

home cooking with confidence

with good reason

The difference between a professional chef and a home cook is understanding why some things are done and not others, writes CRAIG SQUIRE

WHY does a cake need baking powder or self-raising flour, why don't you put salt on meat before cooking, why don't you use a steel spoon in an aluminum pot and why are some things best cooked covered?

Some cook books and recipes cover some of these "whys" in the form of chef's hints and secrets. However, a lot of home cooks simply follow a recipe by the letter without reading between the lines and learning the why or concept to make a similar dish or the same dish again without again following a recipe.

Generally, the professional chef has learned these answers to the "whys" by word of mouth, experience and trial and error – trade tips passed on over the generations.

For the home cook this would have been more prevalent in generations past when parents and grandparents taught their children to cook.

I will attempt to pass on some of these "trade secrets" – the answers to the "whys" to help you understand the concepts of cooking – which can greatly assist your confidence. Successful cooking, like most things in life, has a lot to do with being confident in what you're doing. A little knowledge in why you do it this way or that way relieves a lot of pressure, especially when you're in a hurry or cooking for friends or family, moreso when everyone's in the kitchen watching you.

Some recipes I will write are going to be based on knowledge and why – they won't all have quantities or a list of ingredients per se.

These recipes will make you learn to cook by experience and taste. This will empower you to make a similar-style dish anytime with pretty much what's in the standard pantry and fridge.

Further articles in this series will cover soups, easy sauces for grills and roasts, dressings for salads and seafood and whatever else I can think of.

I also plan to write a series on sustainable regional foods, tropical dishes, modern Australian dishes including native ingredients (that will be easiest for me), party catering, Sunday lunches and salsas.



Craig Squire is the chef and director of the award-winning Red Ochre Grill in Shields St.

stir-fries



Chicken and egg noodle stir-fry for all the family

Preparation time: 20 minutes

Ingredients:

- 150g chicken breast or thigh per person
- Onion
- Garlic - finely chopped
- Carrot
- Green vegetable
- Mushrooms
- (Don't use celery, zucchini or cauliflower)
- Vegetable oil
- Sesame oil
- Tomato sauce
- Soya sauce or ketjap manis
- Sweet chilli sauce
- Peanut paste
- Chinese five-spice
- 1 pkt egg noodles



I STUDIED Chinese cuisine in 1982-83 at Regency Park College under the guidance of Mary Battersby.

As an 18-year-old Anglo Australian this was enlightening.

This ancient cuisine is steeped in tradition and philosophy. Dishes are based on balance and harmony – ying and yang.

The knowledge I gained then has guided all my cooking since – flavours must work with and not against.

Now to be empowered.

1. Ingredients. There are five essential elements in Chinese and most Asian cuisines. They are salt, sweet, sour, hot and fragrant. Using these in balance will create the perfect flavour harmony every time.

Examples of the five are:

- Salt – soya and fish sauce, dried seafood
- Sweet – cane, palm, coconut sugars and sweetened sauces such as plum and chilli
- Sour – vinegars, citrus juices
- Hot – chilli, peppers, galangal
- Fragrant – sesame oil, herbs, ginger, peanuts, lemongrass, lemon myrtle

Having one of each of these in your pantry is a great start to easy stir-fries and Asian cooking.

2. Balance. The quantity of vegetables should never be greater than the protein (meat or seafood).

3. Experience. When cutting vegetables, consider the cooking times, for example carrots take longer than broccoli or bok choy. So cut the carrots fine and broccoli large.

The meat should be cut into strips about 6x2cm to allow cooking in no more than five minutes. Beef would be thinner than chicken, chicken thinner than fish.

Why you do this is so all the ingredients are cooked together over the same time frame and all are cooked through perfectly.

If you want a strong ginger or garlic flavour, cut the pieces large but thin, if you want these as an underlying flavour cut them very fine.

Have all the ingredients prepared and laid out on the bench before you start cooking.

The key is to be prepared and cook fast.

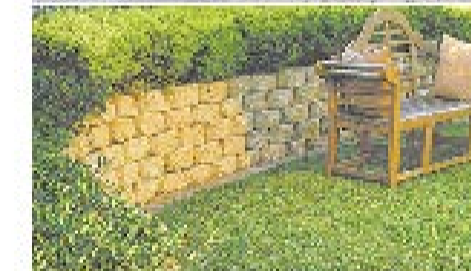
Once everything is prepared this will take no longer than five minutes to cook.



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Cut and prepare chicken and vegetables, lay out side by side on a tray. Blanch noodles per instructions on packet.

Heat about 100ml vegetable oil in wok, when it's really hot place all the chicken in. Stir over, stirring away from yourself so you don't get splashed. Quickly spread evenly over cooking surface of wok, the idea being to keep the wok as hot as possible and cook everything quickly.

After about 1 minute add garlic and all vegetables. Remember, if they have been cut right they will all be cooked perfectly at the end.

Stir together and spread out, turn over so it all cooks evenly.

After another minute add the sauces, a big splash of tomato sauce (don't be shy), about one-third as much of the soya and sweet chilli, a bit less of sesame oil and a big spoon of peanut paste. Turn the heat down a bit, sprinkle some five-spice, add the noodles and stir over.

Now, the most important thing – taste it – it should taste great. If you want a bit more salt, add some soya, some more heat, add some chilli or pepper. The chicken and vegetables should be cooked after 5 minutes. Serve with extra chilli for mum and dad.

Next time use the same concept or philosophy but change the ingredients and or ratios slightly for a new and different dish.