

For Healthy and Delicious Meals, Four is the Magic Number

Adapting Samin Nosrat's "Salt, Fat, Acid Heat" rubric to healthy cooking

By Melanie Peters | October 31, 2019

Samin Nosrat's beautifully rendered Netflix documentary *Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat* and her cookbook of the same name centers upon this simple premise: To cook well, you need only understand and use these four elements. From the simple to the sublime, she writes, "[master these four elements, master the kitchen. ↗](#)"

This approach to cooking is elegant and revelatory, especially for those who may feel intimidated by complicated recipes or cooking in general. If something doesn't taste right, then maybe you just need to add soy or Worcestershire sauce ("Salt"), a pat of butter ("Fat") or a hit of lemon ("Acid"). If something is cooking too quickly or not quickly enough, maybe you need only move a pan from one oven rack to another or turn the burner flame up or down ("Heat").

Of course, this won't make you an expert out of the gate, but Nosrat posits that if you pay attention to the interplay of these four elements, you're well on your way to becoming more comfortable with cooking.

Mastering Nosrat's elements is one thing, but for those with dietary restrictions, watching her liberally (in some cases, very liberally) apply salt to a hefty steak might confuse the issue of cooking well with healthy cooking. What if you have high-blood pressure or are at risk for cardiovascular disease and need to limit sodium intake (Salt)? What if you're trying to decrease your risk for stroke or diabetes through weight-loss (Fat)? How do you navigate these two important parts of the big four?

First, let's talk salt. Why do we need sodium? Sodium controls blood pressure, maintains hydration and helps our nerves and muscles function properly. A deficiency of sodium can cause headaches, nausea, muscle spasms and, in extreme cases, death. Too much sodium in the diet, however, can lead to high blood pressure, kidney disease and congestive heart failure. Controlling intake is important to maintaining the balance between what our bodies need and what can be harmful to our health.



While many foods naturally contain sodium, such as milk, green leafy vegetables and some beans, the majority of our sodium intake comes from sodium chloride,

aka table salt, and salt added to processed foods, such as lunch meats, canned soups and other prepared foods. What makes controlling our sodium intake difficult is that the majority of sodium we consume has already been added to our food well before we reach for the salt shaker.

According to the American Heart Association, more than 75 percent of the sodium in the average American diet comes from salt added to processed foods. Too much sodium, according to current dietary guidelines, is anything more than the equivalent of one teaspoon (2,300 milligrams) of salt per day.

How to maintain a healthy balance? The best way to avoid too much salt intake is to eat foods already low in naturally occurring sodium, like fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, lean meats and low-fat dairy products, and to limit your intake of processed and prepared foods. Preparing your own meals and learning to cook with a [variety of spices](#) will allow you to control the amount of salt in your food.

Now, let's tackle fat. As with salt, our bodies need fat to function. We derive energy from fat. It helps us maintain body temperature, insulating us from cold. It provides protection for our internal organs. And fat aids absorption of vital nutrients, such as vitamins A, D, E and K.

There are two kinds of fat: Dietary fat, which is found in some plants (like nuts and avocados) and in animal tissues and stored fat, which our bodies make from excess calorie consumption.

For many years, the rule of thumb for losing weight and limiting risk for heart disease and stroke was to eat a low-fat diet, specifically, a diet low in saturated fats and cholesterol. In recent years, the thinking has become more nuanced. It's not a matter of eliminating all fats, but knowing



which fats are the better option and in what amounts.

When looking for healthy fats, think unsaturated. More specifically, think polyunsaturated, monounsaturated

and omega-3s. According to the CDC, the majority of our fat consumption should be from these unsaturated sources, in the form of foods like nuts, vegetable oils and fatty fish. Only 20 to 35 percent of your daily caloric intake should come from fat. That means limiting your consumption of red or processed meats, like bacon.

If you are worried about calcium and your main source of the nutrient is dairy consumption, which can be high in saturated fats, try incorporating more of these sources of naturally occurring calcium: kale, broccoli, [salmon](#) or [sardines](#).

Cooking can be intimidating. Healthy cooking even more so. When applying Nosrat's four elements to your cooking, think of these four guidelines to keep your meals healthy while making them delicious: eat mostly plant-based and whole foods, choose lean meats and fish, avoid added sugar and limit processed and prepared foods.

Here's a recipe that encapsulates all the ideas above and is sure to please a crowd:

Cauliflower Fried "Rice"

This spin on a Chinese take-out favorite from the Healthy Eating Program at Moores Cancer Center at UC San Diego Health uses chopped or “riced” cauliflower as its base. It’s a great way to get in your required daily vegetable servings and the perfect accompaniment to your favorite lean protein. Full recipe at health.ucsd.edu/news/features/Pages/2017-03-03-recipe-DASH-and-dine
