



How I Organize My Kitchen for Easy Vegan Cooking

By Charles Ely

I've found that the key to keeping myself motivated on a plant-based diet is accessibility, accessibility, accessibility. I also buy so little in the way of ready-made foods, because I'm always feeling ambitious and optimistic when I go grocery shopping. It's all for love, at the end of the day: love for myself, for my family, for the planet and the animals, and for the farmers in my community I make a point of buying from. I take care of myself and others through the food I make, and the foods I choose to exclude, which is worth it to me. And, of course, let's not underestimate the love of a good challenge.

I cook more frequently than my house mates, so I got to arrange most of the kitchen. Compromise is a virtue, but it's best to follow a clear system. The basic goals are to a) not spend any extra time searching for things, especially at the hazard of burning something while I search, and b) to make my kitchen a user-friendly space where I enjoy spending time.

Pots and Utensils

Categorizing everything as stovetop versus baking helps my system make sense to me, and I prioritize cooking. Therefore, the knives, spatulas and spoons live in the drawer closest to the stove, with measuring cups, whisks and similar items in the further drawer. I definitely recommend investing the few hours it takes to create a clear and intuitive system that changes with your needs.

The pots are organized similarly, bakeware, colanders and strainers, and pots stacked together by type. This has been a work in progress, because of how dysfunctional the cabinets are built, but they've since overtaken the dwindling organic processed foods area. Lids are tricky, especially with glass, and I recommend some way to stack them for people who have the room. Instead, they're laid out on the back shelf of the cabinet.

Pot holders stay in the drawer on the left of the stove. The drawer immediately above that one contains tea, which gives a sense of my family's priorities, and underneath is Tupperware, jars and other recycled storage containers. While I could see having them other places, keeping Tupperware separate from the dishes and close to the stove makes it easier to get into the habit of portioning leftovers, and making sure everything is put away for later.

Spice Cabinets

To the right of the stove, above the cooking utensils, the cupboards contain all the spices, easy to reach while cooking. We keep them in clear plastic boxes, so that we can pull them out and look through them if we need to, and to make cleaning easier. While spice racks and holders are theoretically great, they require all your spice containers to be the same basic shape and size, which has never worked for me. On the left, closest to the stove, I have all of my savory spices, with turmeric, curry, oregano and cayenne up at the front. On the shelf above is my self-indulgent array of specialty salts. The other cabinet contains what I've deemed to be sweet spices, including rose water, cardamom, cinnamon sticks and pumpkin pie spice. Sugar and agave also live here, along with necessities for baking like baking soda and chocolate chips.

Labeling Food

Either label everything, or leave everything in see-through containers. I ended up, initially, with my dad's system of unlabeled, stainless steel containers that were meant to protect flours, whole grains and seeds from the tiny critters that come to feast upon them. Sadly, when no one knew what was in the containers, odds were still good an insect would find it first. I've grown fond of the labeling aspect of the food safety guidelines impressed upon me as a barista. Labeling, and even dating, food containers, or the shelf under them, has helped me reduce food waste. This is an especially good practice for dealing with leftovers, especially in a house where reused opaque containers are the norm storage unit.

Pantry

Everything is labelled or clearly organized, right? Since the current living arrangements are less critter-friendly, I've taken to leaving the non-bulk beans, quinoa, and the like in their original containers. It's simpler, and saves me the

hassle of labeling. The only drawback is that bags and oatmeal cylinders are harder to stack, so using containers that allow for more careful arranging is useful, and preferring bulk items is a good way to save money.

Fridge

All of the vegetables! A vegan fridge is easy to stock, placing emphasis on fruits and vegetables, with my guilty pleasure vegan pepper jack cheese lurking on the top shelf and vegan butter in the butter compartment. Most items are organized according to the recommendations on the drawers, because of the way the fridge regulates temperature. I also have an impressive array of jams from the farmers' market, which is one reason I sometimes forgo bagels and put jam in stir fries. I make a valiant effort to know where things are, so I don't have unpleasant surprises like forgotten leftovers or spinach, and that to clean out the residue frequently, which helps everything inside stay fresh and smelling good.

Counter Space

Bananas, apples, citrus, onions, garlic and squashes all live on the counters in wooden bowls. These are some of the main ones that shouldn't be stored in the fridge. I also usually leave out a cutting board and knife, because I know I'll always need those items and it's one less thing to get out. I just rinse or scrub after using them, and return them to their spots. I also moved the eating utensil drawer away from the cutting space, so that no one would need to interrupt me to get a spoon while I prepped dinner.

No matter the size of a kitchen, there needs to be enough room on the counter to hold a cutting board, mixing bowl or food processor, even if this requires setting up a table next to the counter or annexing another room to the kitchen. Everything non-essential can be squeezed elsewhere, or sorted a space saver suspended from the ceiling. Otherwise, I spend time cleaning and shuffling

things around, and it may take an extra half an hour to get to the stove or the mixing bowl.

Stovetop

My tea kettle lives here, along with, often, the most frequently used frying pan, which works for tofu scramble, sautéed veggies for two, and even oatmeal. If I'm making one of my go-to dishes, I'll already have the pot and the cutting board available, and put less thought and effort into getting started.

The Social Aspect

I am a social creature, and cooking and eating are social acts, the bedrock of culture. My open kitchen, where I can talk to guests while I make them dinner, or sit down to read while I wait for squash or rice to simmer, are important to convincing me to cook. I know I would hesitate to use the kitchen if there were no room for friends to keep me company from time to time. This isn't an option with every kitchen layout, and may be less appealing to introverts, but acknowledging that the kitchen is a social space as well as a work space can make cooking more enjoyable.

That's the goal: to make cooking a pleasurable, simple experience so that you can completely take control of your meals.

Source: One Green Planet