

# Blue Zones

**“If you’re too busy to work out, your priorities need to change. I can’t think of too many things more important than your health.” – Rolsey**

## Tips from local chefs on cooking at home



The great thing about cooking at home is you have total control over what goes into your meal. GETTY IMAGES

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Cooking from home can be one of the most underrated yet valuable life skills.

The convenience of ordering and heating pre-packaged meals, or ordering take out has caused home cooking to take a back seat to those who otherwise could greatly benefit from this “lost art”.

Not only can cooking at home be easier on the wallet (it is five times more expensive to order takeout from a restaurant and three times as expensive to use a meal kit service!), there are also health benefits that you may be missing out on. In fact, the more you cook, the healthier you are.

A study published online by Cambridge University Press found that when people cook most of their meals at home, they consume fewer carbohydrates, less sugar and less fat than those who cook less or not at all. It also found that those who cooked at home more frequently (six-to-seven nights a week) also consumed fewer calories whether or not they were trying to lose weight on the occasions when they ate out 2.

Of course, there are times when we get tied down with other responsibilities and don’t have time to cook so we need to order take out. Or, we want to treat ourselves to a night out at a restaurant with family and friends.

Fortunately, there are more than 40 Blue Zones Project Approved restaurants in Southwest Florida that have committed to the well-being of our community by including many healthy and delicious options in their menus.

Noreen and Ross Edlund, chefs and co-owners of Blue Zones Project Approved restaurant, Skilllets along with Laura Owen, chef and owner of Blue Zones Project Approved restaurant, CJ’s on the Bay offer some practical tips for those looking to cook from home.

Recipes are not set in stone

Recipes can sometimes be overwhelming and while the dish may look great, the amount of ingredients and steps can be enough to make someone give up before they even begin. The good news is, there are ways around it.

“At the end of the day, rarely is any recipe idea the Holy Grail, as many cookbook writers would like you to think,” says Ross. “Most likely Grandma was cooking with equal know how, before you were born.”

Ross suggests cruising the web first and reading 2-3 different recipes for the same dish. Look particularly at the seasoning combinations and key ingredients. “You will see common threads — if a particular bean chili recipe says add cumin, for instance, you don’t want to leave that out.” For other ingredients, substitutions can be found.

Laura suggests using a work backwards approach. “Scan the items you have and do an online search of one or two and be flexible. If you want to make lasagna but don’t have lasagna noodles, use no yolks egg noodles or slices of zucchini, eggplant or even carrot.” She also suggests swapping out other common ingredients such as olive oil for butter, penne pasta for ziti, or cannellini beans for garbanzos.

Do you like potatoes but want to try something a little different? Noreen Edlund recommends trying Parsnips. “They can be mashed instead of potatoes or roasted with carrots and fresh peppers,” she says.

### Keep clean and organized

According to Ross, successful cooking starts with organization and cleanliness, clutter is your foe. “Every professional chef is taught “mise en place”, literally French for “everything in place.” He suggests when preparing a meal, after every preparation, clean up the space around you and wash the utensils and pans you have used. “Store a mental image of your refrigerator and pantry items, note what is old and

what is fresh and rotate food accordingly,” he says. And for cleanliness he says to “always err on the side of cleanliness and wash all fruits and vegetables.”

### Keep it healthy

The great thing about cooking at home is you have total control over what goes into your meal and how it is prepared. This can help in making healthier choices.

“Think carefully about cooking styles,” Laura says. “Can something be steamed or grilled instead of fried or sautéed?” She also recommends getting local produce from farmers markets to get the freshest ingredients you can and use them fully.

Ross suggests taking an adventurous approach. “The first tip is to explore the vast array of foods to eat that you have previously overlooked—the tremendous variety of beans, nuts, legumes,” he explains. “Make it a point to buy something off the produce shelf you’ve never cooked with before like Jicama or Bok Choy. Also, study recipes from the Mediterranean countries, as they are considered to offer the healthiest dining.”

To add delicious flavor while keeping your dishes healthy, Noreen recommends growing fresh herbs to always have on hand like basil, mint, rosemary, thyme, dill and cilantro.

*For a complete list of Blue Zones Project restaurants in Southwest Florida visit, Southwest-Florida.BluezonesProject.com. For Blue Zones Project cooking demonstrations, visit tiny.cc/BZPcookingdemo.*

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