



Summer Flavor School #2: Creating a perfect flavor base

Welcome to week #2 of Summer Flavor School! This week we reveal a secret that chefs know but many home cooks don't: sweating the aromatics. This simple move involves cooking onions, garlic, and other aromatics slowly in a little fat until they turn soft, golden, and sweet. This is the flavorful base that starts almost every great pot of food.

Cooks in Spain and across Latin America prepare *sofrito*, finely chopped onions, garlic, peppers, and tomato cooked down in olive oil. France features *mirepoix* ("meer-PWAH"), onions, carrots, and celery, and this same base is called *soffritto* in Italy. Cajun cooking has the "holy trinity" of onion, celery, and green pepper, and Indian cooking starts countless dishes with onions, ginger, garlic, and tomato cooked to a jammy *masala*. Different cultures use different vegetables, but it's the same concept: cook the aromatics slow and low until they turn sweet and deep, resulting in a foundation of flavor that seasons the remaining ingredients.

It Takes Patience and Order (you've got this!)

If a rich pot of food is your goal, time is your friend. Raw onions cooked fast over high heat are fine, but they'll taste sharp and flat. Cooking them gently for ten or fifteen minutes over low heat turns them soft, golden, and sweet. Order makes a difference too: onions take the longest and go in first, garlic burns fast and gets added later, and tomato goes in near the end. Let it cook down until it darkens and loses its raw edge, the same deep browning you tasted in the tomato paste last week. This technique is really about patience and following the golden rule: don't rush the first 10 minutes. Once you can add savory depth to just about anything.

One Base, Many Directions

Once you've got that base of sweated aromatics going, whichever vegetables you use, the sky's the limit. Some ideas:

- A summer vegetable braise with zucchini, peppers, and eggplant added to the aromatics and cooked down until soft and silky, resulting in a texture that is both a side and a sauce.
- A quick pot of beans, with canned white beans or chickpeas simmered in the base for fifteen minutes until they taste like they cooked all day.
- A fast tomato sauce, where the base plus a can of tomatoes becomes a pasta sauce with sweet depth in under half an hour.
- Shakshuka, where you crack eggs or nestle cubes of tofu into a spiced tomato base and let them cook right in it.
- Flavored grains, with rice or farro simmered in the base instead of plain water, so the whole dish is seasoned from the start.

Summer Sofrito Braise



This is the summer vegetable version, close to Spanish pisto or French ratatouille, cooked slow so the vegetables collapse into a soft, tender braise. Eat it warm or at room temperature, and add other components for a satisfying meal. For example, fold in white beans; crack eggs into it to poach; stir in cubes of tofu; or spoon it over rice, grains, or hearty bread.

Ingredients (serves 4-6):

- 1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil, plus more for finishing
- 1 large onion, diced
- 4 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
- 2 bell peppers, any color, diced
- 1 medium eggplant, diced
- 1 medium zucchini, diced
- 1 teaspoon smoked or sweet paprika
- 1 can (28 oz) whole or diced tomatoes, with their juice
- Salt and black pepper
- A handful of fresh basil or parsley, torn
- Red wine vinegar or lemon, to finish

Instructions:

1. Heat the olive oil in a wide pot or deep skillet over medium. Add the onion and a pinch of salt and cook slowly until soft and golden, about 10 minutes. Don't rush this part, since it's the base of everything else.
2. Add the garlic and peppers and cook until softened, about 5 minutes, then stir in the paprika and let it bloom for a few seconds.
3. Add the eggplant and zucchini with another pinch of salt, and cook, stirring now and then, until they start to collapse, about 10 minutes.
4. Pour in the tomatoes, crushing whole ones with your spoon, and bring to a gentle simmer. Cook uncovered, stirring occasionally, until everything is soft and the sauce has thickened and darkened, 25 to 30 minutes.
5. Season with salt and pepper, stir in the herbs, and finish with a splash of vinegar or a squeeze of lemon and a drizzle of olive oil. Serve warm or at room temperature.