

Build a Meal

The concept of “Build A Meal” is to plan and research before you delve into the kitchen. This prevents mishaps and lack of ingredients, and ensures a quality meal for you and your guests.

The first step in “Build A Meal” is to determine what you’re going to cook. Considerations are: what’s in season, what’s on sale, how many am I serving, time restraints, picky eaters, budget, weather, cooking method, plating/serving, and so on.

The next 10 steps will walk you through the thought process of “Build A Meal” with emphasis on selecting a region other than your own and building a culinary masterpiece!



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The table to the right shows examples of spices and herbs traditionally used in various regional dishes.

This table is certainly not inclusive of every ethnicity, but it gives you an idea of how to “Build a Meal” from another culinary region.

Garlic and onions are universal seasonings that always heighten the flavor of a dish.

You can apply any of these seasonings to proteins, grains, or vegetables.

| Seasoning Group | Culinary Region | Accompaniments |
|---|-----------------|---|
| Basil, rosemary, thyme, oregano, herbes d’ provence | Italian | Pasta, tomatoes, clams, cheeses: mozzarella, parmesan, asiago, romano, mascarpone |
| Cumin, chili powder, cilantro | Mexican | Ancho, habanero, chilis, jalapeno peppers, Mexican cheeses, beans, avocado, jicama, tortillas |
| Cumin, cardamom, coriander, turmeric, cilantro | Indian | Coconut milk, yogurt, rice, quinoa, chickpeas |
| Dill, cucumber, za’atar, parsley, saffron, sage | Mediterranean | Barley, couscous, pita, kalamata olives, yogurt, dolma, hummus |
| Paprika, saffron, cayenne pepper, parsley | Spanish | Tomatoes, couscous, rice, beans, tortillas |
| Ginger, cloves, star anise, lemongrass | Asian | Noodles, rice, dumplings, broccoli, bamboo shoots, mushrooms, bok choy |

10 Steps to Build a Meal

1 DETERMINE YOUR PROTEIN, GRAIN AND VEGETABLE

Let's say you want to make chicken breasts with brown rice and green beans.

2 PICK A CULINARY REGION

You want to add a Mediterranean flair to your meal. Identify the spices you'll need.

3 DETERMINE HOW YOU PLAN TO COOK THE PROTEIN

Are you going to bake the chicken? Grill it? Or Sauté it on the stove? The cooking method helps determine how best to prep the food for the selected cooking method.

| Seasoning Group | Culinary Region | Accompaniments |
|--|-----------------|---|
| Lavender, Marjoram, Rosemary, Thyme, Oregano | French | Eggplant, tomatoes, squash, cheese |
| Garlic, Cumin, Chili Powder, Cilantro, Oregano | Cuban | Peppers, sweet potatoes, cheeses, black beans |

For instance, if you were grilling the chicken, you wouldn't want to coat it in fresh rosemary, because rosemary is a hard-stemmed herb and would be likely to burn. Instead, you'd want to use ground rosemary as your seasoning choice.

4 DETERMINE WHICH INGREDIENTS YOU NEED

We are going to use yogurt, dill, onion, garlic, sage, parsley and za'atar. We're going to need a little chicken broth, too. And for the green beans, we need some chopped kalamata olives and/or pimentos.

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5 FOOD PREPARATION

Generally speaking, most proteins need to be prepped and seasoned prior to cooking. Trim the fat from poultry, de-bone a fish, remove casing from sausage, and so on. Beef and pork usually doesn't need trimming because you want the fat on the beef to flavor the meat and, there is usually little fat on pork.

A marinade is a combination of oil, acid (lemon, vinegar) or some other liquid (broth) and seasonings. When foods are placed in a marinade, they are *marinating*. Marinating foods are always in a sealed container or plastic bag. A marinade is never re-used over cooked meat unless it is brought to a rolling boil first; otherwise, consider it tainted with bacteria of raw meat.

In our example, we are going to bake the chicken, so we will want to marinate it with ethnic options: we will use a little oil and vinegar, combined with some yogurt, regional seasonings, salt and pepper.

Mix the marinade in a bowl, place the chicken in a sealable plastic bag, pour the marinade in and let it sit in the refrigerator for 30 minutes or so. Rotate the bag every 10 minutes to ensure the chicken breasts are entirely coated.

6 CONSIDER PLATING OPTIONS

In our case of the chicken, rice and green beans, we need to determine how we want to serve the rice and green beans? Do we want a casserole? Do we want the rice on the the side, nice and fluffy? Or do we want it to serve as a rich base for our chicken?

In this example, we will have the rice on the side, nice and fluffy! Our green beans will be submerged in boiling water for about 15 – 20 minutes.

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7 CONSIDER TIMING

When preparing a meal, consider the timing of each dish; the time it takes to prep, cook, and/or rest each dish.

In this example, consider the baked chicken, which will take 45 minutes or so AND the oven has to heat up: the rice, 35 minutes cooking time plus time for the water to come to a boil and the green beans, cook time about 25 minutes, AND the water has to come to a rolling boil first.

You can see by this example that it's going to take about an hour, from start to finish, to get this meal on the table.

First things first; get the meat marinating. Next, bring any liquids to a boil (if needed). Then prep your vegetables (rinse, chop, etc.) Use a kitchen timer or your phone to help keep track—it can get confusing!

In our example, we are going to bake the chicken, so we will want to marinate it with regional seasonings, oil and vinegar, combined with some yogurt, salt and pepper.

Mix the marinade in a bowl, place the chicken in a sealable plastic bag, pour the marinade in and let it sit in the refrigerator for 30 minutes or so. Rotate the bag every 10 minutes to ensure the chicken breasts are entirely coated.

8 CONSIDER VARIETY

When you're cooking a meal for a specific regional flavor, you want a little variety among your dishes. For instance, you don't want the chicken, rice and green beans to all taste the same. You will want to add a little flair to them!

You can easily do this **by incorporating heat, sweet or sour** to a savory dish. Consider adding tangy kalamata olives and creamy feta cheese to the green beans or topping the fluffy rice with a dill butter sauce. Or, use crushed red peppers and feta on the green beans, and put dill and kalamata olives in the rice! Once you've cooked everything, finish off the seasonings by tasting: adding salt, pepper, or other spices as needed.

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9 SERVING

Serving style is a personal preference and usually depends upon the number of diners, seating preference (formal vs. casual) and overall theme of the meal. A family weeknight may be a “sit down together”, or “eat when you can” type situation. In a more formal situation, you might serve buffet, French or American style.

If you’re serving buffet style to a large group, you might want to invest in chafing dishes to keep foods warm. Remember to have serving utensils, as well as cutlery, napkins and salt and pepper where everyone can help themselves.



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10 ENTERTAINING

This is a whole other world that require too much information at this point. The primary goals in hosting and entertaining are: welcome and introduce your guests, don't overdress, be humble, encourage lively conversation and ensure all have a nice time in your home. Oh, and serve amazingly delicious food!