

Missing an Ingredient? Here's What You Can Use Instead

Don't worry: You probably have something in your kitchen that will work. It might even improve the recipe.

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The most important skill in the kitchen — and, arguably, life — is adaptability. The list below, which is by no means comprehensive, is meant to help you replace ingredients with confidence. Every alternative listed may not work in every case, especially when it comes to baking, but if you consider the ingredient's texture, flavor and cook time, and make decisions according to taste, you'll greatly expand your options — and you may even end up with a dish you like better than the original.

Dairy

Flavor and texture are important considerations when substituting dairy products. When working with liquids, you can doctor consistency easily, thickening milk with a little flour or cornstarch to mimic half-and-half, or thinning out Greek yogurt with water to replicate milk.

The ingredients below are ordered from thinnest to firmest; if you don't have the desired substitute for a specific item, feel free to move up or down the list.

Milk: Half-and-half or heavy cream thinned with water, evaporated milk, light coconut milk, light cream, oat milk, nut milk, soy milk.

Half-and-half: Thicken milk with a little cornstarch or flour (about 1 tablespoon per cup of liquid) or thin heavy cream with a splash of water.

Heavy cream: For 1 cup heavy cream, substitute 3/4 cup milk plus 1/4 cup melted butter (for richness), or simply thicken 1 cup milk with 1 to 2 tablespoons cornstarch or even flour. (Whisk the milk into the dried ingredient little by little.) Other options include coconut milk or coconut cream (beware of increased sweetness), or even softened cream cheese whisked with a little water. Be aware that you won't be able to beat alternatives into fluffy whipped cream.

Buttermilk: For 1 cup buttermilk, add 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice (or light vinegar, such as white vinegar, white wine vinegar or Champagne vinegar) to a measuring cup and add enough milk to reach 1 cup. Alternately, thin one part yogurt, sour cream or other creamy dairy product with one part milk, or thin two parts yogurt or other creamy dairy product with one part water.

Butter: If using the butter to conduct heat, as in pan-frying, you could use olive oil or other fats. (See Oils and Fats category below.) For flavor substitutions — like stirring butter into risotto or polenta to add richness — a number of creamy options like heavy cream or mascarpone will achieve similar results.

Creamy dairy products: Tangy, textural ingredients like crema, crème fraîche, mascarpone, Neufchâtel, Quark, queso fresco, sour cream or yogurt of any variety can be used interchangeably.

Cheese: The cheese world is so vast that it's impossible to cover the entire range. When substituting cheeses, think about its purpose: Will your cheese melt evenly in a creamy pasta sauce, or spread easily on toast? If you're cooking the cheese, you might want to substitute a cheese with a similar texture, but if the cheese is used as an accent, you've got much more flexibility. Most widely available cheeses (predominantly cow's milk) can be broken down into the following broad categories:

- **Fresh, unripened cheese (soft and wet):** Cottage cheese, cream cheese, fromage blanc, ricotta cheese.
- **Soft-ripened cheese (creamy):** Brie, Camembert, Pont l'Évêque, taleggio.
- **Semifirm or semisoft cheeses:** Cheddar, Colby, Edam, fontina, Gouda, Havarti, Jarlsberg, Monterey Jack, mozzarella, Muenster, pepper Jack, Port-Salut, Swiss cheese.
- **Hard aged cheeses:** Asiago, Comté, Gruyère, Manchego, Parmesan, pecorino.

Oils and Fats

Oils and fats each have a smoke point, which is the temperature at which the oil or fat begins to burn: Neutral oils with high smoke points won't burn when exposed to high temperatures (as in deep-frying or pan-frying), whereas butter and other solid fats (with low smoke points) burn easily.

We've grouped oils and fats into three categories, bearing in mind flavor and smoke point. While many of these ingredients in the following categories are interchangeable, you'll want to base your selection on those criteria.

Neutral oils (high smoke point): Canola oil, coconut oil, corn oil, grapeseed oil, peanut oil, vegetable oil.

Flavored oils (medium or high smoke point): Avocado oil, nut oils, olive oil, sesame oil, sunflower oil.

Solid fats (low smoke point): Bacon fat, butter, chicken fat, lard, margarine, vegetable shortening. Solid when refrigerated but liquid when hot, ghee (clarified butter) has a very high smoke point similar to neutral oils.

Stock

Though stock improves flavor, its primary purpose is to add liquid. **If the recipe calls for a little stock, you can substitute water. If the recipe calls for a lot of stock, use water seasoned with one of the ingredients below,** keeping the flavors of your recipe in mind. Start small and taste as you go, especially since some items skew significantly sweet, salty or condensed.

Stock substitutes: Water seasoned with beer or white wine, juice (such as orange juice or apple juice), melted butter, milk (dairy, coconut, nut or soy milk), miso paste, mushroom stock (liquid from soaked dried mushrooms), olive oil, soy sauce, tea.

Produce

Greens

Most greens can be defined by their flavor and texture: Are they bitter or mild? Sturdy or tender? **When choosing a substitute, consider how the greens are being used.** Tender greens are often consumed raw while sturdy ones might need to be cooked longer; simply add the greens earlier or later in the cooking process as needed.

- **Mild and tender:** Chard, lettuce, mâche, mesclun, spinach, tatsoi.
- **Mild and firm:** Bok choy, cabbage, collard greens.
- **Bitter and tender:** Arugula, endive, frisée, mizuna, radicchio, radish greens, watercress.
- **Bitter and firm:** Escarole, kale, mustard greens, turnip greens.

Vegetables

Substituting vegetables in a recipe can be tricky, and depends largely on personal taste. But some can definitely step in for others: say brussels sprouts for broccoli. You'll just want to bear in mind texture, moisture content and density. We've broken common vegetables up into two categories, based on cook times: **Many in the same category cook at a similar rate, but if you'd like to substitute a firm vegetable for a quick-cooking one or vice versa, simply increase or decrease the cook time** by adding the ingredient earlier or later in your recipe.

- **Quick-cooking:** Asparagus, cabbage (bok choy, broccoli, broccolini, brussels sprouts, cauliflower, kale), celery, corn, eggplant, fennel, mushrooms, peas, peppers, summer squash, zucchini.
- **Firm:** Root vegetables (beet, carrot, celery root, parsnip, potato, sweet potato, turnip), winter squash (such as butternut squash, delicata, kabocha, pumpkin).

Alliums

Because of garlic's pronounced flavor, it's difficult to find an exact substitute, but **leeks, onions (red, white or yellow), scallions, shallots and spring onions are largely interchangeable.** Garlic and onions are available in dried form (powdered, granulated or dehydrated as flakes), which are infinitely more potent — and can skew bitter if overused. Substitute dried ingredients in place of fresh with moderation, and only when the fresh is called for in smaller quantities rather than bulk.

Herbs

Fresh herbs fall into two categories: tender, bright herbs (basil, chervil, chives, cilantro, dill, mint, parsley and tarragon), which are typically at their most flavorful when fresh, or woody, savory herbs (bay leaves, marjoram, oregano, rosemary, sage and thyme), which better retain their essential oils when dried. **Since dried herbs are more potent than fresh, you'll want to use less: Substitute one teaspoon dried herbs for each tablespoon of chopped fresh herbs.** In

general, you can substitute one tender herb for another, or one woody herb for another, but substituting a woody herb for a tender herb (and vice versa) works less frequently. Rely on personal preference, availability and the other ingredients you're cooking with to pick an appropriate substitute.

Basil: Chervil, cilantro, dill, Italian seasoning, oregano, mint, parsley.

Bay leaves: Herbes de Provence, oregano, rosemary, sage, thyme.

Chervil: Basil, dill, parsley, tarragon.

Chives: Cilantro, garlic powder, onion powder, parsley.

Cilantro: Basil, chives, parsley, mint.

Dill: Basil, chervil, mint, parsley.

Marjoram: Herbes de Provence, Italian seasoning, oregano, rosemary, sage, thyme.

Mint: Basil, cilantro, dill, parsley.

Oregano: Bay leaves, herbes de Provence, Italian seasoning, rosemary, thyme, sage.

Parsley: Basil, chervil, chives, cilantro, dill, Italian seasoning, mint, tarragon.

Rosemary: Bay leaves, herbes de Provence, oregano, thyme, sage.

Sage: Bay leaves, herbes de Provence, oregano, rosemary, thyme.

Tarragon: Chervil, parsley.

Thyme: Bay leaves, herbes de Provence, oregano, rosemary, sage.

Spices

When substituting spices, think about what will work in your dish. Most spices can be grouped into four flavor profiles — earthy, floral, peppery and warm. You'll often be able to substitute a spice that hits the same notes by picking one with the same qualities.

Earthy: Curry powder, garlic powder, onion powder, turmeric, Vadouvan, za'atar.

Floral: Cardamom, coriander, fennel, lavender, nutmeg, saffron, star anise.

Peppery: Allspice, ground ginger, peppercorns, mustard powder, sumac.

Warm: Cinnamon, chile (dried), chili powder (blend), cloves, cumin, nutmeg, paprika.

When it comes to spice, there is ample room for experimentation. Consider layering flavor carefully by seasoning lightly at the start of cooking so the end result is subtle, that way you can increase the spice to taste, if desired, once your dish is fully cooked.

Allspice: Combine cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg, or use any one of the three.

Cardamom: Coriander, fennel, ginger, lavender.

Cayenne: Aleppo pepper, chili powder, dried chiles, hot sauce, paprika, red-pepper flakes, sumac.

Chili powder: Combine paprika (sweet, hot or smoked), onion powder, garlic powder, cumin, oregano and cayenne or red-pepper flakes; or use another warm spice, such as cayenne, cloves, cumin, nutmeg or paprika (sweet, hot or smoked).

Cinnamon: Allspice, apple pie spice blend, cloves, coriander, nutmeg, pumpkin pie spice blend.

Cloves: Allspice, cinnamon, nutmeg, black pepper.

Coriander: Cardamom, cinnamon, fennel, nutmeg, saffron, turmeric.

Cumin: Chili powder, coriander, curry powder, garlic powder, onion powder, turmeric.

Curry powder: Combine coriander, cumin, ginger, turmeric, cinnamon and black pepper; or substitute allspice, chili powder, coriander, cumin, garam masala, or turmeric.

Ginger: Allspice, cinnamon, cloves, coriander.

Nutmeg: Allspice, cinnamon, cloves, ground ginger.

Paprika: Cayenne, chili powder, curry powder, black pepper.

Turmeric: Curry powder, garlic powder, onion powder, Vadouvan, za'atar.

Meat and Seafood

While many home cooks plan meals around a protein, even that's flexible. **Make protein substitutions according to preference and what you have on hand, and shift cook times accordingly, adding longer-cooking meats, like beef chuck, earlier or quick-cooking seafood later within the recipe.** You can also adjust the size of the protein by cutting it into smaller pieces (or remove the meat from the bones) so it cooks faster, or leaving it in larger pieces so it cooks at a slower rate. Thinking broadly can expand your options even further: Tofu, lentils, beans and other vegetarian options can make excellent textural substitutes.

Beef: If swapping one cut of beef for another, try to substitute tough cuts (like chuck, brisket or round roast) for other tough cuts, and tender cuts (like strip steak, flank steak or filet mignon) for other quick-cooking cuts. You can also use lamb in place of beef in many recipes, though its flavor is more assertive.

Ground meat or fresh sausage: Both can be used interchangeably. You can remove sausages from their casings, and cook them as ground meat, or flavor plain ground meat with red-pepper flakes, fennel seed, Italian herbs and other

seasonings. You can also substitute ground meat of any kind, swapping in ground pork for ground beef in meatballs, or ground chicken for ground turkey in a larb, for example. But bear in mind the fat content of whatever you're using: Ground pork is the fattier option; if cooking with ground beef, chicken, turkey or veal, you might want to add extra oil to provide extra fat.

Pork: Bone-in pork chops cook in roughly the same time as steaks of similar thickness, but you will want to use a meat thermometer to check the temperature to achieve desired doneness. If working with diced pork stew meat, cubed beef stew meats will cook at a similar rate. Cubed chicken will also work, but you'll need to reduce cooking times.

Chicken: You can substitute whole boneless, skinless breasts for boneless, skinless chicken thighs: Just butterfly the breasts or pound them thinly to achieve a similar thickness of thighs. (You may also need to adjust cook time.) If substituting bone-in, skin-on thighs, increase the cook time. Ground turkey or turkey breasts also achieve similar results as their chicken counterparts.

Fish fillets: Most fish fillets are either lean (bass, catfish, cod, flounder, halibut, monkfish, red snapper, skate, sole, tilapia) or fatty (char, mahi-mahi, salmon, swordfish, tuna). Substitute lean for lean, and fatty for fatty.

Shrimp or scallops: Fresh or frozen, both cook very quickly at similar rates and benefit from quick, high-heat cooking methods. Depending on your recipe, fish fillets or small pieces of meat or poultry also might be suitable substitutes.