

# Staples

These are the building blocks of great meals. Freshly made flatbreads are amazingly cheap to produce and taste fabulous. They can take a bit of time to make at first, but you'll get faster with practice and the flavor is absolutely worth it. Large batches of grains and beans can be cooked at the beginning of the week, then used in different meals each day, saving both time and money. Staples are where the possibilities begin!



# Flour Tortillas

MAKES TWENTY-FOUR SMALL

Homemade tortillas are a bit of work, but they're totally worth it. With practice, you'll get quicker and enjoy the process as much as the results.

- 1¼ cups all-purpose flour
- 1¼ cups whole-wheat flour
- 2½ tsp baking powder
- 1 tsp salt
- ⅓ cup clarified butter or lard
- 1 cup hot water

In a large bowl, whisk the dry ingredients. Add clarified butter or lard. Lard is more traditional, but I prefer clarified butter. Even regular butter is fine. Using your fingers, squish the butter against the flour until the mixture looks like moist crumbs. Add the hot water—not boiling, just hot—and form into dough with your hands. Leave the dough in the bowl for an hour, covered by plastic wrap or a moist towel.

Roll the dough into 24 small balls. Keep them covered with the towel.

Lightly flour your countertop. Gently flatten one dough ball with your palm, then roll it out with a rolling pin. Flip it over to make sure it doesn't stick to the counter; add more flour if it does stick. Once you have the ball rolled out nice and thin, set it aside under a moist towel.

Once you've rolled out one or two tortillas, put a non-stick or cast-iron pan on medium-high heat. Let it get nice and hot. Place a tortilla in the pan. Once it starts to dry up around the edges, flip it over with a spatula, then gently press it down to give it some color underneath. Once the tortilla has brown spots on both sides, remove it from the pan and continue with the next. Work quickly! As you wait for each tortilla to cook, roll out more. You'll get better at this part with practice.

If you're serving the tortillas soon, place them in a warm oven to keep them pliable. If they're for later in the day, pile them under a cloth while you finish making them. Once you're done, wrap them in aluminum foil and put them in the fridge. Heat in the oven before serving.

\$1.70 TOTAL  
\$0.07 / TORTILLA





# Roti

MAKES SIXTEEN

These are a staple flatbread in many parts of India. They're quick to make and very tasty when fresh. Enjoy them with a curried filling, dip them in soups or stews, or fill them with eggs at breakfast.

2 cups whole-wheat flour  
1 tsp salt  
1 cup water

In a small bowl, mix together all the ingredients using one clean hand. It should form a fairly moist dough. Knead until smooth and form into a ball. Cover with a damp towel or paper towel and set aside for 10 minutes to an hour.

Divide the dough into 16 small balls.

Sprinkle a countertop with flour and place one piece of dough in the middle. Cover the ball with flour on all sides so that it doesn't stick to the surface, then gently roll it out with a rolling pin (or a bottle if you're in a pinch) until it's thin and flat, about  $\frac{1}{8}$ " thick. As you roll the dough, be sure to unstick it from your counter and flip it over. To make it round, roll straight in front of you, then turn the dough 90 degrees and roll out again.

Place a non-stick skillet on medium heat. Once the pan is hot, add the roti and cook until the dough lifts away from the pan around the edges and small bubbles form. Flip the bread over and cook the other side. Usually it goes very quickly. You want to see light-brown bubbles all over the dough. Don't let it get too dark, though, as this will make the roti too crunchy to use for rolls. Repeat this process until you're finished with the dough.

Once you have practiced, you can roll out one roti while another cooks in the pan to make the process quicker.

Keep them under a towel on the counter or in a warm oven until ready to serve.

\$0.50 TOTAL  
\$0.03 / ROTI

# Pizza Dough

MAKES FOUR INDIVIDUAL PIZZAS

There are two ways to make pizza dough: the fast way and the slow way. They're the same amount of work, just with different waits. The slow method is convenient for a weekday if you make it before bed the night before, pop it in the fridge, then pull it out to rise before dinner.

3 cups all-purpose or bread flour  
1½ tsp salt  
½ to 1 tsp instant yeast  
1 tbsp olive oil  
1¼ cup water

## FAST METHOD

Measure out the flour, salt and a teaspoon of yeast into a big bowl. Mix the oil into the flour with your hands, crumbling it until the texture is a bit sandy, then add the room-temperature water. Keep mixing with your hands until it comes together.

Knead the dough on a lightly floured countertop for 5 to 7 minutes, until it becomes a smooth elastic ball. The dough will be smooth but quite wet.

Add a small amount of oil to a bowl. Place your dough ball in the bowl and cover with plastic wrap. Let it rise for 1½ to 3 hours, depending on the warmth of your kitchen. It's done rising when it has doubled in size. Then it'll be ready to shape into your favorite pizza!

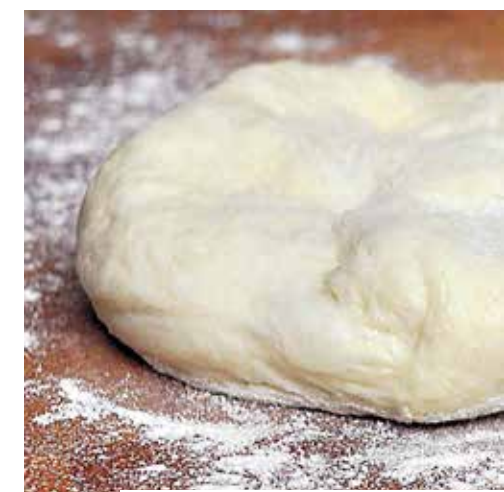
## SLOW METHOD

If you're organized enough to make the slow dough, I recommend taking the extra time: it's the best.

Use the same process as at left, but add only ½ teaspoon of yeast to the flour mixture. Rather than room temperature, the water should be very cold.

After you place the dough ball in a bowl and cover it, put it into the fridge overnight. Letting the yeast work overnight creates a better flavor; it also makes the dough more elastic and easier to work with.

The next day, 2 to 3 hours before you want to bake your pizzas, remove the dough from the fridge to return to room temperature.



\$0.80 TOTAL  
\$0.20 / CRUST





\$0.35 TOTAL  
\$0.35 / SERVING



# Fresh Pasta

FOR ONE LARGE ENTREE

$\frac{3}{4}$  cup all-purpose flour  
or bread flour  
1 egg  
olive oil or vegetable oil

When a reader, Jeanne, asked for a good pasta dish, I decided to show her how to create it from scratch. Sure, making pasta by hand requires elbow grease and a good rolling pin, but you'll be surprised at how simple, cheap, and tasty it is. If an Italian grandmother can do it, so can you! Because fresh pasta is so wonderful, the sauce doesn't need to be complicated. I love this with tomato sauce (p. 142) and a little cheese.

Multiply this recipe by the number of people you are serving, maybe a bit less. The stated quantities are a useful ratio, but produce big portions.

Put the flour in a bowl. Make a crater in the center of the flour and crack the egg into it. Mix with your hands. The egg takes a while to release all its moisture, so don't panic if things are dry at first. If, after mixing for about a minute, the dough still seems excessively dry, add a teaspoon of water. Keep mixing until you develop a stiff dough that is quite dry. The dryness makes it easier to roll out and keeps the noodles from sticking together when you cook them.

Place the dough in a lightly oiled bowl covered with a moist towel or plastic wrap for 1 or 2 hours.

Once an hour (or more) has passed, you'll notice a marked change in the dough. Now that the egg has released its moisture, you'll have a pale yellow, smooth, pliable dough. Knead again to create a smooth ball.

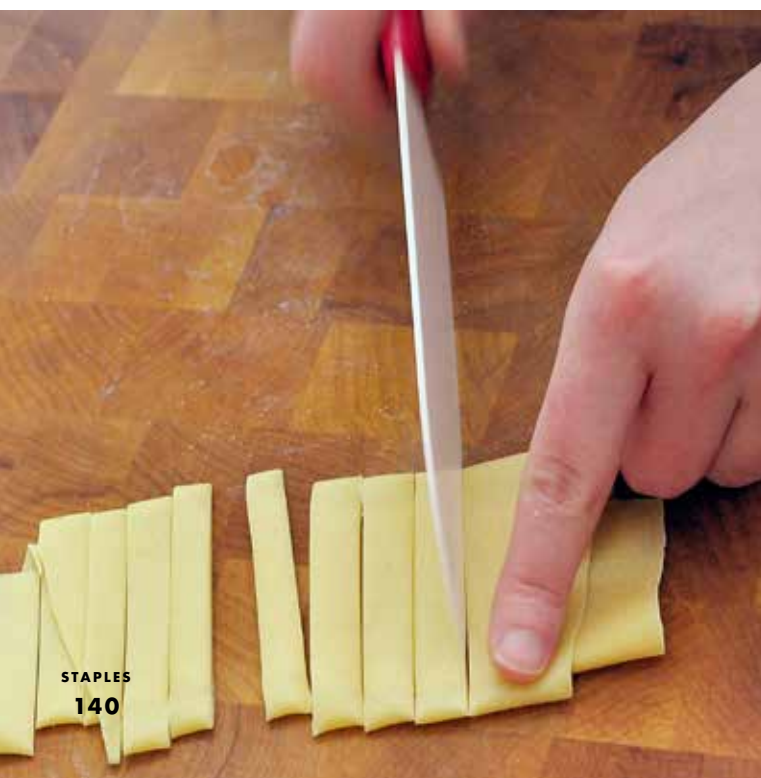
Tear or slice the dough into manageable pieces—usually as many as the number of people you're feeding. Dust your countertop or cutting board heavily with flour, then use a rolling pin to make the dough as thin as you can. Rolling it out will take a while because it's tough and stretchy. Try to get it thin enough to see light through. The thinner the dough, the quicker it will cook, but don't make the dough so thin that it tears.

By the time the pasta is rolled out, it should be dry enough to avoid sticking to itself. If it's still moist, leave it to sit for a few minutes.

Slice into whatever size of noodles you like. It's easy to make the noodles a consistent size if you fold the dough over itself a few times first. Shake the cut noodles on a tray with a bit of flour to keep them from sticking.

Boil in heavily salted water. Fresh pasta cooks in as little as 30 seconds if the noodles are thin. It's ready when it changes color and starts to float.

You can keep uncooked pasta for up to 2 days in the fridge.



STAPLES  
140



STAPLES  
141



# Best Tomato Sauce

MAKES THREE AND A HALF CUPS

There are many ways to make tomato sauce. I don't find that the more complex recipes taste any better; this one is boldly tomatoey and works on just about anything. It also takes 5 minutes to make. Can't beat that.

1 tbsp olive oil  
3 cloves garlic, finely chopped  
½ tsp chili flakes  
28 oz can tomatoes, crushed or diced  
½ lemon, zested (optional)  
salt and pepper

Add the olive oil to a saucepan on medium heat. Sauté the garlic for 1 minute, until it smells great and becomes translucent. Add the chili flakes and cook for 30 seconds. Add the can of tomatoes, mix, and cook until warmed through. Add a little lemon zest, then salt and pepper to taste. Since canned tomatoes are often already salted, you may not need to add any.

If you want a thicker sauce that will stick to pasta better, cook for 10 to 20 minutes to evaporate more of the liquid. Use immediately or keep in a jar in the fridge for later use.

**\$3.50 TOTAL**  
**\$1 / CUP**



# Chorizo and White Bean Ragu

MAKES THREE CUPS

When my friend Chris told me he loves a good ragu, I worked to develop a version that is as hearty as a meaty tomato sauce without the expense and heaviness of a traditional ragu. A batch of this is probably enough for four people, served with grated Romano or Parmesan over pasta (p. 141), polenta, or grits.

1 tbsp butter or vegetable oil  
1 onion, chopped  
3 cloves garlic, finely chopped  
1 tbsp jalapeño, finely chopped (optional)  
½ lb fresh chorizo, casing removed

1½ cups canned or fresh tomatoes, puréed  
1½ cups butter beans, navy beans, or cannellini beans  
salt and pepper

Melt the butter in a pan over medium heat and swirl it to coat the pan. Add the chopped onion and cook until it turns translucent. Toss in the garlic, jalapeño, and fresh chorizo (or any other kind of fresh sausage), then sauté for about a minute. Add the tomatoes and beans, then simmer until the sauce is thick and the sausage is cooked, about 5 minutes on medium heat. Taste and add salt and pepper as needed.

Because this sauce contains meat, it won't keep especially long in the fridge, but you can freeze it for later use if you don't plan to eat it all within a few days.

**\$3.75 TOTAL**  
**\$1.25 / CUP**







\$1.50 TOTAL  
\$0.75 / SERVING

Here are three quick ways to make plain rice a little more exciting. An early reader, Charles, said he loves rice with vegetables, but these treatments work for grains other than rice as well—everything from quinoa to barley to farro. Vegetables are a great way to liven up the usual rice and beans.

## Rainbow Rice

FOR TWO

1 cup rice  
2 cups water  
salt

To make normal rice, pour 2 cups of water into a pot with 1 cup of uncooked rice and two pinches of salt. That'll be enough for two generous portions, or three or four smaller servings. With the lid off, bring to a low boil over medium heat, then turn the heat down to low and put the lid on slightly askew, so that the steam can escape. Cook for about 20 minutes, until the water is all gone.

1 cup canned tomatoes, puréed

**RED RICE:** Stir the tomatoes with 1½ cups of water, then pour it into a pot with 1 cup of uncooked rice and two pinches of salt. Cook as above.

1 cup canned winter squash, pumpkin, or sweet potato, puréed

**ORANGE RICE:** Stir the squash, pumpkin, or sweet potato with 1½ cups of water, then pour it into a pot with 1 cup of uncooked rice and two pinches of salt. (You can also use frozen, boiled, or sautéed squash.) Cook as above.

1 cup frozen spinach, beet greens, chard, or fresh parsley

**GREEN RICE:** Chop up the spinach as much as you like. The more finely chopped, the more it will disperse into the rice. Cook normal rice, as above, for about 15 minutes, until most of the water is gone but not quite all. Mix the spinach into the rice. Cook with the lid off for the last 5 minutes. Adding the spinach at the end keeps it lush and bright, rather than the sad color of overcooked spinach.

METHOD

## How to Cook Dried Beans

ADDITIONS WHILE COOKING

a bay leaf  
a bouquet garni of favourite tough herbs  
dried herbs and spices  
onion  
garlic  
chilies  
ginger root

The best way to prepare dried beans is to soak them overnight. The next day, drain the water and rinse thoroughly before cooking in fresh water.

If you didn't have the foresight to soak the beans ahead of time, you can make up for it. Cover the beans with water, then bring them to a boil in a large pot. After 10 minutes, take them off the heat and drain them. Proceed with the next step.

Cover the drained beans with fresh water in a large pot. Bring to a boil on medium heat, then turn down the heat so that the beans boil gently. Put a lid on the pot, but leave it askew so the water doesn't boil over.

Check on the beans every half hour or so, making sure to keep them covered with water if it boils away.

Beans take vastly different lengths of time to become tender. The older and bigger they are, the longer they take to cook. Very old, very large beans can take as long as four hours.

If you are making refried beans or beans for a soup or stew, don't worry about overcooking them; it's fine if they're mushy. If you want to maintain their shape and integrity, however, monitor them closely once they're getting close to done.

Once the beans are tender, you can drain them or leave them wet, depending on what you're using them for. Add salt to taste—they will need a fair bit!





METHOD

# Croutons or Breadcrumbs

bread  
butter or vegetable oil as needed  
salt and pepper

I am constantly haunted by the hard, several-day-old bread that I have neglected. Luckily there are plenty of delicious solutions that avoid the trash can. Croutons and breadcrumbs will keep for ages in a sealed container on the counter, and when you have them around you'll find yourself using them everywhere and finding excuses to make a salad.

This is a method more than a recipe since you'll have a random amount of bread. If making croutons, start by cutting the bread into cubes. If making breadcrumbs, mince the loaf with a knife, or just tear it apart, or throw small chunks of bread into a food processor. If the bread is too hard to cut, wrap it in a kitchen towel, sprinkle some water on the towel, and microwave for 20 to 30 seconds. This will restore just enough moisture to let you cut the bread easily.

Choose a sufficiently large pan for the quantity of bread cubes or crumbs—or work in batches if you have a lot—and place it on the stovetop on medium heat. Add enough butter or vegetable oil to coat the bottom of the pan. I prefer the flavor of butter, but use whatever you have.

Let the butter melt or the oil get hot. Add the bread and toss gently until coated. Let the bread sit for 2 minutes, then flip the pieces over. Keep tossing and turning until the bread is brown all over. Add oil or butter as needed and sprinkle with salt and pepper. It is basically impossible, unless you are very patient (which I am not) to get every side of the cubes browned, so just get them generally looking good and toasty and then take them off the heat.

For breadcrumbs, if you like, you can go oil-free: just toast whole slices and then crush it into small pieces.

Use the breadcrumbs or croutons immediately, or place them in a sealed container after letting them cooling off. Later, use them in salads or anything you want to add crunch to.