

# Secrets of Great Cooks

LEVAN'S CATERING COOKBOOK SERIES

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## General Cooking Tips

1. **Add a little zest.** When a recipe calls for a “zest” of a citrus fruit, it’s referring to the colorful outer part of the skin, not the inner white part, which is known as the pith. The zest contains all of the aromatic citrus oils and provides a hint of citrus tang to the recipe. A simple method of obtaining a fine zest is by rubbing the fruit against the smallest holes of a cheese grater.
2. **Don’t be afraid to experiment.** Good cooks are never afraid to deviate from a recipe and add their own flair. Whenever you make a substitution or addition be sure to make a note on the recipe so you remember next time whether you liked the change or not.
3. **Salted butter vs. unsalted butter.** Butter is available both with and without salt. The salt is added for extra flavor and to help preserve it so it has a longer shelf life. The problem is that sometimes the salt in butter can be more than a recipe needs. Choosing unsalted butter gives you more control over how much salt your dish contains. If you only have salted butter, the best thing to do is omit approximately ¼ teaspoon of salt per ½ cup (one stick) of butter used in the recipe.
4. **Use your kitchen scissors.** Right now you probably only use your kitchen scissors for opening packaging and bags of milk. But next time you’re trimming fat from a roast, opening pitas or cutting chicken into strips, consider using your scissors! Chefs use them all the time for cutting meats and other food items. It’s probably best to have a pair that are designated as food scissors only. And be sure you clean them very well after each use because they do have crevices where bacteria can hide.
5. **Keep your recipes organized.** Nothing is more frustrating when you’re ready to start cooking then not being able to find your recipe. Keep things organized by finding a system for filing your recipes that you can keep close at hand in the kitchen. A great option is to buy one of those photo albums where you peel back a plastic sheet and underneath is a sticky surface. This makes recipes easy to find and at any time you can remove or replace them!
6. **Stop foods from sticking to the pan.** To keep food from sticking to the bottom of your pans, try to avoid ever putting cold foods into a hot pan. Also, don’t put food into a pan that is not perfectly clean, otherwise the resulting build up could lead to burned food.
7. **Stop water from boiling over.** To keep pans from boiling over when cooking, add a thin layer of butter around the rim of the pan. This works well for rice, pasta and potatoes.
8. **Avoid oozing egg whites.** Do your eggs ooze out some of their whites when you boil them? This is because every egg contains an air pocket at the larger, rounded end. When placed in simmering water the air pocket expands and creates a higher

atmospheric pressure within the egg than in the water. The fragile shell cracks from the built-up pressure. Avoid this problem in the future by removing eggs from the refrigerator and piercing the larger end with a pin. This will give the air a hole to escape through!

9. **Cut breads and cakes perfectly every time.** It may sound strange but dental floss can be used to slice bread and cakes for a perfect slice every time. This is also the easiest way to cut a layer cake in half so you can add a filling. For perfect results freeze the cake before cutting it.
10. **Get more juice from citrus fruits.** When a recipe calls for the juice of lemons, limes or oranges, make sure you get every last drop by first rolling the fruit under your palm on a hard surface. Press down as hard as you can as you roll. Then simply slice it in half and squeeze. You'll find you get significantly more juice to add lots of flavor to your dish.
11. **Peel garlic easily.** Peeling garlic can be frustrating unless you know this little tip that the pros use. Lay a clove flat on a hard surface and then pressing down hard on it with the flat side of a large knife. Once you've pressed hard enough you'll hear a "pop" that tells you the peel has separated. Even with this trick your fingers will undoubtedly smell like garlic. Get rid of that odor by washing them well with salt.
12. **Repair cracked eggs.** If you have an egg that cracks while boiling, just add a capful of vinegar to the water and watch as the eggshell seals itself. Unfortunately though, if the whites have begun to ooze out this trick won't work.
13. **Make sure the oil is hot before frying foods.** Although they're not the healthiest option, fried foods sure do taste good. The key to perfect frying is to get the oil hot before you put the food in. (Not so hot that it is smoking though - be careful!) If you don't get the oil hot, your food will absorb too much oil and taste greasy. To test whether the oil is hot enough for frying, throw in a drop of water or even a small piece of what you're cooking. If it bubbles rapidly then you know it's ready.
14. **Get the right temperature for deep frying.** Does your oil always seem to be the wrong temperature? A simple way to find out if your oil is hot enough is to use a bread cube. If the bread browns in a minute, the oil is between 350 and 365 degrees, 40 seconds - 365 and 382 degrees, 20 seconds - 382 and 390 degrees. Or, if you have one, you can use a thermometer. Just be sure that it is a metal thermometer designed for deep fryers.
15. **A substitution for eggs.** Need an egg for a recipe but you're all out? You can substitute two tablespoons of real mayonnaise for a large egg in any recipe. Be sure not to use whipped salad dressing though unless you want the extra salt that it contains.
16. **Interesting uses for apples.** You may have heard before that it's best to keep apples stored separately from other fruits and vegetables because they give off gases that

speed up ripening. Well those same gases are actually useful for some things. An apple wedge in the bag will soften clumped brown sugar over night. It will also keep your potatoes from sprouting.

17. **Remove the fat from soups.** Remove the fat from homemade soups by tossing in four ice cubes. The fat will congeal around the ice, which can then be removed. This will cool the soup, so you may need to reheat after completing the process.
18. **Serve a perfect punch.** When serving punch it is usually left on a buffet table for everyone to help themselves to. So it’s important to keep it cold. However, instead of ice, which will dilute the punch, freeze some of the punch itself beforehand and use that.
19. **Stop pre-made sandwiches from going soggy.** To prevent lunchtime sandwiches from becoming soggy, spread both pieces of bread to the edges with butter, mustard or mayonnaise. Then wrap the sandwich in waxed paper or plastic wrap. Or is possible, assemble the sandwich just before eating. Just pack the bread and filling separately.
20. **Always marinate foods in a glass or ceramic dish.** Most marinades contain an acidic ingredient such as lemon juice, vinegar or wine that can react with metal and cause off-flavors in your food. To save on cleanup, try marinating your fish or meat in a large plastic bag with a zip closure. Set the bag on a plate or in a shallow bowl and refrigerate, turning the bowl occasionally to distribute the marinade.
21. **Reduce grease splatters.** Few things are messier than splattering grease. And if it gets on your skin it can be painful. Reduce grease splatters by sprinkling hot grease with salt prior to adding the food to be fried. If this is not completely effective, you can buy grease splatter shields at kitchen stores.
22. **Easily grate cheese.** Make grating cheese a snap by tossing your cheese into the freezer for an hour before shredding. This will make the cheese hard enough to grate without compromising the taste or texture.

## **Sauces and Seasonings**

23. **Make perfect gravy for turkey.** Looking for the perfect gravy to have with your holiday turkey? A great tip from the pros is to use tea! Boil a large pot of water and when you put the turkey in the oven add two orange pekoe tea bags. Let the tea steep on top of the stove until the turkey is done then add it to the juices in the pan. Thicken with a mixture of flour and water or cornstarch.
24. **Keep chicken broth handy.** Not only is chicken broth an easy way to add flavor to sauces, it can also be used to add moisture to dry stuffing. And the unsalted variety can be used to tame over-salty gravy without diluting the flavor.

25. **A flavorful alternative to sour cream.** Out of sour cream, or looking for something different? Consider a quick crème fraîche, which can be made from one cup of buttermilk and three cups of heavy cream. Mix them together and let them sit on your counter for about three days. Then store it in the refrigerator for as long as two weeks.
26. **Reduce the power of garlic and onions.** Sometimes you don't want a strong garlic or onion taste. Get a milder flavor by sautéing them in butter or olive oil for a few minutes prior to adding them to other foods. This will release their natural sweetness and give a wonderful flavor.
27. **An easy way to peel ginger root.** To easily peel ginger root, place it in the freezer for an hour before use and then remove the skin with a sharp knife. Or, try using the edge of a spoon when peeling room temperature ginger root.
28. **Use caramelized onions to add flavor.** Caramelized onions are a delicious way to add flavor to mashed potatoes, vegetables, soups and sauces. Luckily they can be made ahead and kept in the refrigerator so they are available when you need them. Do this by chopping onions fine and adding them to melted butter or margarine. Cook at a very low heat until the onions are brown. Be sure there is always lots of butter or the onions will become crispy. Once caramelized, transfer them to a plastic container while the butter is still liquid and store them in the refrigerator. Once solidified it's easy to take a spoonful whenever you need it!
29. **Fix lumpy sauces.** Is your sauce too lumpy? Remove it from the heat immediately and toss it in your food processor to smooth out the lumps and blend the flavors. Add some hot water if necessary to assist with the removal of the lumps. Then reheat as needed and serve!
30. **Using pre-made tomato sauce.** Store bought tomato sauce is an easy alternative to making your own. But sometimes it is too acidic or too salty for the dish you're using it in. A great tip to cut the acidity of tomato sauce is to add about one-eighth of a cup of sugar. To reduce saltiness, add a little cream.
31. **Use wine to add a unique flavor to dishes.** Wine is another way of flavoring your dishes, just like herbs and spices. There are really no rules except those dictated by your own taste. Generally, the kind of wine to use in a dish is the kind you would most enjoy drinking with it. White wines are usually served with fish and white meats, and red wines with dark meats. Don't worry about the finished dish containing alcohol; wine loses its alcohol when simmered long enough so no trace of alcohol remains. An easy way to create a sauce is to deglaze your pan using wine. If needed, thicken with a little cornstarch.
32. **Make your own salad dressings.** Store bought salad dressings are loaded with extra calories and preservatives. And once opened they often go bad long before they're used up. A great alternative is to make your own dressings. For a tasty vinaigrette, mix  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup of oil with  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup of vinegar and season with salt, pepper and even some

Dijon mustard. For other variations try adding honey, balsamic vinegar, orange juice, maple syrup, garlic or lime juice. With a little experimentation you’ll be surprised how many great tastes you can create!

33. **Stock, Broth, Bouillon and Consommé.** In recipes calling for chicken or beef stock, you can use homemade or canned stock prepared from purchased cubes or powdered bases. (Be sure to watch the amount of salt you later add to your recipe though because some cubes and powdered bases are very salty). Stock, broth and bouillon are basically the same - the clear liquid produced when meat, bones and vegetables are simmered in water to extract flavor and then strained. Stock can be made from meat, poultry, fish or vegetables. Consommé is stronger than bouillon; it is stock enriched with more meat and vegetables and then concentrated and clarified. Now you know!
34. **Quickly and easily thicken gravy.** Once the roast or turkey is cooked, there’s always the task of making the gravy and waiting while it thickens. Luckily, there is a quicker way! Thicken your gravy by adding a tablespoon of instant mashed potatoes. Start there, and add more if needed until it’s the right consistency.
35. **Dried herbs versus fresh ones.** Fresh herbs are best for flavor, but if unavailable, use about one-third as much dried. If a recipe doesn’t specify fresh or dried, you can assume it means dried, since dried herbs are much more commonly used. Whichever herbs you choose, if you’re unsure of the amount, start with just a little, taste often and add more during cooking. And to ensure that you’re using dried herbs with the maximum amount of flavor, replace them every three months.
36. **Add garlic to oils and vinegars.** Oils and vinegars that have been flavored with garlic provide a quick and easy way to add some punch to salad dressings, stir fries and meats. Once prepared they can keep indefinitely and can be grabbed whenever you want to add a little flavor. To make your own simply peel garlic cloves and cut them in thirds. Put them in the bottom of the vinegar or oil shaker and leave for a few weeks before using.
37. **Use marinades to add flavor.** A good marinade will add lots of extra flavor and juices to meats and vegetables. But be careful not to marinate longer than the recipe calls for. Some foods, seafood in particular, break down when marinated in acidic ingredients such as vinegar, wine or citrus fruit juices. The result can be a mushy mess that no one wants to eat!
38. **Make thicker gravy.** For thicker gravy, mix some butter and flour in a frying pan and cook until the mixture is smooth and thick. Add it to your hot gravy for a thick and rich texture.



## **Meat and Poultry**

39. **Choose perfect cuts of red meat.** Red meat such as beef, pork and lamb should have a moist, red surface with no signs of drying or surface film. The fat should be a creamy white color and should not be dry. Look for even, well-cut meat that is free from sinew and excess fat. To store your meat, it is best to loosely wrap it on a plate and put it in the coldest part of your refrigerator so the air can circulate around it. Red meat should be either cooked or frozen within 2-3 days or purchase.
40. **Keep the breading on meats.** If a recipe calls for coating meat with breadcrumbs, refrigerate the breaded portions for an hour or even overnight before cooking. This will help the breading cling when you cook the meat instead of sticking to the bottom of the pan! Breaded meats can even be frozen and pan-fried without defrosting. Be sure to increase the cooking time slightly.
41. **Freezing meat.** When freezing red meat or poultry, wrap it very tightly or seal it in a plastic bag to prevent air spoilage or freezer burn. Be sure not to pile pieces on top of each other but do pack meat as flat as possible so it freezes quickly, which will ensure its texture is not spoiled. Meat should be completely thawed in the refrigerator before cooking. Never thaw poultry at room temperature or you risk salmonella contamination.
42. **Stop meatloaf from sticking to the pan.** Tired of meatloaf that sticks to the pan? Toss in a slice of raw bacon before adding meat to the pan, and say goodbye to the sticking. It may not be the healthiest alternative but it does work (and tastes great)!
43. **Make a juicer roast.** To keep all of the natural juices inside your roast, sear it on all sides in a hot skillet with a little vegetable oil before putting it in the roasting pan. A few seconds per side is all it takes since the point is not to cook the meat but rather to toughen up the outside so that the juices don’t flow out while it’s cooking. Then be sure to use a shallow roaster to retain more of the moisture. Uncover the meat halfway through roasting in order to avoid a steamed appearance and to get the top of your roast browned.
44. **Make tastier hamburgers.** Homemade hamburgers are easy to make and taste far better than the store bought variety. Make them with medium ground beef, an egg and breads crumbs or crushed crackers. Season with your favorite seasonings or add barbecue sauce for a smoky flavor. For juicier burgers, add one-eighth cup of ice water to your beef or turkey before forming patties.
45. **Choose perfect poultry.** When choosing poultry, the skin should be a light creamy color and it should be moist. It should also be unbroken with no dark patches. Fresh poultry should be stored loosely covered on a plate in the refrigerator for up to 2 days.
46. **Get crispier fried chicken.** For crispier fried chicken, add a teaspoon of baking powder to your coating mix then coat and fry as you normally would. Remember to

make sure that the oil is very hot before adding the chicken to avoid an overpowering greasy taste.

47. **Don’t salt meat before cooking.** One of the biggest faux pas when it comes to cooking meat is to salt it prior to cooking. What the salt actually does is draws the juices out and impedes the browning of the meat. Instead, add salt once the meat is already half cooked. Then taste it when it’s done and if more salt is needed you can add it then. The result is juicy, tasty meat that doesn’t contain more salt than it needs!
48. **Cooking poultry.** Despite what you may have heard, poultry does not need to be washed before cooking. Wipe it with a damp cloth if needed. If it has been frozen, wipe it with absorbent paper to remove any excess moisture. Always be sure that poultry is cooked through. To test for readiness, pierce the flesh at the thickest part with a fork. If the juices run clear then it is cooked.
49. **Cooking fish.** To minimize moisture loss when grilling, baking or sautéing fish, it’s important to use a relatively high heat and cook the fish for a short time. When you cook fish longer than necessary, the juices and flavors are lost, leaving the fish dry and chewy. Plus, overcooked fish is prone to falling apart.
50. **Roast meats perfectly.** For tender, juicier roasted meats, substitute wine, tea or beer for water in your favorite recipes. These liquids help to tenderize the meat more than plain water does and they add a rich flavor to whatever you are cooking. Go ahead and try it, you’ll be surprised what a difference it makes.
51. **Make perfect meatloaf.** If you don’t want your meatloaf soaking in drippings of fat and water while it cooks, invest in one of the new meatloaf pans with a built-in rack. The holes in the bottom of the rack allow the juices to drain away from the meat. The result is perfect meatloaf every time!
52. **The different fat contents in ground beef.** In most cases, regular ground beef is a better buy than medium or lean. And some foods - such as hamburgers - are more tender and tasty when made with regular ground beef because of the extra fat content. Any excess fat can easily be drained off. So, unless medium ground beef is on sale or not more than 7 percent more expensive than regular ground beef, it’s not a good buy.
53. **Quickly cook chicken for recipes requiring pre-cooked chicken.** An easy method of preparing chicken for recipes that call for pre-cooked chicken is to “poach” it. This involves simmering it slowly in liquid. This can be water, broth, fruit juice, wine or a combination of these. Poach the chicken until tender, about 15-20 minutes, then chop or slice as specified in the recipe.

## Barbecuing

54. **Barbecue the perfect steak every time.** Ever have a hard time knowing whether a steak is cooked properly? Instead of poking it with a fork or cutting it open (both of which let the juices run out), learn how to tell by touching the outside. For an example of how a steak feels at the different stages of cooking, look no further than your own hand. Touch your pointer finger to your thumb and then feel the fleshy part of your hand underneath your thumb. That is how a steak that is medium rare will feel. Your middle finger touched to your thumb shows you medium. Your ring finger to your thumb is medium well. And lastly your pinky finger to your thumb is well done.
55. **Prepare the barbecue grill properly.** For a better barbeque, brush your hot grill with a thin layer of oil prior to cooking or line your grill with a layer of aluminium foil covered with cooking spray. This will ensure that the meat does not stick and need to be torn away from the grill.
56. **Never use a fork when grilling.** When you poke meat with a fork you allow the natural juices to flow out. As a result your meat ends up dry and tough. Instead use tongs or grilling tools to turn and flip the meat while keeping the juices locked in.
57. **Place food in the right place on the grill.** Barbecues give off heat in a very different way than your stove or oven. To ensure your food is properly cooked and not burnt, be sure to grill meats and vegetables approximately 4" from the heat source. With chicken, which is more likely to burn, 6"-8" away is best.

## Fruits and Vegetables

58. **Quick and easy corn on the cob.** The simplest way to cook perfect corn on the cob is to toss an ear into the microwave for three minutes. Then, remove the husks, add some salt and butter and enjoy.
59. **Blanching vegetables.** Blanching vegetables means to boil them for five or six minutes prior to using them in a recipe. This is particularly helpful for harder vegetables such as carrots, broccoli and cauliflower that take longer to cook. Otherwise you end up with vegetables that are too crunchy.
60. **Plump up limp vegetables.** Give limp vegetables a second chance by soaking them in ice water to make them crisp after prolonged refrigeration. This is a great technique for lettuce and celery, which seem to go limp fastest. This trick also works for limp herbs.
61. **Stir-frying vegetables.** Stir-fried vegetables are a quick and easy side dish option. Or serve them over noodles or rice for a delicious meal. The secret to stir-frying is to have the pan or wok very hot and the vegetables cut into similar sized pieces so they cook evenly. Great choices are peppers, mushrooms, onions, carrots, snow peas and

beans. Avoid starchy vegetables such as potatoes and yams. Stir-fried vegetables should be flavored near the end of the cooking time for the best results.

62. **Stop white vegetables from yellowing.** When cooking white vegetables, use a light colored pot and add a pinch of sugar to keep the white color and avoid yellowing.
63. **Measure vegetables and fruits properly for recipes.** When using a recipe that asks you to include a specified amount of a fruit or vegetable, it can be confusing sometimes to know just how much they mean. The general rule of thumb is that if the recipe states “1 cup of diced carrots” then you dice them first and then measure out 1 cup. If it calls for “1 carrot, diced” then it wants you to dice up one carrot. Most recipes are pretty forgiving though; so don’t stress too much over getting the perfect amount.
64. **Roasting vegetables.** There are lots of vegetables that can be carrots, potatoes, onions, peppers and squashes. For the best results, coat the vegetables evenly in oil and add seasonings before putting them in a non-stick roasting pan. A great way to ensure they don’t stick (and to make cleanup easy) is to line your pan with parchment paper. Ensure that the vegetables are evenly distributed and not overlapping one another.
65. **Ripen tomatoes overnight.** Putting green tomatoes in a brown paper bag with an overripe banana can quickly ripen them. By the morning your green tomatoes will be red and ready to eat!
66. **Perfectly steam vegetables every time.** Steaming is an easy way to cook vegetables and is a great way to retain their water-soluble vitamins. Almost all vegetables can be steamed except for starchy ones like potatoes. When steaming, make sure that vegetables are cut into equal-sized pieces so they cook evenly. To steam them, place them in a bamboo or metal steamer, place the lid on the steamer and put it over a saucepan of boiling water. Always steam your vegetables with the highest possible heat to avoid sogginess and get them cooked faster.
67. **Make sautéed onions even sweeter.** For tastier sautéed onions, add a few drops of honey to the pan after heating the oil or butter and before adding the onions. Or if you don’t have any honey, add some sugar on top of the onions once they start to soften. This is especially tasty if you’ll be using the onions on a pizza, steak or hamburger.
68. **Easily peel peaches and tomatoes.** Whenever you have to peel peaches or tomatoes, the easiest way is to first immerse them in boiling water for 30 seconds. Then use a sharp paring knife to remove the peel.
69. **Make delicious salads.** If you’ve only ever used iceberg lettuce to make salads, now is the time to branch out and try something new. Red and green leaf lettuces make an excellent - and healthier - alternative. To make the perfect salad be sure to get yourself an inexpensive salad spinner. Nothing is more unappetizing than soggy lettuce leaves. And the extra water will dilute the flavor of your dressing.

70. **Steam vegetables without a steamer.** Don’t have a steamer? Make enough small aluminium foil balls to cover the bottom of your pan and fill with water to half the height of the foil balls. Boil the water, and once it is boiling, add whatever you are cooking. Expect it to be finished in about 10-15 minutes.
71. **Use pureed vegetables.** Pureed vegetables make an excellent thickener for sauces and stews. Consider pureeing your leftovers and freezing them in small plastic bags. Just be sure to heat thoroughly before adding to a hot sauce.
72. **Roast red peppers.** Wash and place whole red peppers on the barbecue grill. Grill them on HIGH to char the skin all around. This takes 15-20 minutes. You’ll know they’re done when their skin is black and lifting away from the flesh in places. Then cool them in a paper bag to loosen the blackened skin. Simply peel them and remove the seeds. Roasted red peppers make an excellent topping for pizzas, hamburgers and quesadillas or are delicious all on their own!

## **Pasta, Rice and Potatoes**

73. **Cooking fresh pasta.** Fresh pasta needs less water than dried pasta. To cook fresh pasta, have a large saucepan of rapidly boiling water ready. Make sure you have enough boiling water for the pasta to cook in. Add a little oil to the water, so the pasta doesn’t stick together. Add pasta to the pan, ensure the water stays boiling and stir slowly for 10 seconds to separate the pasta. Boil pasta for 2-4 minutes depending on the type you’re using.
74. **Untangle spaghetti before serving.** If you have allowed your spaghetti to cool for too long and it becomes tangled, toss it back into the hot water and stir with a large spoon. Then, drain and rinse the pasta in cold water immediately. You can add some olive oil if you’d like, but it’s not a necessity.
75. **Al dente pasta.** Al dente means “to the tooth”. When it’s cooked, pasta should be soft but still firm when you bite it. The easiest way to tell whether pasta is al dente is to remove a piece from the saucepan and test it between your teeth. The pasta should have some texture when you bite into it, but it should not be dry and hard in the middle.
76. **Cooking dried pasta.** The most common mistake when cooking dried pasta is not having enough boiling water. Have a large saucepan of rapidly boiling water ready. Add a little oil and pasta to the pan, and stir for 20 seconds to separate the pasta. Boil for 10-14 minutes depending on the shape of the pasta and the flour used. Drain it and eat immediately without any extra oil or butter if you’ll be having it hot. For cold pasta rinse it under warm water and then cold water.

77. **Perfectly cooked pasta every time.** For perfect pasta, do not boil the noodles! Instead, boil the water and then turn off the fire and add the pasta. Cover, and stir the pasta every five minutes for twenty minutes. Your pasta will never overcook, and it will be perfect every time.
78. **Make fluffier rice.** For fluffier rice, add one teaspoon of lemon juice to the water before adding rice. It won’t change the flavor but it will plump up the grains to give you perfect rice.
79. **Add flavor to rice.** Instead of using plain water when boiling rice, try chicken stock, beef stock or even tomato juice. Serve it as is or add even more flavor by sautéing some vegetables in olive oil and garlic and adding them for a delicious and healthy side dish.
80. **Reduce the stickiness of pasta and rice.** The starch in pastas and rices often cause them to stick together. Avoid this by adding a splash of vinegar when boiling them. The result will be perfect, stick-free pasta and rice every time.
81. **Make the fluffiest baked potatoes.** Start by choosing a potato with a high starch content. Russets and Idahos are both good choices. Before placing your potatoes in the oven, pierce them several times with a knife in order to let the steam escape during baking. Never wrap your potatoes, as it will cause them to steam rather than to bake. When serving your baked potatoes, cut a slit in the top and squeeze the sides of the potato before adding toppings.
82. **Soften up the skin on baked potatoes.** Do you like to eat the skin along with your baked potatoes? Make it soft and delicious by rubbing the outside of your potatoes with some vegetable oil before placing them into a hot oven. Add a little butter and sour cream - even some shredded cheese if you like - and you have a perfect side dish!
83. **Make perfect mashed potatoes.** Whether you like them on their own, smothered in butter or drowned in gravy, mashed potatoes are an excellent accompaniment to many different meals. To make them like the pros do start by putting several whole garlic cloves in the water with the boiling potatoes. The garlic will cook and once the potatoes are mashed it will give them a wonderful flavor. While mashing, add buttermilk, cream cheese, sour cream, butter, or a combination of these. Experiment to find the taste that you like best!
84. **Bake potatoes in a flash.** Need them fast? You can microwave potatoes but they’re always nicer in the oven. To bake them quickly, slice your potatoes in half lengthwise and bake them with the flat part facing down. Be sure to grease the baking sheet, and them simply place into a 375-degree oven for about half an hour.

## Baking

85. **Stop cheesecake from cracking.** Cheesecakes often crack on the top because they lose moisture while they cook. If you’re adding a topping it doesn’t matter, but if you’re serving the cake without anything on top it’s nice to have it looking perfect. Avoid cracking by putting a small dish of water on the rack beside your cake while it is cooking. This will keep it moist and crack-free!
86. **Make sure your yeast is fresh.** Yeast is a living organism. And in order for it to work to it needs to be alive when you use it. To test whether yeast is active, combine it with the amount of warm water asked for in the recipe. Then add a small amount of sugar (1/8 of a teaspoon is all that’s needed). The sugar acts as food for the yeast and if it’s alive it will begin to bubble within approximately 10 minutes. If there is no bubbling then you know the yeast is no good.
87. **The key to great pastry is cold ingredients.** Making your own pastry can sometimes be a challenge. But once you master it you’ll enjoy having it as part of your baking repertoire. To get really fabulous pastry, the key is to make sure ALL of the ingredients are cold before you mix them together - including the flour! Then once you’ve formed the dough, refrigerate it for at least 30 minutes to make it easier to roll.
88. **Add a little something extra to your pies.** Most pie recipes call for the same plain piecrust. Boring! Instead create your own variation by adding spices to your dough such as cinnamon, nutmeg or even ginger. Another great idea is to add ground nuts or even cookies crumbs on top of the bottom crust before adding your filling. Be sure to press them down a little though so they stay as part of the crust.
89. **Make flakier pie crust.** Add a teaspoon of very cold vinegar in place of a teaspoon of ice water for flakier pie crusts. Be sure that it is very cold though. This helps the fat chill and prevents it from releasing its water content and moistening the flour. When this happens, gluten develops and the result is pastry that is tough instead of light and flaky. Ideally you’ll also let the dough rest in the refrigerator overnight before using to get good and cold again.
90. **Toast nuts to intensify their flavor.** Toasting nuts before using them in recipes intensifies their flavor. To toast nuts, place them in a dry skillet over medium heat. Shake the pan often, and roast for four or five minutes until fragrant. Cool before using. Because nuts have a high fat content, they go rancid quickly. The best way to store shelled nuts is in an airtight container in the refrigerator where they’ll keep for about four months.
91. **Test whether your baking powder is fresh.** Baking powder is a leavener that contains a combination of baking soda, an acid (such as cream of tartar), and a moisture absorber (such as cornstarch). Baking powder releases carbon dioxide gas bubbles when mixed with liquid, and this is what causes breads and cakes to rise. However, baking powder loses its potency over time, so if you’ve had the same

supply for eons, be sure to test whether your baking powder is still good. Pour ¼ cup of hot tap water over ½ teaspoon of baking powder and observe - the fresher the powder, the more actively it will bubble. If a weak reaction occurs, or none at all, your baked goods will end up flat!

92. **Use frozen berries in baked goods.** Frozen berries can taste just as good as fresh when used in baked goods. Look for whole berries without syrup. You don’t even have to bother thawing them before adding them to your batter. You may need to add a few minutes to your cooking time however because they will make the batter cold.
93. **Melt chocolate without burning it.** Melt chocolate with no risk of burning! Just break chocolate into small pieces, place in a sealed bag and drop into a bowl of hot water. Give the bag a squeeze every five minutes until the chocolate reaches the right consistency.
94. **Create a wonderful vanilla taste.** Do you miss real vanilla extract? Soak two vanilla beans in a litre of vodka for about three months, shaking it well every morning. At the end of three months, you will have a delicious natural vanilla flavoring to use in your baking.
95. **Melt chocolate perfectly every time.** The easiest way to melt chocolate is in the microwave. But be sure to stir it often because it can burn. Does chocolate go lumpy when you try to melt it? Never add milk or water, because it will make the problem worse! Just add a tablespoon of oil or solid shortening and mix well.
96. **Keep Jello-O firm.** Jello-O is a favorite with kids, but it does tend to “melt” after sitting out for a while. A teaspoon of vinegar will keep Jell-O firmer, even on the hottest summer days. Simply add it in place of one teaspoon of cold water.
97. **Roll out dough without a sticky mess.** Professionals use a slab of marble to roll dough out on so that cleanup is easy. If you don’t have this, instead use a large sheet of waxed paper that is “anchored” to your countertop. To do this, simply moisten the back of the paper with water before laying it down. This will hold it in place while you work. When you’re finished, just toss it out and there are no sticky bits to clean up!
98. **Get fluffier egg whites.** Fluffy egg whites are a great way to add lightness to your baking. The fluffier they are, the more air they contain which makes for a better end result. For the fluffiest egg whites, never tap the whisk on the bowl containing the egg whites. The vibration will cause them to lose their fluffy consistency.
99. **Avoid sinking in your baked goods.** You can prevent ingredients such as chocolate chips, nuts and dried fruit from settling the bottom of your cake by coating them with a light dusting of flour before mixing them into the batter. The flour absorbs some of the surface oil and water that exudes from these ingredients during baking, reducing their tendency to sink to the bottom.



100.        Don't **throw away your brown bananas**. Remove the peel, and toss overripe bananas into a large freezer safe Ziploc bag. Freeze until you have enough for some banana bread, banana muffins or a fruit smoothie. Since the bananas are already peeled you can easily measure exactly how much you need and simply leave the rest in the freezer for next time.
  
101.        **Make tastier oatmeal cookies and muffins**. Add a different flavor to your oatmeal cookies and muffins by baking oatmeal in a shallow pan for about ten minutes before adding it to the mix. Be sure it does not get too brown or it will take on a bitter taste.