

# Chef school

Keeping (and using)  
a European pantry

The line between heating up food and cooking really isn't that fine. However, if you're intimidated by the idea of preparing a gourmet meal, take a few tips on how to pose as a chef. Here are a few items to keep on hand for that nosy date who snoops through the cabinets before you head out to yet another restaurant.

By Candace Leigh

## Salt

### What is it?

*Fleur de Sel* is considered the premier choice. It's made up of the crystals that form naturally on the surface of salt evaporation ponds in the Brittany region of France and are hand-harvested. Grey salt is a popular moist, unrefined sea salt whose color comes from the clay in the salt flats. Kosher salt contains fewer additives and tastes more "salty" than table salt.

### How is it used?

*Fleur de Sel* complements salads and cooked meats and vegetables. Grey salt is the current culinary darling, often considered "the best." Flaky, kosher salt is perfect for margarita rims and hot pretzels. For dry grinder salts, use a mill with a plastic or ceramic wheel, as metal will adversely affect flavor.

## Extra-virgin olive oil

### What is it?

Olives are harvested, washed, and crushed into a paste before a cold-press assists in oil extraction. The oil is decanted into tanks for bottling. Black truffle olive oil is particularly pungent and expensive, so use sparingly.

### How is it used?

Keep oil and vinegar both in a cool place, out of direct sunlight. Dark bottles help with this. Pair with salads, breads, or steamed vegetables. Porcini-infused oil works perfectly with steaks, pasta, and risotto.

## Black peppercorns

### What are they?

The finest peppercorns are hand-picked when red, and sun-dried until black. Some of the best are from the mountaintops of Madagascar. Very aromatic, they should bring out the best of whatever you're cooking without masking the flavor.

### How is it used?

Buy whole and grind with a brass peppermill. Use with abandon!

## Balsamic vinegar

### What is it?

After grapes are harvested for wine, the "must" is run off, but not allowed to ferment. It is filtered, boiled, and cooled and, in quality brands, waits in casks for 25 years.

### How is it used?

Intended as a syrupy condiment, it's best drizzled over artisan cheeses, berries, or ice cream.

## Bouquet garni

### What is it?

A French term meaning "bundle of herbs," the bouquet garni is a blend of herbs and spices in a fine cloth, tied with a piece of string. Though there are many variations, fresh parsley, thyme, and bay leaf make up a basic traditional mix. Oregano, marjoram, and rosemary are often common ingredients. It may also be sold dried as Herbes de Provence in either little cloth bags or terra cotta pots.

### How is it used?

Add to any stew, soup, sauce or casserole. Also, as a complement to hot vegetable and meat dishes or even hot desserts. Steep in olive oil for aroma. Infuse to create a more complex flavor.

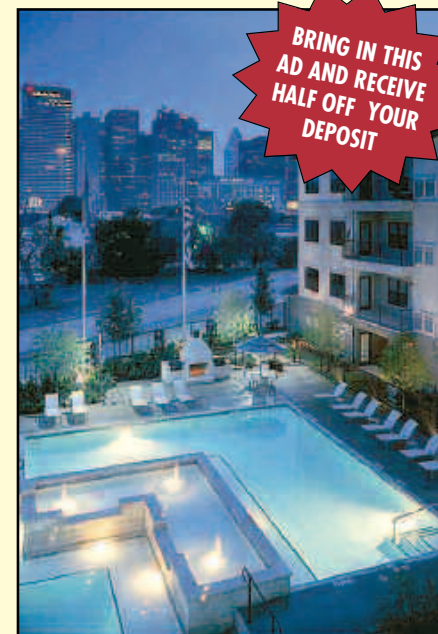


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