



## **my pantry: a dilettante's confessional**

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7 p.m.. Sirens blare. You run to the window and a blue staccato flash nearly blinds you. Fourteen black Ford Excursions and five limousines pull up in front of your house. The deafening flap, flap, flap of a helicopter vibrates overhead. Suddenly, a dozen deadly serious men in black suits surround you. One of them approaches. "There's no time to explain. We need dinner for 6. Immediately."

The President and several Middle Eastern leaders are ushered in as you run to the kitchen. You swing open the refrigerator door and what you see sends you into a panic: leftover Thai food, beer, chocolate syrup, lettuce, strawberry-mango yogurt, and four packets of ketchup.

Your pantry *could have* saved you. It could have saved you and brought peace to the Middle East.

Now, if they'd stopped at *my* house, I'd have served a roasted garlic goat cheese and pine nut tart with arugula salad, grilled pork loin in a balsamic Dijon reduction, and four-cheese tortellini with artichoke hearts and capers. Chocolate mousse Napoleons with Frangelico and toasted almonds would conclude an impressive and surprisingly simple repast. Dietary restrictions notwithstanding, that meal *certainly* would have brought tolerance—if not absolute peace—to the troubled Arabian peninsula.

Despite all the (very welcomed) praise, I'm not a culinary genius. I'm an extremely successful culinary *fraud*. I'm a dilettante and a show-off, and I say: 'If you can't make it, fake it!' My pantry does most of the work for me. People often ask, "How do you pull this off?" or "How long did this meal take to prepare?" or even "Did you mentor Julia Child?" My modest reply is always "I have a terrific pantry."

Make no mistake, here. I admire and respect the passionate process of creating a splendid meal without shortcuts. Sometimes I go through that rewarding process, myself; but, usually, I just don't slow down enough for that to happen. So, I rely heavily on a list of all-star assistants to help me perform culinary legerdemain at a moment's notice.

I've chronicled, for you, the most influential items in my pantry. The list isn't exhaustive, but these particular ingredients have great impact on presentation, flavor, and ease of preparation. They're the diamond earrings perfectly complementing a little black dress.

### **Frozen**

- puff pastry sheets
- pie crust

- spinach
- raw nuts
- leftover wine for sauces

### **Oils**

- extra virgin olive oil
- sesame oil
- truffle oil (white or black is fine)

*Buy small dark bottles. it's better to run out of oil than to have it turn rancid.*

### **Spices, Dried Herbs, Extracts**

- seasoning blend (i.e. "Mrs. Dash")
- cumin
- curry powder
- smoked sweet paprika

### **Dairy**

- heavy cream
- sour cream
- parmesan
- bleu cheese
- hard cheeses
- goat cheese

### **Miscellany**

- sun-dried tomatoes
- pesto
- pitted Kalamata olives
- high-end mustards
- dried shiitake mushrooms
- pasta
- prepared pizza crust

### **Produce**

- sweet potatoes
- arugula

I maintain small quantities of the basics—bread, fresh meat and seasonal vegetables—as a canvas for the 'paint' lining the shelves of my pantry. So, when I decide to invite someone over for an impromptu dinner, I'm able to easily prepare something as casually elegant as a string of vintage pearls.

- goat cheese and Kalamata olive tart with wilted arugula
- ginger mashed sweet potatoes with spiced pecans
- Greek salad with sun dried tomato crostini
- shiitake mushroom bisque with parmesan croutons
- goat cheese and spinach quiche with pesto sour cream

- curried three cheese tart
- cumin roasted sweet potato fries with smoked paprika mayonnaise
- bleu cheese and pecan tart with truffle oil
- sesame noodles with garlic and arugula

Depending on what sort of fresh meat and produce I have available, simple, sophisticated dishes can come quickly and easily. Any number of savory tarts may be made with puff pastry. Quiches and pastas have been known to abound. It's all a series of delightful 'What ifs': 'What if I put this with that?' 'What if I top that with this sauce?' 'What if?' It might take some practice, but the results are worth it.

If *you're* insecure about experimenting, then start small. Use just a few ingredients to produce better results. Research recipes on the Internet and, maybe, watch some cooking shows. Remember that a thoughtfully stocked kitchen is your best sous chef. Begin building up your own pantry and relish the creativity it affords you. It's good to show off a little. You'll smile. Others will smile. And who knows? If the food and the timing are just right, Israelis and Palestinians may even smile together, someday.

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