

#108 - Food in a Bowl: Flavors

Hi, friends! You're listening to The Lazy Genius Podcast! I'm Kendra Adachi, and I'm here to help you be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't. Today is part two of our Food in a Bowl series. Last week we talked about Food in a Bowl basics - how you need contrast more than anything else, and you build that contrast using four dinner bowl building blocks - base, protein, toppings, and sauce. If you missed that episode, definitely listen to it before you listen this episode. Today in part two, we're talking about flavors. There are so many ways to put together flavors because flavor options are literally endless. And that's a little bit of why it's hard, right? When we have so many options, it feels overwhelming and we just give up. So today we're going to distill flavor down a bit to help you think through how to put together your own dinner bowl.

To pare down the options for a dinner bowl, it's helpful to start with two things: an engine and a destination. Your engine is the one choice you know you're definitely using. It's likely something you already have in your house that you want to use or maybe fresh produce from a generous neighbor's garden or meat that was on sale. Your engine can be any of those four building blocks, but making one set decision for your bowl makes the other choices easier. You just need something that's already there that can drive the rest of the decisions, like an engine does. And the other thing that's helpful is your destination, and I think the best way to frame a destination is by cuisine. Your engine is a rotisserie chicken that was on sale, but where are you going with it? Japanese? Tex-Mex? Italian? Thai? So a cuisine can be your destination. Or you can use an already existing dish as a destination inspiration for your dinner bowl. Cheeseburgers, barbecue chicken pizza, California rolls, beef stew, fish tacos. You can use a dish that's not technically a dinner bowl and use it as your destination to build your dinner bowl with that dish's flavors as inspiration. Does that make sense? When you have your engine - the one ingredient you're already planning to use - and your destination which helps you limit your flavor options, you're 80% of the way there to building your bowl.

We'll practically build some bowls at the end of this episode using the engine-destination model, but for now, let's talk about some destination options, more specifically what ingredients go together when you think of certain cuisines.

Before I give you flavor combinations, you know what I'm going to mention, right? Yes. The Flavor Bible. The Flavor Bible is my most treasured book in my kitchen. It's a literally encyclopedia of what ingredients go together, and it's my favorite. The binding is starting to get sad because I use it so often. It's such a great place to start when building bowls because you can get topping ideas so easily, so if this way of eating seems like your scene or you just want to become better at riffing on recipes and throwing stuff together with what you have, this book is essential. If you have basic cooking skills like how to roast and saute and grill (a few of which I have episodes on), you can put anything together using The Flavor Bible.

Okay, let's talk about what foods go together. If you don't have The Flavor Bible or just want to quickly think about ingredient combinations without having to check a resource, a great way is honestly to think about restaurant meals. When you go to your favorite Mexican restaurant, what ingredients are in a lot of things? Jalapenos and other chiles and peppers, tomatoes, avocado, beans, tortillas, queso fresco cheese, cilantro, onions, and then spices and flavors like chili power and cumin. You can imagine a restaurant menu or even pay attention the next time you go and see what ingredients are used often. That means they go together well to create a

unique flavor. If you think about it, different cuisines from different countries are based on common cooking techniques and a limited number of ingredients used in many ways. In America, most of us are spoiled because we can get any ingredient any time, but if you live in Tokyo, sure you have access to variety, too, but you're on the sea so there's a lot of fish and other seafood. Japanese food has a lot of seaweed in it, not because they love seaweed but because ancient Japanese people had to eat what they had, and they had a lot of seaweed. And now it's traditional. Rice grows well in the wet landscape by the ocean as do soybeans that form the basis for tofu. The Japanese culture traditional is also very patient, so they have a lot of big flavor ingredients that take a long time to create, like months. Things like soy sauce and bonito flakes which are basically pieces of dried fish. Don't overthink it. My in-laws are Japanese, so I have a lot of exposure to these ingredients, and they're amazing. But they're really simple and limited because Japanese cuisine was built on the foods that they had access to, and people were just creative with all the ways to use what they had.

Let's go back to the Mexican restaurant and look at the same thing. Jim Gaffigan had a joke years ago about how every dish at a Mexican restaurant is meat, beans, cheese, and tortilla. Kind of, yeah, but in a million different ways. For example, jalapeño peppers. Jalapeño peppers are a great ingredient to have in your dinner bowl with a Mexican-inspired destination. You could chop up raw jalapeño. Easy. You could also buy or make pickled jalapenos. A different flavor and texture but still very complementary to Mexican flavors. There are also smoked jalapeños called chipotle peppers which are spicy and smoky and amazing. You could even throw a couple of jalapeños on the grill when you're grilling your steak or chicken to add a different kind of smoky flavor and a softer texture to the jalapeno. The ingredients for many cuisines are fairly limited, but you can be creative in how you prepare them and how they fit into your four dinner bowl building blocks - base, protein, toppings, and sauce.

You don't always have to use plain heated up black beans on your Mexican dinner bowl. Change it up from that limited list of ingredients! You can mash them together with some sour cream and lime juice for a different texture if you need some creaminess. You can throw them in a skillet with oil and sliced onions to get a little crisp on them. Use a basic list of ingredients that go with a certain destination, but remember that you have options with how you use those ingredients.

Okay, let's break down a few cuisine destinations to help you think about ingredients that go together, and then you can have some options on what to do with those ingredients as you build your bowl. I'd say we'll start with Asian, but just saying Asian feels so unfair because Asia is enormous. The differences in different cuisines like Japanese, Korean, Thai, and Indian are huge, but you don't have to let that stop you. You're offending an entire people group by using green salsa on a Korean bowl. As long as you're using ingredients that generally go together and offer contrast, your dinner bowl will be great. So let's plow through a few lists of flavors inspired by different cuisines.

I already said Japanese, so I'll start there quickly. Rice and noodles are the perfect base. Fish is a great protein, but chicken or beef are great, too. For toppings, you might use raw radish, green onions, ginger whether it's used on the meat or pickled or just grated on top which is super traditional to do, anything pickled (Japanese people love them some pickles), and greens. In terms of sauces or flavors, soy sauce is plenty. You could also use dashi which is a Japanese stock made from kelp and is actually super delicious, mirin which is sweet, ponzu which is citrusy, sesame seeds or oil for a rich umami flavor, and wasabi for a great fresh, heat. So let's

say really high quality salmon is on sale at Whole Foods and I jump on it and want to cook it that night. I only buy a couple of salmon steaks to keep the cost down since it's in a bowl. Salmon is my engine and my protein. A perfect base for a Japanese bowl with salmon as the protein is rice. White rice and salmon are magical together I cannot even tell you. P.S. I'll offer some rice thoughts next week in the hacks and how-to's episode, but I just need to say that I'm married to a Japanese man. We take our rice really seriously. I buy enormous bags of high quality rice at the Asian grocery store every couple of months and have a rice cooker that legit does not have English words on it. And I love it. I will never go back to other kinds of white rice again. Not saying you can't, but I don't make rice on the stove anymore or have rice in the style of Uncle Ben's because we like it sticky and short-grained and amazing. I'll offer what tips I can next week, but I feel like that's an important thing to mention today. Okay, so we've got rice and salmon as the base and protein. No seasonings yet, just mild toothsome rice and tender, fatty, slightly sweet salmon. It's also great in color so far with the white and contrasting deep pink, so we're already looking good. Now as you decide what goes next - toppings or sauce - think about what you already have or already know. You might have a great salty ginger dressing that would be a perfect sauce which frees you up to take a few minutes to sauté up some spinach and scallions. Or maybe you want to finally play around with those bottles of Asian ingredients and make a sauce, so your toppings will be simpler. So here are a couple of ways to finish out this bowl. Rice, salmon, spinach sautéed in soy sauce and ginger, crunchy fresh green onions, and a drizzle of yum yum sauce. Another would be rice, salmon, fresh cucumber, avocado, and a soy-sesame dressing, almost like a salmon roll. Salmon rice bowls are a thing of beauty, so if you haven't tried it yet, I encourage you to give it a whirl.

Okay, that was a longer one. Let's speed up and get through some more.

If Thai food is your destination, here are some ingredients to pull from: Thai basil, Chile peppers and bell peppers, cilantro, coconut, garlic, ginger, lemongrass, lime, mint, and peanuts. Also rice and a variety of proteins and vegetables. So let's say you have rotisserie chicken as your engine, and Thai as your destination. Put the chicken over brown rice or Thai noodles. Saute some colorful bell peppers along with a little jalapeño for heat until slightly charred and still with a bite. Layer that on the rice and chicken, and then in that same skillet you just sautéed the vegetables, stir in some garlic, ginger, and coconut milk. Let it bubble together a little to thicken, put a squeeze of lime in there to finish because you need that acid and pour it over the bowl for the sauce. Top it with chopped cilantro and peanuts. You guys that sounds so good. Again, we'll talk about the logistics of how all of this happens next week. For now, just get inspired by flavors.

How about a Greek destination? Remember to think about restaurants too and imagine how these ingredients show up. Your ingredient list would be fresh herbs like basil, parsley, and mint, feta cheese, garlic, honey, lamb, lemon, olive oil, oregano, peppers and onions, tomatoes, zucchini, rice, yogurt, and pita bread. This could be great with a rice base, but let's say you really don't want to do rice. Let's do a base of roasted vegetables - eggplant, peppers, and onions roasted until they're charred and soft. That's your base. On top you could do rotisserie chicken or some quick grilled shrimp. Your toppings are easy - chopped cucumber and tomato, maybe olives, and your sauce is yogurt mixed with lemon juice, garlic, and salt and any fresh herbs you have around. Delicious.

For you adventurous folks who are tired of everything being Asian or Tex-Mex, what about North African, like Moroccan food? That food is delicious. Your list would be chickpeas, couscous,

mint, lamb, tomatoes, cucumbers, rice, garlic, cumin, and bell peppers. So your bowl could be a base of couscous cooked plain. Your protein could actually include your sauce. Saute ground lamb until it's crispy and cooked, then add chickpeas, garlic, cumin, and a can of diced tomatoes. It's saucy and spicy and everything is talking to each other. You put that on top of the couscous and then top it with fresh crunchy cucumbers, tomatoes, and, fresh mint. I'm so hungry right now.

We'll stop there because you don't need to get too overwhelmed with all the cuisines ever. Here's your hack though to build a bowl with great flavors. Have a destination. It'll often be a cuisine, or it can be an actual dish that inspired the bowl. We didn't one of those, so let's do one really quick. You might have had a banh mi sandwich before. They're so good. It's on a special kind of Vietnamese baguette. P.S. Vietnam has a lot of French influence because of colonization and all that stuff, so this is a baguette riff and it sometimes even has pate on it which is hilarious and awesome. Again, cuisines come from what's there in the country or what's brought into the country. So a banh mi is on a light crunchy baguette, it's usually chicken or even roasted pork, slathered with mayonnaise or even the pate to offer a creamy contrast to everything else in the sandwich which is jalapeño, fresh cilantro and other herbs, and a ton of pickled vegetables. Do you see how you can easily make a banh mi dinner bowl? Base of rice or even cubed up toasted leftover baguette. Ground pork or rotisserie chicken for your protein. Your toppings would be fresh cucumber, jalapeno, pickled carrots and onions, and fresh cilantro, and you'd literally thin out some mayonnaise with a little lime juice as your sauce. Amazing.

Now we'll stop. Okay, so you need a destination to help you narrow down your flavor options, and it helps to have an engine - one building block that you know is already set. If you need ideas on how to find out what ingredients go together, use already existing dishes as inspiration, think about what's served at your favorite ethnic restaurants, Google "ingredients in Chinese food," or get The Flavor Bible. Not only does it tell you what ingredients go together like everything that goes with corn or black-eyed peas; it has cuisine lists, too. Where do you think I learned all this? So in case you're curious, these are all the cuisines listed in The Flavor Bible with a complete ingredient list: Afghan, African (north, south, and west), Australian, Austrian, Brazilian, Cajun, Canadian, Chilean, Chinese, Creole, Cuban, Eastern European, English (yes, that list has peas and mutton), Ethiopian, French (several regions), German, Greek, Hungarian, Indian, Indonesian, Iranian, Italian (also several regions), Japanese, Korean, Latin American, Mexican, Middle Eastern, Moroccan, Portuguese, Russian, Scandinavian, Southeast Asian, Southern (like the American South), American Southwestern, Spanish, Swedish, Thai, Turkish, and Vietnamese. And scene. This book is amazing. Truly.

And if you look at Eastern European ingredients and think "cool, but what goes with caraway seeds and juniper berries?" You just flip to the lists for caraway seeds and juniper berries. I don't care for either and you're likely not going to use that example, but that's the power of this book. You can find matches for literally anything if you wanted to.

I'll put a link to The Flavor Bible in the show notes, or you can just click the link in the info section on your podcast app. I love it more than any book in my kitchen. Truly. It's a treasure. And so are dinner bowls. I hope this episode has given you some inspiration on how to build your own. Don't be overwhelmed by the fact that there are more flavors than a person can try in a lifetime. Just enjoy what you have and take the pressure off of every bowl being perfect. That's not how cooking works. Just try something and see if you like it, but start with what you have and know. I promise you can do this.

Okay, that's it for today! Next week we'll talk about hacks and how-to's to make the logistics of a dinner bowl actually work in your house as well as talking about the whole picky kids situation. Until then, be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't. I'm Kendra, and I'll see you next week.