

Take stock in your pantry

Today's modern pantries have evolved into the glorious envy of kitchen remodels, and our newer homes have carved out more room than ever for high-capacity refrigerators that have literally taken the "pantry concept" to a chilling new level. Both amenities are more functional than ever and can promise to become the key to success in any kitchen if stocked with the end in mind – meal solutions.

What makes a good pantry great?

Ask most avid cooks and they will probably confess that their kitchen pantry and freezer, not their cookbooks, are often their greatest sources of inspiration at mealtime. For them, almost anything is possible when they open their doors and look inside with an open mind.

For me, a well-stocked pantry provides a tasty balance between "cooking with what we have" and taking the extra time and money to visit a grocery store or restaurant across town. By design, my pantry functions as the nerve center of our family's kitchen, and it generally provides us with everything we need for a convenient meal or snack.

For some of us, cooking from our pantry to meet these spontaneous needs is a challenge that can be overcome with a renewed commit-

ment to organization. Can your pantry rescue you with a quick meal solution if friends stop by at dinnertime? What if your kids negotiate a sleepover with the requisite (but unplanned!) batch of pancakes or scones for breakfast?

Organizing your pantry

Your first step is to unleash the Martha Stewart in you to eliminate unnecessary clutter and items that you don't use. Now is the time to check for expired codes and to incorporate convenient storage bins and stackable containers to help optimize your precious space.

Another great tip is to segment your pantry into useful categories that reflect your cooking needs and lifestyle. For example, my pasta basket contains several types, and it is the first place that the kids go for a quick meal. I like to label my pull-out baskets, containers, and shelves in order to help my family spot items — and more importantly, put them back in the same place!

Stocking your pantry can be as simple as referring to an itemized shopping list before you visit the market. If your pantry is well-organized, a quick glance is all it takes to spot the missing items. Try purchasing different sizes or brands to meet your changing needs or to add variety to your cuisine. When it comes to the



Mary Rose Hoover is the owner of Cucina Della Rosa Cooking School, based at the McCauley Design Studio in downtown Barrington. She shares her passion for cooking and entertaining by offering adult cooking classes, private parties, and corporate team-building events. Classes and camps designed especially for teens and children are also available. For more information on Cucina Della Rosa schedules or to order a gift certificate, visit www.maryrosecooks.com or call 847-650-9463.

freezer, be careful of the space hogs and go for the flash-frozen and vacuum-sealed products, because they have superior quality and longer shelf lives.

Trust that your pantry's ability to inspire or rescue you will only be as good as the time and effort that you put into it – literally.

To learn about stocking your pantry or cooking with my some of my favorite pantry items from local grocers, please visit the Cucina Della Rosa web site at www.maryrosecooks.com.

Mary Rose's Best: 15-Minute Pasta & Beans

(SERVES 4)

Ingredients:

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 cloves garlic, cleaned but left whole
- 14-oz. can "pomodorini" or cherry tomatoes
- 4 cups chicken broth
- 1 teaspoon sea salt or to taste
- Red pepper flakes to taste
- 1/2 cup medium- to small-size pasta, such as ditalini
- 1 15-oz. can garbanzo beans, drained and rinsed
- Parmesan cheese to taste

Cooking Instructions:

In a four-quart sauce pan, heat the olive oil on medium for a minute, add the garlic, and cook until light golden brown. Remove the pan from heat and dispose of garlic if you want a milder garlic flavor. Once the oil has cooled, add the tomatoes and heat on medium until the mixture begins to bubble. Add the broth and salt and pepper to taste. Bring the mixture to a boil, add the pasta and beans, and cook until al dente. Garnish with pecorino cheese and serve hot with a green salad and sourdough baguette.

