

Kitchen Cleanout

Whether you categorize your cooking skill level as “expert,” “competent” or “non-existent,” it’s easier to get down to the business of cooking in a well-equipped but uncluttered kitchen. Similarly, no matter how you feel about cooking, whether it’s a form of artistic expression or just one of a number of daily tasks, like brushing your teeth, cooking is more enjoyable when you’ve pared things down to your essentials.

Gameplan:

Spend 1-2 hours per day, or devote a larger chunk of time to getting it all done!

Supplies:

- Boxes or bags for sorting what to toss, donate, or store elsewhere, and possibly to sort keeper pantry foods by category (if you have a large well-stocked pantry) while you are reorganizing.
- A bucket, rags or sponges, and an eco-friendly kitchen cleanser (you will be cleaning your fridge and pantry as you clean it out).
- Music to listen to.
- Tea, coffee or another beverage that you enjoy.
- Optional: Mason jars with lids for pantry storage.

As you go through the cleanout, don’t let yourself fixate on “sunk costs.” Yes, it can be painful to part with “perfectly good” food and kitchen equipment, but if you aren’t using it, or it’s no longer edible, then it doesn’t matter what you paid for it. All you can do is resolve to be more thoughtful about what you buy going forward.



Three questions to ask yourself as you sort, toss and clean:

1. What kind of food do I enjoy and make regularly (i.e., specific cuisines, simple vs. gourmet?)
2. What kind of food can I expect to make this year (i.e., do you plan to experiment with more meatless meals, more fish instead of meat, more vegetables)?
3. Do I have the right tools and equipment for the job (i.e., have you noticed that you are missing certain things that would make cooking easier)?

Odds are you have most of what you need – but have a lot of things you don’t need. That’s what we want to cull from the herd! They are only dragging you down.

Step 1: The Freezer

Ruthlessly toss:

- Anything of indeterminate age or that you know has been in there for more than a year.
- Anything that is coated in ice crystals or has other signs of freezer burn.
- Anything else that you are pretty darn sure that you're not going to use.

When you put items back, group them together (nuts together, frozen fruit together, frozen veggies together, still-good leftovers together, meats/poultry/fish together).

Step 2: The Refrigerator

Ruthlessly toss:

- Any bottles and jars in the door shelves that are of indeterminate age.
- Any leftovers that have turned into science projects.
- Any rotting or badly yellowed produce.
- Anything else that you are pretty darn sure you're not going to use.

Make up a bucket of diluted cleansing solution using hot water and wipe down all surfaces. Ideally, you'll remove each shelf and drawer and wash them in the sink or bathtub.

Wipe down any jars that have a film or residue on them.

When everything is clean and dry, put the food back.

- Upper Shelves: Leftovers, drinks, and ready-to-eat foods (like yogurt, cheese, and deli meats).
- Lower Shelves: Ingredients slated for cooked dishes.
- Door: This is the warmest part of the fridge, so only put condiments there. Put eggs or milk in a colder part of the refrigerator.
- Drawers: Refrigerator drawers are designed to hold fruits and veggies at a specific humidity, but they're usually at the bottom of the fridge, so you risk contaminating fresh produce if you put raw meat on the shelf above. Here are a few ideas:
 - If you have three drawers, use the lowest drawer for meat. Clean the drawer you're using for meat often.
 - Only two drawers? Improvise your own meat drawer by using a clear plastic bin that will catch any accidental drips and keep the meat safely away from everything else.

Step 3: The Pantry

As you purge, decide whether foods can be donated or need to just be tossed. Ruthlessly remove:

- Any “food gifts” (soup/cookie/muffin mixes in jars, weird flavors of jam) that you are pretty darn sure that you’re never going to use.
- Any foods that have attracted pantry moths or other pests (enough said). Look very closely at grain products and dried fruits, because pests love these.
- Any open packages of food that have gone stale.
- Any packages/containers of flour, cornmeal, nuts or seeds that are more than a month old.
- Any packages/containers of whole grains or dried beans that are more than a year old (or that look or smell “off”).
- Any open bottles of oil that smell rancid.
- Any packaged foods made with hydrogenated oils or that have “wheat flour” (that’s code for refined white flour, since you don’t see the word “whole”) listed first on the ingredient list.

Get your bucket of cleansing solution and rags or sponges and wipe down all surfaces before putting food back. If any containers have a film on them (oil, for example), wipe them down, too.

Consider transferring foods from their original packaging (boxes, bags) to jars with tight-fitting lids. It will be easier to see what you have, and foods will stay fresher (and pest-free) longer. Mason jars are an inexpensive option (especially if you can score some from garage sales or thrift stores) and you can buy reusable plastic lids anyplace that sells canning supplies.

As you go through your freezer, fridge and pantry, keep a list (mental or, better, written) of meals you could make with still-good ingredients you already have. This practice of “shopping” your pantry (etc.) is a good practice to get into, as it reduces food waste, which is good for the environment, the economy, and your wallet!

It’s also a good idea to keep a running list of basic items that you need to replace.



Step 4: Kitchen Tools & Equipment

Turn a hard eye to your small kitchen appliances. Which ones do you actually use? Generally speaking, keep coffee makers and bean grinders, food processors and blenders, slow cookers and pressure cookers, toasters or toaster ovens, stand mixers. If you have an appliance you rarely use, but aren't sure you can part with, don't keep it in the kitchen. Put it in a holding zone in the garage, the basement or an extra closet if you don't use it in the next six months or so, let it go.

Separate out:

- Items you use regularly. Coffee maker? Toaster? Wooden spoons? Mixing bowls?
- Items you use occasionally. Stand mixer? Seasonal glassware? Ice cream maker? Muffin tins?
- Items you never use. Bread machine? Corn cob holders? Fondue pot? Duplicates (or triplicates) of items you do use?

Use your bucket of cleaning solution to wipe down drawers, shelves and cupboards. Then put items back strategically with these factors in mind:

1. Kitchen size. Larger kitchens can accommodate more stuff (as long as you actually use it) smaller kitchens may warrant less-used items being stored elsewhere.
2. Counter/drawer/cupboard space. Lots of counters but few drawers? You might be storing more utensils in crocks on the counter. Little counter space? You will need to severely cull what you keep there so you still have space to prep and cook.
3. Fixed objects. You'll want spatulas and wooden spoons near the stove, dishes and glassware near the dishwasher, coffee supplies near the coffee maker, and so on.

Location, location, location

Not everything deserves prime real estate in your kitchen. That's true for both large and small kitchens. If you have a tiny kitchen, you simply can't have much on the counter, but if you have a large kitchen, it doesn't mean you should have rarely-used items on the counter.

- Generally speaking, only keep small appliances that you use daily (or nearly so) on the counter. For example, in my kitchen, we keep our coffee maker, espresso maker, toaster oven, crocks of kitchen utensils and a tray of salad oils and vinegars on the counter, but we stow our blender (which we use almost daily for smoothies) in a low cupboard with a slide-out bottom shelf.
- For lesser-used items, Store them in less-accessible spots (in the back of deep cupboards if you have ample space in the kitchen, in the garage, basement or an extra storage closet if you have a small kitchen). You can always pull them out the few times a year you use them.

What about things you never use? Donate them, pass them along to someone who truly will use them, put an ad on Craigslist, sell them on eBay. Let them go!