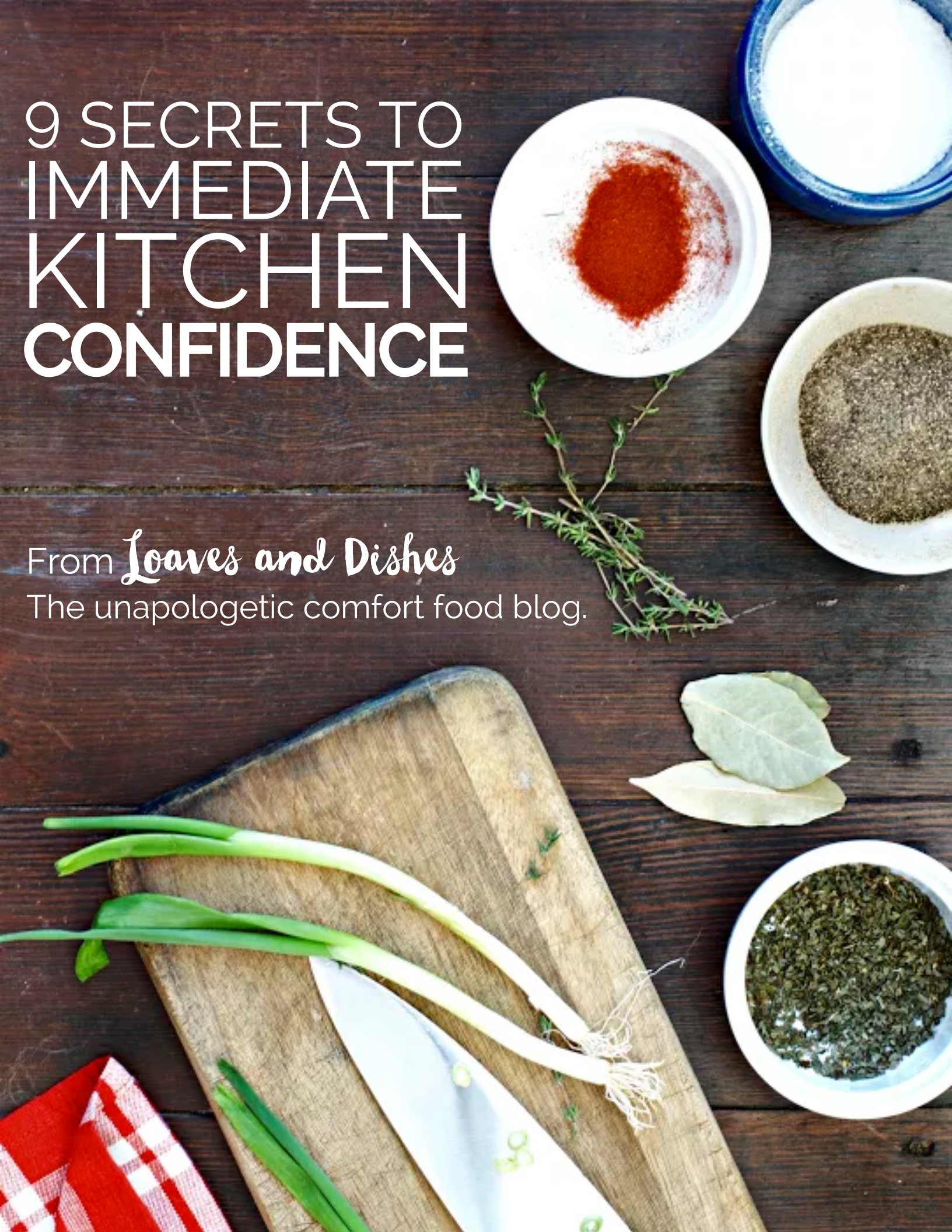


# 9 SECRETS TO IMMEDIATE KITCHEN CONFIDENCE

From *Loaves and Dishes*

The unapologetic comfort food blog.



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Wendi Spraker, Owner and Chief Dishwasher

## Loaves and Dishes

Hello, Friend!

I'm just going to say it.

"Do not make any more straight-to-the-trash dinners"!

Never watch your family wrinkle their noses and push their food around their plate again!

Refuse to hear, "BUT I DON'T LIKE \_\_\_\_\_," EVER again!

I know. You have tried dozens of recipes and something always goes wrong. Cakes go soft in the center. Veggies are either limp and flavorless or crunchy and underdone. Chicken is dry and stringy. You never hear your family exclaim, "My Mom/Wife is the Best Cook EVVEERRR"!

I have wonderful news for you. I am sharing my TOP 9 Secret Kitchen Strategies. These tips improved my own cooking by at least 500%. You are going from kitchen beginner to "Best Cook Ever" in no time flat! In fact, you can start today.

~ Wendi

# 1

## CLEAN UP THE KITCHEN BEFORE YOU START A NEW COOKING PROJECT!

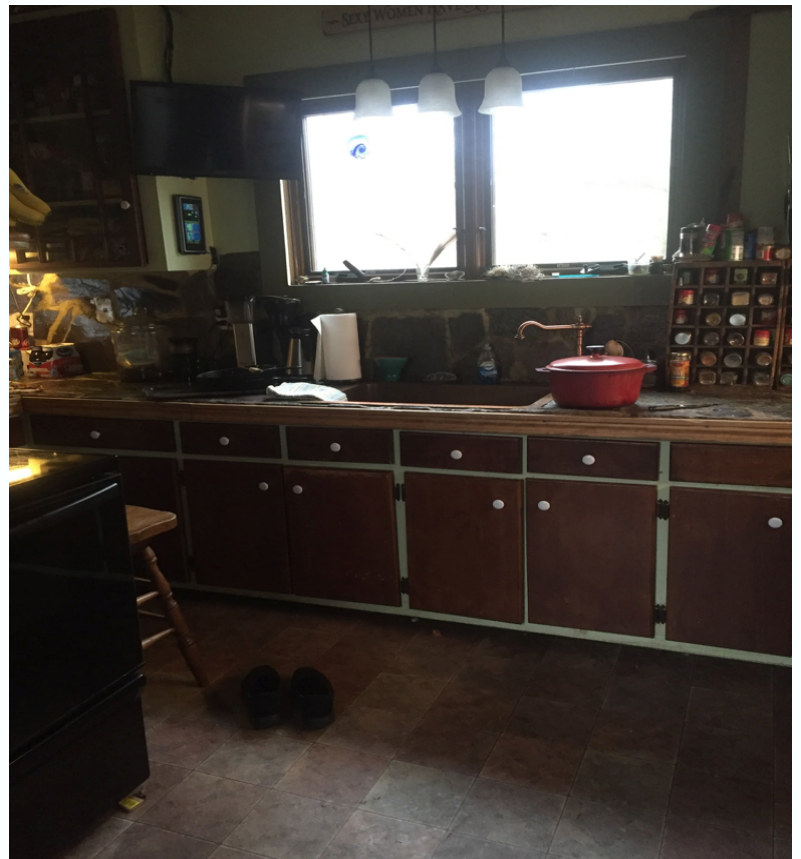
Admit it. The toaster and its crumbs are out on the counter from breakfast. Plates and cups are stacked in the sink (I know, you rinsed them and stacked them neatly—gold star for you). There are important papers stacked by the mixer so you won't forget about them. A school project sits on the end of the bar. Someone left their shoes in the kitchen floor.

Here is what always happens: You start a new recipe trying to work around these things. Why clean up the kitchen when you are getting ready to make a mess anyway? Suddenly, while cooking, you find that you are feeling angry, tired, over-whelmed and generally frustrated! It **MUST** be the new recipe! It's too hard, too complicated, too. . . ? "I HATE COOKING," you scream!

The truth is that a messy kitchen is standing in your way. You are bumping into things, knocking things in the floor, feeling over-whelmed because there is too much stuff in your way and you don't have enough space to work.

Before you start **ANY** cooking project, take a few minutes and clean the kitchen first. Put everything away, take out the trash, clean out the dishwasher, put the dirty dishes in the dishwasher, tidy up and wipe the counters down. It takes 10 minutes, tops; just do it.

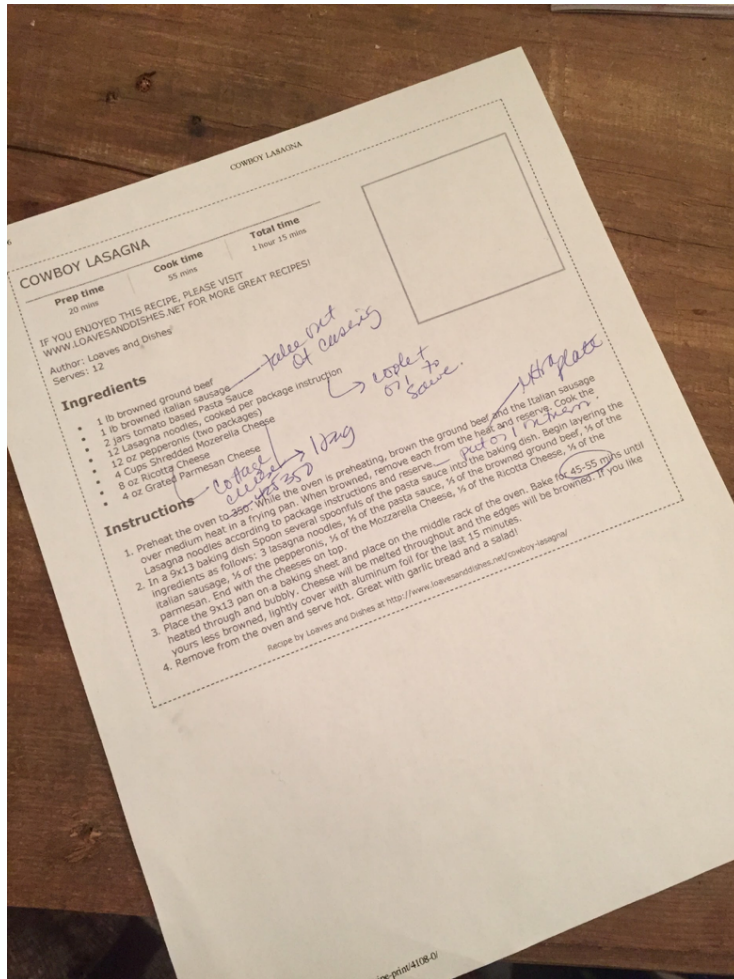
Start **ALL** kitchen projects by being good to yourself **FIRST!** If you just do this one thing, you will find that your cooking projects go more smoothly and your confidence is increased immediately!



See this kitchen? Who left shoes on the floor? What is in that red pot on the counter? It needs to be put away. The knife is laying on the counter: Is it clean or dirty? The soft drinks are all scattered in the corner, those need to be put away. All of that stuff will mess with your kitchen mojo!

# 2

## READ THE RECIPE ALL THE WAY THROUGH AND MAKE NOTES BEFORE STARTING. HAVE A PAPER COPY AVAILABLE ON THE COUNTER!



This photo shows a recipe that I am making with notes to myself about ingredients and what needs to happen first.

Would you try to set up a new digital device with no instructions? Would you try to put together a new IKEA® desk just by looking at the pieces? Would you try to start painting your living room without putting something on the floor, taping off the trim and painting in the edges first? No. You. Would. Not. Don't start a cooking project that way either.

Take note of the ingredients list. Does the recipe call for things to be chopped, minced, browned, etc? If so, you will need to have all of this done BEFORE you start with step number one.

Notice each step of the way where you will mix in an ingredient, where a different bowl is needed, where something must rest for 5 minutes or where something must go immediately in the oven.

**Say** the recipe **OUT LOUD** to yourself. "First I need to chop, peel and prepare all of the ingredients, then I need to preheat the oven to 350°, then I will need to spray my 9x13 pan, then I will need to put a little oil in the pan and brown the chopped onion."

As you read the recipe aloud, imagine yourself doing each step.

(I am NOT being some kind of nut case here!) If you have imagined yourself doing each step, you will be much less likely to miss something when you are actually preparing the recipe.

Finally, have a paper copy available on the kitchen counter. I know, everyone is green and paperless these days with their laptops, tablets and phones in the kitchen.

The problem is that cooking is messy. Your hands get wet, sticky and gooey. Wet, sticky and gooey ARE NOT friends of digital media.

Dirty hands will cause you to avoid scrolling and swiping when needed. In addition, swiping, scrolling and looking for the right place in the recipe can cause you to miss the critical moment you need to take something out of the oven.

Instead, go **Old School** and print the recipe—if you touch the paper, it isn't the end of the world and you haven't messed up an expensive piece of equipment.

# 3 GATHER ALL OF YOUR INGREDIENTS FIRST.

Before starting any recipe, gather all of your ingredients first. In a professional kitchen, this is called "Mise en place." In my kitchen, it's called getting my \*stuff\* together.

It is true, you might dirty a few more dishes by preparing things ahead of time, but. . . the first time you are halfway through a recipe and find you don't have all the ingredients, you will be wishing you had gathered things first.

Been there. Done that.

# 4

## MAKE THE RECIPE EXACTLY AS THE RECIPE INSTRUCTS THE FIRST TIME.

I know you like to make adjustments. You want to substitute because that is what you have on hand. You don't want that much salt or you don't like cheddar cheese—only provolone.

However, the first time you make a recipe, make it exactly as the instructions indicate. Then, the next time you make it, you can adjust from there. You won't know what the original recipe is supposed to taste like if you are making adjustments from the beginning.

# 5

## DON'T TRY TO SPARE THE DIRTY DISHES.

We've all done it. The recipe says "in a separate medium sized bowl, mix eggs, milk and melted butter" and you think to yourself, "I don't know why I have to mix those in a separate bowl, I'm just going to add the eggs, milk and melted butter to the dry ingredients—why not save the extra dirty bowl and go ahead and mix them as I go"?

The answer. . . ?

Because MORE is going on in your recipe than just mixing.

**Reactions** are going on in that bowl. It is like a mini science experiment in there and you want your reaction to go RIGHT!

Your best chance at having the recipe turn out perfectly is to make the recipe exactly as it says to make it—dirty dishes and all.



OK—I admit it. This photo shows just how many dishes I can dirty just making a simple breakfast! No worries—dishes can be washed!

# 6

## PREHEAT THE OVEN WHEN IT SAYS TO PREHEAT.

If the recipe says to preheat the oven, that means to turn the oven on ahead of time and let it come to the required temperature. It **DOES** take a few minutes.

Most all baked recipes require a constant and steady baking temperature. You are missing out on the proper temperature if you put your recipe in a cold oven and let it bake while the oven is coming to temperature.

This might not matter if you are cooking a frozen pizza or refrigerated cookie. It will definitely matter if you are baking muffins, bread or a soufflé from scratch.

If you put your recipe in a cold oven and allow the oven to warm with your recipe inside, your baking time will be off, your baked goods may over rise or worse, fall. Give yourself the gift of preheating!

## KEEP YOUR FRIDGE, PANTRY AND FREEZER STOCKED WITH A FEW THINGS THAT YOU CAN MAKE AT A MOMENT'S NOTICE.

**Here is a little test:** Your child comes home and says, "Hey Mom! Can Stevie and Dalton come for dinner"? Perhaps the spouse comes home from work and says, "Hey Honey, I invited Dallas and his wife over for dinner on Friday night, OK"?

The first words out of your mouth are \_\_\_\_\_?

- A. "Uhhhhhh. . . NO"!
- B. "YOU DID WHAT?????????"
- C. "OK, no problem."

The difference between the A & B vs C? The confident cook has a secret weapon stashed away—and I don't mean a nuclear bomb for getting rid of those pesky family members. If you have the ingredients on hand at all times for a quick and delicious spaghetti, a fettuccine alfredo and a salad or a terrific chicken dish (whatever your secret best dish is) then these situations are no sweat.

# 7



Do you need a special secret weapon dish?

Here are a couple of simple ones in which you can keep the ingredients on hand in the pantry, fridge or freezer.



## FETTUCCINI ALFREDO

[www.loavesanddishes.net/  
best-ever-fettuccine-alfredo](http://www.loavesanddishes.net/best-ever-fettuccine-alfredo)



## 10 MINUTE HOMEMADE CREAMY PASTA SAUCE

[www.loavesanddishes.net/  
10-minute-homemade-  
creamy-pasta-sauce](http://www.loavesanddishes.net/10-minute-homemade-creamy-pasta-sauce)



## SMOKED SAUSAGE AND CHEESY ORZO

[www.loavesanddishes.net/  
smoked-sausage-and-  
cheesy-orzo](http://www.loavesanddishes.net/smoked-sausage-and-cheesy-orzo)

# 8

## WHEN YOU HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO BUY SOMETHING NEW FOR YOUR KITCHEN, BUY THE VERY BEST THAT YOU CAN AFFORD.

You need a new spatula. You are at a discount store and see that plastic spatulas are \$0.99. You buy one. When you get home you find that the spatula base is stiff but the handle is floppy. You can't flip an egg with it, you can't even get under the edge of a hamburger with it.

The next time you are at the mall, you wander into the big fancy cooking store and see a spatula for \$9.99. It is beautifully designed. It shines. AHHHHHH. It is pliable and will probably last forever.

You put the \$9.99 spatula back and tell yourself that you will stick with the \$0.99 spatula because it still works and hasn't worn out yet. The \$0.99 spatula torments you EVERY SINGLE DAY for the next 564 days before it turns you MAD and you open the back door and throw it out into the alley. (That is almost two years of daily torment my friend but hey, you saved \$9.00).

Buy the \$9.99 spatula if you can afford it. You will be using it daily for the next few years and you, my friend, deserve to have a tool that works and is pleasant to use.

You can extrapolate this story for whatever kitchen tool you are thinking about. Pots and pans. Gadgets. Coffee Maker. You name it. You deserve to work with something nice.

That is NOT to say that all expensive equipment is the best. It isn't. Just do your homework before you buy ANY kitchen equipment and learn about the important factors for that item. I have about 15 spatulas from the 1960's that I think are TERRIFIC! I didn't pay more than a couple dollars for any of them—at antique malls, charity and consignment stores! My KitchenAid® mixer is an ugly shade of yellow green and it was built in the 1970's. It cost me \$100. It works GREAT! I wouldn't trade it for ANY new stand mixer on the market today.

# \*\* MOST IMPORTANT RULE OF ALL \*\* ALWAYS BUY THE BEST QUALITY **REAL** INGREDIENTS THAT YOU CAN AFFORD.

I know that advertising has programmed you to think all kinds of bad and horrible things about “real” food. You think that margarine is better for you because it has less fat. You have heard that eating eggs from the chicken in the back yard is unsafe. Raising and butchering your own cow is barbaric. Drinking milk straight from the cow is dangerous, outrageous and a horrible health hazard. Yeah. Right.

I've got news for you. How do you think you got here? For many generations, this is the food people ate—and were glad to get it! I dare say that if your great grandmother had seen the ingredients in a honey bun, she would have fainted dead away from surprise saying something like, “You can't eat that stuff, it will kill you”!

I'll tell you one thing, as for me and mine, give me real butter or give me death! Cow vs. chemist? I'll choose cow. Every. Single. Time.

What does this have to do with cooking confidence, you ask? Once you begin cooking with real ingredients, you will find that flavors begin to POP! People who taste your cooking will say things like, “Oh man, I can taste that butter”! and they mean it in a good way!

On another note, if you can find (it isn't easy) farm fresh meat (not the kind that has been through the local grocery)—but actually from a farmer—the flavor is out of this world!

Personally, I only purchase meat this way for my family to eat. This has more to do with my personal beliefs about the lives that the animals live and our responsibility as human beings to God's other creatures. But, that is a discussion for a different blog. Suffice it to say, local farm direct meat is definitely the way to go if what you want is MORE FLAVOR!

Believe me, if you want better tasting meals that your family will gobble up and you want to see them lick the plate clean, then you want the freshest most natural ingredients that you can get your hands on.

Here is the kicker: When you start eating real food, you will eat less. Truth.










My nutritionist said that when your palate is satisfied with the real food, you will actually eat less and you may lose the weight that you feared you would gain. I am a living testament to that.

Go ahead, have a little dash of real cream, spread a little sweet cream butter on your bread, drink a small glass of whole milk. I believe you will find that you only want a small amount before you are satisfied.

Now, I dare you. Go compare the calories of your margarine to my butter. About the same, right? Did you eat less margarine or butter?

Now, look at the ingredients—how many are there? Pronounce them all. Get the drift?

# CHECKLIST OF STEPS FOR IMMEDIATE KITCHEN CONFIDENCE.

-  TIDY THE KITCHEN BEFORE YOU START COOKING.
-  READ THE RECIPE OUT LOUD TO YOURSELF.
-  GATHER INGREDIENTS FIRST.
-  FOLLOW THE INSTRUCTIONS EXACTLY. USE A PAPER COPY.
-  DON'T TRY TO SPARE YOURSELF DIRTY DISHES.
-  PREHEAT THE OVEN WHEN THE RECIPE SAYS TO PREHEAT.
-  STOCK INGREDIENTS OF YOUR FAVORITE RECIPES.
-  BUY THE BEST KITCHEN EQUIPMENT YOU CAN AFFORD.
-  USE REAL AND FRESH INGREDIENTS.

I hope that this list has helped you cut through the frustration and find ways that you can gain kitchen confidence.

If you have found this guide helpful, I hope that you will do me a small favor: share this resource with friends. Please tell your friends that they **WILL** find useful information and great recipes by visiting and signing up for the newsletter at [www.loavesanddishes.net](http://www.loavesanddishes.net).

By helping me to spread the word about this cooking resource, you are helping to support *Loaves and Dishes* and you are helping me to create more great content that you can use to be the **Kitchen Rock Star** that I know you are!

## BONUS!

Here are examples of some simple and delicious recipes for you to practice the **9 Secrets to Kitchen Confidence**. I think you will be very happy with the results.



### COWBOY LASAGNA

[www.loavesanddishes.net/  
cowboy-lasagna](http://www.loavesanddishes.net/cowboy-lasagna)



### PUMPKIN PRALINE CAKE

[www.loavesanddishes.net/  
pumpkin-praline-cake](http://www.loavesanddishes.net/pumpkin-praline-cake)



### SHRIMP SAUCE/ YUM YUM SAUCE

[www.loavesanddishes.net/  
shrimp-sauce-yum-yum-  
-sauce-4](http://www.loavesanddishes.net/shrimp-sauce-yum-yum-sauce-4)

## ABOUT WENDI SPRAKER

As a busy mom and wife, you need a better way to prepare delicious meals that will have your family not just eating their dinner but also BEGGING for MORE! I believe that anyone can be a confident cook regardless of kitchen skills. That is why I have compiled the recipes and helpful kitchen tips that you will find at *Loaves and Dishes*. You can reach me, 24/7, at [wendi@loavesanddishes.net](mailto:wendi@loavesanddishes.net).



I would like to send along a special thanks to some super special people.....

Thank you so much to Marcia Kilby Rethwilm, Travis Nickelston, Sheree Booth, Lorri Stringer and Barb Tilson who were willing to peruse the rough draft of this book and give their heart and soul felt feedback as well as their keen English usage, grammar and punctuation assistance! How would I continue without you?

Thank you to Mark Spraker and Sarah Blackwell for reading copy and listening to my never ending, excited and sometimes off the wall ideas about this process.

Thanks to Christina Klumph - without whom this book would be merely an unappealing word document. Thanks to Stephanie Powers who actually DOES power my entire web world.

Thanks to Pete for helping me to keep it real by turning the trash over at least once per day.

But mostly, thank YOU for your interest, conversation and continued support of Loaves and Dishes. YOU are the BEST!

Peace,

~Wendi