How to Read a Recipe

By

[Brain Food Kitchens](https://altonbrown.com/author/brainfoodkitchens/)

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According to my calculations, about 30 percent of the dishes prepared from written recipes go wrong because the cooks concerned didn’t actually read said recipe. Sure, we glance at them sideways, scan them, peruse them, peek at them, make grocery lists from them, but we rarely glean all the information we really need. This is especially true of dishes being prepared for the first time. Here are a few simple guidelines to prevent this from happening to you.

1. **Sit Down:** That’s right … sit down at the kitchen table and simply read the recipe all the way through. Don’t make notes, don’t make lists, just read.

2. **Read It Again**: Highlight any special procedures or sidebars that might change your timeline, i.e. bringing butter to room temperature or soaking dry beans (that’s the one that used to get me). Be careful to note punctuation. For instance, “1 cup chopped nuts” is not the same as “1 cup nuts, chopped.” Nor is 6 ounces of brown sugar the same as 3/4 cup brown sugar.

3. **Gather Equipment:** I always do this first because if there’s something esoteric on the hardware list, you may need to abandon the dish until you can procure a left-handed pasta roller.

4. **Gather Ingredients:** Pantry ingredients and dry goods should be corralled into a staging area. Anything that’s missing goes on the grocery list. I do the same thing with the refrigerator/freezer, collecting everything onto one shelf. Whatever’s missing goes on the grocery list. During this phase be especially mindful of ingredients that may need to be thawed, or brought to room temperature. Keep in mind, recipe writers list ingredients in order of use, typically from largest amount to smallest. This is also a cue for the cook as to how the ingredients should be measured and used. For example, if a recipe calls for both a tablespoon of honey and a tablespoon of oil, we call for the oil first so that the honey will be easier to measure.

5. **Note the Order of the Steps:** Heat the oven and prep the pans (soak the beans) before messing about with other ingredients. This will save you both time and heartache in the kitchen. And in the case of timely preparations such as egg foams, it may prevent an actual disaster.

6. **Always Triple Note Cooking or Baking Times and their ‘Doneness Indicators’:** If the biscuits should be golden brown or the butter should smell nutty, your eyes and ears can tell you more than a timer ever will.

Above all, learn to enjoy recipes as you would literature. Many recipes you’d never actually cook make for intriguing reading. Just because you’re not going to actually cook Charlie Trotter’s recipe for Three Day Rabbit Stock doesn’t mean you won’t get a kick out of reading it.