

The COMPLETE
Recipe
Writing
Guide

*Mastering Recipe Development, Writing,
Testing, Nutrition Analysis, and Food Styling*

RAEANNE SARAZEN, MA, RDN, FAND

eat
right.



Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics
120 S. Riverside Plaza, Suite 2190
Chicago, IL 60606

The Complete Recipe Writing Guide

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Foreword

Thorough, engaging, and inspiring, Raeanne Sarazen's *The Complete Recipe Writing Guide* is a long-awaited addition to the library of culinary arts and communication. No doubt it is destined to become an essential resource for anyone wishing to develop, write, and publish compelling recipes.

Recipes are everywhere—not only in cookbooks but also in blogs and social media posts, in newspapers and magazines, and on television. Food and recipes can also be a key part of travel and cultural exploration. Many cooks, however, are unfamiliar with certain ingredients, techniques, and flavors. How can a recipe developer provide this information accurately to ensure a successful cooking and eating experience? And what about the cook with minimal cooking background and confidence: how much explanation is necessary (for example, what terms should be used to describe proper measuring techniques and equipment)?

As a dietitian, I became aware of my own recipe writing limitations when my first book, *The Art of Cooking for the Diabetic*, was published in 1978. I was guided by my coauthor Kay Middleton, a retired food editor. Since then, many food writers, editors, and culinary dietitians have relied on two classic books for guidance: *Recipes Into Type* (published in 1993) and *The Recipe Writer's Handbook* (published in 2001). Today, however, we need more. Enter *The Complete Recipe Writing Guide*, a state-of-the-art reference that provides comprehensive guidance on recipe development, writing, testing, nutrition analysis, food styling, photography, and video.

Author Raeanne Sarazen has a unique and diverse background in food communication that made her an ideal author for this book. Raeanne is a registered dietitian as well as a professional chef and food writer with expertise in creating consumer-friendly recipe content, a former public relations executive, a former test kitchen director at the *Chicago Tribune*, a cook at the renowned Chicago restaurant Charlie Trotter's, a television cooking personality, and a curriculum developer and educator at several charities that teach children to how to cook. She brings her extensive knowledge and experience plus the advice and techniques of other food experts to the table with remarkable clarity and creativity. Her ability to synthesize the vast amount of information found in this book into a cohesive and easy-to-follow text exemplifies her expert communication skills. Raeanne provides the guidance needed to take your recipe writing to a whole new level.

The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics has long been a source of nutrition and food expertise, but historically has focused on clinical nutrition, as a majority of its members worked in health care. As time passed, many dietitians gained positions throughout food industry, including food service, product development, marketing, sustainability, and agriculture and related fields. Culinary nutrition has also become an important career path. In 1997, I was the founding chair of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Food & Culinary Professionals dietetic practice group, with the goal of providing advanced food and culinary education to

dietitians. Raeanne was one of the 175 founding members of this group, which now boasts over 1,900 members, including many food writers, chefs, food and nutrition educators, and food industry professionals.

With interest in and demand for personalized nutrition growing, along with increasing emphasis on culinary medicine, the importance of focusing on taste and flavor in recipe development has never been greater. Whether there are dietary restrictions or not, every recipe should be delicious. *The Complete Recipe Writing Guide* helps recipe developers meet this challenge, enabling them, like artists, to work with a limited palette to create palate-pleasing food.

Everyone who writes or publishes recipes can benefit from the words of wisdom found in this book. Raeanne walks you through the recipe production workflow—from recipe concept to development and testing to presentation in print, digital, or other formats. Many dietitians along with prominent chefs and food personalities have contributed their expertise, as you will see in the abundant tips highlighted throughout the book. Even experienced recipe developers will learn new tricks of the trade; I know I did!

I am honored to provide this foreword to a book that is a manual of best practices for developing, writing, and producing recipe content. And I salute its dedicated and brilliant author.

Mary Abbott Hess, LHD, MS, RDN, LDN, FAND

Founder, Food & Culinary Professionals Dietetic Practice Group

Former President, The American Dietetic Association

Former Chairman of the Board, American Institute of Food & Wine

Introduction

You are here because we share a connection: the desire to create and document recipes that work. Perhaps you're a food professional—a chef, nutritionist, editor, cookbook author, or marketing expert. Or maybe you want to turn your love of food into a career. No matter, you are in the right place.

Over the years I've come to appreciate different styles of recipe writing. Yet I'm a purist when it comes to the ultimate goal of the written recipe:

A written recipe must be accurate, readable, and reproducible—a set of instructions that translates the act of cooking into words.

My clarity-first approach reflects a career immersed in the science of nutrition and the culinary arts. I've worked as a clinical dietitian; recipe developer, writer, editor, and tester; professional chef; food stylist; and as a television and video host. I'm also an avid home cook and mother of three—two of whom have celiac disease.

I wrote *The Complete Recipe Writing Guide* because I wanted to pay it forward. I wished I'd had a book like this early in my career, a single source of truth for developing recipes—from kitchen to plate, and finally, to publication. Today, endless information on food, health, and nutrition is only a click away. Yet much of this information is overwhelming, contradictory, and confusing at best. Nowadays, it's easy to become an “expert” simply by creating a digital presence. No education or experience is needed thanks to easy-to-use platforms, nutrition analysis software, and smartphone cameras. Don't get me wrong, there are some great food and recipe sites out there. But there are many that contain misleading or just plain inaccurate food, nutrition, and recipe information.

Writing this book, I passionately approached every topic like an investigative journalist, interviewing top industry professionals, reading research studies and



books, and attending professional conferences and webinars. I wanted to curate and share not only what I've learned over the years but also share the expertise of others. And I wanted those in the field of recipe writing to have professional standards of practice that incorporate the science of nutrition. Inside these pages, you'll learn how to develop recipes for plant-based diets, diabetes management, celiac disease, food allergies, and everything in between.

I hope you'll use *The Complete Recipe Writing Guide* to build a foundation of knowledge and expand your skill set. Once you master the principles, I encourage you to add your own personal style and creativity to the mix.

Food Is My Passion and My Profession

Food is medicine. The array of nutrients in food supports good health and can help prevent, manage, or even reverse disease. Yet, food is so much more. Food is memory. Food is cultural identity. Food is community. And, of course, food is joy. People don't eat nutrients; they eat food.

For me, food has always been the lens through which I view and understand life. I am curious about everything as it relates to food—from how it grows to its meaning and place in history. What I love about food is that there's always more to know and to experience, which no doubt explains why I've taken so many different career paths in the food industry and have sought out culinary adventures around the world. My husband and children have come to accept (and even embrace) that we'll return from our travels with stories sure to regale our friends—fried scorpions in Beijing, testicle meatballs in Arizona, or the culinary and cultural discoveries from cooking alongside local home cooks (the true experts).

Most toddlers outgrow the *why* phase of development. I never did. Even at age seven, I wanted to know why the popcorn stuck together in the popcorn balls my friend Susan's mother made. I looked through my mom's few cookbooks and found nothing. Later, I was at another friend's house flipping the pages of one of her mother's cookbooks. There I discovered the answer: Karo syrup. *WOW!* Liquid sugar. How cool. I remember reading that popcorn balls were originally made with molasses. Even as a young girl, when it came to questions about food, I could go down a rabbit hole like nobody's business.

Growing up, my grandmother Sonia's kitchen was an endless source of fascination. There I discovered pickling salt, kosher salt, and sour salt (citric acid). We only had table salt at our house. She used pickling salt to preserve the cucumbers from her garden, sour salt to balance the sweetness of her meatballs rolled in cabbage, and kosher salt for everything else—veal brisket, *kneidlach* (matzo balls), beet borscht, and chicken soup. She also loved to bake. Stashed in her kitchen drawers were bags of semisweet chocolate chips and chips I'd never seen before—butterscotch, peanut butter, white chocolate, mini chocolate. There was not only vanilla extract but also almond and mint. What could I make with these?

The truth was that my grandmother was far more interested in cooking and baking for her family than teaching me how to do it. Most of the time, her goodies just appeared. They arrived in sturdy boxes mailed from Ottumwa, Iowa, to our home in Chicago, Illinois,

filled with chocolate chip cookies, rocky road bars, *mandelbrot* (an Eastern Europe cousin of biscotti), and *hamantaschen* (three-cornered pastries filled with poppy seeds or prunes). Why did the rocky road bars remain moist and tasty long after they arrived, but the other cookies dry out so quickly?

When we visited her in Ottumwa, these same treats emerged from a coffin-sized freezer in the basement. How long could you freeze cookies and bars? Why did the spaghetti she cooked, frozen and then defrosted, change in texture? What was the liquid inside the jars of dill pickles, tomatoes, and peaches that lined the cool walls of the basement?

The magic she performed in her kitchen was hard to replicate. She didn't use measuring cups or spoons. And I never saw her use a recipe. Yet I watched intently as she sprinkled sugar in her spaghetti sauce (that's why I must have liked it!) and smeared butter on bread so the tuna sandwiches, wet with pickle juice, didn't get soggy. Years later, with the help of my brother, a documentary filmmaker, I translated her pinch-of-this and handful-of-that creations into recipes, some of which I shared with my readers when working as the test kitchen director for the *Chicago Tribune*.

It wasn't until many years later, after she'd passed away, that I found she actually did have recipes—magazine and newspaper clippings taped to 3" × 5" notecards or hand copied from the back of food packaging—stored in a recipe box. I discovered that her recipes were not *hers*, per se, but ones she'd adapted to make her own.

When I look back, the genesis of this book began when I was a girl enthralled with the mysteries inside Grandma Sonia's kitchen. It was there that I first had the urge to pull back the curtain, to discover the *whys* and *hows* behind the magical dishes and treats she lovingly prepared for us. I believe that recipes (like my grandmother's) are meant to be shared. For recipes to live on, they must be accurately recorded.

How to Use This Book

Inside these pages you'll learn how to create professional recipes from development to publication with accuracy and confidence. I use the term "publication" loosely to encompass the many ways we consume content these days, whether flipping the pages of a cookbook, reading an online publication, or watching a recipe video.

While each chapter of this book stands on its own, to get the most out of this book, read (or reference) Chapters 1 through 6 together. They contain the building blocks of recipe development with a special focus on health and wellness. If you're more experienced, simply open to the section of the book where you're looking for guidance. Be sure to take in the Quick Tips throughout the book for advice and insights from top industry professionals. Here's a quick overview of the contents:

Chapters 1 through 6: Recipe Development

With the growing interest in eating for better health, as well as rising rates of diet-related diseases, food allergies, and food intolerances, recipe developers need reliable resources. These chapters show you how to develop recipes for health and wellness, while keeping the focus on flavor, including plant-based diets; food allergies and food sensitivities; fat, sodium, and sugar modifications; celiac disease (gluten-free); and FODMAP intolerance.

Chapter 7: Recipe Writing

Learn how to translate the act of cooking food into words with clarity, consistency, and original voice. You'll find answers to questions on grammar, spelling, punctuation, and recipe writing styles.

Chapter 8: Recipe Testing

Learn the recipe testing process and how professional testers ensure a recipe can be replicated with consistent results every time. Access recipe testing forms and tips on how to use home cook recipe testers for your cookbook projects.

Chapter 9: Nutrition Analysis

There are many types of analysis options. This chapter teaches you how to evaluate and use them. You'll learn the guidelines professionals use to analyze recipes with complex ingredients and preparation methods.

Chapter 10: Food Styling, Photography, and Videos

Food photos and videos take center stage when it comes to recipes. While there are entire books written on these topics, this guide wouldn't be complete without professional secrets and tips for improving your skills in food styling, photography, and videos.

Appendixes

Turn to these helpful go-to resources when you're developing, writing, and testing recipes:

- Common ingredient equivalencies and conversions
- Recipe writing style guides
- Food safety instructions in recipes
- Understanding meat cuts for recipe development

PLEASE PROVIDE FEEDBACK

Nutrition science is constantly evolving. So, too, are consumer preferences based on current values, beliefs, and culinary trends. If there is anything you believe is missing or needs further explanation or detail, please email your suggestions and feedback to me at raeanne@raeannesarazen.com. There is always the next edition!



Photo credit: Renée Comet Photography





Chapter 1

Guidelines for Recipe Development

IN THIS CHAPTER, LEARN ABOUT:

- The key steps involved in the recipe development process
- The importance of celebrating and respecting global cuisines in recipe development
- How to develop an original recipe or adapt an existing one
- Recipe copyright and professional best practices for recipe attribution and recipe sharing

Recipe development is both an art and a science. Creativity, inspiration, and open-mindedness contribute to the art, a process that is unique to each recipe developer. The science is in the culinary techniques and strategies that are shown to be effective. While there is no one right way to develop a recipe, the objective is always the same—the final recipe should taste good and work consistently. To meet this goal, the ingredients, amounts, and instructions need to be communicated clearly. This process includes writing out the “bones” of the recipe, preparing it, making adjustments, preparing it again, and perhaps adjusting and preparing again as needed. This is true whether developing recipes for restaurants, hospitals, schools, senior living centers, cookbooks, websites, trade associations, food companies, or print or online newspapers or magazines.

Aspiring and seasoned recipe developers alike always have room to further develop their craft. Recipe developers should recognize, however, that it takes time to develop and hone recipe development skills. Through a process of constant experimenting and tasting in the kitchen combined with reading and researching about food and cooking, experienced food professionals and chefs continually improve their recipe development skills and increase the breadth and depth of their food and culinary knowledge.

The Recipe Development Process

The skill of recipe development is distinct from the ability to properly write and edit a recipe (see Chapter 7). This chapter is not intended to teach professional cooking principles and techniques; instead, it will show how to develop an original recipe or modify or adapt an existing one.

The recipe development process can be divided into three key steps, each of which will be discussed in more detail:

Step 1: Build Culinary Knowledge

Step 2: Create a Recipe Strategy

Step 3: Start the Creative Recipe Development Process

Recipe Development Step 1: Build Culinary Knowledge

Cooking, tasting, and learning about food will strengthen your culinary knowledge and expertise in flavor and technique, which are essential skills for recipe development. Build your culinary skills by spending time cooking, refining your tasting skills, and exploring culinary resources.

Cook: Master the Culinary Basics

Extensive cooking experience allows a recipe developer to know instinctively which recipe steps or culinary techniques can be shortened and changed. Cooking is based on a foundation of objective techniques we refer to as culinary rules. Culinary rules, once mastered, can be tweaked/tailored to create new recipes.

Following are some basic and essential culinary rules that every recipe developer must understand and apply.

Kitchen equipment Know which knives, pieces of cookware, appliances, or tools are appropriate for which kitchen tasks.

Heat and foods Understand what happens to different foods when they are heated in various ways—the relationship and effects of heat and heat transfer. For example, the various forms of heat (roasting, baking, grilling, frying, searing, conduction, convection, radiation, microwaving, and steaming) cause proteins to coagulate, starches to gelatinize, sugars to caramelize, water to evaporate, or fat to melt.

Cooking methods Recognize why different cooking methods are chosen for different types of foods and choosing the technique that will best capture a food's flavors. Methods include moist heat (poaching, simmering, blanching, boiling, steaming, or braising), dry heat (roasting, baking, broiling, grilling, cooking on a griddle, or air frying), dry heat using fat (sautéing, panfrying, or deep-frying), and microwaving.

Principles of seasoning and flavoring Understand when to season and add flavor to heighten the natural

flavors of the foods being cooked, and the common seasonings (salt, pepper, acids) and flavoring ingredients (fats, herbs and spices).

Sanitation and food safety Know the rules of proper food handling and storage as well as cleaning and sanitizing procedures.

Culinary knowledge for recipe development can be acquired in many ways: attending culinary school, working in professional kitchens or alongside other food professionals, or becoming self-taught with cookbooks and recipe trial and error. Various cookbooks or culinary textbooks can provide the why, the how, or the food science behind cooking, as well as information on fundamental techniques (see **Recipe Development Resources** on page 23). Major food publications invest in test kitchens, so their food information is quite reliable, and their recipes deliver consistent results. Reading and trying tested recipes allows a recipe developer to experience the expertise of other professionals, assess what works, and learn their own preferences for cooking styles.

A mix of curiosity, interest in experimentation, and a desire to perfect basic culinary techniques through repetition and refine skills over time will form the foundation needed for a career as a recipe developer. Keep in mind that recipes must align with the cooking skills of the target audience; this is discussed in more detail in Chapter 7 on recipe writing.

Taste: Develop Your Palate

You will become a better cook and recipe developer by experimenting with flavor combinations, learning how to season foods—especially with salt—and seizing every opportunity to taste foods. Over time, it will become clear when an ingredient can stand on its own and when to add some flavor to enhance the dish. Food that tastes “just okay” may be underseasoned or it may be the choice of ingredients or the cooking method.

Some recipe developers follow the rule of tasting at the start of cooking, again when halfway through, and then again at the end. Others taste and adjust each time an ingredient is added if it is appropriate

CULINARY KNOWLEDGE FOR RECIPE DEVELOPERS

Following are a few examples of the culinary knowledge recipe developers should acquire.

Stocks, sauces, and soups	Learn techniques for preparing their foundations (e.g., roux or gravy)
Meats*	Get familiar with the basic cuts, know which cooking methods to use for each, and how to determine doneness
Poultry	Understand how to cook light versus dark meat and determine doneness
Fish and shellfish	Recognize the common varieties and the few basic cuts for fish, select appropriate cooking methods, and determine doneness
Vegetables	Understand methods of preparation; how to control texture, flavor, and color
Beans, peas, lentils, and soy products	Identify the varieties and types and learn different techniques for preparation
Pasta, rice, and other grains**	Identify the types and characteristics of each when cooking
Salads and salad dressings	Identify the types of salad greens available (e.g., endive, butter, frisée) and the method and preparation of various types of salads and dressings (e.g., vinaigrette, emulsified, or mayonnaise based)
Breads, desserts, and other baked goods	Learn the principles of baking, including proper measurement or weighing of ingredients and the function of key ingredients, such as flour, fat, sugar, eggs, liquids, and leavening agents

* See the appendix **Understanding Meat Cuts for Recipe Development** on page 381 for more information.

** See **Guide to Cooking Whole Grains** on pages 78 and 79 for more information.

and safe. Determining seasoning, especially with salt, is a matter of personal taste. Seasoning can turn a dish that tastes bland and flat into something special.

Your palate will become more discerning and developed as you taste foods while cooking. By tasting, you learn when a dish needs more seasoning (e.g., salt to enhance the flavor, or herbs, spices, or pepper to add flavor) or how and when to balance flavors by adding an acidic ingredient (e.g., lemon juice, wine, vinegar, Parmesan cheese, tomato, or Dijon mustard) that contributes a sour flavor or puckery sharpness (the culinary description for which is brightness).

The creative process of recipe development should consider all factors that influence flavor: taste, aroma, mouthfeel, and the sensory stimulation of food. How food is experienced is a fusion of all these factors.

Aroma

Aroma is the odor perceived when inhaling through the nose. The senses of smell and taste work together to

influence perception of flavor. Olfactory cells located at the ends of the nasal passages detect the aromas of foods, and the information gathered by these cells is also relayed to the mouth via a process called olfactory referral. The sense of smell is believed to be responsible for 75% to 95% or more of the sense of taste. You can test this by plugging your nose while eating: an inability to detect the aroma of foods will directly influence your ability to taste them. Chefs often add fresh herbs, spices, citrus zest, or other aromatic ingredients to enhance the aroma of a dish because doing so also enhances the dish's flavor.

Mouthfeel

The temperature and texture perceived while eating—the mouthfeel of food—stimulates sensory cells located alongside taste cells and activates the perceived qualities of enjoyment, such as heat, spiciness, creaminess, crunchiness, and crispness.

FIVE TASTE SENSATIONS

Taste buds, located on the tongue and roof of the mouth, respond to the five basic taste sensations of sweet, salty, sour, bitter, and umami. When we eat, our taste buds become activated, and we perceive the flavors of these types of foods and ingredients.

Taste	Common foods	Culinary uses
Sweet	 sugar, honey, jams, jellies, syrups	mellows acidic or bitter tastes
Salty	 salt, soy sauce, miso	enhances flavor, counteracts bitterness, accentuates sweetness
Sour	 lemon, lime, and orange juices; tomatoes; yogurt; sour cream; vinegars	adds brightness, reduces saltiness, balances spiciness, counterbalances sweetness
Bitter	 cocoa, coffee, beer, and various greens, including kale, endive, radicchio, spinach	provides color, complexity, depth
Umami	 anchovies, Parmesan cheese, fish sauce, miso, seaweed, mushrooms, tomatoes, cured meats (bacon)	adds savory sensation

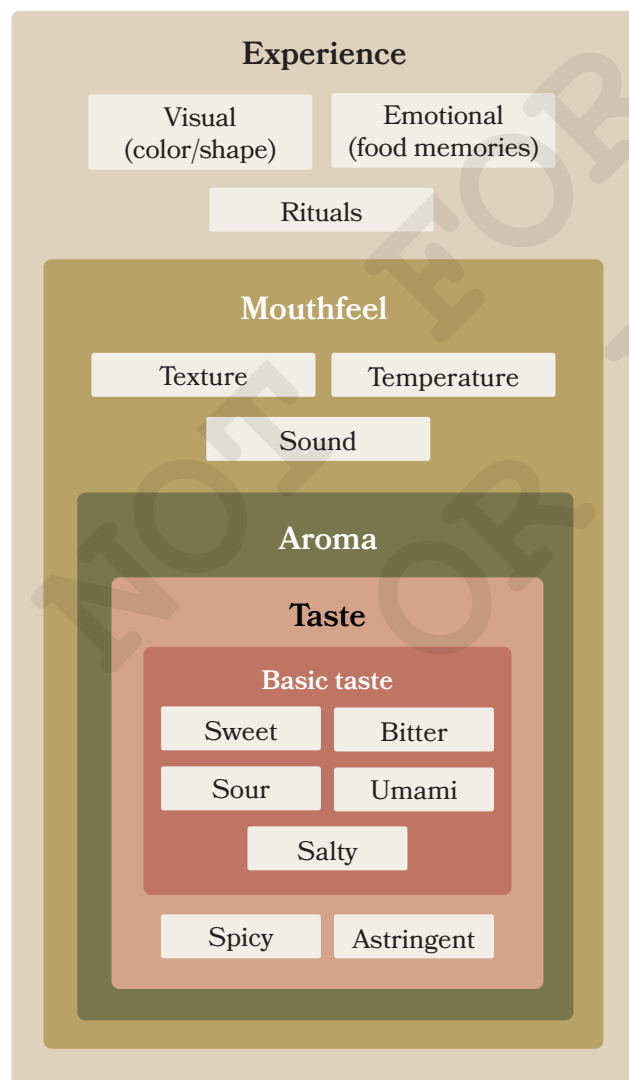
Experience

The experience of eating includes aspects of the visual (“eating with your eyes”) and emotional (evoking memories of food) as well as the rituals of eating. These characteristics enhance a food’s palatability and enjoyment.

Quick Tip

“When I develop recipes, I always look for ways to create what I call the Big Taste . . . food that is deeply satisfying, and that appeals to all the senses. I like dishes that leave their flavor with me, whose tastes and aromas I will never forget.” —Paula Wolfert, *Paula Wolfert’s World of Food*

Factors That Influence Flavor



Read: Expand Your Food Knowledge

Recipe developers can expand their culinary knowledge and improve their kitchen skills by reading books about food—cookbooks, food and ingredient reference books, food science books, cultural history books, and food memoirs—and by watching food media, including online cooking tutorials, cooking shows, and food-themed movies and documentaries. In addition to the obvious benefits of skill improvement, acquiring culinary knowledge through reading and visual media can inspire developers to push the traditional boundaries of their culinary knowledge base. These resources can teach you about food and cooking and can serve as a source of wisdom. Think of them as a starting point for gathering recipe ideas from other experts and gaining a better understanding of how successful recipe developers think. (See [Recipe Development Resources](#) on page 23 for examples of reference books.)

While reading about food and watching food media provides wonderful opportunities to learn, eating in restaurants and traveling to places with different culinary styles and traditions puts eating and food in the context of experiential learning about the flavors, ingredients, and techniques of a specific region. When traveling, try to learn about the local cuisine’s traditional preparation methods not only by eating at restaurants but also by cooking alongside the people who live there. Food-themed travel or tours led by chefs or local food experts offer a blend of cultural and culinary knowledge that can yield taste memories and inspiration for future recipe development.

Recipe Development Notes

To help generate ideas for future recipe development projects, create your own system of organizing your food and recipe notes. Some professionals, many of whom say they are always thinking about food, find it helpful to store future ideas for recipe development projects on their smartphones or in notebooks. Consider keeping notes about interesting ingredient combinations, flavors, techniques, and food presentations so you can reference them when brainstorming new recipe ideas.

Recipe ideas or general thoughts about food may arise after enjoying a great meal, visiting a market while on a trip, eating at a friend’s house or a new

restaurant, seeing something new at a trade show or conference, or even dreaming about a new recipe. Any experience might inspire a food idea or a memory, so always be prepared to write them down. Take and attach pictures, if possible, to complement your notes and help jog your memory.

A recipe development notebook can be maintained in various ways: for example, using a note-taking, task management, or organizational smartphone app (e.g., the Notes app), or recording in a spreadsheet or paper notebook. Regardless of how you keep food notes, they can be useful to reference when you need recipe development inspiration at a later time.

ORGANIZE RECIPE DEVELOPMENT IDEAS

Following are examples of ways to organize and document your food and recipe ideas to more easily reference them for future recipe development projects.

By Season

(Seasonal ingredients and dish ideas)

Fall: molasses, maple syrup, pecans, pumpkin, figs, apples, brisket, pork

Dish idea: grilled pork chops with maple butter and pickled apples

Spring: asparagus, peas, spinach, eggs, lamb

Dish idea: asparagus and pea frittata

Summer: raspberries, blueberries, watermelon, corn, broccoli

Dish idea: watermelon salad (watermelon, cucumber, corn, and feta cheese)

Winter: beans, butternut squash, celeriac, pomegranates, barley

Dish idea: Bean stew with barley and winter squash

By Culture or Region

(Ideas for ingredient combinations and cooking methods)

Spain/Mediterranean:

Squid, paprika, and olive oil
Asparagus, orange, and Ibérico ham
Sautéed breadcrumbs, garlic, chorizo, roasted pepper, and poached egg

North African or Moroccan:

Chickpea, eggplant, couscous, lentils, and mint (cold salad)
Chicken, harissa, almonds, and dates (braised)
Roasted lamb, coriander, lime, and mayonnaise

Vietnamese:

Tofu, pickled carrots, rock sugar, fish sauce, lemongrass, chili, and mint
Chicken, shrimp paste, red Thai chili, fried shallots, cinnamon, and lime

By Recipe Category

Appetizers or starters
Soups
Eggs
Main dish: vegetarian, fish, seafood, beef, pork, and poultry
Salads
Vegetables
Pastas
Sweets
Breads
Beverages

By Meal, Recipe Type, or Occasion

Breakfast
Lunch
Dinner
Snacks
Desserts
Fast/easy
Healthy
Special occasion/holiday



Recipe Development

Step 2: Create a Recipe Strategy

Mastering the culinary basics, developing your palate, and committing to lifelong culinary learning through reading and experimenting with food will enhance your recipe development skills. With this foundational culinary knowledge, you can move on to step two—the recipe strategy. The recipe strategy involves thinking through the objectives of the recipe and the profile of its intended audience: essentially, the who, what, when, where, and why of the recipe. Getting these questions answered first will help guide your recipe's content.

First, understand the audience and their needs—including their problems and frustrations, particularly the ones that a recipe developer can solve. Recipe success is more than just a summary of clicks, shares, and page views. **Rather, the end goal of a recipe, whether it's for a print or digital publication, social media platform, or food company, is that it must work as written, taste good, look appealing, and provide replicable results.** After preparing the recipe, the end user should feel successful as a cook.

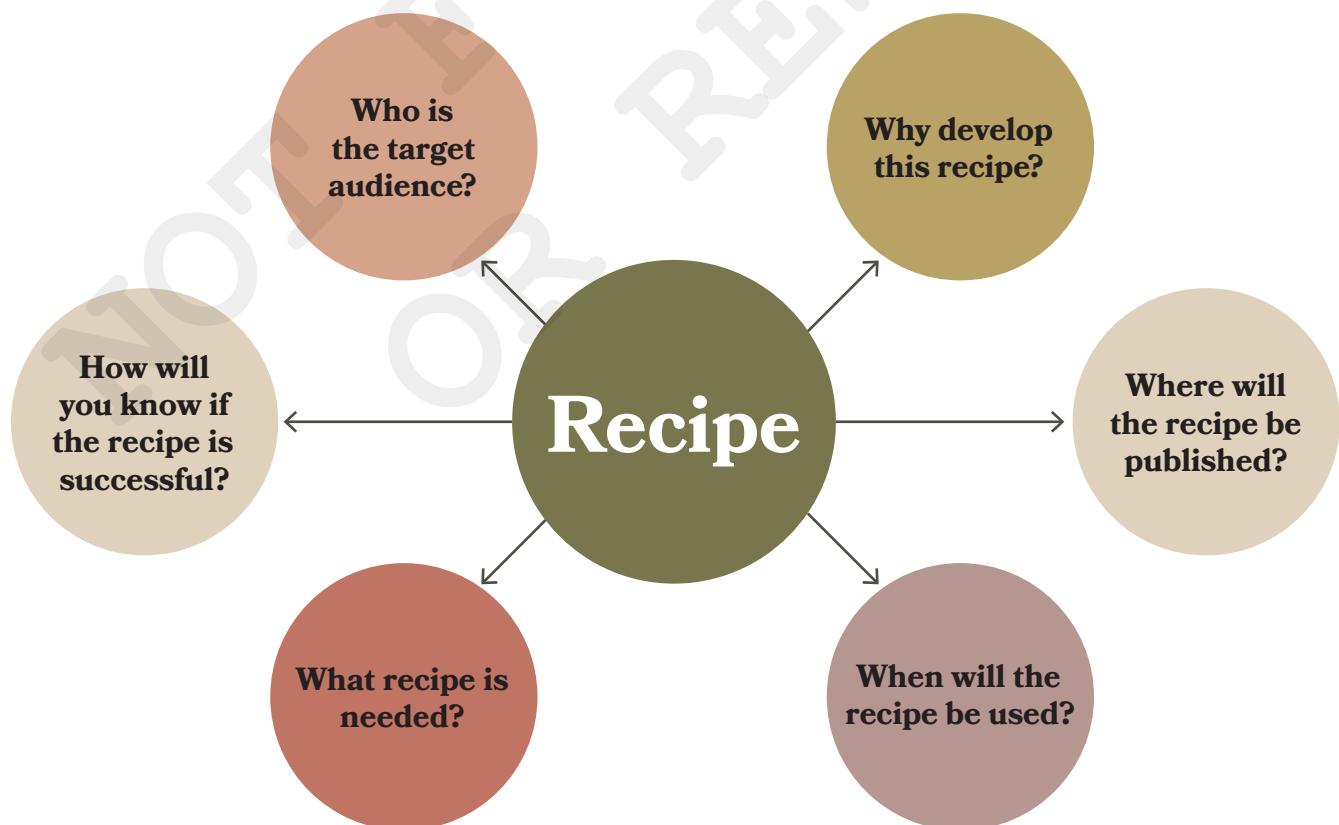
A professional recipe developer must strive to be a trusted resource whom cooks can count on.

A recipe strategy should answer the following questions:

- **Who** is the target audience?
- **What** recipe is needed?
- **When** will the recipe be used?
- **Where** will the recipe be published?
- **Why** develop this recipe?
- **How** will you know if the recipe is successful?

The Target Audience

Recipes are like formulas, with instructions that tell a story using the active voice. When creating a recipe strategy, it is best to start by identifying the people who will most likely prepare the recipe: its target audience. Clearly defining the target audience helps the recipe developer meet their interests and needs. Today, this step is more important than ever before, since consumers can access hundreds of recipes a day through a variety of platforms but may only choose to use one or two.



If a recipe is being developed for a food company or food association, it's likely that they will have their own research and data on the target audience. Brands are tightly bound to their understanding of their customers' needs, and any recipe developed for a brand must adhere to that understanding. A recipe developer should ask the client for as much audience data and product insights as they can provide. If audience data is unavailable, the recipe developer should personalize the ideal cook as much as possible by visualizing what the ideal cook will do with, think about, and want from the recipe.

Begin by identifying and exploring audience demographics and the various lifestyle and behavioral characteristics of the target group. Defining these demographics and behavioral traits is critical. Developing a recipe for a family with young children is very different from developing a recipe for a retired couple, just as developing a recipe for someone with good access to many quality ingredients is different from developing a recipe for someone on a strict budget or who lives in an area with limited food access. A clear understanding of the target audience is critical to the recipe strategy.

Demographics

Consider the following factors first when establishing the basic profile of the target audience:

- age
- gender
- cultural background
- where they live (country, region, whether they live in cities or rural areas)
- education level
- estimated income level
- household size
- age of household members

Lifestyle and Behavioral Characteristics

Next, answer the following questions to further narrow or segment the recipe's audience.

What is the ideal cook's culinary skill level? For example, do they understand more esoteric culinary terms (supreme an orange, julienne a vegetable)? How much detail should be included in the recipe's instructions?

Quick Tip

“Start with a focal ingredient—everything needs to go with every other ingredient/ flavor component. If it doesn't work with everything, it cannot be part of the flavor equation.”

—Grant Achatz, world-renowned chef and restaurateur, on “flavor bouncing” and food pairing (YouTube, 2015)

What type of equipment will the ideal cook have on hand? For example, are they likely to own a blender to puree a soup or make a frozen smoothie? Do they own specialized pans, such as a popover pan or a roasting pan with a rack?

What measurement system is used by your audience? Does your audience understand and use metric (kilograms, grams, milliliters) or US customary measures (pounds, ounces, cups, tablespoons, teaspoons) or both?

What are the ideal cook's shopping habits? Does the ideal cook have easy access to a well-stocked grocery store? Do they shop daily or biweekly, or do they make weekly visits to the grocery store?

When will the recipe be prepared? Is the recipe intended to be made on an average weeknight or is it a prep-heavy recipe intended for a weekend or a special occasion when the cook would have more time?

What is the availability or accessibility of the ingredients of the recipe? Are there cost considerations when choosing ingredients?

Is the recipe trying to solve a consumer challenge? For example, is it making dinner at the end of a workday in 20 minutes or less? Or creating a lunch item that can be eaten using one hand?

Does the audience have dietary restrictions? Does the recipe need to meet different dietary requirements for each family member?

RECIPE CONSIDERATIONS FOR AN AUDIENCE WITH LIMITED COOKING EXPERIENCE

Consider the following factors:

- Use basic cooking equipment and appliances.
- Make sure recipes are easy to read and follow.
- Limit the number of ingredients—for example, five or fewer.
- Limit the total preparation time to 20 or fewer minutes, with the finished dish ready and on the table within 30 to 40 minutes.
- Whenever possible, try to use the entire amount of an ingredient in the package specified in order to prevent waste, such as 1 (14.5-ounce) can chicken broth instead of 1¼ cups.
- Ensure that the recipe is flexible: it should be able to accommodate fresh, frozen, or canned versions of the ingredients and provide practical suggestions, including easy substitutions (e.g., bouillon cubes for canned broth).
- Include tips and additional educational information when appropriate.
- Include information on handwashing and food safety.
- Offer suggestions on what parts of the recipe can be made ahead of time or how leftovers can be used in a second meal.
- Provide general nutrition information in the recipe's headnote.



The Purpose of a Recipe

Just like other forms of communication, recipes convey a message by fulfilling a specific purpose for an audience, publisher, or company. A recipe's primary purpose might be to inspire action on the part of the audience—eating more vegetables, buying a specific product or appliance used in the recipe, or supporting marketing goals on social media. Secondary purposes or goals could include a desire on the part of a publisher or company to create a new audience or to encourage its existing audience to seek out other content on a website or on social media.

Before starting a recipe development project, consider the what, why, when, and where of the recipe. Finding the answers to these questions will help clarify the recipe's purpose. If the client is a food company or restaurant, many of these answers can be found on their media outlets or in their publications. Do your own research to ensure you are familiar with their goals.

What?

What features of the recipe may be most appealing to the target audience?

Should the number of ingredients in the recipe be limited?

Does the recipe need to meet certain nutrient criteria for a specific audience?

Should the cook use a specific piece of equipment (e.g., a handheld blender) or technique (e.g., a no-bake pie recipe)?

Should this recipe showcase a particular ingredient or product? If it's a brand recipe, what image, budget, and branding guidelines must be followed? How will the recipe showcase the brand's promise or message?

How visually appealing is the end product? Depending on how the recipe will be used, the accompanying photo of the dish may be just as important as the dish's flavor.

How will this recipe differentiate itself from others?

Why?

Should the recipe convey a feeling or emotion, such as love, comfort, warmth, fun, or joy?

Should the recipe solve a problem for its audience?

Will the recipe convey a message or educate its audience about a specific culture, ingredient, family tradition, cooking technique, or any other important factor?

Should the recipe tell a story?

Will the recipe highlight a new food trend, regional foodway, or seasonal ingredient?

When?

When will the audience use the recipe? Think through the consumer's entire experience with the recipe, from when and how the consumer finds the recipe on through to shopping, prepping, cooking, eating, and cleanup. Recipes can be brand ambassadors that help consumers experience, taste, and buy into a brand's message.

When will the finished recipe be served? Will it be served at a picnic, a potluck, an elegant or casual dinner party, or a holiday gathering? This may alter certain ingredient and cooking method choices.

Where?

Where will the recipe be available once it is complete? Will it exist digitally or in print to be used by employees in food service; on a food company's website; on a food product package; in a consumer brochure; in an online or print magazine or newspaper; or in a cookbook, an email newsletter, or on social media? The number of possible platforms for where a recipe can exist continues to grow, and different platforms have different space constraints and word count limits. If the platform includes food photography and video capabilities, the space devoted to the recipe may be affected as well.

MEASURING RECIPE SUCCESS

How will you know if a recipe is successful? A key “ingredient” often missing in recipe development is follow-up with the target audience to determine both whether the recipe ends up being used and if so, the audience's reactions to the recipe in terms of its taste, cost to prepare, and ease of preparation. Ask a publisher, food company, or foodservice establishment if they have data on their most popular and most-requested recipes. It may be nearly impossible to measure a recipe's impact on sales of a specific product featured, but recipe developers can assess a recipe's performance in a variety of ways, including consumer engagement with the recipe (including clicks, likes, and ratings), posts about the recipe, comments, or inquiries.



Quick Tip

“When I work on branded partnership recipes, I like to connect with the test kitchen professional to understand their product requirements before getting in the kitchen to avoid any misses. And when I present recipe concepts to the brand teams, my recommendation is to include trend insights, consumer research insights, the product's prominent role in the recipe, what consumer solutions it offers (such as lifestyle or convenience), and more. Marketing wants their budgets to go toward hardworking content.” —Mary Margaret Sinnema, food content and innovation consultant

Quick Tip

“I try to create a recipe that would be used frequently versus a once-in-a-while type of recipe. My goal for developing recipes: they should be appealing, approachable, accurate, and achievable.”

—Rosemary Mark, recipe developer and culinary consultant



STAYING ON TOP OF CONSUMER FOOD TRENDS

Following consumer food trends can help a recipe developer pitch ideas, gain a better understanding of a recipe's intended audience, or provide a rationale for a specific recipe.

- Monitor companies and associations that perform market research and gather industry insights, data analytics, and trend reports on food and beverage; restaurants and food service; food retail; and consumer eating and drinking behavior. (Examples include Circana, SPINS, Data Essentials, Hartman Group, Deloitte, McKinsey & Company, Food Genius, Mintel Food and Drink/Mintel Menu Insights, Food Navigator, Sterling Rice Group Culinary Trends, and the National Restaurant Association.)
- Read blogs and other online media outlets (e.g., Eater's Trends section, Food52, Kitchn, Allrecipes' Measuring Cup Consumer Trends Report).
- Scan online platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok, and Pinterest trends, Pinterest100.com (annual report), Substack (for food e-newsletters), Google Analytics, or Google Trends.
- Customize social media feeds so they display trending topics. (Search trend hashtags like #foodtrends or #trendyfoods.)
- Read trade journals, trade newsletters, cookbooks, and consumer magazines.
- Eat out at local and out-of-town restaurants.
- Become a keen observer of other people and their eating habits.



200

150

100

50

ml
175

125

75

Appendix: Common Ingredient Equivalencies and Conversions

In **recipe development**, a personal document detailing the volume and weight equivalents of frequently used recipe ingredients can be very helpful when converting volume to weight measurements or adjusting food amounts in recipes and for nutrition analysis. Consider sharing your document with your editor or copy editor to ensure consistency within your recipe project.

This appendix presents general approximate weight and volume equivalencies for many common ingredients. Keep in mind that discrepancies in weight and volume measurements exist, even between the most respected food publications. Factors such as density, moisture, and temperature can influence the volume of ingredients, making weight a more accurate measurement than volume. For example, 1 cup of brown sugar (measured by volume) can change depending on whether it is loosely or tightly packed into the measuring cup. On the other hand, 213 grams of brown sugar will always be 213 grams of brown sugar. Remember that consistency is critical in a multirecipe project, so be sure to use a consistent volume measure or weighed amount of an ingredient across different recipes.

Experienced recipe developers who also specialize in nutrition analysis often create a similar document as a cheat sheet and use it as a reference to ensure consistency when performing nutrient analysis.

Refer to **Measurement Conversions**, **Measurement Equivalencies**, and **Temperature Conversions** on pages 360 and 361 for formulas to easily convert US customary measurements to metric and vice versa.

Types of Ingredient Measurements

There are different ways to describe measured ingredients in a recipe, depending on the type of ingredient and how much accuracy is needed.

Number measurement (i.e., number of items): Use number measurements, such as 3 medium mangoes, when accurate measurement is not critical for the success of the recipe and close-in-size is good enough.

Volume measurement (e.g., teaspoon, tablespoon, cup, etc.): The volume, or the measure of how much space something takes up, is most often used for liquids and dry ingredients in American home cooking recipes.

Weight (ounces or grams): Weight is the most accurate, reliable, and consistent way to measure recipe ingredients and portion sizes—whether liquids, dry ingredients, or solids. When measurement accuracy is critical, in baking for example, provide recipe measurements in weight using a digital scale. Liquids with a high sugar content, such as honey and syrup, ideally should be weighed. In general, small quantities (less than 4 tablespoons), such as 2 tablespoons of olive oil or 1 teaspoon of baking soda, are given in volume, not in weight.

Fruits

Ingredient	Volume/count	US customary weight	Metric weight
Apple	1 medium (1 cup diced/sliced)	5½ ounces	161 grams
Applesauce	1 cup	9 ounces	255 grams
Apricots, dried	½ cup	3 ounces	80 grams
Avocado	1 medium (1 cup cubed)	5¼ ounces	150 grams
Banana	1 medium (about ½ cup mashed)	3½ ounces	100 grams
Bananas, mashed	1 cup	7½ ounces	212 grams
Berries, frozen	1 cup	5 ounces	142 grams
Blueberries	1 cup	5 ounces	148 grams
Cantaloupe	1 medium (4 to 4½ cups cubed)	3 pounds AP*	1,362 grams
	1 cup cubed	–	125 grams
Cherries, fresh with pits	1 cup (about 21 cherries)	5 ounces	138 grams
Cranberries, fresh	1 cup	3½ ounces	99 grams
Currants	1 cup	5 ounces	142 grams
Dates, dried	½ cup	3 ounces	76 grams
Dried fruits, in general	1 cup	5½ ounces	160 grams
Figs, dried	1 cup	5¼ ounces	150 grams
Grapes	1 cup	5¼ ounces	150 grams
Lemon	1 medium = • 2 to 3 tablespoons juice • 1 tablespoon zest	6¼ ounces – –	180 grams 30 to 45 milliliters 2 grams
Lemon juice, strained	1 cup	8¾ ounces	240 milliliters (244 grams)
Lime	1 medium = • 2 tablespoons juice • ½-1 teaspoon zest	3½ ounces – –	95 grams 30 milliliters 1 gram
Mango	1 medium (1 cup chopped)	5¾ ounces	165 grams
Orange	1 medium = • ¼ cup juice • 1½ tablespoons zest	9½ ounces – –	265 grams 60 milliliters 1.5 grams
Orange juice, strained	1 cup	8½ ounces	240 milliliters (248 grams)
Peaches, peeled and diced	1 cup	6 ounces	170 grams
Pears, peeled and diced	1 cup	5¾ ounces	163 grams
Pineapple	1 medium (about 5 cups cubed)	3 pounds AP*	1,362 grams
	1 cup chunks	6 ounces	170 grams
Pineapple chunks, canned	1¼ cups chunks	15.25-ounce can (8.25 ounces drained weight)	234 grams, drained weight
Raisins	1 cup	5¼ ounces	149 grams
Raspberries	1 cup	4¼ ounces	120 grams
Rhubarb, sliced	1 cup	4¼ ounces	120 grams
Strawberries	1 cup sliced	6 ounces	165 grams
Watermelon, cubed	1 cup	5¼ ounces	150 grams

* AP is as purchased, in the raw state before any cutting, processing, or cooking has occurred.

Vegetables

Ingredient	Volume/count	US customary weight	Metric weight
Asparagus	16 to 20 spears	1 pound	454 grams
Beets	1 (2-inch diameter)	3 ounces	82 grams
	About 5 medium (2½ cups diced)	1 pound	454 grams
Broccoli	1 cup florets	3 ounces	85 grams
	3 cups florets	1 pound (AP)*	454 grams (AP)
Cabbage	1½ cups	3 ounces	85 grams
	4½ cups shredded	1 pound (AP)*	454 grams
Carrots	1 cup chopped (2 to 2½ medium)	5 ounces	142 grams
	3½ cups sliced or grated	1 pound	454 grams
Cauliflower	1 cup florets	3½ ounces	100 grams
	1 medium head (about 6 cups florets)	2 pounds	908 grams
Cauliflower, riced	¾ cup	3 ounces	85 grams
Celery	About 1½ large ribs (1 cup chopped)	3½ ounces	100 grams
	4 cups chopped	1 pound	454 grams
Collard greens	6 to 7 cups	1 pound	454 grams
	1½ cups cooked	7 ounces	195 grams
Corn, canned	1¾ cups	15.25-ounce can (8.25 ounces drained weight)	234 grams, drained weight
Corn kernels	1 medium ear (1 cup)	5 ounces	145 grams
Cucumber	1 medium (about 2 cups sliced)	7 ounces	201 grams
Eggplant	About 6 cups cubed	1 pound (AP)*	454 grams
Garlic	1 clove (1 teaspoon chopped)	0.2 ounce	6 grams
Ginger	1-inch piece (about 1 tablespoon chopped)	0.3 ounces	7 grams
Green beans	About 3 cups, trimmed	1 pound	464 grams
Herbs, leafy, chopped	¼ cup	0.2 ounce	6 grams
Leeks, diced	1 cup	3¼ ounces	92 grams
Lettuce, iceberg	1 medium head (about 9 cups shredded)	1½ pounds	680 grams
Mushrooms, sliced	1 cup	2½ ounces	70 grams
Olives, sliced	1 cup	5 ounces	142 grams
Onion, yellow	1 large (1 cup chopped)	5½ ounces	160 grams
Onions, green	1 cup chopped (about 9)	3½ ounces	100 grams
Peas, frozen	1 cup	5 ounces	134 grams
Peppers, bell	1 medium (about ¾ cup chopped or heaping 1 cup sliced)	3½ ounces	100 grams
Potatoes	2½ cups diced	1 pound	454 grams
Potato flakes, dried	1 cup	2 ounces	54 grams
Potatoes, cooked, mashed	1 cup mashed (1 large potato)	7½ ounces	213 grams
Shallot	1 medium (1 tablespoon minced)	0.4 ounce	10 grams
	1 cup	5½ ounces	156 grams
Spinach, baby and other greens	1 cup	1 ounce	30 grams
	10 cups	10 ounces	283 grams
	1 cup cooked	1 pound	454 grams

Table continues >

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Reviewers

Laura M. Ali, MS, RDN, LDN

Nutrition Consultant and Freelance Writer
Pittsburgh, PA

Julie Andrews, MS, RDN, CD, FAND

Cookbook Author, Chef, Food Photographer
The Gourmet RD, LLC
Grand Rapids, MI

Jennifer Armentrout

Former Editor-at-Large
Fine Cooking Magazine
Newtown, CT

Bonnie Benwick

Former Deputy Food Editor
The Washington Post
Washington, DC

Garrett Berdan, RDN

Culinary Nutrition Consultant and Educator
Portland, OR

Mark Boughton

Professional Photographer
Mark Boughton Photography
Nashville, TN

Andrea Custer, MS, RDN

Mérieux NutriSciences
Chicago, IL

Dawn Jackson Blatner, RDN

Nutrition Consultant and Communications Expert
Chicago, IL

Maria Caranfa, RDN, LDN

Global Food and Nutrition Strategist
Chicago, IL

Patsy Catsos, MS, RDN

Medical Nutrition Therapist and FODMAP expert
Patsy Catsos Advanced Nutrition, LLC
New London, NH

Lisa Cherkasky

Professional Food Stylist and Writer
Arlington, VA

Renée Comet

Professional Food Photographer
Renée Comet Photography
Washington, DC

Kristy Del Coro, MS, RDN

Culinary Nutritionist and Co-Founder of the
Culinary Nutrition Collaborative
North Yarmouth, ME

Sanna Delmonico, MS, RDN

Associate Professor
Culinary Institute of America
Saint Helena, CA

Cheryl Dolven, MS, RDN

Corporate Dietitian
Orlando, FL

Meghan Donnelly, MS, RDN, CDN

Senior Manager of Nutrition Services
Dr. Schär
New York, NY

Cindie Flannigan

Professional Food Stylist, Recipe Developer
C.L. Flannigan, Inc.
Venice, CA

Huge Galdones

Professional Food Photographer
Galdones Photography, LLC
Chicago, IL

Carol Mighton Haddix

Former Food Editor
Chicago Tribune
Chicago, IL

Sarah Hendren, MS, RDN, LD, CD

Regulatory Affairs Scientist
Frito Lay North America
Irving, TX

Wendy Hess, MS, RD

Owner, Consulting in Nutrition Analysis
Burlington, VT

Ellie Krieger, MS, RDN

Food Network and PBS Host, Author, Columnist
New York, NY

Trinh Le, MPH, RD

Food Writer
Berkeley, CA

Nancy Macklin, MS, RDN

Food, Nutrition, and Test Kitchen Professional
Dallas County, IA

Rosemary Mark

Culinary Consultant, Recipe Developer, Test Kitchen Professional
Walnut Creek, CA

Jeff Martin

Professional Food Stylist, Founder of Food Photo Affair,
Food Photographer and Stylist Conference
Covington, KY

Marisa Moore, MBA, RDN, LD

Registered Dietitian Nutritionist
Marisa Moore Nutrition, LLC
Atlanta, GA

Jackie Newgent, RDN, CDN

Plant-Based Culinary Nutritionist, Recipe Developer, Food Writer
Brooklyn, NY

Nikki Nies, MS, RD

Nutrition Associate Manager
Aramark
Dallas, TX

Sharon Palmer, MSFS, RDN

Writer, Editor, Blogger, Plant-Based Food and Nutrition Expert
Ojai, CA

Todd Pierson

Professional Photographer and Video Producer
Pierson Studios
Oswego, IL

Catharine Powers, MS, RDN, LD

Partner, Culinary Nutrition Publishing LLC
Akron, OH

Michele Redmond, MS, RDN, FAND

Dietitian Chef and Food Enjoyment Activist
The Taste Workshop
Scottsdale, AZ

Rick Rodgers

Cookbook Author, Recipe Developer
West Orange, NJ

Michael Sutz

Filmmaker and Video Producer
Twelve Plus Media
Saint Paul, MN

Marissa Thiry, MS, RD

Senior Associate Manager, Global Nutrition and Sustainability
Taco Bell Corp
Irvine, CA

Tricia Thompson, MS, RD

Founder, Gluten Free Watchdog, LLC
Manchester, MA

Mary Valentin

Professional Food Stylist and Educator
Mary Valentin Food Stylist, LTD
Chicago, IL

Alisa Via-Reque, MS, RD, LD

Registered Dietitian, Eat Fit Dallas
Coppell, TX

Denise Vivaldo

Professional Food Stylist
President, Denise Vivaldo Group
Oxnard, CA

Dédé Wilson

Co-author of *The Low-FODMAP Diet Step by Step*
Former *Bon Appétit* contributing editor
Co-Founder and Editor-in-Chief of FODMAP Everyday
Amherst, MA

Taylor Wolfram, MS, RDN, LDN

Owner of Taylor Wolfram LLC
Chicago, IL

About the Author

Raeanne Sarazen is a registered dietitian and chef who specializes in food writing and recipe development. She is known for translating complex nutrition recommendations into recipes for people with diet-related health conditions and simplifying the complicated recipes of professional chefs for the home cook. Her philosophy is that food is more than just sustenance—it is a source of healing and joy.

Raeanne has more than two decades of food industry experience. She has worked in hospitals as a clinical dietitian, at the *Chicago Tribune* as test kitchen director and assistant food editor, and in restaurant kitchens, including Charlie Trotter's. Raeanne has written articles, developed recipes, and produced videos for the *Chicago Tribune*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Cooking Light*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, and national food companies.

Raeanne completed her professional cooking studies at Le Cordon Bleu. She received her Bachelor of Science in Nutrition and Medical Dietetics from the University of Illinois, and a Master of Arts in New Media Studies from DePaul University. She is a Distinguished Fellow of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and a founding member of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Food and Culinary Professionals dietetic practice group.

A mother of three, Raeanne lives in Chicago with her husband Rob. Her greatest joys are hiking and traveling the world with her family and learning about local foods and culture.



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