



Summer Flavor School #5:

Three finishing touches that wake up your food

Welcome to the final week of Summer Flavor School! We've built savory depth with umami, started dishes with an aromatic base, bloomed spices, and added smoke. This week, we cover the last few touches you add right before serving. This skill is easy to learn, but it makes a noticeable difference in how your food tastes. When a dish tastes "close," like good but not quite there, it's usually missing one of three things: salt, acid, or fresh herbs. Over time and with practice, you'll figure out which one with a single taste and fix it almost without thinking.

Salt: Its True M.O.

Salt isn't just about making food taste, well, salty. In the right amount, it brings out the other flavors already in a dish, so everything tastes more pronounced. That's why a soup that tastes bland is often just under-salted, and the fix takes seconds.

Add it gradually and taste as you go, since you can always add more but can't take it back. And salt in layers, a little as you cook and a little at the end, rather than all at once, so the flavor develops through the dish instead of sitting on top.

If you're watching your sodium, you don't have to feel left out. Acid and fresh herbs sharpen the other flavors much the way salt does, so they can do the trick with little or no salt. Sometimes just a pinch is enough, if that's within your sodium budget, or you can use salt substitutes, if your doctor says they're okay, or salt-free seasoning blends.

Acid: The Secret Weapon in Your Kitchen

When celebrity chefs say a dish "needs a little acid," they mean a tangy, sour ingredient like lemon juice or vinegar. A hit of acidity cuts through richness and wakes up a dish that tastes heavy or dull.

Acids to keep on hand:

- Citrus (lemon, lime, orange, grapefruit)
- Vinegars (red wine, white wine, apple cider, balsamic, rice, sherry, distilled white)
- Fermented dairy or plant-based substitutes (yogurt, buttermilk, sour cream, kefir)
- Wine and cooking wines* (dry white, red, sherry, Marsala, or vermouth)
- Tomatoes (fresh, canned, or as paste)

- Pickles and their brine
- Capers
- Olives
- Tamarind (common in South/Southeast Asian cooking)
- Fermented foods (sauerkraut, kimchi, and their liquids)

*Skip the bottles labeled "cooking wine" at the grocery store, since they're loaded with salt, which defeats the purpose. Use a dry wine or sherry sold for drinking.

When a dish tastes meh or like it needs something you can't name, turn to acid. Stir a little in, taste, and witness the whole thing come together. Every cuisine has its version: lemon and wine vinegar in the Mediterranean, lime across Mexico and Southeast Asia, yogurt in India, and rice vinegar in East Asian cooking.

Fresh Herbs: Add at the End

Fresh herbs added at the end taste lively and aromatic. Dried herbs work well in plenty of dishes, but nothing replaces the real thing stirred in or sprinkled on at the last minute. The timing is the trick, since heat kills the delicate flavor fast, so tender herbs go on at the very end. Don't be shy with the amount, either. Good restaurants use fresh herbs by the handful, which is one of the secrets of deliciousness.

The Magic Trio

The next time something you cooked tastes "almost" but not quite right, think about the magic trio: salt, acid, and herbs. A weak-tasting vegetable soup or unseasoned roasted veggies come alive with a good pinch of salt. A squeeze of lemon cuts the heaviness of a rich stew, while a splash of rice vinegar balances out a stir-fry heavy on the soy sauce. A grain bowl that tastes dull perks up with a handful of parsley or cilantro, and a plain green salad turns delightful with a flurry of chopped herbs. Add one, taste again, and adjust. Over time you'll learn to trust your taste buds, and the more you practice, the faster you'll know exactly what a dish is missing.

Master Formula: Any Salad Dressing



A vinaigrette puts the magic trio to work, which makes it the perfect recipe to practice. Learn the ratio and you never need a bottled dressing again.

The formula is 3 parts oil to 1 part acid, plus salt, a touch of sweetener, and whatever herbs and seasonings you like. From there you adjust to taste: more acid if it's dull, more oil if it's too sharp, more salt if it's weak.

Makes about 3/4 cup.

- 1/2 cup extra virgin olive oil
- 3 tablespoons acid (lemon juice, or red wine, balsamic, or apple cider vinegar)
- 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard, to help it emulsify
- 1 teaspoon maple syrup or honey
- 1 small garlic clove, grated
- A handful of chopped fresh herbs
- Salt and black pepper
- Optional: 1 tablespoon minced shallot

Whisk everything but the oil together in a bowl or shake it in a jar, then add the oil and whisk or shake until combined. Taste and adjust: more acid if it needs a lift, more salt if it tastes weak, another pinch of herbs for freshness. It keeps in the fridge for about a week.

Oil-Free Version

The same formula works without oil, which is useful on a low-fat or oil-free plan. Swap the oil for a base that highlights the flavors without the fat: blended white beans, silken tofu, tahini thinned with water, or simply more acid loosened with a little vegetable broth or water. Blend 1/2 cup of the base with the same acid, mustard, sweetener, garlic, salt, and herbs, and thin with water until it pours the way you like.