# Help! I haven’t got…

At the Let’s Cook Project we’re all about giving people the skills, knowledge and confidence to cook from scratch. Once you’ve mastered the fundamentals you can move on to more technical dishes and it is worth noting that even the most complex cookery is really just series of stages to get through.

A confident cook will have learnt what flavours go with each other and, armed with a repertoire of different cooking techniques, will be able to rustle up the tastiest meals at the drop of a hat. All too often though we may look at a recipe and dismiss it because we haven’t got a certain ingredient that’s listed. Sometimes it is essential to have exactly what’s required – baking is a science and requires precision, but cookery is an art and, as such, forgives a substitution here and there.

Foods fall into families and knowledge of those can help you out when dinnertime beckons and there’s not an onion to be found.

Alliums

White Onions, Red Onions, Brown Onions, Spring Onions, Leeks, Garlic, Chives

For the base of a pasta sauce or casserole you can easily substitute a white onion with red onions or spring onions. For a salad asking for spring onions a white onion may be too strong but soak it in a little vinegar or lemon juice to mellow the flavour. Tomato sauces will be just as good with lots of garlic.

Berries –

Blackberries, Blueberries, Blackcurrants, Cherries, Raspberries, Strawberries etc

Some are a bit sharper, some are bit sweeter but all in all they’ll all work with what your recipe asks for.

Beans

Black eyed, Chickpeas, Cannellini, Borlotti, Kidney, Green Lentils, Haricot, dried beans are a cheap source of protein but, to be honest, a bit of a faff! Tinned beans on the other hand are a great store cupboard standby. For meat free meals green lentils make a great base for a bolognese, a chilli con carne wouldn’t be the same without kidney beans but don’t get hung up on having exactly the right ones they’re all pretty much interchangeable even baked beans at a push.

# Help! I haven’t got…

Brassicas

Broccoli, Brussel Sprouts, Cauliflower, Kale

Did you know that kale comes from the same family as broccoli which is also related to Brussel sprouts? Getting little people to eat their greens has always been and always will be one of life’s battles but it may be worth knowing that cauliflower cheese is just as good made with broccoli aka small trees! Kale tossed in a little oil and baked in a hot oven makes great little crisps (add some paprika for a kick) and raw cauliflower whizzed up in a food processor is a tasty and healthy alternative to couscous.

Cheese

Blue, Cheddar, Cream, Parmesan

The best kind of cheese for hiding a horse is Marscapone but it’s also helpful to know that if a recipe asks for parmesan you can easily swap it for mature cheddar. Generally, it’s better to cook with mature or extra mature cheese as you’ll need less to add flavour. It’s also worth noting that not all cheese is vegetarian... some use animal rennet in the cheesemaking process so look for the little green V on the label if you need a meat free version.

Chillis

Red, Green, Birds Eye, Chipotle, Dried Chilli Flakes, Chilli Powder, (Smoked) Paprika, Cayenne

A little bit of spice can go a long way to lift a dish out of the doldrums, a lot may not be for the feint hearted but they all stem from the same family of capsicums and ultimately they’re all there to provide some heat.

Going meat free? Our top tip – try a little chipotle paste in your tomato-based sauces like Boston Beans. It’ll add some spice, some smokiness and a depth of flavour.

Citrus

Lemon, Lime, Orange, Grapefruit

In Chinese cookery there are four pillars of flavour – salty, sweet, hot and sour. Citrus fruit are brilliant at adding a sour note to all food – not just a stir-fry. It is the acid in citrus that makes other flavours sing! It’s why we might squeeze some lemon on a piece of fried fish for example.

But what if your recipe asks for lemons and all you have are limes? It’s fine, just remember that lemons are a little bit sharper than limes. Making a lemon drizzle cake with oranges instead – go for it…absolutely no reason why not!

# Help! I haven’t got…

Curry

Balti, Madras, Jalfrezi, Rogan Josh

All curries have their own subtleties and creating the perfect blend of aromatics and spices is something to be mastered. Ready-made spice pastes (not sauces) are a really good shortcut for the home cook. In a hurry for a curry there’s no need to worry which one you use but keep an eye on the heat level on the label.

Dairy (Alternatives)

Soya, Rice, Oat, Pea, Coconut etc

Thankfully, having an allergy or intolerance to dairy isn’t the dilemma it used to be. Even your local corner shop will have an alternative to milk and the range of other products such as cheeses, creams and spreads is vast now. However not all dairy alternatives behave the same way when cooked and can split or curdle. Checking the label is a good start or even look at the manufacturer’s website. Our top tip – a teaspoon of cornflour in a sauce will act as a stabiliser and help to keep your dairy free pasta sauce smooth.

Dried

We’ve already mentioned dried beans as being a kerfuffle but other dried things are great! Dried herbs and spices can really lift a dish and, at a fraction of the cost of fresh, they keep for ages in a cool dry place. Add a handful of dried fruit to a regular breakfast cereal to count towards your five a day or mix in some sultanas with your apples in a crumble.

Fruit

Apples, Bananas, Mangoes, Pears, Peaches, Kiwis etc.

We all know that we should be getting five portions of fruit and veg a day, for adults a portion is 80g or about a handful. Don’t stress if it’s not all fresh though, frozen or tinned is just as good, juiced or dried are OK but go easy as they are higher in sugars than in their natural state. It’s also OK to mix up your fruits – fruit kebabs for a picnic or just a fruit salad, no blackberries for that crumble? No worries just throw in a few raisins instead.

# Help! I haven’t got…

Herbs

Basil, Bay, Coriander, Dill, Oregano, Parsley, Rosemary, Sage, Thyme

We’ve already mentioned dried herbs but fresh are great too. Herbs really add their own distinctive personality to a dish- pesto without lots of fresh basil just wouldn’t be pesto! Herbs are easy to grow in a pot on a windowsill or in the garden. In cooking its worth remembering the golden rule - hard at the start and soft at the end. Hard herbs like bay, rosemary and thyme go in at the start of cooking to infuse your dish whilst soft herbs like parsley, basil and coriander go in right at the end or they’ll lose all their flavour.

Noodles

Wheat, Rice, Egg, Soba

It is thought that the Italians were first introduced to pasta when Marco Polo, a 13th Century spice merchant, brought noodles back from the far east.

Noodles are a fun, inexpensive and easy to cook source of carbohydrate – whatever you have to hand will work just soak them in hot water and you’re ready to add them to a stir fry or even as an easy take away lunch! Try and avoid the ‘ready noodle pots’ though as they tend to be very high in salt. Avoiding wheat or gluten?? Rice noodles mean you don’t have to miss out.

Oil

Coconut, Sunflower, Vegetable, Rapeseed, Sesame, Olive (inc. Extra Virgin)

This section is slightly longer but when oil is the starting point of many dishes it is worth getting it right. Different recipes will ask for different oils and there is a reason for that. Oils and fats have different smoke points which is the temperature at which they, unsurprisingly, start to smoke. Other oils will be used because they either have little taste or, conversely, lots of flavour.

We’d recommend that you probably only really need two types in your cupboard – Sunflower and Extra Virgin Olive Oil. Sunflower oil will serve all your frying, roasting and greasing tin needs and make a great base for a lightly flavoured salad dressing. Extra Virgin Olive Oil should never be used for cooking, you pay a little more for great flavour and heating it up just kills that but a drizzle on pasta dishes just before serving or on a simple salad of tomatoes can turn something simple into something extraordinary.

# Help! I haven’t got…

If you were to want a third oil then a small bottle of sesame oil will serve you well but, again, not for cooking with. Just a few drops on a stir fry just before serving will yield amazing aromas.

Coconut Oil is the relative new kid on the block and purported to have many additional health benefits, it is worth noting that coconut oil is actually a saturated fat. Also remember that no matter where your fat comes from they all have the same calorific value of 7 calories per gram.

Pasta

Fusilli, Penne, Spaghetti, Tagliatelle, Macaroni (to name a few)

According to the national pasta association there are around 600 different pasta shapes in the world, each shape is believed to have characteristics that lend themselves to different sauces. Did you know that Spaghetti Bolognese isn’t even an Italian dish? In Bologna a ragu (sauce) would traditionally be served with Tagliatelle (flat noodles). Basically don’t worry about it – serve your sauce with whatever pasta you have to hand but remember a true Italian will always take the pasta to the sauce and mix together in the pan not serve the sauce on the pasta!

Potatoes / Sweet Potatoes

Maris Piper, King Edward, Jersey Royal, Pink Fir, Yam

The humble potato is actually where the UK gets most of its vitamin C from! Technically a tuber and not a vegetable it counts towards your daily intake of starchy foods and not as one of your five a day. Some varieties are waxy and some are starchy but if you stick to the reliable ‘white potato’ it will perform most jobs like boiling, mashing, roasting and making potato wedges.

Technically, a yam isn’t the same thing as a sweet potato but often they’re labelled the same. A sweet potato has orange flesh whereas a yam has white. The Yam also tends to be starchier. Either way sweet potatoes make a great change from regular spuds in mash or as wedges.

# Help! I haven’t got…

Quinoa

Pronounced “Keen-wa”

Couscous, actually a tiny form of pasta, is an economic and easy way to ring the changes from serving rice or pasta and brilliant as a base for vegetables to make a one pot salad. However, if you’re steering clear of gluten the wheat content makes it a no go.

Quinoa (spelt nothing like it sounds) is high in protein and cooks in just the same way as couscous.

Rice

Arborio, Carnaroli, Basmati, Long Grain, Pudding

Another great store cupboard staple rice tends to fall into two classifications – short grain or long grain. Short grain (Arborio, Pudding or Carnaroli) is used when you want a creamy consistency as in a risotto or paella. This is because the grains break up and the starch thickens the cooking liquid. Long grain varieties such as basmati make fluffy dishes like a pilaf or pilau.

Whichever type you use always make sure that you never reheat once cooked as this is a common cause of food poisoning.

Salt

Table, Rock, Sea

The recommended daily allowance of salt for a child is just 3g (about half a teaspoon) and for an adult it’s 6g. We do need some salt in our diets but most of that comes from bread and processed foods so we shouldn’t really be adding extra when we cook or at the table.

You’ll notice in this list we’ve talked a lot about herbs, citrus and spices. This is because when you fill your food with flavour with these you really don’t need to be adding extra salt anyway!

# Help! I haven’t got…

Spices

Coriander, Cumin, Fennel, Peppercorns, Nutmeg

Chilli will add heat to a dish but spices will give your food aromas. To preserve the amazing perfume buy spices little and often rather than in bulk (unless you know you’re going to use them). Ground spices are easy but do tend to lose their flavour more quickly so, if you can, buy whole spices and grind them yourself. They’ll also keep a lot longer in a sealed jar in a cool dark place.

Tomatoes

Cherry, Plum, Chopped, Passata, Puree

A real kitchen hero! The tomato features in so many dishes (not just ketchup!). Generally, the smaller varieties like cherry or baby plum are a little bit sweeter, beefsteak tomatoes look impressive but don’t have lots of flavour. Keep fresh tomatoes for salads.

Tomatoes in tins, cartons, jars or bottle are best for cooking with. They’re inexpensive and grown in countries with a lot more sunshine than the UK so you’ll be getting loads more flavour. Sometimes tomato based sauces can be a little bit acidic so just a pinch of sugar helps to balance that out.