

I know it sounds like a lot, but trust me, it's actually intuitive, especially once you become familiar with several Thai dishes. It's second nature for most Thais, and every time I'm with friends and family in Thailand ordering food at a restaurant, it's an interesting dynamic to observe. It starts with a couple of people ordering something based on their wants, and from that point on, you can see the wheels turning for everyone else, using those first dishes as a base for ordering the rest of the meal. I don't think most people even realize that's what they're doing, but it becomes clear that balance is on everyone's minds when you hear people veto suggestions with "Too many soupy things already" or "We already have two deep-fried dishes." One point that's often brought up when my friends and I order food is "We don't have any vegetables yet." Seems like we often forget about vegetables when faced with tantalizing meat and seafood options!

Tips for Fast and Efficient Cooking

If you want to cook *sabai-sabai* on a weeknight, you'll need to be efficient in the kitchen so that cooking the dishes don't end up being more time-consuming than necessary. Here are some tips:

Make Your Own Meal Kits

If you're not yet proficient with cooking Thai food, it may take you a bit longer, as you will still need to read recipes and don't yet have the muscle memory for the dishes. On the weekend or whenever you have time, you can do a lot of advance prep to cut down on the amount of time it takes on the day-of. Here are a few things you can do:

MAKE THE SAUCES. There are very few sauces I can think of that will not last in your fridge for at least 1 week and usually much longer. Curry sauces, stir-fry sauces, and dips can all be made in advance, then you can add meat and vegetables on the day-of. You can make curry sauces in bulk

and freeze them in portions, and sauces or dressings that contain salty ingredients, like fish sauce and soy sauce, will last a long time in the fridge. But if anything contains lime juice, save the lime juice for adding on the day you're serving the dish, as it tastes best when freshly squeezed.

MAKE THE WHOLE DISH. Can the whole thing be done in advance and just reheated? Curries, soups, and stews are all great for this and will taste even better the next day. Just be sure to save fresh herbs, delicate vegetables, fresh lime juice, and anything that can easily overcook for when you reheat before serving.

CHOP STURDY VEGETABLES. Chopped non-leafy, sturdy veg like carrots, bell peppers, and cauliflower will last in the fridge for up to 1 week.

CUT MEAT. If your meat is fresh, you can cut it into pieces 1 to 2 days in advance and keep it in the fridge, but seafood should be cooked as fresh as possible.

Bulk Process

Some ingredients need the same thing done to them every time, and instead of doing this a little at a time, do it all at once. Here are some examples specific to Thai cooking:

CHOP PALM SUGAR. Chopping palm sugar a few tablespoons at a time as you need it is one of the most annoying things, especially because you need to do it on a clean board, since you may have to put half of the puck back in the cupboard. Chop a bunch at once, then keep it in an airtight container. Fresh palm sugar is softer and easier to chop than when it is old and dried out, anyway.

TOAST SPICES. You can toast any whole spice, but coriander and cumin seeds in particular benefit from toasting, and they are the ones used most often in Thai cooking. Toasting them will help the aroma come out more fully, but trust me, you don't want to toast them a teaspoon at a

time! Toast them all at once, and keep in an airtight jar in a cool, dry place. And on that note, never pre-grind coriander seeds, as they do not maintain their aroma well. I use whole spices whenever I can.

TOAST RICE. If you want to regularly prepare Thai recipes that use toasted rice powder, such as laab ([this page](#)) or BBQ chicken with *nam jim jeaw* ([this page](#)), you can toast the rice in advance, but do not grind it. Toasted rice will maintain its aroma in an airtight container for at least 1 month, but once ground, it loses its aroma quickly. Toasting a large amount of rice can get a bit smoky, so make sure the kitchen is well ventilated. Keep pre-toasted rice in an airtight container in a cool, dry place or in the fridge.

TRANSFER OYSTER SAUCE TO A SQUEEZE BOTTLE. It is a royal pain to try to pour a measured amount of oyster sauce out of a glass bottle. Transferring it takes time, but at least you'll feel annoyed only once and it'll be a dream to use going forward. Make sure the oyster sauce is not cold when transferring or it will be even harder to pour. You can also do this with any other liquid ingredients that come in containers and are not easy to regulate when poured; I have vanilla extract, white vinegar, cooking oil, maple syrup, and a few other ingredients in squeeze bottles too.

MAKE TAMARIND PASTE IN BULK. Homemade tamarind paste is miles better than store-bought, and many people in Thailand make tamarind a little at a time every time they need some. But it's much more efficient to make it all at once, as it lasts a while in the fridge and can also be frozen, and you can even can it, for long-term room temperature storage. See [this page](#) for how to make tamarind paste.

PREWASH YOUR HERBS AND VEGETABLES. I know that when you're tired from grocery shopping, all you want to do is stuff the produce in the fridge and be done. But washing and drying your produce before you put it away means you don't have to do it each time you cook, and you don't have to deal with cutting wet vegetables. Not to mention that delicate herbs like

cilantro will last longer if you wash off dirt and surface bacteria before storing.

Is There Any Idle Cooking Time Involved?

Doing all the prep before you start can help keep things organized, and that certainly feels good, but it's not necessarily the most efficient thing to do. Before you prepare any recipe, read the instructions and see if there is any hands-off time. It might be 10 minutes of simmering, or 30 minutes of roasting. Then do only as much prep as needed to get to that stage, and use the idle time to prep for the rest of the dish. If cooking multiple dishes, these idle times are also golden opportunities to get another dish started. And if nothing else, clean.

Plan Your Chopping

One of the things that adds unnecessary time to cooking is having to wash and dry your knife and cutting board in between chopping certain ingredients. So if there are a bunch of items to chop that don't need to be cut in any specific order, I try to start with those that will leave my board the cleanest, so that I can move on to the next one without having to wash it or the knife.

Scraps Bowl on the Counter

"No idle moment, no wasted movement" was one thing I learned when working under pressure in professional kitchens. If you have to move or, heaven forbid, open the cabinet door to get to your compost or garbage bin, your prep session isn't as efficient as it might be. I keep a bowl handy on the counter, next to my cutting board, so I don't have to take even one step just to throw something away. Think about other inefficiencies in your kitchen: What else can you do to minimize movement when you cook?