



## Misty's View of Cooking: Magical Organization

### all similar tasks at the same time.

After your trip to the farmers' market or grocery store, bring in all your purchases to an immaculate kitchen with clear, pristine counters. Unpack each item and store the bags. Congregate all ingredient items before you and "triage them" for immediate attention.

The meat that will be cooked later, goes into the fridge, but the

this task. That means that all the trimmings have gone into your compost, all non-compost-friendly products are in the garbage, and your kitchen is once again immaculate with pristine, clear counters. Peelings, grocery bags, tags, elastics and flyers from the store create clutter in your work space and threaten to enter one of your dishes. Oust them away!

Most cooking mistakes happen because too many extraneous activities are happening at the crucial moments when food evolves into cuisine. A good friend of mine, a chef instructor in Halton, once told me that **cooking is nothing more than damage control**. If you do everything possible to prevent disaster you will produce credible food products. Focus on the task immediately at hand, carefully watch what you are doing and nothing will ever get burnt!

Be honest. How many times have you peeled a clove of garlic, left the peelings on your cutting board, chopped the garlic beside the skins, placed the garlic in a hot pan with oil, and then looked into your cookbook for the next step?

While you were reading, even for a moment you protest, your garlic turned mahogany and your smoke detector started to scream. I've been there too...but that was when I was still doing too many things at once and in an ad hoc manner.

I have a confession to make. I am not a culinary magician. Sure, I can cook for 75 people with little notice, but the titles of wizard, guru, and heroine that friends, family and clients often attach to my name are not well founded. This ability is no mystery, it comes from a little concept that the French developed called *mise-en-place* (pronounced meez-on-plaasuh).

Here is its big secret: in a word – organization. Period. To illustrate its power, imagine for a moment, what a shoe factory might look like if each pair of Nikes were made from scratch beside the production involved in making jewel-encrusted mules with pink satin heels. Does the image of chaos come to mind?

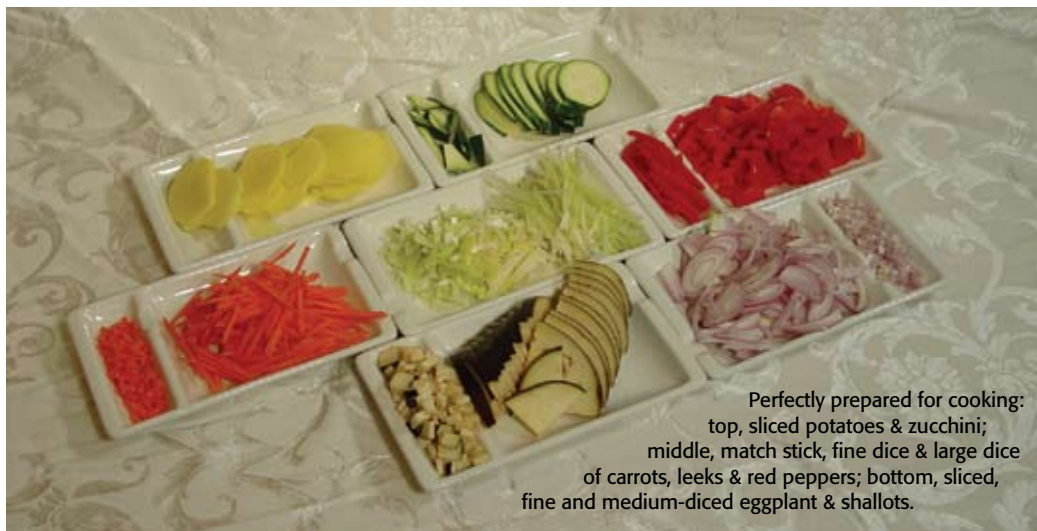
In my early days of culinary apprenticeship this same picture could easily describe my attempts to get 15 menu items ready for the pre-theatre rush! Echoes of expletives hurled by my chef in broken English and fluent Hungarian, along with the odd dish or pan, resonate in my mind even today at the memory of it. For you, however, cooking might only mean complaints about your mess that stretches beyond the counter space in your kitchen.

Unfair as it may seem to you, the person trying to cook and feed the masses, leaving a trail of disaster behind may only result in criticism from your ungrateful, now-fed diners. Magical *mise-en-place* will transform you into an appreciated artist and your kitchen into a garret of inspiration.

Here is a simple way to approach the production of cooking. When preparing a dinner party, **do**



Food prep results in plenty of scraps that should be immediately tidied away for compost.



Perfectly prepared for cooking: top, sliced potatoes & zucchini; middle, match stick, fine dice & large dice of carrots, leeks & red peppers; bottom, sliced, fine and medium-diced eggplant & shallots.

onions, garlic, shallots and carrots get first attention. Remember that they are your flavour building blocks.

Here's a tip. All pre-preparation jobs can be done well before you stress about your guests' imminent arrival. Anything that needs to be trimmed, shucked, peeled, washed, soaked or have its labels removed, should be handled in **one focused session of activity**.

Afterwards there should be **no evidence** of your having worked at

All of your first-level *mise-en-place* items should then be contained in appropriate-sized vessels and stored in your refrigerator. The next time you approach the task of creating your dish or menu, even if it is only five minutes later, you will be faced with **un-dressed ingredients** awaiting your attention. And if you're a novice cook they will need to be just that – ready and able to easily give up their flavours and textures to you.

If you approach cooking in small, controlled stages, prepare your products in a logical sequence, and leave no evidence of each level of preparation, you will soon be able to create reliable dishes that cause your family and guests to wonder **how you did it all**. Was it magic? You know the answer.

*Misty Ingraham is a chef and co-owner of the catering business The Portable Feast at Home, in Ancaster.*

PHOTOS: MIKE DAVIS