
15 Essential Ingredient Upgrades that Will Elevate Your Cooking!

From Good (Enough) to **BADASS** Cook



By Kristi Smith of [Figs & Chèvre](#)

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Ingredients Matter!

I can think of no easier way to elevate your cooking status into domestic goddess territory than by making a few (painless!) ingredient upgrades. Seeking out ingredients that offer “true” flavor is key, as is avoiding those that do nothing to contribute to the quality or flavor of the end dish.

Like you, my food budget isn’t unlimited, and I can’t always buy grass-fed beef, organic bell peppers, and \$9 pints of gelato. But, there are certain corners I’m unwilling to cut because the end dish fails to meet my standards when I do. It’s this attitude that really does elevate one’s cooking into the ethereal domain. Become an ingredient snob and elevate YOUR cooking into sublimeness.

It’s not about buying organic...

...except when it is about buying organic.

It’s about embracing that unbridled passion for excellence.

You can’t make an outstanding dish from mediocre ingredients.
Period.



15 Ingredient Upgrades Worth Making

Instead of this...	...buy this!
ultra pasteurized heavy cream	pasteurized heavy cream
out-of-season tomatoes	campari tomatoes
iodized table salt and pre-ground pepper	premium salt & freshly cracked pepper
olive oil that is odorless and tasteless	extra virgin olive oil that is flavorful
all other parmesan cheeses	Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese
chain grocery store "artisan" bread	authentic, well-made artisan bread
instant or "white" rice	basmati or jasmine rice
meat that doesn't knock your socks off	quality meats
their non-organic counterparts	organic berries, apples, broccoli, bell peppers, and potatoes
limp, dried-out, or otherwise sad-looking produce	produce that appears to be fresh, crisp, and full of vitality
mass market chocolate	premium chocolate
prepared foods that have chemicals, stabilizers, thickeners, "flavors" (even "natural"), and colors	prepared foods devoid of weird ingredients
jarred, roasted nuts	fresh, raw nuts
farmed salmon	wild salmon
cheap or mass market eggs from "cage-free" chickens	fresh eggs from truly "cage-free" eggs



Here's Why

1. **Ditch the ultra-pasteurized heavy cream shit**, as it has a cooked, bland flavor that provides little more than richness to a dish. Simple pasteurized heavy cream isn't quite as easy to find, but it's seriously worth the effort to locate if you want to make an exceptional dish or dessert garnish. It has a shorter shelf life (which is often a lot longer than the sell-by date), and boasts a noticeably superior flavor. Try to find a variety that doesn't have added ingredients like stabilizers.
Recommended brand: Organic Valley
2. **Campari tomatoes are typically far more flavorful than other out-of-season tomatoes (which typically taste like tart cardboard)**. Unless your tomatoes of choice are seasonal and perfectly ripe, go with camparis. An added bonus is that even the non-organic versions are often low in pesticide residues. Yay!
Recommended brand: just about all of them
3. **Premium salt and freshly cracked pepper lend superior flavor to a dish.** I know it sounds crazy that something as simple as swapping out iodized salt for that pink Himalayan stuff can really elevate a dish into the sublime category, but I swear that it does! *Recommended brands (salt): [Real Salt*](#), [Pink Himalayan Salt*](#)*
4. **There is extra virgin olive oil, and then there is extra virgin olive oil. Buy the latter.** High-quality EVOO that tastes "green", peppery, or buttery can really affect the subtleties of a dish in some amazing ways. (Hint: you may have trouble finding this at a grocery store chain at a reasonable price, but Whole Foods, World Market, and Costco all carry excellent options that won't break the bank). *Recommended brands: [Kirkland Tuscan Extra Virgin Olive Oil](#), [Napa Valley Naturals*](#), [365 \(Italian\)](#)*
5. If you are reading this, I probably don't have to tell you that the green cylinder of grated parmesan is a no-no. But, **if you haven't yet tried Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, you are seriously missing out.** Yes, it's pretty expensive if you buy it at Whole Foods or a chain grocery store, but Costco offers it at stupidly great prices. I have tried many a parmesan cheese, and not a single one can hold a candle next to the strictly regulated Parmigiano-Reggiano. *Recommended brands: [Kirkland](#), [Amazon*](#)*
6. **Artisan bread that's properly scored and in possession of a very deep golden hue sends a signal about its baker, namely that he(he) is a domestic god(dess).** I'm not kidding! A properly scored loaf is indicative of a perfectly fermented/proofed loaf, which is rare to find, and which either reflects a deep knowledge about the fermentation process or magical forces. It's this fermentation that builds remarkable flavor. *Recommended sources: [your seriously awesome local artisan bakery \(hopefully - quality can be hit or miss\)](#), [your own!](#) (see [my post on making the perfect ciabatta](#))*
7. **Basmati and jasmine rice possess subtle but distinct undertones that are intoxicating** - nuttiness for the former, and floral notes for the latter. Plus, they

are ridiculously easy to cook properly! Bring 1 ½ cups water and a pinch of salt to a boil, add a cup of rice, cover, reduce heat to the lowest possible setting, and cook - no peeking! - for 15 minutes. Turn off the heat, and let sit undisturbed for another five. That's it. Toss out that "instant" crap, as it tastes like nothing and takes just as much effort to make as the good stuff. *Recommended brand: [Mahatma](#)**

8. **Quality meats are king! Aside from not supporting an industry that's as screwed up as industrial animal husbandry, I swear that the massaged, happy shit tastes better.** A LOT better. Price doesn't necessarily translate into better quality, but you aren't going to get quality meats at bargain prices. Instead of buying crap beef more frequently, why not replace some of it with quality chicken, and splurge a bit more on high quality beef as a special treat? My personal favorite is pasture raised and finished beef - especially the ribeye cut (check out my recipe for [The Most Badass MoFo Ribeye Steak](#)), but I'll also sometimes swing by the meat counter at a great premium grocery and snag a hormone-free ribeye instead. Not all meat counters are created equal, though - even premium local groceries - so some trial and error may be required. *Recommended sources: [Whole Foods \(level 4\)](#), [your local trusted butcher](#)*
9. **Produce - know when organic matters and when it doesn't really.** Here's the thing - organic produce usually costs more (duh!) and sometimes it costs a LOT more. Pesticides and GMOs are a serious issue, too, and there are some things that I simply almost never buy unless they're organic. I've worked in the organic grocery industry for five years, and I've learned a thing or two about what really matters from both a pesticide consumption standpoint and in terms of superior flavor. At least from my own perspective and based on my personal tastes and preferences. The following are the standards that I adhere to when choosing between organic and non-organic produce. Items that I have found to be more flavorful when organic (and ripe) are bolded:
 - a. Produce I almost never buy unless it's organic: **strawberries**, raspberries, blueberries, **apples**, broccoli, potatoes, ginger, **bell peppers**, **tomatoes** (other than campari), corn, fresh herbs, celery
 - b. Produce I buy solely based on freshness: asparagus, fruits that will be peeled, onions, garlic, mushrooms, campari tomatoes, winter squash, lettuces and chicories
 - c. Produce I prefer to buy organic but have been known to cave without much difficulty: zucchini, greens, sweet potatoes, green beans, cucumbers (I peel them if they aren't organic), carrots
10. **Only the freshest produce makes its way into my basket.** I'm seriously amazed at how many people will just pick up a bunch of dried out, wilted asparagus and toss it into their carts without giving it a moment's thought! Or, people who don't check to see if their bag of mixed salad greens has decomposing leaves. Eew! You

can freshen up some produce with cold water submersion techniques, but often sad-looking produce is beyond help. Just be mindful when you choose your produce - touch it, inhale its scent, examine its leaves...and buy only what is truly fresh. It makes a huge difference! Check out this [third party link](#) on choosing fresh produce like a pro. *Recommended sources: your local farmer's market (arrive early!), high-end grocers*

11. **Get the best chocolate you can afford. Chocolate is like wine in that you can get some great stuff without breaking the bank, but it may take some trial and error.** Great chocolate has an intense but not overly bitter flavor, it has a smooth mouthfeel (this comes a process called conching), and it's not adulterated with intense flavoring agents. I spend roughly \$1-\$1.50/ounce, and the chocolate I buy falls somewhere in the 71% to 90% range. This holds true for both the chocolate that I eat straight up, and the chocolate I use in baking. Oh, and I'm currently obsessed with Equal Exchange's 88% Extreme Dark Bar for its super intense chocolate flavor that has the most wonderful hint of bitterness. *Recommended brands: [Equal Exchange*](#) (my current obsession), [Guittard*](#), [Valrhona](#)*
12. **On those occasions when you must use prepared foods, a great rule of thumb is to avoid those that contain ingredients you wouldn't use if you were to make the same food yourself.** Examples of ingredients I avoid in prepared foods include soy and most other oils (except for extra virgin olive, coconut, or palm oil); corn syrup and high fructose corn syrup; thickeners, stabilizers, and gums (I make an exception when it comes to coconut milk); chemical preservatives; "flavors" - even "natural" or "organic" flavors; and colors (why add color?!). *Recommended sources: organic grocers (although you will still have to read labels, they tend to not stock the obvious offenders)*
13. Roasted nuts are brittle, often rancid, and have added ingredients that do little more than hide the rancidity. **Fresh nuts that are stored well are moist, pliable (depending on the variety), and taste nothing like the crap that comes in cans.** It's simple to roast nuts in an oven or to toast them on the stove top. You can accomplish the latter by laying them in a single layer in a skillet set over a medium-low flame. Pay very close attention so that they don't burn. Once you notice a hint of their fragrance being released, flip them over and toast for up to another couple of minutes. I like to lay them all on the same side so that it's easy to see which nuts still need to be flipped. Note that I just use my fingers to flip them, which isn't very wise but which hasn't fried off my fingers yet. Yum! Buy only the quantity of nuts that you will use in, say, a month, as they lose their moisture quickly. *Recommended sources: Costco (if you can eat 2 lbs in short order), Whole Foods, your local organic grocer (check the bulk bins)*
14. When it comes to choosing salmon, farmed salmon NEVER makes the cut. **Seriously, do you know what they feed farmed salmon?!** Plus, one of the reasons I reach for salmon is for the omega-3s, which wild salmon purportedly

has far more of. Trader Joe's sells frozen wild caught salmon for as little as \$7.99 lb where I live, and it thaws well. Just sayin'. *Recommended sources: Trader Joe's, [Amazon](#)**

15. Finally, for dishes where eggs have a heightened degree of importance, the difference between a “meh” dish and a “WOWZERS!” one boils down to the chosen egg. **Eggs should (usually) be super fresh and come from chickens that have the opportunity to hunt and peck for insects and all that jazz.** Delightful, yes, but that's what yields those stunning orange nutrient-dense yolks! It's pretty tough to find eggs like this unless you homestead or buy them from your local farmer, but if you can locate such a source, it would behoove you to take advantage of it. You will probably pay a premium for these eggs, and it's an investment well made. For things like cakes, though, I wouldn't worry about using \$6/dozen eggs. *Recommended sources: farmers' markets, locally produced (not a sure thing)*

I hope that this guide to upgrading your ingredients has provided you with some new takeaways that will help elevate your cooking to the next level! An awareness about the subtleties that make a good ingredient great combined with an unrelenting refusal to use anything but the best makes it easy to create simple, delectable meals that exude vibrant flavor. I've been passionate about ingredients since 1998, and this passion is by far the single most important item in my cooking arsenal. Thanks for stopping by!

If you'd like to leave me feedback or suggestions, you can contact me [here](#).

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