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Must-Know Basics for Serious Foodies

By Lou Fancher



Photo provided

Culinary secrets unfold into science lessons in the pages of author J. Kenji Lopez-Alt's 960-page doorstop of a cookbook, "The Food Lab: Better Home Cooking Through Science" (W. W. Norton & Company, 2015). The Serious Eats managing culinary director balances must-know basics including tips for the perfect boiled egg and properly toasted bagels with a bicep-building pancake technique (baking soda is vital), 20 pages of Thanksgiving-related instructions, over 1,000 full-color images, 39 pasta recipes, eight pages on making chicken stock (unflavored gelatin is key) and easy-to-read explanations of radiant heat transfer, the anatomy of a knife, the chemical makeup of meat and why a burger's "smash time" matters - and more.

For kitchen fanatics, the best-selling book by the author of the James Beard Award-nominated

column "The Food Lab," is exhaustive. But even those less inclined to ooh and ah over conversations about meat moisture or engage in fresh versus dry oregano debates can experience the thrill of discovering there is a scientific reason Granny's roast beef was five star-worthy or Uncle Joe's meatloaf had that extra zing.

Lamorinda's love for all things food was evident Oct. 22, as approximately 100 people attended a Commonwealth Club appearance at the Lafayette Library by Lopez-Alt. Moderator Joanna Pearlstein, deputy managing editor for Wired, said Lopez-Alt was a like a superhero for "geeks" who like to cook. Seeking wisdom, she first asked about the most common mistakes made by cooks.

Lopez-Alt said the one rule that should never be violated is to "respect the person with the knife in their hand," setting a casual, fun tone for the evening. Sounding more like two friends chatting over brisket and beer than like highly respected writers and experienced cooks (Pearlstein shared that she's been perfecting a chocolate chip cookie recipe for years and has no intention of stopping), the conversation moved swiftly to searing, salt, brining and more.

The words from the master?

Searing meat incorrectly will not bring out the juices: don't try to bring the meat to room temperature and start out with a dryer steak for faster searing and a moister steak in the end. "Salt is one of the most important ingredients in dishes," Lopez-Alt said. "It enhances the way you perceive other flavors." Chemical properties in salt draw moisture out of meat by osmosis so timing is crucial for forming a brine on the surface. With poultry, salt allowed to relax the muscle fibers by seasoning the bird and letting it sit, then evaporate and cook when dry, again results in the most desirable texture.

Lopez-Alt uses three kinds of salt in cooking: Kosher salt that is coarse enough to pick up with his fingers for 99 percent of the food he prepares; large-flake finishing salt for adding crunchiness; and popcorn salt. He said for regular table salt, Morton is OK.

Talk soon turned to eggs, with Lopez-Alt describing "blind egg" research he had conducted. After people peeled "hundreds of eggs" prepared with slightly different methods, he said the best results depended on the starting temperature of the water. Cold to warm makes the shell adhere to the egg, but starting the eggs in boiling water, adding a little ice 30 seconds into the boiling, and cooking at a simmer for 11-12 minutes before shocking them with ice water is best.

A proponent of low-water volume pasta cooking (scoring a hit during California's four-year drought), he said the best time to go to an Italian restaurant is late at night. The cooks reuse the pasta water and this raises the starch content of the pasta.

Newbies in the kitchen benefit most from learning knife skills. "If you can't cut well, you can't cook evenly," he said. And training your tongue to recognize savory, salty, acidic, sweetness, heat intensity and the right amount of seasoning requires constant tasting while cooking. Essential tools other than good knives include cast iron pans and an accurate meat thermometer. Advice others give to "poke your cheek then poke your meat and if they feel the same it's medium rare," had him saying, "Everyone's cheeks are different. How do you know yours are medium rare?"

With Thanksgiving Day just one month away, Lopez-Alt said toss the roasting pan; the part of the turkey you want to cook the slowest receives excess heat from being close to the pan edges. Instead, ask the butcher to "hack out the back," salt under the skin two days prior to cooking and spread the turkey out on its breast in a flat pan to bake it. He admitted, you must not mind "your turkey looking like a porn star." For those who object and prefer a Norman Rockwell turkey, there is a solution. A turkey's fast and slow twitch muscle fibers create two temperature zones: placing a preheated baking stone under the turkey he said will allow both light and dark meat to cook at different rates and retain their moisture.

Of course there was more information - including that at one point his manuscript "meatballed" into a 1,600-page book before it was trimmed to just under 1,000 pages. Lopez-Alt's next book will include material cut from his first book, mostly things you can eat with your hands including burgers and tacos. Book three will be a vegetarian cookbook.

Another Food Lit Event at LLLC Dec. 3

Join chef, cooking instructor and television host and author Joanne Weir, in conversation with Chef Gary Danko, as she takes a trip down culinary memory lane, sharing stories from her days cooking with Alice Waters at Chez Panisse, traveling and teaching throughout Europe and becoming the California chef she is today from 6:30 to 8:15 p.m. Thursday, Dec. 3 at the Lafayette Library and Learning Center. For information, visit <http://www.lllcf.org/calendar/consortium.html>. Tickets are \$15 - \$25 at www.commonwealthclub.org.

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