

A Cook's Journal

Tips & Tricks – Bits & Basics (Part 3)

by Connie Tucker

Saving time in the kitchen conserves a cook's energy and saves money. Seasoned cooks know many of these tips and basics, but if you're new to the culinary world, you'll appreciate learning these bits and basics.

Cooking is a sort of chemistry experiment, after all. Mixing acids and bases and applying heat qualifies as science, so results should be consistent and predictable. So even if you flunked chemistry in high school, you can apply these principles with great success! Check out part-1 and part-2 tips and tricks columns on my blog, too.

Tips & Tricks (totally random)

1. **Onions** – Too strong and pungent? Learn how to slice them first: cutting down through the width into rings will give you a lot of exposure to ruptured onion cells thus lots of tears and smelly fumes. Cutting into the side of the onion will give you less cell rupture and more friendly slices.

TIP: After slicing either way, rinse with *hot* water for 45 seconds. Trust me—the onions won't wilt because the pectin that holds the plant cells together won't melt till 185°, and tap water is usually around 140-150°. Onion slices will now be sweet and less pungent.

2. **Beans** – When cooking dried beans, *always* salt the soaking and cooking water. Salt helps the skin stay intact and tender, preventing beans from “blowing out.”

And always add your fully cooked (softened) beans to chili or baked bean liquid. Cooking them in an acidic stew of molasses or tomatoes before they are soft will toughen them or blow them out.

3. **Crème fraîche** is easily made at home by mixing 2 Tbs. of buttermilk with 2 cups of heavy cream. Set aside on the counter covered with a tea towel 6-12 hours till thick. Afterward, store in a closed jar in the refrigerator for up to 2 weeks.
4. **How fresh are your eggs?** Most cartons display a sell-by date and a packing date. The packing date is a 3-digit number above the sell-by date with 001 for January 1st to 365 for December 31. Always use this to determine freshness as eggs must be packed no later than 30 days after they are collected. Refrigerated eggs stay wholesome for 70 days.
5. **Fresh farm eggs** (not commercially distributed) need no refrigeration because they are laid with a built-in “cuticle,” a natural waxy coating that seals the eggs' contents keeping bacteria out and moisture in. Commercial eggs are washed and lose that protection so they need refrigeration.

6. **Test your eggs' freshness** by submerging them in water to cover. Older (but safe) eggs will stand up because a little air has gotten into the shell. Really old eggs will float and should be discarded.
7. **Egg shell color** has no effect on its quality or flavor. Color varies according to the breed of the chicken.
8. **Skin is easily peeled** from many fruits and vegetables (peaches, tomatoes, etc.) by placing them in boiling water for a few minutes then lifting them and plunging in ice water (this is called shocking). Skins will peel right off.
9. **When beating egg whites** for meringue or other uses, place egg whites in an immaculately clean metal or glass bowl, and be sure beaters are also completely clean. Any trace of grease or oil (or yolk) will prevent the whites from frothing properly.
10. **When preparing strawberries for shortcake**, hull and slice them, then sprinkle generously with sugar, toss, cover, and refrigerate for a few hours. This will bring out the juices in the fruit.
11. **Muffin batter** should sit for about 20-30 minutes before it is placed in tins. The extra time allows the baking powder to work its magic for higher, lighter muffins.
12. **Always let meat rest** after cooking. Juices excited by extended periods of heat need to settle before *any* meat is cut. This means steak, roasts, chicken—anything.

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