THE PROOF SERIES

A PLAYFUL GUIDE TO SIMPLE, HEALTHY COOKING

Cook Proof

Good food without fuss — in plain language, with big type and a few laughs.



John Marshall

PROUDLY CANADIAN



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FREE SAMPLE CHAPTER

By John Marshall

www.buyproof.ca

the foundation

The Well-Stocked Small Kitchen

You don't need a warehouse to cook well — you need the right twenty things. A small, smart pantry turns 'there's nothing to eat' into 'dinner's almost ready' on any given Tuesday.

Clear the decks › Stock the core list › Add your favourites › Shop the pantry first

1. Oils and vinegars — One good cooking oil, one olive oil for finishing, white vinegar and one fancy vinegar. That's the whole oil-and-vinegar department.

2. The grain shelf — Rice, pasta (two shapes), oats, and one bread/tortilla option. These are the blank canvases of a thousand dinners.

3. Cans and jars — Canned tomatoes, beans, tuna or salmon, and broth. Shelf-stable heroes that wait patiently for their moment.

4. The flavour builders — Onions, garlic, soy sauce, mustard, honey, and canned chipotles or curry paste. Small bottles, enormous impact.

5. Freezer basics — Frozen vegetables, frozen berries, and one emergency protein. The freezer is a time machine for good intentions.

TALE

E STORY

When Ed, 78, from Saskatoon moved to a smaller place, he stocked his new pantry using one rule: 'If I can make three meals from it, it stays.' His entire pantry fits on two shelves now.

'I used to own six kinds of vinegar,' he marvels. 'I have survived just fine with two.'

! A well-stocked pantry means dinner is always 20 minutes away. The goal isn't gourmet — it's never staring into an empty cupboard at 6 p.m.

Take care: Check expiry dates twice a year. Spices lose punch after a year; oils go rancid. A tiny pantry is easy to keep fresh — that's the point.

less is more

Pots, Pans, and the Few You Need

Open the average cupboard and pans tumble out like clowns from a car. Here's the liberating truth: almost everything you cook needs just three vessels. The rest is cupboard decoration.

Audit what you own › Keep the workers › Donate the rest › Buy only gaps

1. The skillet — A 10-inch skillet (frying pan) handles eggs, stir-fries, seared meat, and one-pan dinners. Non-stick or cast iron — your call.

2. The saucepan — A 2-quart saucepan with a lid: soups, oatmeal, rice, reheating. The workhorse you reach for daily.

3. The sheet pan — A rimmed baking tray for roasting vegetables, baking, and sheet-pan suppers. Line with parchment for zero cleanup.

4. The supporting cast — One sharp chef's knife, one cutting board, a wooden spoon, tongs, a colander, and a baking dish. That's the whole team.

5. Release the rest — The fondue set, the third saucepan, the novelty shaped pans — donate them. Someone's first apartment needs them more than your cupboard does.

TALE

E STORY

Professional chefs were asked what three pans they'd keep if stranded on a desert island (with electricity, presumably).

The universal answer: a skillet, a saucepan, and a sheet pan. Marie, 72, from Quebec City downsized to exactly that. 'My cooking got better,' she reports. 'Fewer choices, more confidence.'

!

One good $40 skillet outperforms five cheap pans. When you do buy, buy the best you can afford — it lasts decades and cooks better every day.

Take care: Heavy cast iron is wonderful but genuinely heavy. If lifting is hard, choose lighter stainless or non-stick — the best pan is the one you can lift safely.

shop smart

Smart Shopping for One or Two

Shopping for one or two is a different sport than feeding a family: smaller quantities, more frequent trips, and zero tolerance for the giant bag of spinach that becomes green soup in the crisper. Here's the system.

Plan three dinners › Write the list › Shop the edges › Store it right

1. Plan just three dinners — Not seven — three. Plan Monday to Wednesday, shop, then plan again. Short horizons mean fresher food and less waste.

2. The list, by aisle — Write the list in store order: produce, meat, dairy, dry goods. You'll stop backtracking and impulse-buying.

3. Shop the edges — Fresh food lives around the store's perimeter; the middle aisles hold the processed stuff. Edges first, middle with purpose.

4. Buy small, buy frozen — Small formats for fresh items; frozen for everything else. Frozen vegetables are picked ripe and waste nothing.

5. The hungry rule — Never shop hungry. Eat a snack first. Your cart — and your budget — will thank you.

TALE

E STORY

Grocery shopping used to take Helen, 75, from Penticton ninety minutes and end with wilted lettuce guilt.
Now she shops with a list organized by store layout, twice a week, in and out in twenty minutes. 'The list is the whole trick,' she says. 'And never shopping hungry. That's the other whole trick.'

!

Canadians throw away a shocking amount of food — and most of it is produce bought with good intentions. Shopping twice weekly for fresh items cuts waste dramatically.

Take care: 'Buy one get one' deals are only deals if you'll use both before they spoil. For singles, the second free yogurt often becomes expensive garbage.

every item has an address

The Fridge, Organized

The average fridge is a archaeological dig: mysterious containers in the back, condiments from another era in the door. Zones — every item with an address — end the excavation forever.

Empty and wipe › Assign zones › Label the leftovers › Maintain weekly

1. Top shelf: ready-to-eat — Leftovers, drinks, yogurt, herbs. Eye-level, visible, eaten first. Nothing hides up here.

2. Middle shelf: dairy and eggs — Milk, cheese, eggs — the temperature is most stable here. (Despite the molded shape, the door is the worst place for milk.)

3. Bottom shelf: raw meat — Raw meat goes low so drips can't contaminate anything below. On a plate or tray, always.

4. Drawers: produce — Vegetables in high humidity, fruit in low. Washed and ready produce gets eaten; buried produce gets buried.

5. Door: condiments only — The door is warmest — fine for mustard and jam, terrible for milk and eggs. Relocate accordingly.

TALE

TRUE STORY

After reorganizing her fridge by zones, Dorothy, 79, from Winnipeg stopped finding science experiments in the back.

'Everything has an address now,' she says proudly. 'The leftovers live on the middle shelf, eye level, where they can be seen and eaten. It changed my life more than it should have.'

! Your fridge should run at 4°C (40°F) or below. A $5 fridge thermometer removes all guesswork — and prevents a lot of quiet spoilage.

Take care: Clean spills immediately and toss expired items weekly. A five-minute Friday fridge check prevents most food-safety surprises.

tiny flavour library

Spices: The Tiny Flavour Library

Spices are the difference between 'chicken again' and 'oh, what's in this?' Seven small jars transform a plain kitchen into a flavour workshop. You don't need the whole rack — just the greatest hits.

Start with seven › Store them right › Bloom for flavour › Replace yearly

1. The essential seven — Black pepper, garlic powder, cumin, paprika, oregano, cinnamon, and chili flakes. These seven season 90% of home cooking.

2. Salt matters too — One box of kosher or sea salt for cooking (easier to pinch than table salt), plus your regular shaker. Salt is a spice too.

3. Store away from heat — Not above the stove! Heat and steam kill flavour. A cool drawer or cupboard keeps spices potent.

4. Bloom for magic — Sizzle spices in hot oil for 30 seconds before adding other ingredients. This 'blooming' wakes up flavours dramatically.

5. Taste and adjust — Spices are suggestions, not laws. Start with less, taste, add more. Your tongue is the final authority.

TALE

E STORY

Sam, 74, from Toronto owned one spice: 'pepper, maybe from 2015.' His daughter bought him seven small jars and a label maker.

Six months later he was blooming cumin seeds and saying things like 'needs acid.' His daughter is 'cautiously proud and slightly afraid.'

!

Ground spices fade after about a year. Buy small jars, sniff before using — if there's no aroma, there's no flavour — and date the lids.

Take care: Spice blends can hide a lot of salt. Check labels if you're watching sodium — or blend your own from single spices.

your best friend

Your Knife, Your Best Friend

The chef's knife is the single most important tool in your kitchen — and the most misunderstood. One good knife, kept sharp and handled right, does 95% of all cutting. Here's how to choose it and befriend it.

Choose one good knife › Learn the grip › Practice the claw › Respect the blade

1. The 8-inch chef's knife — One good 8-inch (20 cm) chef's knife beats a block of mediocre ones. Hold it in the store — it should feel balanced, not handle-heavy.

2. The pinch grip — Pinch the blade just above the handle between thumb and forefinger, wrap remaining fingers around the handle. Control lives in the pinch.

3. The rocking motion — Tip stays on the board, heel rises and falls. Let the knife's weight do the work; you're guiding, not forcing.

4. Cut on wood or plastic — Never on glass, granite, or plates — they murder edges. A $15 wooden board protects a $60 knife.

TALE

E STORY

For years, Joan, 71, from Halifax chopped vegetables with a dull paring knife and wondered why cooking felt like a chore.

Then a friend gave her a real chef's knife — sharp, weighty, balanced. 'It was like going from a tricycle to a bicycle,' Joan says. 'I actually enjoy chopping now.'

!

A sharp knife is safer than a dull one: sharp blades go where you aim them; dull blades slip. If it can't slice a tomato cleanly, it's dull.

Take care: A falling knife has no handle — let it drop and step back. Never try to catch it. Your toes will thank you; the floor is washable.

fingertips stay attached

The Claw Grip

The claw grip — fingertips curled under, knuckles guiding the blade — looks odd and works brilliantly. It's the difference between confident chopping and nervous hacking. Ten minutes of practice changes everything.

Make the claw › Go slowly › Practice on soft foods › Speed comes later

1. Form the claw — Fingertips tucked under, knuckles forward like a cat's paw. The flat of the blade slides against your knuckles — they become the guide.

2. Anchor the food — Press the food firmly to the board with the claw hand. Wobbly food plus sharp knife equals excitement of the wrong kind.

3. Small, even pieces — Aim for uniform size, not tiny size. Even pieces cook evenly; ragged pieces burn on the edges and stay raw inside.

4. Practice foods — Start with mushrooms, zucchini, and bananas — soft, forgiving, cheap. Onions come after graduation.

5. Slow is smooth — Deliberate, rhythmic cuts. Speed arrives on its own after a few weeks; chasing it early is how fingers get shortened.

TALE

E STORY

The claw grip felt ridiculous to Bob, 77, from Regina — 'like holding a kitten I was afraid of.' Two weeks of practice later, he was dicing onions at respectable speed with all ten fingers intact.

'My wife stopped hovering,' he reports. 'That alone was worth the practice.'

!

Professional chefs cut fast because they cut thousands of onions. You need safe and steady, not fast — speed is a byproduct of practice, never the goal.

Take care: Cut away from your body, and never cut toward your holding hand. If a cut needs stitches or won't stop bleeding, get medical help — no heroics.

the 30-second habit

Keeping Knives Sharp

Knives don't stay sharp by themselves — but keeping them sharp is easier than most people think. A honing steel, thirty seconds, and a yearly professional sharpening keep your best friend keen for decades.

Hone regularly › Sharpen yearly › Test on tomato › Store safely

1. Hone before big jobs — A few strokes per side on the honing steel realigns the edge. It's maintenance, not sharpening — quick and easy.

2. The angle — Hold the steel vertical, blade at about 20 degrees, and sweep down and across. Light pressure — you're straightening, not grinding.

3. Sharpen yearly — When honing stops helping, the knife needs real sharpening. Many kitchen stores offer it for a few dollars per knife.

4. The tomato test — A sharp knife slices a ripe tomato with barely any pressure. If you're sawing, it's time for attention.

5. Store blades safe — In a block, on a magnetic strip, or with blade guards — never loose in a drawer. Loose knives dull fast and bite hands.

TALE

STORY

Ruth's knives were so dull they 'could barely cut butter on a warm day.' A $12 honing steel and a two-minute video changed everything.

'I honed them while watching the news,' she says. 'By the weather report, I had new knives. Same knives. New knives.'

!

Honing (realigning the edge) is a 30-second job you do often; sharpening (grinding a new edge) is a yearly job, often best left to professionals.

Take care: Electric pull-through sharpeners remove a lot of metal fast and can ruin good knives. For quality blades, use a steel for maintenance and a pro for sharpening.

the 20-second habit

Wash Your Hands Like You Mean It

Handwashing is the cheapest, simplest food-safety tool ever invented — and the most skipped. In a home kitchen, clean hands prevent more illness than every gadget combined. Here's the proper drill.

Wash often › **Wash well** › **Dry fully** › **Repeat always**

1. When to wash — Before cooking, after touching raw meat or eggs, after the bathroom, after pets, after blowing your nose. When in doubt, wash.

2. How to wash — Warm water, soap, twenty seconds — backs of hands, between fingers, under nails. Then rinse well.

3. Dry completely — Wet hands spread germs faster than dry ones. Clean towel or paper towel — and replace kitchen towels often.

4. The towel rule — One towel for hands, not for dishes, not for spills. When it smells even slightly off, it's overdue for the laundry.

5. Gloves are optional — Home cooks don't need gloves — clean bare hands with short nails are safer and more sensitive. Just wash them like you mean it.

TALE

STORY

During a cooking class, the instructor asked the class when to wash hands.

Answers ranged from 'when they look dirty' to 'what?' By the end, everyone was singing 'Happy Birthday' twice at the sink. 'I have washed my hands ten thousand times,' said one student, 73, 'and never once properly.'

!

Twenty seconds with soap — about two rounds of 'Happy Birthday' — removes the vast majority of germs. Hand sanitizer is a backup, not a replacement, in the kitchen.

Take care: If you have a cut on your hand, cover it with a waterproof bandage (plus a glove if handling food). Open wounds and food are a bad combination.

containing the invisible

The Raw Meat Rules

Raw meat, poultry, and seafood can carry bacteria that proper cooking destroys — but only if those germs don't hitchhike onto your salad first. Four simple rules keep the invisible enemies contained.

Separate always › Wash between › Cook it through › When in doubt, throw it out

1. Separate — Raw meat gets its own cutting board (or goes first, then the board gets washed). Never let raw juices touch ready-to-eat food.

2. The bottom-shelf rule — Store raw meat on the fridge's bottom shelf, on a plate. Gravity is real; drips happen; planning beats mopping.

3. Wash between tasks — Cut the chicken? Wash the board, the knife, and your hands before the vegetables. Every time, no exceptions.

4. Don't wash the chicken — Rinsing raw poultry splashes bacteria around the sink. It doesn't clean the bird — cooking does. Skip the rinse.

5. Marinate in the fridge — Countertop marinating is bacteria's happy hour. Fridge always — and never reuse marinade without boiling it first.

TALE

STORY

The great chicken-juice incident of 2019 taught the Mendez family a permanent lesson: raw chicken on the top shelf dripped onto the birthday cake below.

'We ate pizza that year,' Mrs. Mendez says. 'Now raw meat lives on the bottom shelf, on a plate, and the cake lives far, far away.'

! You can't see, smell, or taste the bacteria that cause food poisoning. The rules aren't fussy — they're the only defence against invisible risks.

Take care: If raw meat touched something and you're unsure — the salad, the clean plate — the safe answer is to discard or recook. Guessing games with germs always end badly.

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