshness of the tzatziki yoghurt. Then for the meat use whatever you feel like. So you can fry and dice up some minute steaks, or some cubes of pork or chicken. When frying up the meat, add a little Cajun spice/harissa paste for added heat and flavour. Pitas are so easy and such a winner!

An important tip...This is something my dad always taught me...When chopping, where you can, work off a flat surface, meaning that once you have chopped a butternut, work off the flat surface of the butternut (or potato or whatever it may be) so that you knife doesn't slip and you cut yourself with a sharp edge! When it comes to butternut, however, I always buy pre-chopped, as I can't bear the weird residue it leaves on your hand when you've peeled it.

Two other things...Wash your hands well after chopping chillies because you will inevitably touch your eye!! Also, keeping onions in the fridge will make them sting your eyes less when you are chopping them because the vapours don't evaporate as quickly and hit the eyes so soon.

Then, a final word... I haven't included exact measurements because I believe everyone's taste buds are different and half the fun of cooking is cooking instinctively. So just add a little here, then a little more if need be, etc., etc., until you are happy with the final flavour combination. Play around with cooking and enjoy it! A cook who does not taste as they go along, is not a cook!!

Happy cooking and warmest wishes,

Cookin' Connie
—x—