

How To Season Foods for Gourmet Flavor and Optimal Nutrition

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I was seated at dinner one evening in a lovely Seattle restaurant with chef Rebecca Katz and culinary instructor Catherine McConkie. We were eating a puréed soup which, though good, was not quite excellent. I could tell it was missing “something,” but what? The chefs at the table gently swished the soup around their palates and proclaimed it needed a smidgeon of acid. Lemon would do the trick, so I fished the wedge of lemon out of my drinking water, and added a few drops to my soup. It was suddenly transformed into a great soup: vibrant, warm, smooth and unexpected. Wow. How does a chef know what will bring out the best flavors in a dish? If you could give your meals a bit of that culinary magic, wouldn’t that encourage you to eat the very best anti-cancer diet and, most importantly, really look forward to it?



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Many people eat mediocre tasting food, focusing on the fact that specific foods, like vegetables, are healthy for us. But superbly delicious, gourmet food—the domain of master chefs—is within your reach. And the very strategies that create outstanding flavor also increase the nutritional value of a dish.

Let’s explore an example. Kale is a super nutritious leafy green vegetable. Steaming kale and eating it plain is good. But kale sautéed in olive oil with garlic, onions, and red pepper flakes then drizzled with balsamic vinegar is superb. Serendipitously, these simple culinary additions significantly increase the nutrient density and cancer-fighting power of the kale. Oil is necessary for the absorption of cancer-fighting

carotenoids in kale. The acid, vinegar or lemon, improves the bioavailability of minerals (kale is a rich source of calcium). The garlic, onions and peppers add phytonutrients that act synergistically with those in the kale to shift our gene expression away from cancer. So, not only does the chef’s sautéed version of kale taste better, it’s actually far more nutritious than eating the vegetable plain! Your taste buds are your guide to optimal nutrition.

But I Followed the Recipe Ever have the experience where you followed a recipe exactly, but the results weren’t as awesome as expected? Or a dish that’s great one night, is less than impressive another time you make it? It’s because ingredients vary. The flavor, texture and color are influenced by how an ingredient is grown, when it’s harvested, how it’s stored, its age, how it is heated, and the equipment it came in contact with. For example, kale grown in the summer can be bitter; but that harvested in fall and early winter is sweeter and more flavorful.

A recipe is for interpreting: more like a general guideline than a set

Marrying Flavor and Nutrition in Your Cooking			
Flavor Balancer	Examples	Culinary Job	Nutritional Job
Aromatic	garlic, onion, shallots, citrus zest, ginger, pepper, herbs & spices	Provide depth of flavor and interest	Provide modulators of healthy gene expression (antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, NFkB inhibitors)
Fat	olive oil, butter, coconut oil, sesame oil	Distribute flavors across the palate, add creaminess (rich mouth feel)	Needed for absorption of phytonutrients (carotenoids), increases satiety
Acid or Sour	lemon, lime, vinegar, tamarind, sumac, ponzu, tomatoes, pickles, caneberries	Add “zing,” brighten flavors	Increase absorption of minerals, stimulate digestion
Salt	kosher or sea salt, tamari or soy sauce, MSG-free bouillon (“Better than Bouillon” brand), fish sauce, nitrate-free bacon or ham	Bring out flavors, reduce blandness, move flavor to the front of the tongue (where it’s best perceived)	Improve appetite, balanced ratio with potassium essential for energy and cellular metabolism
Sweet	maple syrup, honey, agave, other low-glycemic sweeteners, apples, fruits, caramelized onions	Calm harsh, sour or spicy flavors, “round out” or harmonize the flavors	Increase desire to eat and sense of pleasure. Provide sense of being nourished.

of fixed instructions. Tasting throughout the cooking process, and working to balance the flavors, is needed with every recipe.

Begin with Superior Ingredients The first step in achieving a great dish is in selecting high quality ingredients: local, organic, seasonal, and harvested at the peak of ripeness. Once harvested, produce begins to lose nutritional value, so when you select locally grown foods, their nutrient density is much higher than foods that have been shipped from afar. Organic foods, because they are grown in mineral-rich soils, have higher levels of vitamins and minerals, as well as phytonutrients. A plant's cancer-fighting phytonutrients serve as its host-defense system to deter pests. When plants are sprayed with agricultural chemicals, they don't need to develop these compounds to protect themselves, and their nutritional value is diminished as a result. To select superior produce, choose it by color, touch and scent. Taste a sample if it's offered. Ever noticed how vine-ripened tomatoes harvested from your own garden (or from the farmer's market or CSA) taste so superior to the pale, mealy counterparts found in supermarkets mid-winter? The missing yumminess is your clue to a lack of nutrients. For animal-based ingredients, select pasture-raised, and organic (hormone-free and antibiotic-free) options. Your insistence on superior ingredients helps you obtain the highest nutrition!

Adjusting the Flavor of a Dish A chef works to balance the flavor of a dish, so that no one flavor overpowers the others, and together the flavors work as a harmonious and delightful whole. Developing this ability will help you be successful more than any other kitchen skill. Balancing flavors allows you to brighten a drab dish, rescue something that's on the brink of disaster, or transform an ordinary meal into an extraordinary one. Rebecca Katz—author two excellent cookbooks: *One Bite at a Time* and *The Cancer-Fighting Kitchen*—teaches a simple technique for creating “yum” that she calls FASS. The acronym stands for the four cornerstones of creating amazing flavor: fat, acid, salt and sweet.

The first rule of flavor balancing is taste, taste, taste! Even before you begin a recipe, consider sampling your ingredients to get a sense of their qualities. A recipe that calls for bananas may need less sweetener if they are very ripe and sweet, or you may need a bit of extra sweetener if your bananas are under ripe. Continue tasting as you prepare the dish. Adjust, taste again, and re-adjust the dish. Add flavor adjustors—see guidelines below—in small amounts: you can always add more, but you can't add less (particularly important with salt). For most recipes, you will begin by sautéing the aromatics (garlic, onions, celery) in some oil with a pinch of salt. Follow the recipe as directed, tasting as you go. In the last few minutes of preparation, just before serving, adjust with salt, acid and sweetness as needed.

Too spicy? Add some sweetness or creaminess (dairy cuts heat)

Too sweet? Add some sour or heat (cayenne, red pepper flakes, chili powder, curry, mustard, black pepper, coriander)

Too sour? Add sweet

Too bland? Add salt or some heat

Too salty? Add sour. A sliced raw potato cooked in the dish for a few minutes then discarded can help absorb excess salt

Just needs a spark? Add acid or one of the aromatics added at the end of cooking, or just a touch of heat

Need more depth? Start with aromatics next time (or sauté them separately and add to the dish now).

Too harsh? Try just a touch of sweetness, such as 1/4 tsp Grade B maple syrup to a pot of soup.

To gain confidence using FASS, try this experiment. Roast a whole, un-peeled butternut squash in the oven at 400°F for one hour until tender. Cool enough to handle, then cut in half, remove the seeds, and scoop the flesh into a blender or food processor. Now sauté one diced yellow onion and one minced clove of garlic in olive oil for 3-4 minutes and add to blender. Purée until smooth and creamy, adding water or broth as needed to achieve desired soup consistency. Now, it's time to FASS! Taste the unseasoned soup and consider the flavor. Add a generous pinch of salt and taste again. Add a squeeze of lemon and taste. Now add about 1/4 tsp maple syrup (no need to worry about glycemic issues with such a small amount). Taste again. Notice how the flavor shifts and improves with each addition. You are training your taste buds in the skill of culinary artistry, while at the same time ramping up the nutritional value of the soup!

If you are going through cancer treatment, temporary changes to your taste buds and olfactory perception can make foods taste off. You can use the FASS technique to adjust your portion so that it tastes right to you.

Just as you keep your pantry stocked with essentials, you may wish to ensure you always have your FASS essentials on hand. Good quality kosher or sea salt, extra-virgin olive oil (in a dark-colored glass bottle to protect it from oxidation), lemons or limes, and some grade B maple syrup. For spices, purchase in small amounts as they will lose their vibrancy after 6 months and need to be replaced. Keep them stored in air-tight containers in a cool, dark place.

