

Kitchen Words Explained

A plain-language recipe translator and cheat sheet

Recipes often compress several actions into one short word. If nobody has shown you what “fold”, “reduce” or “until translucent” looks like, that word can halt the whole meal. This guide translates common kitchen language into an action and a visible sign.

You do not need to memorise everything. Circle the words you meet most often, keep the page nearby, or rewrite a recipe one action per line.

Cutting and preparation

Word	Plain-language meaning	What to do or notice
Chop	Cut into pieces; exact sameness usually does not matter.	Aim for pieces small enough for the recipe. Pre-cut is valid.
Dice	Cut into small cube-like pieces.	Make them roughly similar so they cook at a similar speed.
Mince	Cut extremely finely.	Use repeated careful cuts, a press, jarred garlic or prepared paste.
Slice	Cut into flat pieces.	Thickness matters more than perfect shape; use a stable board.
Grate	Rub food across a grater to make shreds or crumbs.	Stop before fingers reach the blades; ready-grated is safer on low-capacity days.
Peel / trim	Remove skin / remove unwanted ends or damaged parts.	Only peel when the recipe or your preference needs it.
Zest	Remove only the coloured outer skin of citrus.	Avoid the bitter white layer underneath.
Drain / rinse	Remove liquid / run clean water over food.	Use a colander or sieve; ask for help with heavy hot pans.

Mixing words

Word	Action	How it looks
Stir	Move a spoon around and through the mixture.	Ingredients spread through one another.
Whisk	Beat quickly with a whisk or fork, often to add air.	Mixture becomes smoother, lighter or foamy.
Beat	Mix firmly and repeatedly.	Lumps reduce and ingredients combine.
Fold	Combine gently so trapped air is not knocked out.	Cut down through the middle, lift from underneath, turn over; repeat slowly.
Cream	Beat softened fat and sugar together.	It becomes paler, softer and slightly fluffy.
Knead	Press, fold and stretch dough.	Dough becomes smoother and more elastic; use a mixer if appropriate.

Heat words

Word	What it means	Sign to look or listen for
Boil	Heat liquid until it bubbles strongly.	Large bubbles rise and break continuously.
Simmer	Cook gently just below a full boil.	Small steady bubbles with less movement.
Sauté	Cook small pieces fairly quickly in a little fat.	Gentle sizzle; move food regularly.
Sear	Brown the outside quickly over higher heat.	A coloured crust forms; the inside may still need cooking.
Brown	Cook until the surface changes from pale to brown.	Colour and toasted smell develop; brown is not the same as burnt.
Grill	Cook close to strong direct heat, usually from above in the UK.	The surface colours fast, so stay nearby.
Bake / roast	Cook with dry oven heat; roasting often aims for browning.	Use the stated temperature, shelf and time.
Steam	Cook in steam above hot water.	Food sits above water with the lid on; open away from your face.

Sauces, texture and finishing

The words that tell you how the food should change

Phrase	Translation	The useful sign
Reduce	Simmer uncovered so water evaporates and there is less liquid.	The level drops and flavour becomes stronger.
Thicken	Make a liquid less runny.	It coats a spoon more heavily or moves more slowly.
Loosen	Add a small amount of liquid to make a mixture less thick.	Add a little, stir, then decide whether it needs more.
Deglaze	Add liquid to a hot pan and stir up the browned bits.	The stuck flavourful layer lifts into the liquid; watch for steam.
Season	Add salt, pepper, herbs, spices or another flavouring.	Start small. Medical diets may require specific advice.
Bring to the boil	Heat until strong bubbling starts.	The next instruction may tell you to lower the heat.
Preheat	Turn the oven on early so it reaches the stated temperature.	Wait for the indicator or time recommended by the appliance guide.
Grease / line	Coat a tin lightly with fat / cover it with baking paper.	Helps prevent sticking; use the exact tin preparation stated.

Words that describe “done”

Word	Usually means	What it may look or feel like
Tender	Soft enough to bite or pierce easily.	A fork or knife enters with little resistance.
Translucent	Partly see-through, often used for onion.	Softer and glassier, but not deeply browned.
Golden	Light warm-brown colour.	Check edges and underside too; stop before dark burning.
Al dente	Cooked but still slightly firm when bitten.	Commonly used for pasta; not hard or chalky in the centre.
Set	No longer loose or liquid in the way it was.	It holds its shape; the centre may still have a gentle wobble if specified.
Rest	Leave food alone for the stated time after cooking.	Keep it somewhere safe; resting can finish cooking or settle texture.

A recipe sentence, translated

Original: “Sauté the diced onion over a medium heat until translucent, then deglaze the pan.”

1	Cut the onion into small, roughly even pieces — or use ready-diced onion.
2	Put the pan on the hob, add the stated fat and set the control near the middle. Stove settings vary.
3	Add onion. Listen for a gentle sizzle. Stir regularly; lower the heat if it darkens fast or smokes.
4	Continue until the onion is softer and looks slightly glassy rather than raw and opaque.
5	Add the stated liquid carefully. Stir the browned bits from the base into it, watching for hot steam.

Vague recipe language

Recipe says	A workable interpretation
Medium heat	Start near the middle of your control, then judge the food: gentle sizzle is different from smoke or violent spitting.
A splash	A small pour. Add less than you think, stir, then add more only if needed.
Season to taste	Taste only when the food is safe to taste; add a small amount, mix, taste again. You may leave it as it is.
Cook until done	This is incomplete. Check the packet, a trusted recipe or a food-safety source for that exact food.
Stir occasionally	Stir from time to time so it does not catch. A repeating timer can remove the guesswork.

Low-demand and sensory-friendly translations

Barrier	Permission to change the method
Knife work	Use pre-cut or frozen ingredients, kitchen scissors where safe, or ask someone to prepare them.
Touch	Use tongs, a spoon, gloves, baking paper or pour directly from a packet.
Noise or smell	Use ear protection, ventilation, a lid where appropriate, or choose microwave/oven over frying.
Sequencing	Rewrite one action per line; put equipment out first; use labelled timers and tick boxes.

Your recipe translator

Turn one difficult instruction into visible, manageable steps

Recipe phrase: _____

What I think it means: _____

The first physical action: _____

Equipment or easier alternative: _____

Heat setting / temperature: _____

What I will look, listen or feel for: _____

Timer or check-in point: _____

Safety or allergy check: _____

The step I want help with: _____

My personal kitchen dictionary

Word or phrase	What it means in my words	What "ready" looks like

Before heat goes on

Check	Yes / not needed
I have read the whole instruction once or asked a tool/person to break it down.	_____
The pan, tray or container is suitable for the appliance.	_____
I know which step needs close attention and have set a timer.	_____
Handles, cables and hot surfaces are positioned safely.	_____
I have checked packaging for cooking, storage and allergen information.	_____

A short safety translation

Hot oil: water can make it spit. Add wet food carefully. If oil smokes heavily, turn off the heat if safe. Never use water on an oil or fat fire; leave, stay out and call 999. **Steam:** open lids and films away from your face. **Knives:** use a stable board, cut away from yourself and choose prepared ingredients when coordination or concentration is reduced. **Raw foods:** wash hands and prevent raw meat, fish or eggs from contacting ready-to-eat food. Follow current packet, appliance and food-safety instructions.

A message from Maggie

Kitchen language can make an ordinary meal feel like a test you were never taught how to pass. It is not a test. Every cooking word can be slowed down, translated and replaced with a clearer action. You are allowed to use prepared ingredients, repeat the same method, annotate recipes and ask for help.

The best instruction is not the most impressive one. It is the one you can understand, complete safely and use on the day you actually have.

Sources and further reading

Food Standards Agency. Food safety, hygiene, allergens, chilling and cooking guidance. [food.gov.uk/safety-hygiene](https://www.food.gov.uk/safety-hygiene)

NHS. The Eatwell Guide and general balanced-eating information.

[nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/food-guidelines-and-food-labels/the-eatwell-guide/](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/food-guidelines-and-food-labels/the-eatwell-guide/)

Merriam-Webster. Dictionary definition of simmer: cooking gently at or just below boiling point. [merriam-webster.com/dictionary/simmer](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/simmer)

How to Cook Everything: The Basics by Mark Bittman — illustrated foundations and techniques.

Delia's Complete How to Cook by Delia Smith — detailed explanations for core skills.

Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat by Samin Nosrat — a framework for understanding how cooking choices affect food.

Cook As You Are by Ruby Tandoh — flexible recipes for different energy, equipment and experience.

Clinical and safety note

This educational resource does not replace product instructions, individual allergy advice, swallowing guidance, medical nutrition advice or an assessment of whether a particular food is safely cooked. Needs can differ during pregnancy, reduced immunity, illness or treatment. Use current packaging and trusted food-safety guidance; seek appropriate professional advice when needed.

Space to Breathe Therapy | Bodmin, Cornwall | spacetobreathetherapy.co.uk