Store Cupboard Staples

There are certain 'essentials' that you'll always find useful in your cooking. Ingredients like pasta, rice and noodles are the basis of tasty and easy-to-cook meals. Of course, stocking your store cupboard is a matter of your taste, but here are some pointers as to which items will come in very useful if you have them to hand.

OILS

Olive oil – extra virgin olive oil is best for quality and flavour and is a great staple for salad dressings and marinades.
Vegetable oil – sunflower oil is good for frying.

SAUCES AND CONDIMENTS

Mustards – wholegrain, English and Dijon
Soy sauce
Sea salt
Whole black peppercorns
Vinegars, malt and balsamic
Tabasco sauce
Tomato ketchup
Tomato purée
Yeast extract
Worcestershire sauce

FOR THE FRIDGE

Try not to over-buy on fresh produce, it can be a waste of food and money, and you shouldn't store items like meat and fish for long anyway – it's much better to buy them fresh when you know you're going to eat them. If you're working and do your shopping in one fell swoop at the weekend, depending on your tastes, try to plan so that you have two meat- or poultry-based meals, one fish-based meal and two vegetable-based meals during the week, so that you have variety and flexibility in your diet. Things you can keep stocked in your fridge are:

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Butter
Cheese
Eggs
Milk
Mayonnaise

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FOR THE VEGETABLE RACK

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Onions
Garlic
Potatoes
Lemons and Limes

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DRIED GOODS

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Rice – long-grain, Indian, risotto
Pasta – spaghetti, penne, lasagne
Noodles – Chinese egg noodles

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Dried herbs and spices – oregano, sage, rosemary, marjoram and dried mixed herbs; curry powder, dried chillies, turmeric, coriander seeds, cumin seeds, fennel seeds and a mixed spice should be sufficient for basic recipes.
Cans – chopped tomatoes, canned tuna, anchovies in brine, red kidney beans
Stock – beef or lamb, and chicken and fish stock cubes, plus a jar of vegetable bouillon
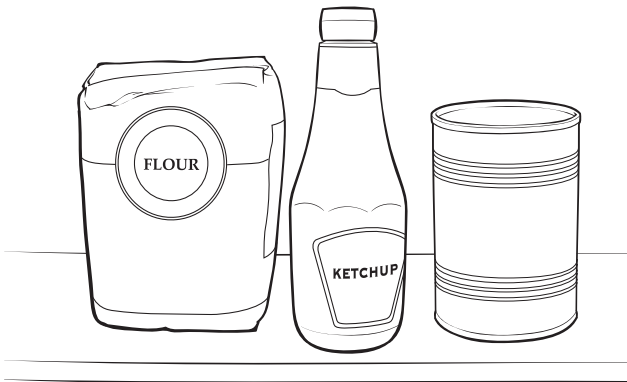Flour – self-raising and plain

MISCELLANEOUS

Olives
Chocolate
Tea and coffee
Sugar – granulated, caster, soft brown
and Demerara sugars, plus clear honey

Perfect Pasta

The secret to real Italian pasta is that it should not be drenched in sauce. The pasta itself should be the main part of the dish, with the sauce acting as an accompaniment to the pasta. The fact is that most of us (me included) actually add too much to a pasta sauce and take away from the depth of the dish by overcomplicating things. The best idea when making sauce is to use a little of the best quality item, rather than a lot of something that's poorer quality. For example, use good, fresh garlic or really ripe and fresh tomatoes; go for a handful of fresh herbs rather than a sprinkling of dried. Make your own pesto sauce with a handful of basil, some pine nuts, a clove of garlic, some extra virgin olive oil, and grated Pecorino cheese, all crushed together with a mortar and pestle.

Cook's Tip

Add fresh basil or oregano towards the end of the cooking time to make sure their zesty flavours infuse the dish.

WHICH PASTA WORKS BEST WITH WHICH SAUCE?

An Italian cook will always ask what sorts of pasta are available before deciding which sauce to make. Penne and fusilli, for example, are best with creamy, thick sauces, whereas finer pastas such as spaghetti or linguine work better with thinner, oil-based sauces that will thoroughly coat the pasta. Sheets of pasta, such as lasagne, are good with meaty sauces.

COOKING TIMES

You should calculate the pasta's cooking time from the moment the water has come back to a boil after the pasta has been submerged. Always test the pasta before draining.

* Fresh pasta – 1 to 3 minutes

* Fresh stuffed pasta – 3 to 7 minutes

* Dried long pasta – 8 to 15 minutes

* Dried pasta shapes – 10 to 12 minutes

Testing pasta for doneness
The Italian way is to cook pasta until it is *al dente* – firm to bite, not mushy. Towards the end of the recommended cooking time, take a piece of pasta from the pot and bite into it. It should be tender without any hint of rawness, but with just a little resistance to the bite. If it is done, drain the pasta immediately, otherwise return to the heat and test again after 30 to 60 seconds.

DIFFERENT PASTA SHAPES AVAILABLE

Farfalle

Cannelloni

Macaroni

Fusilli

Penne

Conchiglie

Fettuccine
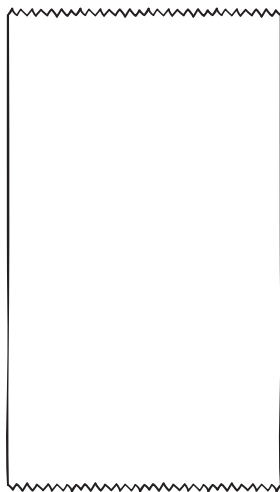
Spaghetti

Tagliatelle

Campanelle
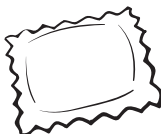
Cappelletti

Cavatappi

Ditalini

Orzo

Radiatori

Ravioli

Rotelle

Tortellini

Lasagne

Linguine

Vermicelli