

# #93 - Cook Without a Recipe

Hi there! You're listening to The Lazy Genius Podcast! I'm Kendra, and I'm here to help you be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't. Today is episode 93 - Cook Without a Recipe. Talking about food is one of my favorite things, and it's such a priority for me that you feel empowered in your kitchen, not to be Martha Stewart but simply to walk in unafraid with a small but powerful arsenal of tools and skills so that you can gather around your table with less stress. We love the table but often hate getting there; helping you bridge that gap is literally my favorite thing ever, so I'm stoked for today's episode. Just a quick reminder that the window to buy my decluttering ebook called *The Swap: The Lazy Genius Guide to Decluttering for Life*, is quickly closing. It's available for a few more days until the end of January, and it's meant to offer you a really simple but effective path through your stuff and help you get into rhythms where you'll never want to burn down your house and start over ever again. Check out the show notes by swiping in your podcast app or by going to [thelazygeniuscollective.com/lazy/recipe](http://thelazygeniuscollective.com/lazy/recipe). You can get all the info about *The Swap* and see if it's right for you. It's likely for you if you want to abandon ship and start over and haven't found the solution you need in the dozens of decluttering books and blog posts you've read over the years. I was you once, so I created what I couldn't find. Maybe it's what you need, too. So *The Swap* is available until January 31st, and if you have any questions, don't hesitate to ask me on Instagram or over email at [kendra@thelazygeniuscollective.com](mailto:kendra@thelazygeniuscollective.com).

Okay, let's talk about cooking without a recipe. There are two main skills you need to cook without a recipe. One is to know how to develop flavor and texture in ingredients, and the second is to know what ingredients go together. Both of these skills are honed with practice. Not every meal is going to be a home run by a long shot, but if you continue to practice and pay attention to what works and what doesn't, you'll get confident in the art of trying. The problem with cooking is that we think we need to master recipes, but really we're on a journey of mastering flavors and textures and making everything on the plate friends with each other. We're going to get into a few concepts here in this episode, but I want to make sure this is clear: you will not walk away from this episode being a master chef. You'll likely be the same as when you started, but your confidence and understanding of what can make you become better will definitely change. The actual cooking can only improve with practice, so get in there and burn some stuff. But today I'm going to share a handful of concepts that if you understand them in concept will start to change your cooking experience tremendously.

First, I'm going to mention my two favorite cookbooks that teach the only skills you need to really cook, and neither of these books really have any recipes. If you follow me on Instagram @thelazygenius, you've likely heard me talk about them both, but I'll mention them again obviously. The first book is called *Salt Fat Acid Heat*, and the second book is called *The Flavor Bible*. *The Flavor Bible* is literally an encyclopedia of what foods are friends, and *Salt Fat Acid Heat* explains how those four things - salt, fat, acid, and heat - are the only things you need to understand to be a good cook. Seriously. And by the way, if you want a beautiful visual experience, the woman who wrote *Salt Fat Acid Heat* has a four-part Netflix special by the same name that's magical. She's possibly the most enthusiastic charming person I've ever seen around food. It's such a great thing to watch if you haven't.

Okay, let's set a scene. It's a Tuesday afternoon. You were busy over the weekend and didn't meal plan anything. Yesterday, you had pasta because Mondays are Pasta Mondays, so that

was great but you still don't have any plans for dinner beyond right now. Your crew is busy doing homework or having screen time, and you have maybe 15 minutes to get a head start on dinner before all the children need your attention. You pull down a favorite cookbook to find a recipe, but you don't have the right ingredients for any page you flip to. Eleven minutes left. You open the fridge hoping that a complete meal will jump out at you and then cry a little on the inside when that doesn't happen. You see a pack of chicken thighs you bought on sale the day before and ran out of time to prep which means you need to eat them tonight or else they will destroy everything in your fridge with their rotten chicken stank. You see a pack of almost-slimy mushrooms in the fridge and a couple of wrinkly sweet potatoes on the counter. These are the ingredients you have, and you're a little sad but it's the way it is. Now you could open your laptop and google chicken mushroom sweet potato recipe and might actually find something helpful. I actually did before I hit record just to see, and there are actually a number of options. But you could spend your remaining nine minutes looking for the perfect recipe rather than actually cooking.

Here's where you start. Do the ingredients go together? You can check The Flavor Bible or google the combination and see if you get a lot of results. You don't have to read any of the results, but if people have published recipes using the ingredients you have, chances are they're already friends. So step one is done. Are they friends? Yep.

Question two: how do I make the ingredients taste great? This might feel like a dumb question because it's essentially the goal of cooking, right? But when you know the things that help any and all foods taste great, you can answer that question with actual, helpful answers. Because isn't that where we get stuck? If you stare at chicken, mushrooms, and sweet potatoes and ask yourself "how do I make these taste great?" you'll likely yell at nobody "that's the point! This is why I need a recipe!" But you actually don't. Recipes are great, but here's how you cook those foods without one.

The way you make ingredients taste great is to consider those four elements - salt, fat, acid, and heat. We're going to try and go in a more chronological order though, so for our conversation now, we're going to go salt, heat, fat, acid. Start with salt. Salt doesn't make things more salty; it makes things taste more like themselves. I've been saying this for years; you don't need to be afraid of salt because salt brings out the best in every ingredient. Too much definitely makes things salty, but as you practice and season with your fingers and your own version of what a pinch is, you'll start to recognize how much salt to add to certain foods. And salt can come in forms other than just little white crystals from a box. Cheese adds salt. Certain meats like bacon and sausage add salt. Olives and capers add salt. It's all about the dance of how everything interacts with each other.

So when you look at the chicken, the best way to get the most flavor out of your chicken is to salt it early, so do that now while you think about how the meal will come together. Vegetables don't have the same protein structures that meats do, so you don't want to necessarily salt those early, but salting meat early, especially chicken is the best. So salt your chicken. And in a little bit when you start cooking, remember that seasoning your vegetables well with salt will make the mushrooms taste earthy and rich, not muddy and gross. It will make the sweet potatoes pop with their sweetness and not be kind of bland and annoyingly sweet. Salt makes things pop, so know that you'll get really far in cooking without a recipe if you recognize the value of salt.

Next up is heat. Heat obviously cooks the food, and depending on the intensity of the heat, you'll get different results. Chicken cooked over low heat over a long amount of time will have a much different texture than chicken cooked over higher heat for a short amount of time. Heat affects the way the proteins in the meat interact with other, so when you cook things lower for longer, the proteins relax a ton and pull apart. They get lazy. The meat is really tender, but as you know if you've ever cooked chicken in the crockpot, it's not like you can serve a piece of that chicken. There are no more pieces. That's where the chicken's laziness comes in. But if you saute a piece of chicken or roast a piece of chicken with higher heat over a shorter amount of time, the proteins bind together differently and can still be tender and juicy but hold together in a piece. So your question with heat is often about time. How much time do you have? If you only have half an hour, low and slow isn't in the cards because you don't have the slow. So for quicker meals, you need direct heat that's usually fairly high.

So with the chicken, mushrooms, and sweet potatoes, how do you decide the heat. If you have half an hour, you don't have time to roast whole sweet potatoes or low and slow your chicken, so you might think about sauteing the chicken and mushrooms in a skillet to get some crispy texture that won't take forever. And remember this, that when you saute food in a skillet, the less you move the food around, the more color and therefore texture you will get. Crispiness comes from being still. It happens when the food stays in contact with the heat without being disturbed; it's a bit of a diva that way. So when you put your chicken and mushrooms in the pan, give them room to breathe, and don't move them for several minutes to give that texture a chance to develop. And to add some contrast with that crispy texture from your chicken and mushrooms, you might dice up the sweet potatoes to steam and mash up to add a creamy component to the meal. And remember that salting those potatoes once they're steamed will make them taste most like themselves.

But have you ever had a steamed sweet or russet potato with just salt? I mean, it's fine, but the flavor won't wow you. You know why? There's no fat. Let's talk about fat next. Fat is like the train that carries flavor. A dish without fat is not as good as a dish with fat. This isn't me being all "eat whatever you want! healthy eating is a sham!" I do kind of believe that healthy eating in our current culture is a bit of a sham, but giving fat its due in cooking isn't to stick it to the healthy man; fat is super important in getting a flavorful dish because without fat, the flavors have nowhere to nestle, and you don't get texture. You can't achieve crispiness without fat; I don't care what the informercials of those weird skillets say. Fat is necessary, and understanding the role it plays will make a huge difference.

So let's get back to your three ingredients. You're going to saute the chicken and mushrooms; you need to pick your fat because you have to have at least a little. Olive oil will add a very different flavor than butter will. And just like you get saltiness from things other than salt, you get fat from things other than oil. Avocado and cheese both add fat and richness, but so does the natural fat in your meat. That's why it's so hard to get boneless skinless chicken breasts to taste like anything because they have no natural fat to help the process. Chicken thighs do have some natural fat, so you're likely to get a richer flavor when you cook them. So if you're deciding what fat to cook the chicken and mushrooms in, you might think about the fat for the mashed sweet potatoes. Butter definitely feels like the way to go there, so maybe you choose to saute the chicken and mushrooms in butter to make them flavor friends. Now butter doesn't like to hit very high heat because it burns so quickly, but it does better when it holds hands with a stronger fat. So if you want the flavor of butter but the sturdiness of oil, put both butter and canola or grapeseed or vegetable oil in the pan. You get the flavor and the ability to cook at a higher heat

without burning the butter. So the butter and oil are giving texture to your chicken and mushrooms and also allowing flavor to develop in those foods, along with the salt. And the fat for your mashed sweet potatoes is almost like a condiment. You want to taste the butter; it's there for creamy texture and a rich, butter flavor that, with enough salt you guys? is sublime. I'm not a huge fan of sweet potatoes, but when their natural sweetness is offset by a good amount of salt and rich butter? Nothing like it.

And the last step is acid. This is the one that's most overlooked. In the book *Salt Fat Acid Heat*, the author Samin says "Acid is salt's alter ego. While salt enhances flavor, acid balances them." A lot of times I talk to friends about recipes that didn't work and they're trying to troubleshoot something. I get texts and voxes like this often. "I made this chicken in cream sauce thing, but it tastes boring. What do I do?" I start with salt. I say, does it taste too salty? No, not at all. So I say to add a little more salt until it starts to sing. Then if it's still not quite there, I suggest adding a bit of acid. Acid balances everything out. It cuts the fattiness and richness. It makes sweet things less cloying. It makes starches less blah. There's an entire chapter on acid in the book *Salt Fat Acid Heat*, and there's way more than I'm going to say here, but for the sake of learning to cook without a recipe, you need to simply know that acid balances things out. If the flavor is as enhanced as it's going to get from the salt, if the texture has been achieved with fat and the flavors have transported through the entire dish, but something is still missing, you probably need acid.

Acids are overlooked because we don't always even know what they are, but acids you might choose from are things like a squeeze of citrus from a lemon or lime, vinegars, wine, hot sauce, yogurt, tomatoes, and even mustard. So for our chicken mushrooms sweet potato dinner, you don't necessarily need to add acid to everything because the whole plate is dancing. The sweet potatoes are likely happy with their salt and fat, but you want a balance of the entire plate. The chicken thighs and mushrooms have rich earthy flavors, but all of that together might be tasty but a little too much. So before you take the chicken and mushrooms out of the pan, add a quick dash of red wine vinegar, and you'll be shocked at how everything suddenly comes together.

It might go the other way, too. Something might be too acidic and you need to balance the other way with fat and salt and flavor. Think about tomatoes. Have you ever tasted plain old tomato sauce from a can, like the kind without salt or anything? It's not great, and it makes your mouth pucker because it's pretty acidic. That's why to make a good tomato sauce, you start with garlic in olive oil so that the garlic flavor will travel through the entire dish on the olive oil train and then you add the tomatoes and some salt to neutralize the acid. You might even add a pinch of sugar if the balance is still a bit off. It all works together, and understanding that will help you cook without a recipe.

I realize this might seem super involved when it comes to cooking dinner, but as you practice these concepts, you'll find the decision making happens in a minute or two. Truly. It just takes a little practice in asking the right questions.

If you know how to develop flavor or seek to continue learning how to develop flavor through techniques like roasting and grilling and sauteing, some of which I've done full episodes on, if you see that salt enhances flavors and makes everything taste like itself, if you recognize the role that fat plays in creating texture and transporting flavors throughout the dish, and if you know that acid balances everything out, you can cook anything without a recipe. Truly.

This episode has a fraction of the answers. There's so much to learn, but no one learns it all at once. Everyone learns it bit by bit through practice. Now if cooking without a recipe is terrifying, do this instead. Follow your recipes, but start to pay attention to salt, fat, acid, and heat. Pay attention to how the ingredients play or don't play well together. When you make a recipe and it tastes really good, how did those four components work together to make something good? You'll start to see how salt, fat, acid, and heat show up in food, and then maybe, just maybe, you'll feel more confident to cook without a recipe.

I know this is a lot and also at the same time very little, but you have to start somewhere, and I hope this is an encouraging start for you to love your kitchen just as much as you love your table. You can do this. You can learn to cook, and you can even learn to cook without a recipe.

And don't forget that I'll be live on Instagram this Thursday around 12:15pm EST to answer any questions you have about this episode. And you have just a few more days to get The Swap if you're interested! Check the show notes for all the info. That's all for today, guys! I'm Kendra, and until next time, be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't. See you next week!