

CookSmart

A woman with dark hair, wearing a black and white striped long-sleeved shirt and a white apron, is smiling and mixing a large salad in a wooden bowl. She is outdoors, with a green lawn and trees in the background. To her left, there is a table with lemons, a pepper grinder, and some green herbs. The overall scene is bright and cheerful, suggesting a healthy and delicious meal.

*Perfect Recipes
for Every Day*

Pam Anderson

Author of the best-selling *PERFECT RECIPE* and food columnist for *USA WEEKEND*

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Introduction

Pot roasts were a regular item on my mother's menu. Sometimes she'd simmer the roasts on top of the stove. Other times she'd pull out her crock pot. Regardless of how she cooked them, her roasts were always rich, beefy, and so meltingly tender that she barely needed a knife to slice them. Following my mother's example, I cooked pot roast regularly during my early married years, but over time I made the dish less frequently. At first I thought that it had become a victim of my busy schedule, but I gradually realized that good pot roast had become a mere food memory. Had I forgotten the proper cooking temperature, a recipe step, or an ingredient? Whatever the cause, the meat was tough and dry.

Many of my beloved dishes were like my pot roast — better in the imagination than they were in real life. Often, they had quirks that frustrated me when I made them or prevented me from enjoying them completely. But like most people, I had little time for less-than-perfect results. When I cooked, I wanted to make my favorites right, and I wanted them to be perfectly convenient, too.

That's where *CookSmart* begins. In this book, I perfect many of the everyday dishes I love, like oven-fried chicken, fajitas, and Caesar salad, as well as dishes for special occasions, such as crab cakes and chocolate cake.

For me, no-nonsense perfection often means reducing the time and effort that go into a dish. I knew I could make gutsy, memorable ribs by cooking them for hours over a slow charcoal-and-wood-chunk fire, but it took so long that I rarely attempted them. My recipe for cinnamon buns was exceptional, but they needed the better part of twenty-four hours. No wonder I usually opted to buy mediocre ones at the bakery! My french fries required a gallon of oil and two separate fryings, so I left that messy dish to restaurants.

Sometimes no-nonsense perfection means cutting the fat and calories. Did the frosting on my chocolate cake really need three sticks of butter? Did the cream of mushroom soup have to be so rich that guests called it quits after the first course? Perfection also has to ensure safety. With favorites like Caesar salad and Key lime pie, I wanted great taste without raw or undercooked eggs.

Most important, perfection means making a dish the best it can be. A superior shrimp cocktail demands shrimp that are shapely, moist, and firm rather than tight, chewy, and dry. A gazpacho shouldn't taste like cardboard winter tomatoes: it needs a big, sunny, summer-ripe flavor. Pasta salad not only must stand up during parties and potlucks but taste as impressive as it looks. Perfect waffles should stay

crisp long after they're pulled from the iron. Pie isn't perfect unless it's juicy but firm enough for you to get a clean cut.

Before setting out, I analyzed fifty, seventy-five, and sometimes even more recipes to see what made the dish tick. From there, I moved to the kitchen, testing each technique and ingredient and eliminating any unnecessary steps.

In the short essays that precede each recipe, I show you my work, so that you, too, can understand the dish. By seeing what was successful and what wasn't, you'll know why the recipe is designed the way it is and how to avoid pitfalls. You'll even learn principles that you can apply to other dishes.

I've developed these recipes so they work perfectly in real cooking and entertaining. What good is the ultimate onion ring if it requires forty-five minutes of constant attention during the first quarter of your Super Bowl party? For me, the all-time best onion rings are those I can prepare a day ahead and fry thirty minutes before guests ever show up.

Though I occasionally mail-order unusual ingredients, I don't like to rely on recipes that require this sort of advance planning. For that reason, *CookSmart* recipes call for common supermarket ingredients. My recipes also don't demand special gizmos and gadgets; they've been developed using ordinary kitchen equipment.

My family can now enjoy pot roast whenever we're in the mood for a warm, homey supper that, with all due respect, is as good as my mother's. That's the spirit of *CookSmart*: sensible perfection. Enjoy the recipes that follow, and try some of my techniques to improve your favorite dishes. Cooking is usually satisfying. Cooking smart is downright fun.