

Hacking your way to easier cooking

By DANIEL NEMAN
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

I'm so old, I remember when "hack" was a bad thing. Or a taxi. These days, of course, "hack" means a work-around, an alternative and easier way to perform some minor task.

So I was intrigued when I stumbled upon yet another internet listicle, "45 kitchen hacks to help make even a novice chef feel like a total foodie." I clicked, and I'm not ashamed.

Published on the cringingly named morehackz.com, the suggestions are aimed — as the title indicates — at people who are relatively new to cooking. In particular, they are aimed at young people. But some of the ideas are worth noting even for those of us who have been cooking for decades.

For instance, one hack addresses the issue of overly hot coffee. If you drink coffee, you know the problem: You're on the go and it is still too hot to drink before you have to dash out the door.

The solution is easy. Pour cooled coffee into ice cube trays, save the cubes of coffee ice in a bag and pop one into your coffee to cool it down without diluting it. You can also use coffee ice cubes with the same effect in iced coffee, or tea ice cubes to turn your just-brewed hot tea into iced tea.

Another coffee-related hack: Fans of cappuccino can froth their own milk without having to shell out hundreds of bucks for some fancy cappuccino machine. All you have to do is pour milk into a small jar, close



Dreamstime-TNS

If you drink coffee, you know the problem: You're on the go and it is still too hot to drink before you have to dash out the door.

it tightly and shake it vigorously until the milk froths itself. Then the froth can be quickly heated in a microwave before adding to the coffee.

I tried this. It works, but it does take a lot of shaking.

If you cook winter squash, you know it can be difficult to remove the seeds. This article suggests using an ice cream scoop, which is sturdier than ordi-

nary spoons and often has a slightly sharper edge.

The article also has a universal solution to a universal cake conundrum: After you have cut a cake, its exposed sides quickly become stale and dry. To stop this from happening, simply attach a slice of bread to each open side with toothpicks; the bread will keep the cake nice and fresh.

If you've ever gradually whisked a liquid into a bowl with dry ingredients, you'll know the experience of desperately wanting three hands — one to pour the liquid, one to whisk and one to hold the bowl to keep it from spinning. The hack for this is familiar, but effective. Simply place a damp towel underneath the bowl to keep it stationary.

Another familiar-but-

helpful hack is my favorite way of opening tight jars. Just place a rubber band around the lid; you can double it if it is too large. The rubber band provides the friction you need to twist off the lid.

If you're boiling something and it threatens to boil up and spill out of your pot, place a wooden spoon across the top. That should keep the liquid

where it belongs and make your cleanup easier.

Honey moves at its own pace, and there is nothing slower than when you are trying to pour it out of a measuring cup. To speed up the process considerably, simply spray the measuring cup with nonstick spray before adding the honey. The honey slides right out.

To be honest, not all of the article's hacks are helpful or even accurate. One says that to soften butter instantly, place cubes of it inside an upside-down drinking glass. "The heat trapped inside the glass instantly softens the butter," it says.

Nonsense. The temperature inside the glass is the same as the temperature outside the glass. I tested my hypothesis with butter and a glass, and the butter did not soften any faster than it would have without a glass.

The article also suggests placing an ice cube on top of a hamburger as it cooks to keep it from getting dry. That's not how meat works. Then the article halfheartedly mentions that butter or other fat would achieve the same effect, which is how meat works, but at the cost of additional calories.

And the article even offers a hack for cooking grilled cheese sandwiches, which it says "is harder to perfect than one might think." Instead of griddling grilled cheese sandwiches in a pan with butter, it suggests putting them on a greased baking sheet and cooking them in the oven.

Oh, my good heavens no.

That's the problem with these listicles. Some of their hacks are just hackneyed.

The truth about egg cartons, and other egg secrets

By DANIEL NEMAN
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You can't tell, just by looking at it, how old an egg is. So when you're buying eggs at a store, how can you tell which cartons have the freshest eggs?

You look at the carton. Cartons have a three-digit number printed on the side, from 001 to 365 — or 366 in leap years. As you have already cleverly intuited, the number corresponds with the number of days that have passed since the beginning of the year. A carton with the number 054 on the side, therefore, would have been packaged on Feb. 23.

These facts, and many more, come courtesy of a brand-new cookbook devoted entirely to eggs, "The Fresh Eggs Daily" cookbook by Lisa Steele. Steele raises chickens in her backyard, so she knows a great deal about eggs, which she happily imparts in the beginning section of her cookbook.

You know that part of a cookbook that no one ever reads? Sometimes it can be worth reading. Steele's introductory section includes such interesting information as:

- Chickens are omnivores; they will eat anything. They don't just eat plants, they eat bugs, worms, lizards and even frogs. If an egg carton is labeled "vegetarian fed," it necessarily means the chickens were kept indoors. Otherwise, they would eat bugs, worms, lizards and frogs.

- Similarly, the phrases



Alyssa Pointer/Chicago Tribune-TNS

Moah's Ark urban farm owner Mo Cahill shows off the eggs her chickens have laid at her house in the Rogers Park neighborhood in Chicago, Illinois.

"hormone-free" and "antibiotics-free" on cartons are essentially useless terms. In the United States, it is against the law to give hormones to laying chickens, and very few commercial farms use antibiotics.

- If the carton says "cage-free," it could conceivably mean that the chickens are kept in a large warehouse, with their beaks filed to keep them from pecking one another. Even "free-range" could mean they are kept in a large warehouse with an open door to the outside that some of the chickens may never use.

- You can freeze eggs, but not in the shell (the liquid inside will expand, cracking the shell). To

freeze, whisk eggs until they are well beaten, then pour them into ice-cube trays coated with nonstick spray (silicone trays work best). Store the frozen egg cubes in a freezer bag for up to six months. Defrost overnight before using.

- Refrigerated eggs will last for three to four months. If kept unrefrigerated, they will be good for two weeks or more. (The book does not say it, but do not leave eggs out for more than an hour if they have ever been refrigerated; bacteria can enter the porous shell when it goes from cold to warm).

- Most supermarket eggs are white because they are laid by Leghorn chickens, which lay white eggs. Leg-

horns are favored by commercial farmers because they can produce eggs on less feed than many other breeds.

- Chicken eggs can be white, blue, green or tan, and there is absolutely no difference in their nutritional value or taste.
- Eggs are stored

pointy-end down because that makes it harder for bacteria to get through the slightly alkaline white to the more vulnerable yolk. It also centers the yolk, resulting in prettier hard-cooked or deviled eggs.

- Although eggs are graded by size, they are sold by weight. One dozen large eggs weighs 24 ounces. The eggs inside the carton can be different sizes, as long as they add up to that weight.

- You can separate cold eggs more easily than room-temperature ones. So, separate eggs fresh out of the refrigerator. But then let the whites sit for 30 minutes before whipping them, because:

- Room-temperature egg whites whip better than cold ones. The opposite, inci-

dentally, is true of cream — chilled cream whips faster.

- Anything more than the slightest drop of fat — including yolk — will keep egg whites from whipping into a stiff, airy structure. Before whipping egg whites, make sure there is no yolk (or very, very little), and that the bowl and whisk or beaters are perfectly clean.

- To bring chilled eggs to room temperature, either leave them on the counter for 30 minutes or cover them in tepid water for 10 minutes. (I have had success using lukewarm water for five minutes.)

- If you like scrambled eggs to be soft and dry, salt them before cooking. If you like them to be firm and moist, salt them after they are cooked.

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