

Balance Flavors Like a Pro!

By Cherie Soria



The subject of **Flavor Balancing** or **Flavor Dynamics** is an exciting one! Learning how to balance the **five flavors** is one of the most **important** chef skills you can learn.



The most widely accepted basic flavors are **sweet, sour, salty, and bitter**. At **Living Light**, we add a **fifth flavor**—**pungent**, or somewhat spicy.

Learning to artfully combine the five flavors distinguishes a great chef from a mediocre one.

A truly great chef knows how to combine flavors in a manner that adds drama and interest to a dish, and is able to build great sauces, dressings, and soups with interesting layers of flavor.

Learning how to make great sauces is one of the essential chef skills, and learning to balance flavors allows the freedom to create your own delicious recipes utilizing foods you have on hand, rather than relying on recipes other people create. Mastering flavor balancing is one of the most important steps in becoming a true culinary artist.

The elements of sauce-making are the same elements used to balance flavors in all ethnic traditions, and the flavor profiles you learn to bring balance to sauces can be used in a variety of other recipes. Together, the five flavors act as a “choir”, with each “voice” (sweet, sour, salty, bitter, and pungent) barely distinguishable on its own. In a balanced sauce, the individual flavors merge together to become one vibrant harmonic chord. Each of the flavors is influenced by the others in the recipe, and all are gently melded together by the inclusion of fats.

Fats subdue individual flavors in a recipe and yet provide a good foundation for each member of the “choir” to shine through. **Fats help to balance the higher notes of sour, spicy, or pungent flavors of ingredients like chili, mustard, and garlic. Fats also add richness, a luxurious mouthfeel, and a “comfort factor” to recipes.** It is not a good idea to depend on fats too much, yet it is important to understand the vital role they play in culinary arts. One of the most important roles of fat in a sauce or dressing is to **help flavors linger longer** on the palate, adding to the sensation of pleasure. A salad dressing should cling to leafy greens so you can taste all of the flavors in harmony and balance the bitter flavors of the greens. Fats also thicken and emulsify dressings so that the oils, solids, and liquids bind together into a luxurious, creamy texture.



Learning how to balance flavors allows you to choose to either have **one flavor** take center stage and be the **star of the show**, or have all the **flavors merge together as one harmonious “voice”** —an important skill for any chef.



Allowing one flavor to take a starring role can be challenging, since the flavor can easily take over to create an imbalance, or lack of harmony in the recipe. For example, if you want a well-balanced ginger dressing, with ginger in the starring role, you'll need a choir of complimentary flavors to support it. Ginger (and other pungent flavors) can be very spicy; nearly as hot as chili, and it can also be slightly bitter. It might overtake all the other flavors in the dish and ruin a meal, so the **supporting flavors** you choose need to be **subtle, yet strong enough** to add something to the overall flavor profile—a perfect combination of flavors that allow the ginger to come through without being overwhelming. You wouldn't want a ginger dressing to be just ginger. That would be too strong and pungent. It's best to **add sweet and sour flavors**, like a bit of coconut sugar and some fresh lime or orange juice to mellow and soften the powerful flavor of the ginger. Next, **add a fat**, like sesame oil or tahini, which unites all of the flavors, and finally add a small amount of tamari or miso for saltiness. One or more pungent flavors like garlic or mustard will round it all out and balance the recipe, provided you do not use too much of these strong-flavored ingredients. **Of course, the amount of each ingredient you use is as important as the combination of ingredients.**

In raw food preparation, it's important to remember that **pungent foods and dried herbs must always be used very sparingly**, since we don't soften and mellow the flavors through cooking. A good example is onions—they change flavors and soften with cooking, and in the process, actually transform from pungent to sweet. In raw food preparation, we treat onions differently. We marinate them, massage them, partially dehydrate them, or use powdered onion, which has a milder taste. At the very least, we need to cut onions in very small pieces so that the pungent, sharp flavor does not spoil the dish. Some people, including children and the elderly, may not be able to tolerate pungent foods like hot chilies, garlic, or even ginger. It's a good idea to be cautious with these foods, and always **use them in moderation**, especially if we are preparing foods for kids or elders. **If you want to please others, it's important to be aware of their flavor preferences. If you are preparing food for yourself, you can incorporate more of the intense flavors and ingredients you enjoy.**

Let's talk about the Choir of **Flavors!**



Sweet

The matriarch of flavors, bringing balance to all other flavors increases the pleasure quotient

Examples

dates, dried and fresh fruits, coconut sugar, agave nectar, maple syrup, stevia, and sun-dried tomatoes

Salty

Universal flavor enhancer
Adds depth and roundness
to the choir

Examples

Himalayan crystal salt, miso, tamari, sea vegetables, and celery





Acid, Tart, Sour

Enhances other flavors (in small amounts) Enlivens and intensifies flavor. Reduces the amount of salt required. Adds a high note/brilliance/liveliness to the choir of flavors. Keeps greens from oxidizing

Examples

lemon, tamarind, grapefruit, lime, orange, and berries

Pungent or Spicy

Adds drama, brilliance, and intensity

Examples

ginger root, garlic, onion, hot chili peppers, and mustard





Bitter

Highly alkaline. An important flavor in Ayurvedic tradition, the bitter taste releases a chemical in the brain that helps create a strong constitution

Examples

romaine lettuce, kale, arugula, dandelion, beet greens, chard, parsley, basil, nutmeg, cumin, aromatic herbs and spices

Aromatic Herbs & Spices

Can be both Bitter and Pungent

- Adds interest and variety to simple flavors
- Enhances other foods and creates a particular ethnic profile
- Transforms foods from mundane to dynamic
- Adds a bitter component
- Examples are oregano, basil, cumin, cinnamon, turmeric, sage

Fats

The patriarch of the bunch, carrying and emulsifying the other flavors and bringing them together as one harmonious "voice"

Examples

cold pressed oils, avocado, coconut milk, and nut cream



Important things to remember

When we evaluate flavors, we sometimes think about them in a horizontal or linear fashion, but there is also a vertical way to look at flavors. Sour or tart flavors might be considered a high note in the choir, like a soprano voice, whereas tamari and dark miso are intensely deep and salty and provide a lower note. If we are making a recipe that lacks both depth of flavor and a salty taste, tamari or dark miso would be a good choice (provided the dark color wouldn't have a negative impact on the recipe). If something is too rich or fatty, we might add something fresh and zingy, like apples or lemon to lighten up the overall taste.

If you are creating a recipe and have a bitter food like kale as the main ingredient, you'll want to include something sour, like lemon juice or other acids fruits, and something sweet, like raisins, because tart flavors combined with sweet flavors are the perfect choices to tame and balance bitter flavors. Knowing this may be the most important formula of all, as many people don't care for bitter flavors. Sweet and salty are the most popular flavors in the world, but bitter flavors and pungent flavors are also important.



Where to start

I recommend that you begin by tasting things you've never tasted before, or have never tasted on their own. For example, you've probably never tasted cumin or even cinnamon except in combination with other flavors. Notice that all spices and herbs are bitter in flavor. Some more than others, but all have a distinct bitter taste. Try them and see for yourself!

Next, choose a bitter ingredient and add a sour ingredient and a sweet ingredient to see how the flavors change. Or try ingredients like orange or pineapple, which are both sweet and sour. You can then add salty ingredients if needed and pungent or spicy ingredients to add that extra zing to the combination.

Essentially, you balance an existing flavor by choosing an opposite flavor or combination of flavors. Finally, add a fat and see how it changes the dynamic of the combination of flavors.

If the **Flavor** is too...

Sour, Tart or Acid: balance with sweet, salty, fatty, bitter

Salty: balance with sweet, fatty, sour

Spicy or Pungent: balance with sweet, fatty, sour

Sweet: balance with sour, salty, bitter, spicy, fatty

Bitter: balance with sweet, salty, sour

Fatty or Rich: balance with sour, and increase liquids/fat-free bulk or fiber

Bland: add aromatic herbs, sweet, salty, sour, spicy