

REAL SIMPLE

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Upgrade Your Pantry Staples

Invest in a higher-quality version of these 11 basic ingredients and taste the payoff in every bite.

by Jane Kirby



Michele Gastl

The upgrade: Muir Glen Organic tomatoes (\$1.50 for 14.5 ounces, in most supermarkets and health-food stores).

Chicken Broth

Broth from bouillon cubes is overly salty and suspiciously yellow. Low-fat, low-sodium broth is ideal.

The upgrade: Swanson Natural Goodness 100% Fat Free (\$3 for 32 ounces, in supermarkets).

Eggs

Spring for organic eggs from free-range chickens. The yolks are bright yellow-orange, not a muted yellow, and the taste is full, rich, and downright eggy.

The upgrade: Greenbrier or Trader Joe's (\$2.50 to \$3.50 a dozen, at health-food stores or Trader Joe's, traderjoes.com for store locations).

Black Pepper

Pepper is one of the last things you add to a dish, so its flavor has a big impact. Always grind your own.

The upgrade: Tellicherry black peppercorns (\$4 for a four-ounce bag, penzeys.com).

Butter

Use creamy European-style butter on the rare occasions you use butter for cooking. Buy unsalted to control the sodium.

The upgrade: Organic Valley, Horizon Organic, or Land O' Lakes Ultra Creamy Butter (\$3 to \$3.50 for eight ounces, in supermarkets).

Canned Tomatoes

Organic tomatoes come in enamel-lined cans, so there's no metallic taste—just a fresh, natural flavor.

Extra-Virgin Olive Oil

Advertisement

There is a huge difference in quality between the big-brand varieties and oils made by small producers. A flavorful extra-virgin olive oil can transform a simple salad into something spectacular.

The upgrade: Lucini Italia (\$19 for 500 milliliters, lucini.com) or Bertolli Gentile (\$6 for 500 milliliters, in supermarkets).

Parmesan

Bypass the canned version. The best-tasting Parmesan is from a specific region in Italy and has the Parmigiano-Reggiano stamp on its rind.

The upgrade: Authentic Parmigiano-Reggiano (\$9 to \$18 a pound).

Peanut Butter

The kids' stuff is loaded with sugar. The natural kind contains only peanuts and salt.

The upgrade: Smucker's Natural Creamy Peanut Butter (\$3 for 16 ounces, in supermarkets).

Salt

Kosher and sea salt are clean-tasting and easy to control with your fingers.

The upgrade: Maldon Sea Salt (\$7 for 8.5 ounces, thespicehouse.com) or Diamond Crystal Kosher Salt (\$3 for three pounds, in supermarkets, or call 800-428-4244).

Tuna

Italian-style light-meat tuna packed in olive oil delivers a double dose of good fats. It has more calories than the all-white-meat, water-packed kind, but it doesn't need a lot of mayo when made into tuna salad.

The upgrade: Genova (\$2 for six ounces, in supermarkets).

Vanilla

Use pure (not imitation) vanilla extract and you'll be wowed by its complex, heady perfume.

The upgrade: Nielsen-Massey Madagascar Bourbon Pure Vanilla Extract (\$20 for eight ounces, kingarthurfLOUR.com) or McCormick Pure Vanilla Extract (\$7 for four ounces, in supermarkets).



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