Boiling Pointers

Five tips for cooks who are positive they've never cooked before

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So after a lifetime of restaurant rot, you've finally realized that essential nutrition begins at home. But like many who start cooking only after their HIV diagnosis, you wouldn't know Julia Child from Julia Roberts. Start with these simple tips from an HIV long-timer. They may seem obvious, but then again, you thought you knew how to turn on the oven.

1. Always heat the pan before you sauté any food. And make sure the oil is hot before adding ingredients: Cold oil will seep into veggies or meat and make them soggy.

2. Don't overbrown garlic. If you do overcook it, toss it and start over. Burned garlic is bitter and can spoil a dish. When sautéing garlic with onions, avoid burning by adding it after the onions have begun to wilt.

3. Perk up almost any dish with a little chopped, fresh parsley or cilantro (snip it with kitchen scissors). A squeeze of fresh lemon or lime refreshes, too—get more juice by rolling the fruit with your hand on the counter first.

4. Buy precut veggies from a salad bar to cut down preparation time. Be creative with substitutions to keep dishes from loading up calories and fats: Use low-fat yogurt instead of sour cream or buttermilk, for example.

5. Tackle just one new dish per meal, wear comfortable shoes and crank up the music while you cook. Even if you're cooking for one (i.e., you), set a scrumptious table with fresh flowers or a bright place mat and napkin. You won't just eat—you'll dine.

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