

Building Blocks



First, you make a roux...

Bet you've heard that before. It's sort of our joke down here in bayou country isn't it? So many dishes have a roux as their base that we joke that we can't do anything without making a roux first. So, let's talk about that roux. What is it, how do we make it and how do we use it?

It is likely that roux (roo) first came into use as a thickener back in the 17th century. In classic French cooking, it is usually a mixture of equal parts butter and flour. It's cooked for a short time to remove the floury taste and to impart a bit of color. Also, blending the flour in fat coats the flour. This keeps the flour from lumping when it is added to a liquid, especially a hot liquid.



Fun fact: you can use shortening instead of butter, and it's called shortening because it literally shortens the protein strands (called gluten) in the flour. Which is why pie crust and pecan shortbread cookies are crumbly.

Back to the roux. All roux is used for thickening. In French cooking, roux is pretty much white, blonde or brown:

- White is cooked just long enough to get rid of that flour taste and is used for white, or Béchamel sauce;
- Blonde roux gives it a pale color, and you might use this for a chicken gravy for example, or an herb sauce;
- Brown roux is cooked even longer and adds some color to sauces. You will see this used in a demi-glace and darker gravies.

In Creole cooking, the roux is typically darker and may use bacon fat or lard instead of butter. It tends to be more flavorful than the French versions.

Cajun roux, now dat's some flavor, dat! :-D Cajun roux is dark. It is used as a primary flavoring in many recipes and can range from a light brown to a dark and deep brown and can have a complex, nutty and powerful body.

You can't make a roux that dark with butter or margarine. It will burn. So a good Cajun roux will be made with oil, bacon fat, lard, shortening or even duck fat. Those will stand up to prolonged high temperatures.

One other thing worth mentioning. The darker the roux, the less its thickening power, so the super dark roux you use for a seafood gumbo won't have the same thickening power as one you put into a chicken sausage gumbo. On the other hand, you get that intense, rich flavor you can't get any other way.



So let's make some roux.

First things first: Don't scorch it. And if you do, don't even think about trying to use it. Throw it away and start over. How can you be sure you never scorch it? Make it in the oven. We won't even talk about making it on the stove until we talk about the oven version.

Why? Because it is so easy, and you can just make a batch and have it on hand when you need it. Because you never have to worry about it burning and you don't have to stand there stirring for half an hour.

Hey, we're trying to make your life easy here. Take the hint, okay? 😊

Roux in the Oven

Makes about 1 quart

3 cups cooking oil
3 cups flour

- Heat oil in a cast iron skillet on the stove. Get it good and hot.
- Remove from heat and stir flour into the oil.
- Put the skillet in the oven. Walk away.
- Come back in about an hour. Stir. Repeat.
- After a few hours, you might start to check it every 30 minutes.
- When it is the color you want, remove it and just set it out to cool.
- Stir every once in a while and when cool, put in a container and store.

You will notice that the roux darkens a bit as it sits out also.

Stovetop Roux

Makes about 1 quart

3 cups cooking oil
3 cups flour

- Heat oil in a cast iron skillet on the stove. Get it good and hot.
- Stir flour into the oil. Keep stirring until you get the color you want. Be sure that you work the corners of the skillet and don't let it scorch.

Let's Talk Temps

You can prepare the best meal of your career, and it will fall flat if it's served cold when it should be piping hot. Same for a cold dish.

In either case, you also run the risk of foodborne illness. Remember that we aren't just serving great food, we're doing it safely. So let's take time to go over a couple of highlights. Food temps are crucial for taste, quality and safety.

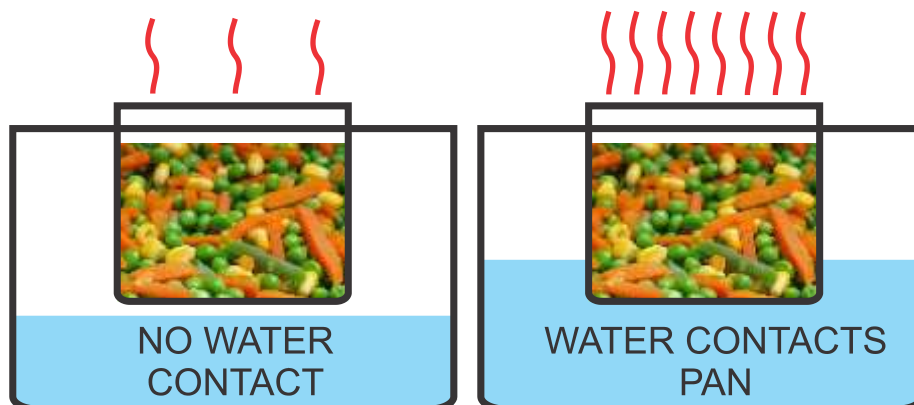
Keep it HOT

Keep it hot. 140 Degrees.

One of the most common mistakes we make when loading a steamtable is not putting enough water in the wells. Please look at the illustration below. As you can see, the correct way to fill a well is so it contacts the food pan.

Water has far more heat energy than air and it will transfer the heat directly far more efficiently than air (otherwise, when you put your arm in an oven to grab a pan, you'd burn instantly). By making sure that you fill the wells properly, you're making sure that you keep your food hot during meal service.

And stir the food occasionally. Gently. Just lift food from bottom to top once in a while. For items like lasagna, it's good to switch pans and bring out a hot pan (and put the other pan back in the oven for a while).



Keep It COLD

Cold items must be kept at 40 F. This is for both quality and sanitary reasons but mostly for the prevention of foodborne illness.

Don't let those prepared salads sit out on a counter unrefrigerated. If you don't have a salad bar, and space is limited, you do have some options:

If you have a large steam table, you can simply turn off one of the wells, load it with ice and use as a small "salad bar."



Put ice in a bowl larger than your salad bowl, then put the salad bowl in the ice bowl as shown at right.

Or, if you have plenty of steam table pans, use a half pan for the same purpose.



It's usually not an option to put these items in the cooler out in the dining room because there isn't space, there's a traffic issue, or the customers don't like it.

Remember that if you keep the food cold, you can re-use it at another meal. If you don't, it must be discarded after 4 hours.

You can – and should – put out smaller batches of cold foods and replenish as you need to. Don't put out 10 pounds of potato salad at a time. Put out a 3 pound dish and swap it out. It looks better, and you aren't exposing so much of your hard work to time / temperature abuse.

Leaving Food in the Danger Zone (Including Rice)

That's the temperature between 40 and 135, which you'll notice includes room temperature. For many foods it doesn't matter, but for some it is critical. For more information you can go to our website or consult our safety training manuals. This is a cookbook after all. But as a general statement, you don't want to leave food sitting out. By the way, rice should never be left at room temperature. Here's what the Foodsafety.Gov has to say about it:

"Bacillus cereus might cause many more cases of foodborne illness than is known..."

Often called "B. cereus," this bacterium can cause two different types of sickness. (1) In the first type, after contaminated food is eaten the bacteria make a toxic substance in the small intestine. This can lead to diarrhea, cramps, and, sometimes, nausea (but usually not vomiting). Many kinds of contaminated foods have been linked to this illness. Symptoms start in about 6 to 15 hours and usually clear up within a day or so.

*(2) The second type occurs if B. cereus makes a different kind of toxin in contaminated food. It most often affects **rice and other starchy foods**. It causes nausea and vomiting in a half-hour to 6 hours and usually clears up in about a day. Both kinds of illness generally go away by themselves, but can cause serious complications, although rarely in otherwise healthy people. As with all infections, people who have weak immune systems (because they have certain other diseases or take medications that weaken the immune system) are much more likely to suffer serious consequences. One of the most important things you can do to protect yourself from infection with B. cereus is to keep your food refrigerated at 40°F or lower...*

Cooking may kill the bacteria, but it might not disable the toxin that causes the vomiting type of illness. "

Enough said about rice? Hope so. Keep it cold, folks.

I Scorched the Beans!

Don't stir the pot!! Really. Don't stir the pot. Remove it from the stove, carefully pour off into another pot without disturbing the burnt layer on the bottom. Give the beans in the new pot a taste. They should be fine.

If you're going to be short on portions, cook a separate, smaller batch in another pot to have on hand for later in the meal. And remember, you should start your beans early in the day, and simmer. They don't need to boil.

I over-salted the soup (or beans)!

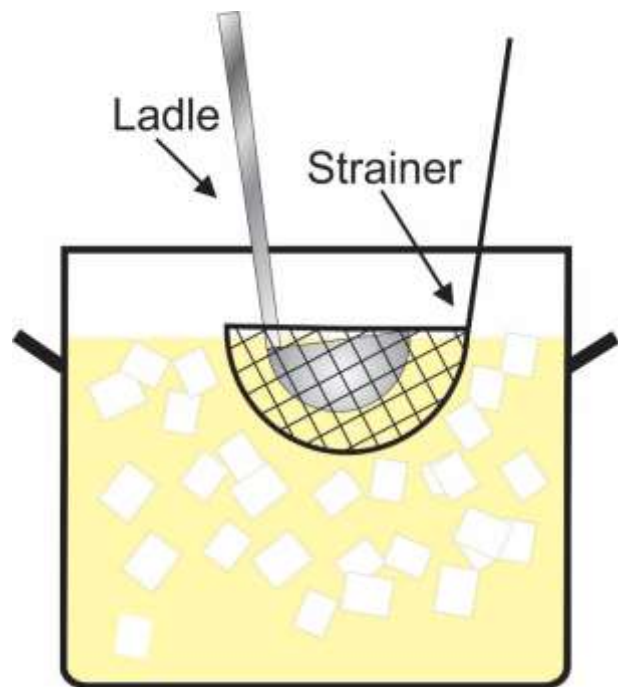
They say to add a potato. It's a myth. Potatoes aren't sponges. All they do is absorb some of the liquid that has salt in it.

A better solution? Put a strainer basket in the soup, then use a ladle to remove liquid from the pot. Replace that liquid with some that has no salt in it, and rebalance your seasonings.

This goofball looking setup helps you do just that. Say you have a pot of yellow looking potato soup and it's too salty. Well, you know for sure that adding potatoes won't help. 😊

Put a strainer in the pot to keep potatoes from drifting into your ladle, then put the ladle inside the strainer and remove liquid as needed.

Replace it with unsalted liquid and adjust as needed. Problem solved.



Speaking of Salt (Think Ham Hocks)...

Ham hocks are an awesome way to add salt to a dish. Beans, greens, and other southern specialties really benefit from the complex flavor a ham hock adds. But not if it's a dense, chewy, rubbery thing floating in the broth. Lots of folks will fight over a good ham hock.

SO what is a **good** ham hock and how do you get there? It's tender, it's been rendered of fat mostly and it's given up its saltiness and its very soul to the stock you just made (remember that magic word – stock?). Or just call it broth. If you're from New Yawk, call it brott. :-D.

Here's what not to do. Don't just throw one in with a pot of beans and then put them on the line a couple hours later. Might as well serve a tennis ball.

Just put a few hocks in a pot of water. Nothing else. Bring them up to a good simmer and let them go. All day if you have to. Add water if you need and let them cook until they are tender. Take the hocks, put them in zip lock bags and then in the cooler or freezer until needed.

Do the same with the broth, but use it more quickly. But whatever you do, use it. You'll be amazed at the difference this simple change in technique makes.



Bummer. I dropped this (anything) on the floor.

THROW IT AWAY. End of discussion.

My Rice is Like Glue. Way Overcooked

Rinse, rinse, rinse. And if it doesn't come back to life, toss it out. There's no excuse to serve poor quality rice. It's just a quality thing. What do you want guys saying about you? You know, "Hey that dude can really cook!", or, "Hey, that cook serves lousy rice." And they will. And reputation is worth more than a pot of rice.

My Cake is Stuck in the Pan!!

Freeze it. Then run a knife around the edge and give the bottom a good knock. That should do it but if not, use two forks, at opposite sides of the pan. Place them in and use them to lever the cake out of the pan.

C'mon Man! Make Your Buttermilk!

Seriously, just make the stuff. It's cheaper, it's better and you never, ever run out. Here's how, using powdered milk.

- Make a quart of milk from Powdered Milk, following the instructions.
- Add a 1/4 cup of lemon juice or vinegar
- Let it stand overnight in the open air (but covered)

Don't "Stir it Up."

No matter what Johnny Nash says. He was a great singer but as a cook? Not sure (that's an old reference. Look it up). Don't just keep stirring. Leave it alone. Let the food cook. If you have to keep stirring, you're cooking at too high a temperature.