

[Seven Essential Things You Need to Know About Eggs](#)

Why are eggs so important? Because they appear in just about every type of cooking and if you can handle them successfully you can deal with anything the kitchen throws at you.

Just in case you don't believe me, here's a few of the ways in which we use them; cakes, omelets, pancakes, souffles, ice cream, soups, meringues, breakfast, tea, sandwiches, sauces, custard, pastry, desserts, dressings, salads and a whole host of other things we don't even eat.

We boil them, poach them, scramble them, fry them, bake them and mix them with oil to make mayonnaise. Let's look at all that a bit more closely.

In the first place eggs need to be fresh. Always check the sell-by date on the box when you buy them. If it's less than four weeks away, don't buy the eggs.

You can check how fresh an egg is by the immersing it in water. If it lies flat under the water it is fresh. If it stands up it is stale. If it floats don't even think about it. Unless, that is, you happen to like the smell of hydrogen sulfide.

For boiling, an egg should be at room temperature before you start. Bring a pan of water to the boil and carefully lower the egg into it, then turn down the heat and maintain a simmer for one minute.

Remove the pan from the heat and cover. Let it stand for about five minutes while you make your toast or whatever else it is that you want to do. That's all there is to it.

When poaching, once again the eggs need to be very fresh and the water should be at simmering point. It should also be about three centimeters (just over 1 inch) deep.

Carefully break each egg into the water and cook for about three minutes. Remove them using a slotted spoon or spatula. I always have a wad of paper handy on which I briefly rest the spoon to drain off any excess water before transferring the egg to the plate.

To scramble eggs, crack two eggs into a bowl, season them with salt and pepper and beat well. Then melt a knob of butter - about the size of a walnut - in a heavy based saucepan. Swirl it round and when it's foaming, pour in the eggs.

Now you need to get to work, stirring the mixture vigorously with a wooden spoon to prevent the mixture from sticking to the pan. Before cooking has finished, take the pan off the heat and add another knob of butter or a spoonful of cream. This will slow down the cooking process, keep the mixture moist and greatly improve the texture.

Eggs can also be baked. This is a great technique to master. You are going to cook the eggs in a bain marie, which is nothing more than a roasting tin with some hot water in it. You also need to preheat the oven to 190 centigrade.

You need ramekins for this dish. Butter them carefully and crack an egg into each one. Put them in the roasting tin, pour in enough hot water to come halfway up the sides of the ramekins and bake in the oven for about 20 minutes.

This is the basic technique. You could also put cheese, cream or a light vegetable such as spinach in the bottom of each ramekin before adding the eggs. This same method is also used to cook desserts such as creme caramel and creme brulee.

Most people seem to know how to fry eggs, but not always how to get an even result. You might not want to hear this if you are concerned about healthy eating, but the best thing for frying eggs is in bacon fat. Of course you can use olive oil, I'm just telling you what I use. You could also use lard. The main thing is to get whatever you do use piping hot before you add the egg.

And here's another little tip: to ensure even cooking, tip the pan slightly and use a spoon to baste the top of the egg while its cooking. Just in case you are a complete beginner, "to baste" means to pour fat over the top of the egg using the spoon. But of course, you knew that didn't you?

We don't just use whole eggs, of course, we also use the yolks and whites separately, the latter most usually for whisking. What happens when we whisk egg whites is that tiny bubbles of air are introduced which swell and stiffen the mix so that it stands up in peaks. Done properly, you can even turn the bowl upside down and the mixture will stay where it is.

The problem with bubbles is that they burst, especially if they get too much air in them. They behave just like party balloons and your mixture collapses. So the most important thing about whisking egg whites is knowing when to stop, and that is when you get those stiff little peaks forming as you remove the whisk from the bowl.

Incidentally, here's a tip for using whisked egg whites in a mousse or a souffle - always take a metal spoonful of the whites and stir it into the souffle mixture first. This will loosen it. Then, best trick of all, fold the mixture into the whites and not the other way around.

Yes, I know what it says in the cookbooks. I also know that Raymond Blanc makes the best goat's cheese souffle in the world and that's how he does it.

By the way, here's a test; which of the methods above would you use to cook a souffle? Did you say "the baked egg method"? You did? Take a bow.

Once you have mastered these techniques you will already be ahead of many of the professional cooks working in restaurants all over the world. These are basic, simple methods which will stand you in good stead no matter what it is that you want to cook.

About the Author

Michael Sheridan - The Cool Cook - is a former head chef and an acknowledged authority and published writer on cooking matters. His website at All About Cooking, contains a wealth of information, hints, tips and recipes for busy home cooks, including video based how-to guides.

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