



Fixing Common Cooking Mistakes

Do you always burn the garlic or turn pasta into a gummy mess? Learn how to avoid these all-too-common cooking mistakes.

Boiling Pasta in a Pot That's Too Small

Why it's bad: For starters, if you use long noodles, they might not fit unless you break them first. But regardless of the pasta's shape or size, it will probably end up sticky and gummy. "When you add pasta to a small amount of water, it lowers the temperature of the water substantially more than if you added it to a large amount of water, so the water will take longer to return to a boil. In the meantime, the pasta will sit at the bottom of the pot and start to clump up and become mushy unless you are vigilant about stirring," says chef Michael Symon, the owner of five restaurants in Cleveland and an Iron Chef on the Food Network's *Iron Chef America*. Also, your ratio of pasta starch to water will be too high—another cause of sticking.

Do this instead: Unless you are cooking a single serving of pasta (in which case you can get away with a smaller pot), do as Italian grandmothers do: Fill a large pot (5 to 6 quarts) with water and let it come to a rapid boil. Add the pasta and stir it occasionally until it is al dente.

Storing Tomatoes in the Refrigerator

Why it's bad: Tomatoes have delicate cells, and excess cold (or heat, for that matter) causes the cell walls to burst, leaving the tomatoes mealy, says Aki Kamozawa, the author of *Ideas in Food: Great Recipes and Why They Work*. The flavor-producing enzymes are also destroyed, rendering the tomatoes tasteless.

Do this instead: Keep tomatoes on the kitchen counter in a single layer for maximum air circulation, and avoid putting them in direct sunlight. (You can leave cherry and grape tomatoes in their packaging, so long as it contains holes.) To speed ripening, place tomatoes in a paper bag with an apple, this emits ethylene gas, a ripening agent. Once ripe, they'll last for up to 3 days. Some varieties, like plum tomatoes, will keep for up to 5 days.

Cooking With a Cold Pan—and Cold Oil or Butter

Why it's bad: If the oil isn't hot enough, those sautéed vegetables will adhere to the pan like glue, giving you a tough scrubbing job later on. A hot pan and oil bond to create a surface that's virtually nonstick.

Do this instead: Heat an empty pan for at least 1 or 2 minutes. The pan is ready when you can hold your hand about 3 inches above it and feel the heat radiating from the surface. Then add the fat. Oil will shimmer when it's hot; butter should melt and foam. One exception: If you're using a nonstick pan to brown delicate foods,

add the oil or butter before turning on the heat, since some nonstick pans release fumes when they're heated up empty for an extended period.

Adding Garlic Too Early

Why it's bad: Garlic browns in less than a minute. If you add it to the pan with, say, chicken breasts—which need about 15 minutes to cook through—the garlic will scorch and turn bitter long before the meat is finished.

Do this instead: Whenever possible, use sliced garlic or smashed whole cloves, which are less susceptible to burning than minced or pressed garlic. And add garlic close to the end of the cooking process. (The exceptions are long braises, stews, and sauces; the liquid will keep the garlic from scorching.) If a sauté recipe asks for garlic to be added at the beginning, have the remaining ingredients prepped and ready to go so you can add them quickly, before the garlic starts to burn while on its own.

Turning Meat Too Often or Too Soon

Why it's bad: "Think of a wet sponge," says Tucker Bunch, a chef-instructor at the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone, in St. Helena, California. "The more you squeeze, prod, and touch it, the more liquid you expel. A pork chop is no different. Also, the meat won't be in one place long enough to brown. You'll wind up with a tough, gray chop and a wet pan."

Do this instead: Be patient. If you're not sure whether a chop is ready to be flipped, nudge it or use tongs to lift a corner. It will release from the pan when the outside is sufficiently browned. If it sticks, let it continue to cook undisturbed and try again in a minute or so.

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