

A close-up photograph of a plate of food. In the foreground, several seared scallops are arranged on wooden skewers, resting on a bed of spiral-shaped pasta. The scallops are golden-brown with some charring on top. The pasta is coated in a light sauce and garnished with small pieces of red and green vegetables. In the background, a glass of beer is visible, slightly out of focus. The overall lighting is warm and inviting.

seriously simple

Easy Recipes for Creative Cooks

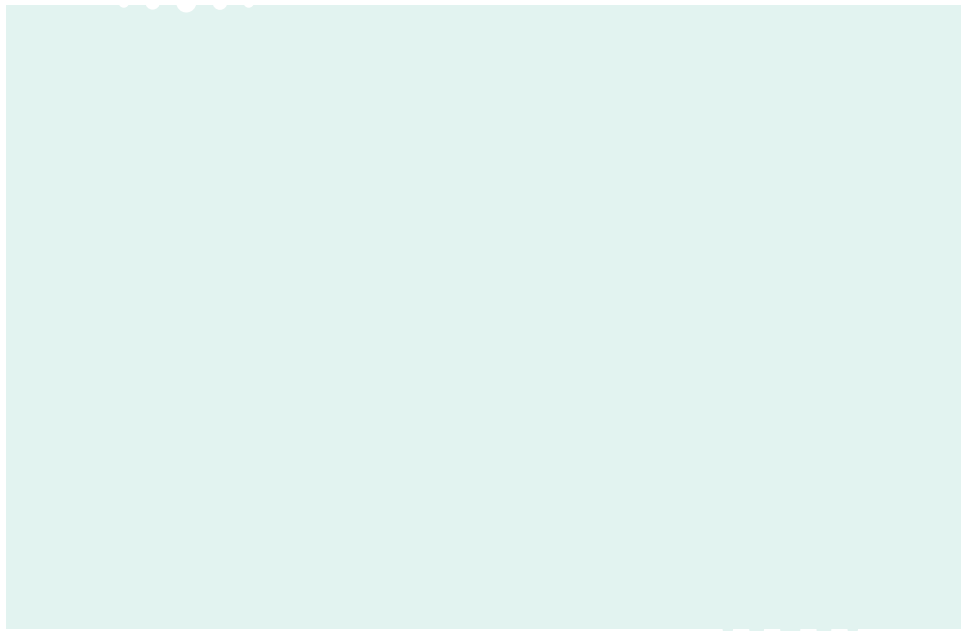
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by **Diane Rossen Worthington**

Photographs by Noel Barnhurst

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CHRONICLE BOOKS
SAN FRANCISCO

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For Denny, who survived my first cooking experiment of deviled eggs and shrimp Louis at the age of eleven and is still my best friend

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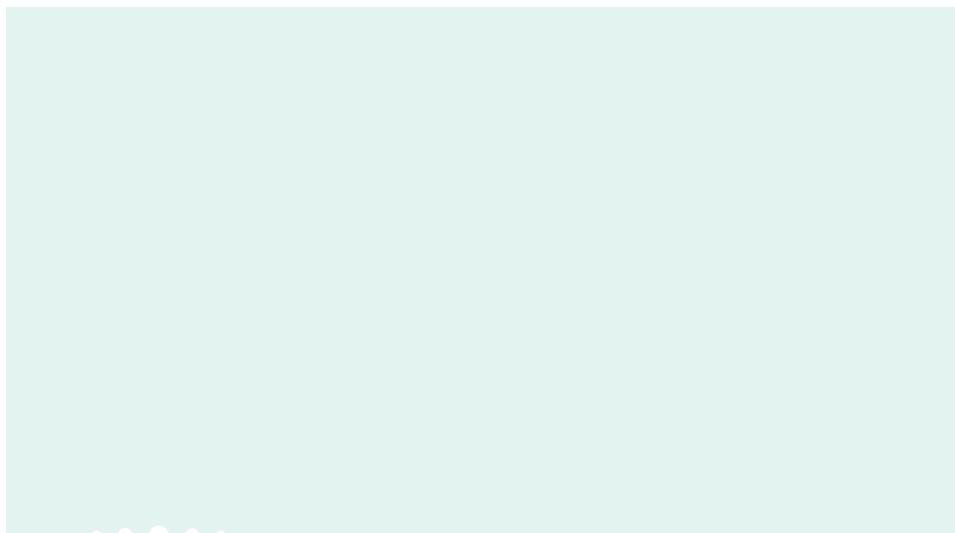
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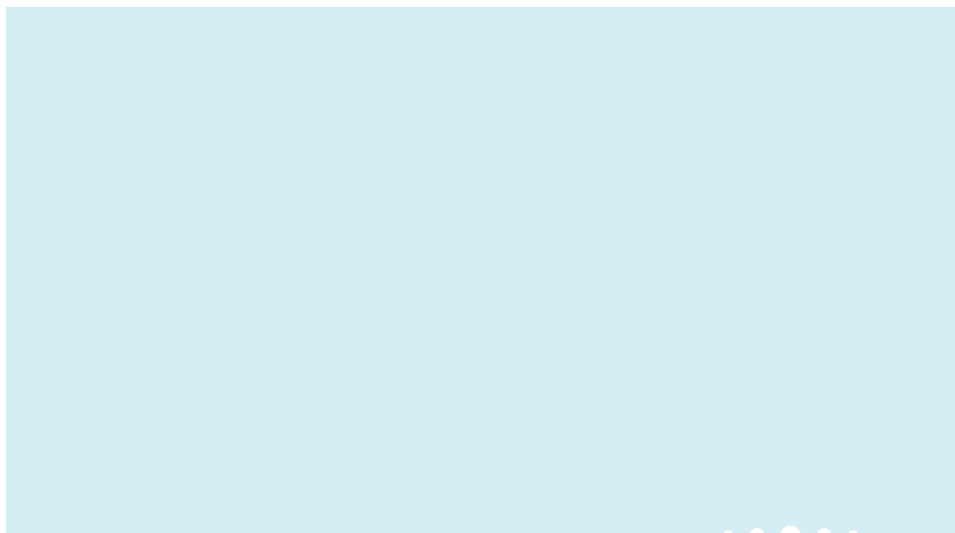


INTRODUCTION Last night's meal at my house was the essence of seriously simple. I raced to the market in the late afternoon to pick up some groceries for the weekend, replenishing the usual basics. As always, I checked to see what was fresh and caught my attention. I eyed a luscious halibut steak that looked too good to pass up. The baby Brussels sprouts and green beans seemed particularly appealing. The raspberries were just coming into season. I grabbed a wedge of blue cheese and a container of mascarpone cheese. My dinner menu was taking shape. I would decide which tastes to accentuate once I started to cook.

With dinnertime approaching, I focused on a plan. *Simple* was what I was thinking; *tasty* was my husband's request. All my daughter cared about was that dinner be ready as soon as possible. She was hungry. Simple. Delicious. Fast. This seems to be the direction my cooking has taken for some time now.

I turned the oven to 450°F because I've found that high-heat roasting is a technique that is fast and produces flavorful results. A quick and easy marinade followed: a mix of extra-virgin olive oil, balsamic vinegar, minced garlic, a good grind of black pepper, and some sea salt. Not much to it, but I knew this marinade would nicely season and brown the fish. The halibut roasted while I sautéed the baby Brussels sprouts, lightly glazing them with some chicken broth and a touch of sugar.





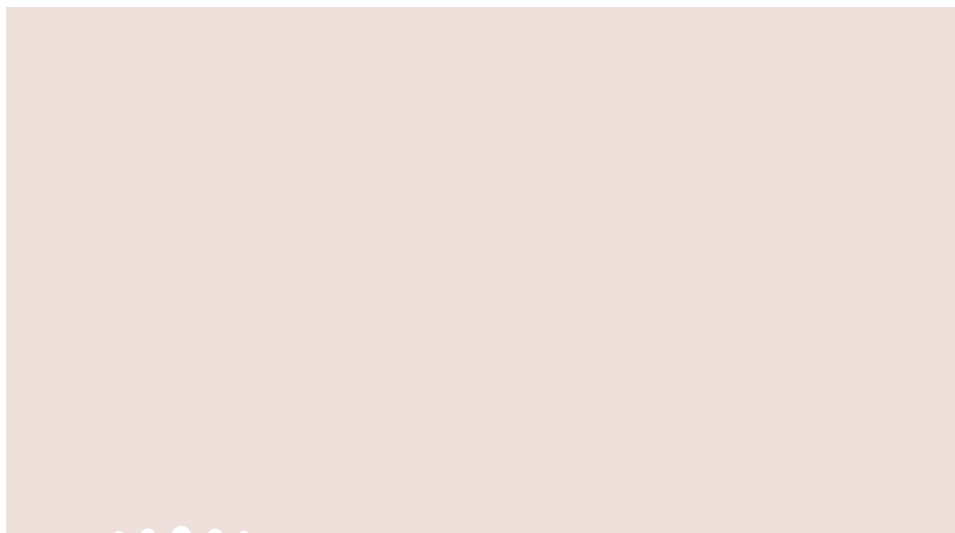
My dinner was ready. To start, a crisp lettuce wedge was drizzled with a blend of olive oil, mustard, vinegar, and blue cheese, then sprinkled with store-bought candied nuts. Next came the roasted halibut steak, moist and thinly glazed with the garlic and balsamic, accompanied by the lightly browned Brussels sprouts. A colorful plate of crostini, those little Italian toasts, finished the meal. They were topped with mascarpone and fresh berries. It was simply spectacular.

This sophisticated meal came together in a short time without laboring in the kitchen. It was easy, it was creative, and it was satisfying. It brought pleasure to me and to my family. This is what I hope to bring to your family and friends in the pages ahead.

Over the years, I have developed hundreds of recipes for people who love to cook. From *The Cuisine of California* to *American Bistro*, my mission has been clear: to help the home cook create delicious food with fresh ingredients and to offer recipes that have as much to do with lifestyle as they do with taste. Following in the same tradition, the recipes in this book focus on flavor, quality of ingredients, and presentation, but the emphasis is on simplicity. These recipes have been designed to reduce prep time and streamline cooking techniques while retaining the same high quality of the finished dish.

How do you minimize the amount of time spent in the kitchen? How do you cook delicious food without using lengthy recipes? What ingredients should you keep on





hand so you can pull together a meal short on time and long on flavor? And how do you create a memorable dish?

Sophisticated simplicity is my underlying philosophy. To me, this means using an array of the freshest ingredients and pantry-ready flavor enhancers along with time-saving cooking techniques. Here are some of my guiding principles:

straightforward cooking techniques are fail-safe

High-heat roasting, grilling, braising, high-heat reduction, and hand blending are the techniques I use again and again.

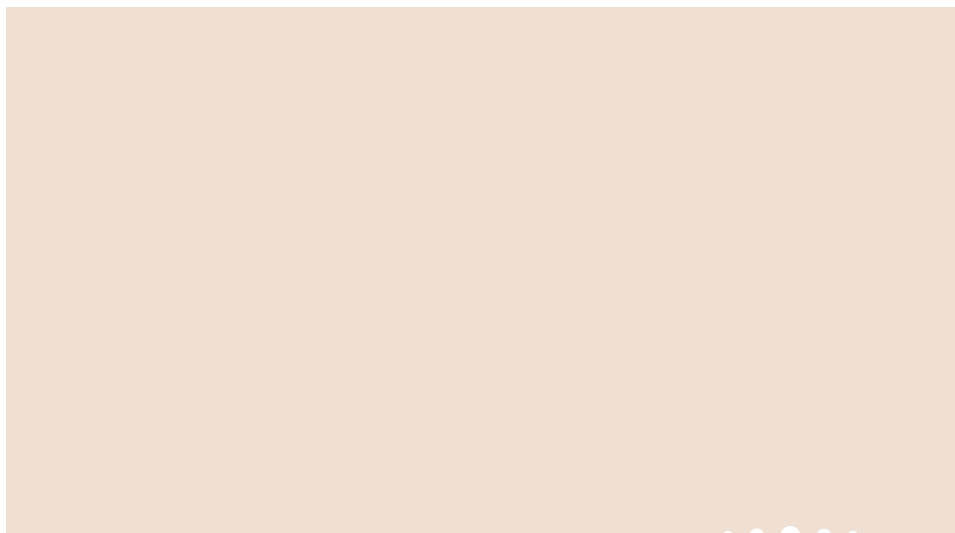
simple shortcuts save time and cleanup

Blend a soup in a pot, add vegetables to braised dishes without sautéing them, cook polenta in the oven instead of constantly stirring it on the stove, use a lock-top bag for marinating, or roast a whole fish that has been filleted ahead of time.

what's in my pantry is crucial

I keep my pantry well-stocked with the basics so I can throw together sauces, rubs, marinades, or relishes as the spirit moves me. I can create a stir-fry at a moment's notice or make a pesto vinaigrette, a sun-dried tomato salad dressing with capers, or a spicy curry rub for chicken or pork. You can do this too if you follow my ideas for stocking your pantry.





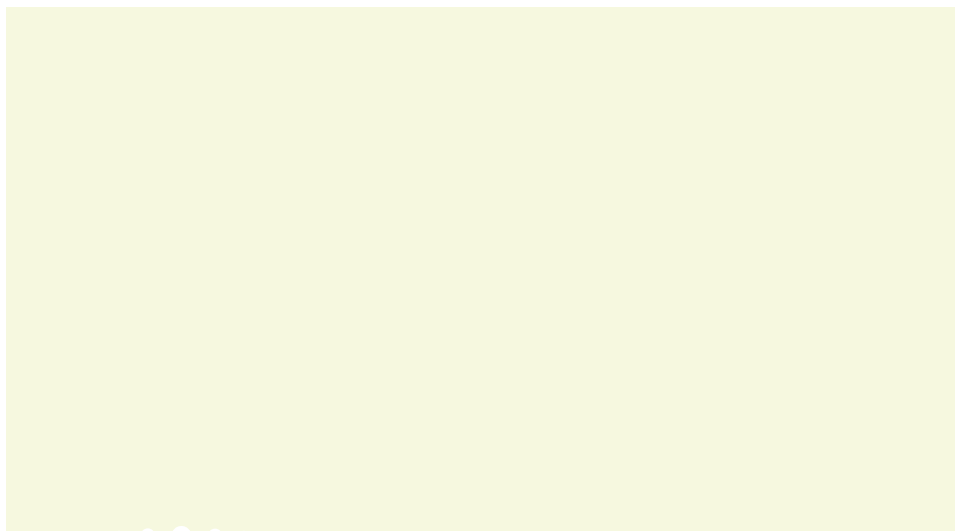
my homemade basics are trusty standbys

There are a number of homemade flavor enhancers that I rely on daily to perk up my food. These are easy to make and well worth the effort. My Seriously Simple Seasoning Salt (page 168) is always within reach of my stove. Just one shake of this and a bouquet of flavors spark any dish in an instant. This salt mixture will last 6 months and takes only a short time to make. You can give it to friends who love to cook. Balsamic Syrup (page 170) is another flavor booster that is worth keeping in the fridge. Chipotle Puree (page 173) offers the cook smoky heat in a teaspoon; a little goes a long way. And if you like citrus, a wedge of Overnight Preserved Lemon (page 169) will surprise you with its silky texture and savory taste. Try it once on pasta, fish, or chicken, and like me, you'll want to keep a jar on hand.

less is more when it comes to flavors

Relying on one or two bold flavors to create a dish is a key strategy for cooking seriously simple but memorable food. A pinch of cumin gives split pea soup new punch. Maple syrup infuses traditional coleslaw with an unexpected sweetness. A touch of soy sauce intensifies the mushroom flavor in mushroom-barley soup. And diced yams and a drop of balsamic syrup give a new twist to a classic osso buco.



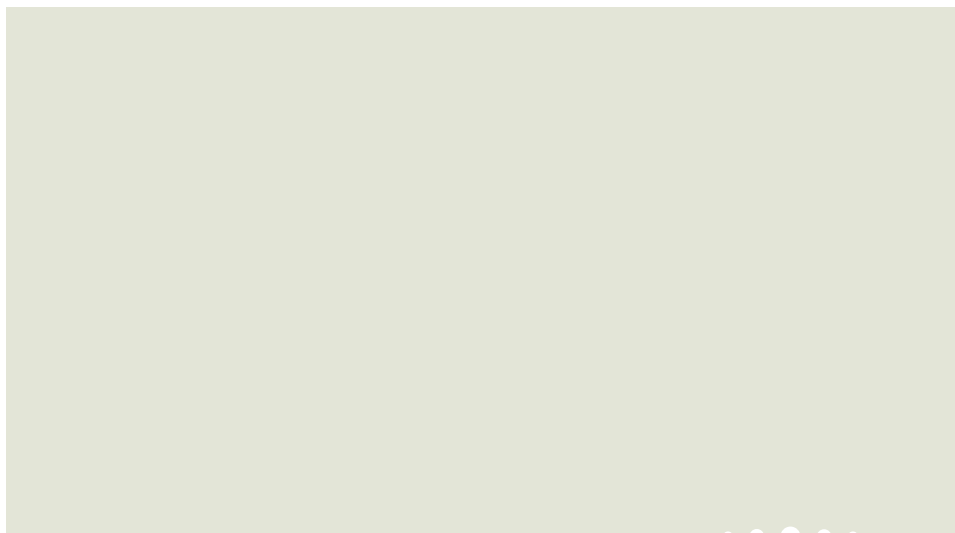


meal-in-one recipes are indispensable for simplifying life

Seriously simple cooking doesn't mean just speedy preparation. On some days, I need to have dinner ready in advance. Friends might be coming over, and I want to spend more time with them than on the food preparation. Or my husband or I might want to pop something in the oven at the last minute. You'll find some meal-in-one recipes that take a few more minutes to prepare but can be made well ahead of time. Two of my favorites are California Fish Stew with Chipotle Aioli (page 81) and Osso Buco with Yams and Balsamic Syrup (page 97). Family favorites include Chicken in the Pot with Tomatoes and Parsley (page 113), Island Braised Short Ribs (page 91), and Baked Pasta with Sausage and Tomato Pesto (page 67).

It's been great fun creating the recipes in this book. With my guiding principles in mind, I've experimented with new and familiar ingredients, making some unexpected discoveries along the way. I've refined some international favorites in order to import ethnic flavors and pungent aromas right into the everyday cook's kitchen. You'll find recipes such as Grilled Chicken Breasts with Chimichurri Sauce (page 111), Jerk-Marinated Pork Tenderloin (page 102), and Japanese-inspired Miso-Glazed Sea Bass (page 77). I've also included some menu suggestions, recommended accompaniments to serve with most dishes, provided my usual advance-prep notes, and added some hints to inspire you.





“The Clever Cook Could” is a feature that is meant to encourage you to change a recipe on your own, to trust your instincts. Those moments when I create a new dish or find a new twist on an old favorite bring me great pleasure. Suggestions in “The Clever Cook Could” allow you to adapt dishes on your own, pointing you in a direction to try alternatives to existing recipes. Use oven-cooked polenta as a substitute for pasta noodles in a lasagna. Turn leftover brisket into a deliciously rich meat sauce. Transform roasted or grilled vegetables into a creamy soup in a matter of minutes. Reinvent grilled flank steak into chilled beef sandwiches with horseradish cream. Or add a few ingredients to Two-Vegetable Rice Pilaf (page 141) to make a preserved-lemon basmati rice pilaf. These notes are designed to help build your confidence in the kitchen by fostering your spontaneity and experimentation.

Writing this book reminded me that cooking can be fun and tremendously rewarding even when our lives are rushed. Though our time may be more limited than ever, it is still possible to put together a great meal and have energy left over for family and friends. If you are someone like me, who loves to cook good food, I know you’ll enjoy these recipes and techniques.

Have fun in the kitchen,
Diane



THE ESSENTIAL PANTRY The essential pantry includes ingredients that help you to cook on a moment's notice and to have the freedom to create last-minute recipes. Look for top-quality ingredients. That doesn't necessarily mean the most expensive. Try a few varieties until you find the one you like the best. It will make a major difference in your final dish. I have included some selection information and personal favorites when pertinent.

THE ROOM-TEMPERATURE PANTRY

flour, sugar, and other baking items

I store these all together in my pantry for easy access. Use airtight containers for flour and sugar.

all-purpose flour Be sure to select unbleached.

baking powder Look for double-acting aluminum-free brands; be sure to check the sell-by date, as it does lose its effectiveness. Keep in a cool dry place for up to 6 months.

baking soda Check the sell-by date as it does lose its effectiveness. Keep in a cool dry place for up to 6 months.

bittersweet chocolate Imported Valrhona or Callebaut, or domestic Scharffen Berger or Ghirardelli.

brown sugar Both dark and light: The color is determined by the amount of molasses added.

cake flour A soft flour that gives baked goods a velvety texture.

chocolate chips Domestic Nestlé's, Guittard, or Ghirardelli.

confectioners' sugar

cornstarch Used in Asian-style dishes as a thickener.

dried cranberries These can be used like raisins in baking and cooking. Growing in popularity are the sweetened dried cranberries (Craisins), which are slightly plumper and sweeter. Adjust your recipe depending on the sweetness of your dried cranberries.

polenta and instant polenta Traditional polenta uses a coarse-ground cornmeal that requires at least 30 minutes of cooking. Instant (precooked) polenta has a finer texture and takes far less time. Look for both near the baking section of your market.

unsweetened chocolate Bakers or Hershey's.

unsweetened dutch-process cocoa powder I use Droste for its smooth flavor.

white sugar Pure cane granulated sugar.

vegetables, beans, pasta, and rice

basmati rice A long-grain aromatic rice that cooks up into separate dry grains.

canned cannellini beans Rinse well before using.

canned diced tomatoes with juice Use a good Italian variety or Muir Glen. Try the fire-roasted for extra flavor.

canned garbanzo beans (chickpeas) Rinse well before using.

dried mushrooms Make sure they are tightly packaged. I like shiitakes, porcini, and morels. Soak all dried mushrooms in warm water before using and cut off the hard, knobby stem end. The soaking liquid can be strained and used to flavor soups and sauces.

good-quality bottled or store-bought tomato sauce Find a variety that you like.

instant couscous Make sure to select the plain variety so you can flavor it yourself.

long-grain white rice It cooks up separate and fluffy and is perfect for rice pilaf.

medium-grain white rice High in starch, it cooks up tender and moist with a slight stickiness, which works great for rice pudding.

panko bread crumbs Japanese-style bread crumbs that are actually dried, toasted flakes and are coarser than Western-style bread crumbs. Available in plastic bags in Asian markets and supermarkets.

pasta, dried Penne, fusilli, spaghetti, tagliatelle, linguine: Use a durum-wheat imported pasta from Italy like De Cecco.

sun-dried tomatoes Dry packed and oil packed. Drying tomatoes greatly intensifies their flavor and gives them a chewy texture. Dried tomatoes are available whole, halved, or chopped.

sun-dried tomato pesto Buy the bottled variety or a refrigerated one.

tomato paste Italian tomato paste in a tube, so you can store it in the refrigerator after it is opened.

yellow onions Store in a cool, dry place in a brown paper bag.

yukon gold, russet, and baby new potatoes Store in a cool, dry place in a brown paper bag.

fruits

lemons One of the most versatile citrus fruits, lemons have many culinary uses. A few drops of fresh lemon juice can enhance poultry, fish, vegetables, and fruit dishes, and the acid can prevent fruits from turning brown when exposed to air. The zest is often grated and used in marinades, sauces, and baking. Use only fresh lemon juice.

limes Closely related to the lemon, limes are tart with a hint of sweetness and are often used as lemon substitutes. The small, thin-skinned green fruit is used throughout the world, especially in juices, cocktails, preserves, salsas, and salads.

oranges Choose the Valencia for juicing and the navel for peeling and eating. Blood oranges, with ruby-red flesh, are imported from Mediterranean countries and also grown in California. Look for them from March through May. They are good juiced or sectioned and served as a fruit. Oranges are great for last-minute desserts and juice for dressings, sauces, and marinades.

condiments, flavoring agents, and others

anchovy paste Sold in a tube, anchovy paste is a combination of pounded anchovies, vinegar, spices, and water.

capers Whether you choose the small French nonpareil variety or the larger Italian capers, make sure to rinse them well to remove excess brine or salt. They add a piquant flavor. These are great in salads, dressings, and sauces and as a simple garnish.

chicken, beef, or vegetable broth Select broth in cartons (not in cans) that can be refrigerated in the container; look for low-salt and non-fat varieties.

chipotle chilies Smoked, dried jalapeños, chipotles are available canned in a sauce of garlic, tomatoes, and vinegar and labeled “chipotles en adobo.” Moderately hot, they have a distinctive smoky flavor and are used to make chipotle puree.

coconut milk Available canned or bottled in Asian markets and large supermarkets. Coconut milk is made by simmering equal parts water and shredded fresh coconut, then straining the milky liquid. Don’t confuse this with the very sweet “cream of coconut,” which is intended for mixed drinks. A great addition to Asian-style sauces. I use the light variety.

dried fruits Dried cherries, apricots, or peaches are a good addition to rice pudding, savory sauces, rice, couscous, or stuffings.

hoisin sauce A salty and sweet Chinese soybean sauce; a good flavoring agent for marinades, sauces, and stir-fries.

honey The many types of honey vary in flavor and appearance, ranging from thin to almost hard, and from white to golden, amber, varnish-brown, or almost black. The most popular types are clover honey and orange honey, both of which are suitable for cooking and baking. You can also find varieties such as lavender, sage, and my personal favorite, white truffle, at farmers’ markets and specialty foods stores. All honeys should be stored in tightly sealed containers.

horseradish Bottled cream-style prepared horseradish is found in the refrigerated section of supermarkets. There is also a product in the staples section that is excellent and does not need refrigeration until opened.

kalamata olives Almond-shaped Greek olives that are rich, salty, and slightly fruity in flavor. They are sold in jars or cans and are soaked in a wine vinegar marinade, either with the pits intact or pitted.

mayonnaise Hellman's and Best Foods are old standbys.

mirin A Japanese rice wine, golden in color and sweet. It adds a touch of sweetness to sauces and marinades.

miso A soybean paste that comes in several varieties. I use white miso (really a pale yellow), also called *shiro miso*, for its slightly sweet flavor. Look for miso in the refrigerated section of your supermarket or in Asian markets. Keep it refrigerated. Miso is good in sauces, dressings, and marinades.

mustards See below.

soy sauce This salty dark brown condiment is useful in marinades and sauces and as a flavor enhancer. You can buy light soy sauce if you are watching your sodium, since it is lower in salt.

tapenade An olive spread that usually includes capers, anchovies, garlic, and olive oil. There are green and black varieties. Use it as a dip for vegetables, a flavoring agent, a pasta sauce, or a spread for grilled bread.

mustards

dijon mustard Smooth, silky textured, and slightly tangy. There are many varieties of this standby. Grey Poupon and Meaux are good brands.

honey mustard Make sure this has a base of Dijon mustard, not the ballpark variety.

whole-grain mustard Mustard with the hull of the mustard seed included. Whole-grain mustards vary in strength, depending on whether or not the mustard seeds have been soaked in vinegar. Moutard de Meaux is my preference.

nuts

almonds Select blanched whole almonds. After opening, put them in a lock-top plastic bag and freeze.

pecans Select pecan halves. After opening, put them in a lock-top plastic bag and freeze.

pine nuts Pine nuts are creamy in color and have a rich, nutty taste when toasted. Be sure they are fresh, as they become stale faster than other nuts. After opening, put them in a lock-top plastic bag and freeze.

walnuts Select walnut halves. After opening, put them in a lock-top plastic bag and freeze.

seasonings

Make sure to have a good variety of dried seasonings in your pantry. Remember that herbs and spices have a shelf life of no more than 6 months before they lose their strength. Here's a list of my must-haves:

black and white pepper Always use freshly ground pepper, whether a recipe calls for this ingredient coarsely cracked or finely ground. Sometimes white peppercorns are preferred, especially with light-colored sauces. Black peppercorns are sharper in taste; the white peppercorn is a more mature seed whose outer layer has been removed.

fresh herbs If you have access to a sunny spot, place a pot each of basil, thyme, and parsley there and watch your herbs grow even in the dead of winter.

good-quality seasoning salt See page 168.

pure vanilla extract Buy only bottles labeled "pure vanilla"; I like the bold-flavored Tahitian pure vanilla available in the supermarket gourmet section.

salt I like fine-grained sea salt and kosher salt because they have a superior flavor to regular iodized table salt.

savory dried herbs Basil, thyme, rosemary, oregano; look for the whole-leaf variety.

spices Allspice, ginger, cinnamon, whole nutmegs, pumpkin pie spice, cayenne pepper, ground cumin, red pepper flakes.

oils

cooking-spray oil Both olive and vegetable oil sprays save calories, time and cleanup.

extra-virgin olive oils These are cold-pressed, rich, and full flavored. A cold-pressed extra-virgin olive oil is usually fruity, green, and redolent of olives. Cold-pressed oil is wonderful when used as a flavoring agent in salad dressings or drizzled over vegetables or bread. Many varieties are now available, so try several until you find your favorite.

pure olive oils Made from olives that have been heated and pressed to extract the last bit of oil, these are milder in flavor than extra-virgin oil. Use for cooking and sautéing when you don't want the flavor to overwhelm the delicate flavors of a dish. Bertolli is fine.

vegetable oil I like canola.

vinegars

balsamic syrup (page 170) If you don't have any, use balsamic vinegar.

balsamic vinegar Imported from Italy, true balsamic vinegar comes only from the area around the town of Modena in Emilia-Romagna. Balsamic vinegar is made by combining high-quality wine vinegar, reduced grape must (the partially fermented juice and pulp of the grape), some young balsamic vinegar as a starter, and sometimes caramel. It is aged in a succession of wooden casks, and this can take from a few years to up to 120. Good-quality balsamic has a dark brownish-red color and is slightly thicker than regular vinegars. For cooking, a commercial vinegar (versus the expensive artisan-produced vinegars) from Modena or nearby Reggio is fine. Look on the label for either API MO (referring to Modena) or API RE

(referring to Reggio) to be sure you aren't buying an imitation from another area. Look for a refined, sweet-tart balance. Use in sauces, dressings, and marinades and as a flavor enhancer.

red wine vinegar An aged vinegar, made with good-quality grapes, that has a full-bodied flavor.

rice vinegar Select an unseasoned variety; great on salads and as a flavor enhancer. Chinese and Japanese rice vinegars are milder and sweeter than distilled white vinegar. They range in color from clear or golden to amber-brown, and are available plain or seasoned and sweetened with sugar. Good in salads, dressings, and sauces.

sherry vinegar This has a distinctive sherry-sweet and slightly tart flavor; use it in dressings and sauces.

white balsamic vinegar This vinegar is produced by adding cooked-down grape juice to ordinary white wine vinegar, which gives it an amber color and slightly sweet flavor. It has a lighter flavor than a true balsamic vinegar. It is good in dressings and sauces.

wine

red wine Keep a good medium-priced Merlot or Zinfandel on hand.

white wine Keep a good medium-priced dry white wine like Sauvignon Blanc or Chardonnay on hand. Dry white vermouth can be used in place of white wine.

THE COLD PANTRY

blue cheese Domestic Maytag blue and imported Gorgonzola, Stilton, or Roquefort are all recommended.

cheddar cheese Choose a good domestic Cheddar like Colby or Tillamook. Imported varieties like Double Gloucester, English Darby, or Caerphilly are also good. Use in scrambled eggs, frittatas, sandwiches, and anything where you want a sharp cheese flavor.