

Creative Cooking

Try these exercises to add variety (and fun) to your culinary repertoire.

If you feel like your cooking is stuck in a rut, try one—or all—of these exercises. We divided them in seven categories: flavor, cuisine, ingredient, technique, cooking tool, entertaining, and technology. We hope breaking out of your kitchen routine will inspire your cooking and even spur creativity in other aspects of your life.

Flavor: Add Hazelnut Oil

A light golden color, slightly darker than vegetable oil, hazelnut oil imparts a toasty, smooth, delicate, buttery flavor. It's great on sliced pears and Brie cheese, or drizzled over butternut squash with brown sugar and can be used in place of vegetable oils in most vinaigrettes. Our favorite brands are Jean-Marc Montegottero Virgin Hazelnut Oil (www.dibruno.com) and Les Moulins Dorés (www.splendidpalate.com)

Once you've experimented a bit, use some of your reserve in this recipe: [Cherry-Hazelnut Oatmeal](#)



Cuisine: Try Thai

To learn something new, try this menu full of traditional Thai dishes. Thai food is known for surprising you on the first bite, you're instantly rewarded with perhaps an accent or spice, a jolt of sweet or sour flavoring, or a combination of textures—soft, chewy, creamy, and crunchy—that intrigue and tease the palate. Yet regardless of the individual recipe or the complexity of the ingredients, Thai food gets its distinct flavors from four basic seasonings: salt, garlic, cilantro, and Thai or white peppercorn. These, in turn, are supported by a cast of chiles and fish sauce.

Feeling adventurous? Try this Thai menu:

[Glass-Noodle Salad with Chicken and Shrimp](#) or [Coconut Soup with Chicken](#)
[Drunken Stir-Fried Beef with Green Beans](#)

Learn more about Thai cuisine in our ["How to Cook Thai"](#) feature.



Ingredient: Experiment with Quinoa

Gaining popularity, quinoa tastes wonderful and has a nice crunch. It's also a good source of protein and fiber, 1/2 cup of quinoa has 14 grams of protein and 6 grams of fiber. Try it for breakfast with maple syrup and milk, add it to pancake and muffin batter, or mix it with potatoes for croquettes. The tiny beige-colored seeds, about the size of pellets of couscous, cook in about 20 minutes. The only special handling required with quinoa is to give it a good rinse before cooking; otherwise, the grains can be bitter.

Here are two recipe recommendations:

1. [Quinoa Chowder with Spinach, Feta Cheese, and Green Onions](#)
2. [Quinoa and Potato Croquettes](#)



Technique: Roll Sushi

The thought of making sushi may be intimidating at first, but it's actually pretty easy. And it's far less expensive than eating at a sushi bar. Sushi refers to rice, after all, and a few rolls require just a small amount of filling. Our sushi rolls include cooked shrimp and fish, but you can substitute any vegetables or seafood you want. Just cut ingredients into long, thin strips to make sure they'll fit in your roll. It's also important to use short-grain rice, which is sticky after cooking. If your grocery store doesn't carry it, an Asian specialty market certainly will. Go ahead, get started:

[Rolling Sushi](#)
[Shaping Temaki](#)
[Forming Nigiri](#)

Cooking Tool: Get the Silpat Mat

Made of a flexible fiberglass and silicone weave, the Silpat was first introduced in France by bakeware manufacturer Demarle as a professional baker's tool. Lately, though, it's made inroads in home kitchens worldwide and is widely available at cookware shops and through specialty catalogs.

"It's perfect as both a work and baking surface for candy making because the candy simply will not stick," says test kitchens staffer Kathryn Conrad. "There's no scorching, no burning, no worry." Food stylist Kellie Gerber Kelley recommends the Silpat for meringues or fruit leathers. "There's no need for parchment."

You pipe the meringues or spread the fruit on the Silpat, and then just pull them off once you're done," she says. "It's especially good for light baking because there's no need to grease it with spray or butter," Conrad adds. And, she points out, when used as an everyday pan liner, the Silpat puts old pans that have lost their nonstick surfaces back to good use. "I baked it up to 500 degrees, put it in the dishwasher, froze it, and rolled it repeatedly," she says. The only thing you shouldn't do with a Silpat is cut or crease it. Check www.demarleusa.com or call 888-353-9726 for pricing and availability information.



Entertaining: Throw a Pasta Bar Party

Please everyone—and have fun in the process—by serving one basic pasta and four different sauces at your next party. Each sauce recipe makes enough for one serving, so if you or your guests want more, just multiply the ingredients by the number of servings needed. To keep things simple, we recommend choosing two or three sauces, but you know best how to satisfy your crew.

Find out more [here](#)

Technology: Share Your Cooking with the World

If you want to rave about your cheesecake recipe or pass along a pesto freezing tip, there are plenty of ways share your culinary delight. One trend is to "web log" or often called "blog" about your food musings.

Blogs are online journals open to the public. A favorite of ours is Cooking with [Amy](#) and [Chocolate and Zucchini](#). We even tried blogging ourselves; visit [Cooking Light Confidential](#) to read the staff's thoughts on work and food—often related as you might guess. To get started, set up an account with a web log service—some are free and others require a minimal fee. Popular web log services are [TypePad](#), [Blogger](#), [WordPress](#).

Whether or not you are ready to take your cooking virtual, food blogs are sure fun to read. Read the below conversation started on our bulletin boards to learn more:

How many Blogs?

A bulletin board conversation of favorite blogs and members' online food journals.

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