

What should I have in my kitchen? I get this question all the time.

This is part of a series I have been writing about healthy choices for you to make at the grocery store. This document is a very simple list of the items that you should begin stocking in your cupboard and refrigerator. This is by no means everything that you might keep on hand, but it's a starting place for those items that will let you always have something healthy in the house to start (or complete) a meal.

For the most part the cupboard items are canned or bottled foods that will keep very well. You'll always have a back up and can use any of them to make meals in a hurry. You might substitute roasted red peppers from a jar in place of roasting your own, for example.

You don't have to go out and purchase these all at once. Instead, each time you go to the grocery store, add two or three of these items to your list and in a few months time you'll have a well fitted pantry. For the canned goods I generally purchase the 15 ounce cans unless otherwise noted.

Cupboard Items

Canned tomatoes

I generally keep whole, peeled tomatoes on hand and have a couple of 28 ounce cans and a couple of 15 ounce cans.

Beans and Legumes

Canned no-salt-added beans are readily available in most groceries. There are some recipes that call for dried beans and I keep duplicates of those beans that I have in cans as well.

Canned:

Garbanzos (chick peas)
White beans (both cannellini and great northern beans)
Red kidney beans
Black beans (I usually keep a few cans on hand)
Blackeye peas
Pinto beans

Dried:

Lentils (green, red and yellow)
Split peas
White beans (both cannellini and great northern beans)
Red kidney beans
Black beans (I usually keep a few bags on hand)
Blackeye peas
Pinto beans
Light coconut milk
Roasted peppers - I always have a couple of jars of red peppers on hand and generally try to keep the yellow peppers as well.

Backup Jars

I try to keep backups of things. I have been lucky to have a large pantry so this might be more difficult for you, but keeping at least some of the basics on hand will help.

Reduced-fat mayonnaise
Mustard - Dijon and coarse ground
Tomato paste - I buy mine in the tube so I don't waste any.
Anchovy paste
Wasabi paste
Capers
Pickle relish
No salt added catsup
Low-sodium soy sauce or gluten-free tamari sauce
Honey
Maple syrup
Your favorite barbecue sauce (look for those low in sugar and salt)

Stocks

If you are cooking for only two get the 15 ounce cans otherwise purchase the quart carton. Keep at least 2 or 3 cans or a carton of chicken stock on hand. I will keep a can of beef stock on hand as well.

Pasta

I tend to collect pastas and purchase a box almost every time I am at the grocery. I keep them sealed in plastic Tupperware type containers or zipper bags. I always have on hand:

Spaghetti
Penne
Ziti
Fettuccine
Linguine
Orzo
Riso

I also have a number of Japanese pastas on hand, including udon, buckwheat udon and soba noodles.

Rice

I keep a LOT of different rices on hand:

Short grained sushi rice
Long grain jasmine rice
Medium grain brown rice
Short grained brown rice
Arborio rice (for making risotto)
Purple sticky rice
Basmati rice
Wild rice - I like to collect wild rices too because there are so many different varieties.

Refrigerator Items

Fruit

Pick what you love. Apples, oranges, peaches, pineapple, grapes, plums... Every time you go to the store, buy some fresh fruit. Some will keep better than others, but by having a variety on hand there's always something sweet in the house that's really satisfying.

Veggies

Like the fruit, each time you go to the store your first stop should be in the produce department. You don't have to get a lot, but you should always have on hand things like red and green peppers, celery, onions, shallots and garlic as basic building blocks. More importantly, get some to eat that week - broccoli, spinach, cauliflower, squash - it doesn't matter, but veggies are key to eating great healthy meals.

Some basics that don't need a lot of explanation:

- 2% milk Non-Fat Buttermilk (I look for the smallest carton on the shelf)
- Reduced fat and fat-free mayonnaise
- Reduced fat and fat-free sour cream (choose small packages)
- Non-fat yogurt
- Capers
- Tomato paste (purchase the kind in a tube, it keeps well)
- Low-sodium catsup
- Low-sodium soy sauce
- Worcestershire sauce
- Active dry yeast
- Low-fat chicken stock
- Tabasco
- Wasabi paste
- Beer (it doesn't matter if it goes flat -- a little really enhances Mexican food)

Cheeses

This one's really important. I like to have at least a good quality Parmigiano-Reggiano and a Romano on hand. Keeping some fresh mozzarella means you're always ready to make pizza (because you have the yeast and whole wheat flour on hand). And low-fat Monterey jack cheese is easier to find but there was a time when it wasn't so I always keep a brick on hand.

Stores these days will cut you little bits of cheese if you like and keep in mind that a little goes a long way. I try to have a good quality blue cheese as well as a little feta in the fridge as well.

Sauces

I have a few favorites and you should too. For example, I love the Thai Peanut Sauce made by Whole Foods. It's lower in sodium and almost as good as what I can make. A little of such flavorful sauces goes a long way. I keep a couple of different barbecue sauces in the fridge and you can find very low calorie, low fat, low salt sauces that are fantastic.

Lemons and limes

I always try to keep at least one fresh lemon and lime on hand. The stuff in the bottle is not "real" even though they call it RealLemon -- it tastes like plastic.

Roasted garlic

I try to keep roasted garlic on hand. It's easy to cook, inexpensive and a great start for almost any recipe. Roasting the garlic mellows and sweetens the flavor, and with almost no calories, a little goes a long way to enhance any dish.

Maple syrup and honey

Adds a lot of flavor with just a touch of sweetness when used sparingly. A teaspoon is all it takes to enrich a dressing or lightly sweeten greens.

Mustards

I generally keep at least two or more on hand. Start with a Dijon mustard like Gray Poupon and a coarse grind mustard. I admit that I don't usually have American style yellow mustard in my fridge.