



Taking stock

Your guide to the perfect pantry

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Taking stock

To fill the pantry cleverly you just need to add some inspiration, writes **Natascha Mirosh**

A COOK'S secret weapon lies not with a favourite recipe book or kitchen implement, but in imagination and a well-stocked pantry. Fill the pantry cleverly and you're on the way to not only more efficient cooking but more money in your pocket.

In the time it takes to grab a takeaway you can make a meal from scratch that not only costs less but tastes better and is probably better for you.

A well-stocked pantry also means that you always have something on hand for last-minute meals.

"The combination of a well-stocked pantry, fresh food in the fridge and freezer means you can cook a great variety of interesting meals — for everyday meals, special occasions and also for those unexpected guests. You just need to add some inspiration," says Tonya Jennings, who owns On the Ridge Cooking School in the Sunshine Coast hinterland.

Pasta and noodles are two of Jennings' top pantry ingredients and while she makes her own, she suggests having a good variety of different shapes and sizes for all occasions.

"By using a good quality packet pasta, making an easy tomato sauce and adding a variety of pantry staples such as chilli or tinned tuna or from the fridge perhaps some ham, mushroom or chorizo you can have a gourmet meal in minutes."

Jacki Passmore, who teaches at South Brisbane's Executive Chef, also nominates pasta, along with rice, as her top pantry staple and she says we needn't buy top of the range.

"Most pasta is pretty good quality, even the cheaper pasta these days because our flour is so good. It's best to have a selection of short pasta such as macaroni or penne with longer ones such as fettuccini and spaghetti."

Canned tomatoes are another essential in her pantry. "Tinned tomatoes are so versatile. I get both whole and crushed. I tend to use the crushed ones for sauces, and the whole ones in things like casseroles that I like to have a bit more texture."

Different flours are a must for baking and, if you're so inclined, breadmaking. Not only do you get to experience the joys of freshly baked bread but making your own is good for the budget.

Coconut milk is also nominated by Jennings and Passmore as a valuable pantry addition. Passmore uses it in sweet and savoury dishes.

"I use it in curries and cook rice in it for a delicious coconut rice, but also use it with a sweetener and make a rice pudding, use it in place of cream in desserts or even just over ice cream," she says

Stock, the basis of soup and risotto or to add flavour to casseroles, is another pantry must-have. Jennings keeps chicken, beef and vegetable stock powders or tetra packs while Passmore prefers the liquid tetra packs as she finds them less salty. She also uses dashi stock, a Japanese seaweed-based stock. "It's great for rice or anything fishy," she says.

She recommends buying Asian condiments and rice from Asian or wholesale stores where the same brands are often cheaper than in the supermarket.

Other condiments such as grain mustard, when mixed with olive oil and lemon juice or oil and balsamic vinegar are handy to make salad dressing.

While it's OK to save on some pantry items, there are some staples such as olive oil that you should spend more on. Good quality olives that can be served on an antipasto plate and tinned fish are a case in point.

"I don't get the tinned anchovies any more, as I've found them a bit mushy. The ones in jars are better," Jennings says.

Along with tuna and anchovies, salmon is another Passmore pantry staple. "I got caught out the other day when someone dropped in and was able to whip up a salmon dip with some tinned salmon, sour cream and capers which was very easy and delicious."

She recommends red salmon, but, if on a budget, the pink is fine she says.

"Tuna is also a good thing to keep on hand; it's great with a simple pasta, a salad or a tuna bake."

To minimise waste it's important to keep an eye on what needs restocking and to creatively use up the ingredients you may have too much of before their expiry date.

"Make sure your pantry is regularly refilled with those ingredients used all the time. Keep a shopping list going to help remember those staples which need to be replaced. Follow the FIFO principle of stocking pantries — first in first out — make sure you organise the pantry so you know the use-by dates of your purchases. Place the newer purchased behind the older ones," Jennings says.

Some pantry staples can be kept for longer or bought in larger amounts to save money, such as flour. Others, like spices,

ON hand ...
Tonya Jennings, above, and, top right, Jacki Passmore display their wares and an organised pantry, far right.

Pictures:
Kevin Bull

should be bought in smaller amounts as they tend to lose their flavour after six months.

"Store them in really good airtight jars," Passmore says. "Don't let them sit open while you're using them and keep them dry. I use those little silica packs you get in shoes or bags in the jars with the packets to keep them dry."

Investing in a spice grinder and buying spices whole rather than ready powdered also helps them keep their flavour, she says.

As to which spices, it depends on the pantry owner, but Passmore nominates coriander seeds, cumin and turmeric, cloves,

cardamom, cinnamon and nutmeg (whole if possible).

"My pantry always has dried chilli flakes and whole peppercorns."

Pulses such as chickpeas (perfect for whipping up hummus), white beans and lentils are also good fallbacks. Couscous, cooked with the addition of boiling water then fluffing up with a fork, is the ultimate fast food. Served cold in a salad, or hot as a bed for lamb or a Moroccan-style meat casserole. Polenta, too, is no more than a few dollars, but can be used in infinite ways — use it instead of crumbs on chicken, cook it with a little parmesan for an alternative to potatoes, or, Passmore

suggests, use in cakes and puddings in place of flour.

Fairly new to our pantry, but fast becoming essentials are the Asian flavours of soy, fish sauce and sweet chilli sauce.

"Sweet chilli sauce is so versatile, you can use it for dips as it is for fried nibbles, or in other dishes to lift them like adding a bit to scrambled eggs," Passmore says.

The pantry of a couple of decades ago probably wouldn't have had curry pastes either, but whether Indian or Thai it does well to have at least a couple that, added to beef or chicken, can easily make a simple curry. Keep some pappadums and chutney in the pantry and you're sure to impress.



Pantry essentials

Flour: Plain and self-raising for baking and pasta making, cornflour for sauces

Sugar: Caster, icing and brown sugar. Palm sugar for Thai or Vietnamese

Pasta: A variety of shapes and sizes

Noodles: Rice and wheat in different sizes and shapes.

Rice: Basmati and jasmine for curries, medium grain for risottos and rice puddings

Grains: Couscous, lentils and polenta

Fish: Tuna, salmon, anchovies for salads, bakes and pasta dishes

Vegetables: Semi-dried tomatoes, artichoke hearts, roasted peppers and olives

Tinned Vegetables: Tomatoes, chickpeas, kidney beans, cannellini beans and sweetcorn

Dried Vegetables: Mushrooms, Chinese and (budget permitting) porcini

Oils and vinegars: Extra virgin olive oil, sesame oil, vegetable oil, balsamic vinegar, white wine and red wine vinegars

Herbs and spices, seeds and nuts: Sea salt, black peppercorns, chilli, cinnamon, coriander seeds, cumin, smoked paprika, nutmeg, sesame seeds, vanilla beans or extract

Jams/Preserves/Spreads: Marmalade, (great for glazing white meat), raspberry for desserts or biscuits, preserved lemons

Nuts: Almonds, pine and walnuts

Condiments: Dijon mustard and hot English; soy and sweet chilli, fish and oyster sauce

Curry pastes: Thai red and green and Indian

Milks: Tinned coconut milk, evaporated milk, condensed milk

Stock: Vegetable, beef and chicken



Pantry pasta with tomato and anchovies

Jacki Passmore

- Serves 4**
400g dried spaghetti or penne
Pinch salt
3 tbs olive oil
1 small onion, finely chopped
2-3 garlic cloves, chopped
6-8 anchovies
400g can diced or crushed tomatoes
3 tbs sliced black or stuffed green olives, or capers
3-4 tbs chopped herbs (parsley, basil, oregano)
Pinch black pepper
Shaved or grated parmesan cheese

Bring a large pot of water to the boil and cook spaghetti for about 10 minutes, or penne for 12 until it's al dente.

In the meantime, heat oil in a large pan and saute onion until lightly coloured. Add garlic and anchovies and saute, mashing the anchovies. Add tomato and simmer for 5-6 minutes. Stir in olives or capers and most of the herbs and season to taste with salt and pepper. With tongs or a slotted spoon transfer pasta to the sauce, with some of the pasta cooking water. Heat through, check seasoning and serve.

Finish with parmesan and remaining herbs.

Pantry condensed milk ice cream

Tonya Jennings

- Serves 8**
600ml cream
1 x 400ml tin sweetened condensed milk
2 tbs vanilla extract
2 tbs Tia Maria or Kahlua (optional)

Prepare the ice cream tray — line with foil and cling wrap for ease of use when un moulding. Whip cream and condensed milk with the vanilla extract and Tia Maria or Kahlua, if using, until thick.

Place in the ice cream tray and freeze. This will keep very well sealed and frozen for two weeks.