



A WORD ON STARCHES & GRAINS

Great for sides, salads, soups or used as a main dish, starches and grains are an important part of any culinary repertoire. When cooking starches and grains the key factor is the proper absorption of liquid. Too little leads to undercooked, tough and/or clumpy textures. Too much leads to soupy mushy messes. Exact degree of doneness for most starches and grains has a range of subjectivity involved (ex. Do you like your pasta firm or soft?). Let's look at the techniques, tips and tricks involved in cooking the more common starches and grains in the kitchen:

Rice

The most widely eaten grain on the planet, this global staple can be cooked in a variety of methods. Brown rice has both the bran and germ layers intact, while white rice has both polished off. The differences between long, medium, and short grain rice have to do with the length to width ratio of the grain along with the ratio of amylose to amylopectin (starch molecules). Amylose, more prevalent in long grain rice, gives a fluffy texture with firm individual grains. Amylopectin, higher in short grain rice, gives a softer and stickier texture. All white rice should be rinsed to remove any excess exterior starch (which would make the cooked grains clumpy). As far as liquid to rice ratio for cooking, the package directions are usually accurate. If you are using bulk rice a safe bet is the following:

- 1 cup brown rice- 1 ½ cup liquid
- 1 cup long-grain rice- 1 ½ cup liquid
- 1 cup medium-grain rice- 1 1/3 cup liquid
- 1 cup short-grain rice- 1 ¼ cup liquid

Cornmeal

Commonly used in American (grits) and European (polenta) cooking, cornmeal is a versatile ingredient. The only real difference between grits and polenta is that grits can be made from both hominy (white) and yellow cornmeal, while polenta is made from yellow only. Served warm, cornmeal is nice and creamy (especially if stirred often during cooking). Left to cool it sets up nice and firm (great for pan frying, grilling or baking).

Couscous

Made from steamed and cracked durum wheat, couscous is becoming a staple in the modern kitchen. Traditionally, from its North African roots, it was cooked by steaming over pots of stewing meats and vegetables. A good 15-minute or so steam will do the trick nicely. Alternatively, it can be cooked by pouring boiling liquid over it (about 1 part grain to 1 ¼ - 1 ½ part liquid ratio), covering and letting stand for 5-7 minutes. While it is not that flavorful on its own, couscous has a wonderful ability to absorb accompanying flavors.



A WORD ON STARCHES & GRAINS

Quinoa

Dubbed “the super grain” because of its high amino acid count, quinoa is an ancient grain native to Central and South America. The tiny grains have a mild bitter taste and firm texture. Quinoa should always be rinsed to remove the saponin (a very bitter coating on the exterior of the grain). A 2-part liquid to 1-part grain ratio works well for cooking.

Pasta

The secrets to cooking both dried and fresh pasta are quite easy to master. First, make sure to cook in a large amount of salted boiling water per amount of pasta. More water will help to dilute the starches released from the pasta and help keep them from sticking together (stirring also helps). Salt the water well to insure good seasoning. Drain from the water using a Chinese spider strainer and immediately toss with seasonings. Pouring pasta into a colander can be dangerous; then you need to toss it with oil to keep it from sticking (which coats the pasta, inhibiting sauces from sticking). If tossing in a liquid sauce, finish cooking the pasta in the sauce for the last minute to increase the pasta’s absorption of the flavorful sauce. Finally, fresh pasta needs much less time to cook; keep a watchful eye.

Potatoes (mashed & smashed)

Truly a favorite among most Americans, rich and creamy mashed potatoes have eluded many an aspiring cook. The keys lie in which spud you choose along with how you add fat or dairy products. When it comes to which type of potato is best, look to the higher starch variety, which are best at absorption of liquids. As far as fats and dairy are concerned, they should be at least room temperature if not warm before incorporating. For the mashing part, using a food mill or ricer lends to a smoother texture than a standard stick masher.

Beans, Lentils, & Peas

As staples around the world, these starches have been part of the human diet for centuries. They are not only tasty, but also packed with nutrients. The key to cooking them is plenty of liquid and slowly simmering them (to avoid bursting their skins). Soaking them overnight can help reduce the cooking time. Lastly, the larger the legume, the longer the cooking time.

Wheat Berries, Barley, Spelt, & Farro

We are used to eating wheat berries as flour and as barley in soup. That’s not where their culinary prowess ends. They are both great cooked as grains on their own. Spelt and farro are ancient grains that are just coming back onto the popular food scene. Known for their nutty taste and firm texture, they are both great side dishes for almost any meal. All these grains are cooked similar to legumes; the key is plenty of liquid and slowly simmering.