

Kitchen pantry is a cook's secret weapon

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Doing any job is easier when you have the right tools on hand. One of a cook's best tools -- and secret weapons -- is having a well-stocked kitchen pantry. Cooking is much simpler if you know that you've already got what you need on hand, and aren't going to have to run to the corner market every time you want to fix a meal.

Having a well-stocked pantry is also the secret weapon especially when unexpected guests drop by.

You'll be able to make every guest feel special and welcome because, whether it is appetizers for four or dinner for ten, you can handle it with style and panache. In fact, your reputation -- and your sanity -- will be assured, because with these things in your pantry, you can put together beautiful and tasty food that is beautifully presented in just minutes, simply and easily.

Here is a list of basic ingredients that should be in any well-stocked pantry. (One great way to stock your pantry is to buy one or two things on the list each time you go shopping, rather than trying to get it all at once. If you watch the sales and take advantage of seasonal buys, you'll be able to save money as well!).

Remember to rotate everything in your pantry on a regular basis, and adjust the items on this list to suit your family's likes and dislikes.

Herbs, Spices, Extracts and Sauces:

- Salt (Sea and Iodized)
- Pepper (Whole Peppercorns, Black, White and Red)
- Nutmeg (Ground and Fresh)
- Cinnamon (Ground and Sticks)
- Pumpkin Pie Spice (Ground)
- Allspice (Ground)
- Cardamom (Whole and Ground)
- Ginger (Whole and Ground)
- Curry (Ground)
- Garlic (Fresh and Ground for Emergencies)
- Mustard (Ground)
- Bay Leaves (Dried)
- Rosemary (Fresh and Bottled)
- Thyme (Fresh and Bottled)
- Sage (Fresh and Dried)
- Sweet Basil (Fresh and Dried)
- Parsley (Fresh and Dried for Emergencies)
- Cumin (Ground)
- Oregano (Dried)
- Onions (Flakes for Emergencies)
- Vanilla Extract
- Maple Extract
- Almond Extract
- Lemon Extract
- Orange Extract
- Soy Sauce
- Cooking Wine or Cooking Sherry
- Rice Wine Vinegar
- Sesame Oil
- Balsamic Vinegar
- Red Wine Vinegar
- Citrus Vinegar

- Teriyaki Sauce
- Barbecue Sauce
- Sweet and Sour Sauce
- Tabasco or Other Hot Sauce
- Chili Sauce
- Steak Sauce
- Packages of Salad Dressing Mix
- Packages of Dried Onion Soup Mix (Or Other Flavors)
- Soup for Sauces (Cream of Chicken, Mushroom, Celery and Cheese)

For Baking:

- All Purpose Flour
- Self-Rising Flour
- Whole Wheat Flour
- Pancake Mix
- Yeast
- Sugar
- Confectioner's Sugar
- Brown Sugar
- Sugar Cubes
- Molasses
- Baking Powder
- Baking Soda
- Yeast
- Cornstarch
- Honey
- Cocoa Powder
- Unsweetened or Semi-Sweet Chocolate
- Semi-Sweet Chocolate Chips
- Butterscotch, Caramel and other flavored "chips"
- Nuts (Walnuts, Pecans, Almonds, Hazelnuts and Cashews)
- Marshmallow Cream
- Vegetable Shortening (Regular and Butter-Flavored)
- Sunflower Oil
- Maraschino Cherries

For Appetizers or Adding "Something Special" to Meals:

- Peanuts in the Shell
- Salted Peanuts
- Mixed Nuts
- Extra Virgin Olive Oil
- A Variety of Crackers
- Black and Green Olives
- Canned Mushrooms
- Palm Tree Hearts
- Bottled Asparagus
- Sun-dried Tomatoes
- Bottled Salsa
- A Variety of Chips and Dips
- Cheeses (Traditionally, 3 to 5 are served, from hard to soft, mild to strong. Find flavors that mix well together, and serve cheeses from different animals and different countries)

For Everyday Meals:

- Bullion Cubes and Powders (Chicken, Beef and Vegetable)
- White Rice
- Long Grain and Wild Rice
- Brown Rice
- A Variety of Pastas

- Barley
- Bread Crumbs
- Croutons
- Tomato Sauce
- Tomato Paste
- A Variety of Canned Tomatoes
- A Variety of Canned Beans (Black, Red, Kidney and Garbanzo)
- Dried Beans (Pinto, Chili and Kidney)
- Canned Tuna, Chicken, Crab and Clams

For Desserts:

- Canned Pineapple (Chunks and Slices)
- A Variety of Canned Fruits
- A Variety of Jams or Jellies
- A Variety of Cake Mixes, Brownies and Frostings
- A Variety of Packaged Puddings
- All the fixings for Ice Cream Sundaes or Banana Splits
- Applesauce

In the Refrigerator:

- Milk
- Eggs (Or Egg Substitutes)
- Cream (A staple for many Mediterranean Dishes)
- Butter or Margarine
- Yellow Mustard
- Brown Mustard
- Dijon Mustard
- Ketchup
- Mayonnaise or Salad Dressing
- Cheeses (Cheddar, Swiss, Feta, Parmesan and Jack)
- Cottage Cheese
- Sour Cream
- Green Onions
- Tomatoes
- Cilantro
- Salad Fixings

In the Freezer:

- Whole Chicken
- Steaks
- Boneless, Skinless Chicken Breasts
- Beef or Pork Roast
- Stew Meat
- Hamburger
- Pork Chops
- Pieces of yellow, red and green peppers (Chop up any leftovers each time you use them and throw them into a bag in the freezer. They will add color and flavor to bland dishes)
- Frozen Bread Dough (Make your own or store bought)
- Frozen Rolls (Make your own or store bought)
- Frozen Pizza Dough (Make your own or store bought)
- Frozen Baguette
- Broccoli
- Spinach

With these ingredients in your kitchen, the only thing you'll have to worry about when it's time to cook is which recipe you want to try!

Author: nk1nk1

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