

Bridget Lancaster on Cooking Misconceptions

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Bridget Lancaster is the executive food editor for television, radio, and media at America's Test Kitchen. She is an original cast member of America's Test Kitchen and Cook's Country, both broadcast on public television. Before working at America's Test Kitchen, she cooked in restaurants in the South and Northeast regions of the United States.

How did you get into cooking?

I got into the hobby of cooking from my mother, who is a great cook. This was the time when convenience food started coming out, prepackaged things, foods that had “Helper” at the end of the title. My mother just refused to participate in any of that. So everything was scratch—always homemade cakes, breads...

Also, my grandfather worked in the Army for years. When he was in Korea, he would ask the men in his company for different foods that were sent in care packages. They would take those foods and create a meal, something special

that wasn't just Army sanctioned. I think he always had that interest in taking something that was so humdrum, so pedestrian, and turning it into something special. I think that's where I got interested in not settling for less, always thinking, “This could be a little bit better. This could be a little bit more.” My relationship with *Cook's [Illustrated]* is all about that.

You once mentioned that you grew up not knowing that things like pasta sauce even came in a jar. As you learned more about cooking, what things surprised you that people buy instead of make?

Well, that was one of them because of the fact that a great pasta sauce takes 10 minutes to make, from scratch. Salisbury steak that's in the frozen aisle, with frozen mashed potatoes? It was almost as if we had all turned into astronauts, and we were looking at food as a thing to consume instead of actually being a meal.

Not to say that there aren't great ready-made things, like really good sausages and canned tomatoes. I use canned tomatoes all winter long because I don't really like buying fresh in the winter; they're red Styrofoam.

You mentioned that you got into the hobby of cooking from your mother. What are the things that you wish you had learned from her, that you think are hard to learn unless you're doing it with somebody?

The simplest ingredient is just, it is what it is. The less you do to it, the better it is.

I think understanding the magic step was missing. Say you put brownies in the oven—it goes away and when it comes back, it looks completely different. What's happening at that point? I never asked those questions. I just accepted it at kind of face value.

I think a lot of people do think that it's a magic box. You put the cookie dough in, and you bake it, and out comes a cookie somehow. What other magic steps happen that people don't realize are important?

Some of it happens before it even goes into the box. One is probably stirring. You think of cake batter, cookies, any kind of baked good. Before it goes into that magic box, if you stir it too much, it makes it tougher. That's now what we know as the new villain on the street, gluten. It's important for structure, but it can be easily activated more, so that there's more gluten developed. So you end up with cake that's tough instead of cake that's tender.

With steak, the magic step is salting. My mom would call it a marinade, but now we know that soy is the primary ingredient, more like a briner-ade. It's part salt brine with more flavor. She would let it sit for a good half-hour in mostly soy sauce, no real acid in there. That went on the grill, and when it came back, it was savory all the way through.

Our grandparents didn't know about connective tissue and the conversion of collagen into gelatin. But they knew that if you had really tough cuts of meat, you could literally change their structure into something very different, as different as cake batter compared to a baked cake, by putting that tough cut of meat into the oven, the longer and slower, the better. You really change the structure with only temperature and time and how long it takes for that to occur.

The black box of cooking vegetables: what do people miss there?

I think if I could go back in time and get my mom to roast some vegetables, I would have been a little less picky. As children, our taste buds are very different, and we pick up on bitter first, before we pick up on other tastes.

Roasting takes away the bitter, and it converts it into sweeter and deeper flavors, but not bitter. I think that's the best thing that ever happened to vegetables. Roasted Brussels sprouts. You see them in restaurants now too! They bring out baskets of roasted Brussels sprouts, and I just laugh because I want to take a survey, go around the restaurant and ask people, "Did you eat Brussels sprouts when you were a kid? Wasn't that the worst

thing that your parents could have threatened you with when you were a child?" Now we eat them like they're popcorn.

Cauliflower is another one. I think this is partially thanks to the vegetarian, even vegan, crowd that wanted something that was thought of as a substantial main course. You now see cauliflower steaks: it's treated; it's browned. It might be high-roasted, or it might be grilled, but you're taking the same treatments that we've done for meat and other things and looking at it as a way to add more flavor and turn something that was a side dish for so long into something more special.

It's interesting that you tie that to vegetarian or vegan cuisine. Are there other subgroups that deal with food that've introduced the broader population to new interesting things?

Today, we see an emphasis on different grains. Not only is it vegetarianism or veganism, but people with gluten sensitivities. They can't have barley. They can't have wheat, obviously. So you're seeing an exploration. Some are new things—breads made with new grains or a combination of grains—and we're also seeing a little bit of a celebration of things that are naturally gluten-free, like Southern cornbread. Northern cornbread tends to have both flour and cornmeal in it, but southern cornbread is just cornmeal.

A lot of these trends start in restaurants because you have somebody going in and saying, "I'm allergic to dairy." Then there are some cultures where the foods are just naturally dairy-free. Take a lot of Thai food. You don't see a lot of cheeses in Thai food. You don't see milk, dairy milk. You see coconut milk.

I think our culture is becoming more diverse, not only in its people, but in its cuisine. We're seeing more of this in cookbooks and in restaurants and in home cooking. We're trying new cuisines from around the world that just happen to be either gluten-free or dairy-free, but they weren't engineered to be that way. You see people making oatmeal porridge with coconut milk now, instead of regular milk, or smoothies with different types of dairy.

What are the common mistakes that you see with people who are learning to cook?

Probably the number one mistake is they're afraid of salt. They don't know that salt added at various stages not only affects the taste, but also the texture of food. You think about adding onions to a pan that has oil or butter in it—add a little bit of salt to draw out the moisture, so you can get more caramelization and more flavor that way. The most important step, after you've turned off the stove, is to check the food. Adjust the seasonings at the end. Is it a little dull? Does salt brighten it?

Number two, people just are watching the clock instead of peeking under that chicken breast to see if it's browned to the right color. That'll tell you if it's time to turn it over, not necessarily the recipe time.

Another thing: there's a fear of the equipment. The safest thing to cook with is a very, very sharp knife. The most dangerous thing to cook with is a dull knife. And there's a fear of the stove, in a certain way. I see people only turn their stovetop up to medium. They'll wonder why, when they put food in the pan, it just steamed instead of getting

a really deep, dark crust on it. You have to crank the heat up, put some oil in the pan, and let that heat until the oil just starts to smoke. Smoke is kind of a danger sign, but it's also a great indication that you're ready to go. I understand that fear, but the heat gives the caramelization and the browning of the food.

Where do you think this fear of the kitchen comes from?

We're definitely afraid to fail, but I think there's been a generation or two that fell away from the kitchen, and the microwave became another black box where almost no prep was necessary. People were able to eat quickly. I have succumbed to Stouffer's mac-and-cheese going into the microwave a couple times in my life. Pretty darn good.

When you have a fear of something, you're supposed to face it every day, and it goes away. I think if you're only cooking once, twice a week, you don't want to screw it up. Plus, if you buy really good food items, there's sticker shock, so you *really* don't want to mess it up.

I think there was a generation where cooking was seen as tethering. Not to get political, but we didn't want to be tied to the stovetop. A couple of generations didn't benefit from someone being in the kitchen. Think of the Italian nana, always adding something to this big magical pot and stirring it away, and you get this amazing gravy at the end of it. Not everybody had that experience. I think it's coming back. But who would have thought that there would be food TV? I'm guilty for being a part of it. But who in the world, besides Julia Child, did you ever think would be on your TV, telling you how to cook? Maybe Justin Wilson or Graham Kerr, bless his heart.

I remember reading after 9/11 there was a big uptick in people buying kitchen equipment, because there was kind of a feeling that you needed to nest. You needed security of your home. I remember reading the article and thinking, "That's one of those game-changers for some people."

What aspects of cooking and science have surprised you? Things that should have been easy but were hard, or were hard and turned out to be easy?

I think knowing exactly what you just said: things that should be easy are the hardest. I now know that, but it was a surprise. One of the jobs that I went for as a cook, you had to make an omelet for the chef. Think about an omelet. An omelet should be really, really simple, and that was the point. But it's so hard to make because there's so little to an omelet; one minor change to a step can really change everything.

I think the biggest thing, though, is that we can always do better—as long as we don't assume anything. Think of the old kitchen lore, "Don't salt your beans." That's my favorite one because I never salted beans growing up because you were gonna just ruin the whole dish. Then we find out that actually you can salt your beans. It not only adds flavor to the dish, but it changes their structure so that they're a little bit creamier.

