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12 Pantry Must-Haves for Healthy Cooking

by [DietsInReview](#), on Mon Feb 22, 2010 7:27am PST[2 Comments](#)[Post a Comment](#)[Read More from This Author »](#)[Report Abuse](#)By [Chef Devin Alexander](#) for [DietsInReview.com](#)

During the months of February and March, you'll find me filling in as the featured guest chef at DietsInReview.com. I'm excited to share some of my favorite tips, tricks and ideas for getting out of the drive-thru, back in to the kitchen and making healthy cooking fun and accessible.



One question people frequently ask is "What do I need in my pantry to live a healthy lifestyle?". Obviously this can vary by person based on goals or preference. However, there are definitely items I'd consider "must-haves" to set yourself up for success. In my upcoming book "**I Can't Believe It's Not Fattening!**" you'll find I use all of these ingredients to create delicious dishes that are family favorites, they're just light on the fat and calories.

The following 12 items are what I consider must-haves when stocking a healthy kitchen.

- 1. Strong-flavored Extra Virgin Olive Oil** – Since you only need a little, I like to use an olive oil with a robust flavor, that way I can taste it without overusing. I also use an olive oil sprayer to mist the top of oven-fried chicken or French fries.
- 2. Lean Protein** – It's necessary to always have lean proteins readily available. Protein is needed to fuel your body and to build, support and/or repair muscle. I always keep a bag of frozen boneless, skinless, chicken breasts and shrimp in my freezer; I defrost the chicken the night before I want to use it, but the shrimp is great for those last minute "oh, drat, I forgot" as it defrosts and cooks quickly.
- 3. Brown Rice** – For years I ate long-grain brown rice, because it was so readily available and I didn't realize that different grains had different flavors. Then I tried short-grain brown rice and have been hooked ever since. It has a great texture and nutty flavor, plus it holds up well in the refrigerator, so I can cook a big pot and rely on through the week.
- 4. Old-fashioned Oats** – It's no secret that oatmeal is an ideal breakfast food because it's all-natural, contains fiber and is heart healthy. I also love using oats as a binder in meatloaf and meatballs, or even chopped in a food processor with dried fruit to create my "Tropical Truffles." I also love processing oats into flour in a food processor to use for healthier baked goods—it's less gritty than whole wheat flour and just as nutritious.
- 5. Fresh Fruit and Vegetables** – You'll find everything from pears and strawberries to apples and bananas in my book. Whether or not you like those fruits, just be sure to buy some fresh fruit (or at least frozen) when you grocery shop as they make great snacks or quick smoothie or oatmeal toppings. Having fresh vegetables in your refrigerator at all times is also necessary. Whether it's makings for a fresh, green salad or nutrient-rich raw veggies, you shouldn't be afraid to stock-up and try as many varieties as you possibly can. Keep them washed and sliced in the fridge so they are always within reach.
- 6. Seasonings and Herbs** – These are necessary to have so that you can add a punch of flavor without fat

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or unnecessary sodium. I always have Reduced-Sodium Old Bay Seasoning, salt-free Mexican seasoning (I use Southwest Chipotle Mrs. Dash), Cajun seasoning, and blackened seasoning in my pantry and I'm always looking for new ones. Fresh herbs are another secret weapon in my recipe arsenal. Chop them finely and add to everything from salads to omelets, dips, marinades and sauces for loads of flavor and virtually no calories, fat or sodium.

7. **Light Cheese** – Obviously, even light or reduced-fat cheeses should be eaten in moderation, but I think it's important to have at least some light or low-fat cheese on hand if you're a cheese lover. Cheese is great to toss on a salad, melt on grilled chicken breast, add to a sandwich, or pair with fruit for a quick and filling snack. Reduced-fat or light varieties of favorites like Swiss, mozzarella, provolone, Parmesan, blue cheese and brie are my essentials.

8. **Reduced-fat Whole Wheat Flour Tortillas** – My recipes call for 8-inch reduced-fat whole wheat flour tortillas – at around 100-120 calories each, these easily make wraps, quesadillas, and even thin crust pizzas. Anything bigger than 8-inches (unless you find the rare 10-inch with 100 calories, like **La Tortilla Factory**) just add unnecessary calories, carbs, and fat to your meals.

9. **Low-fat, Low-sodium Marinara** – I like to keep jarred marinara in my pantry at all times. It's a pantry essential since I love pizza, pasta, and chicken parmesan, or even as a dip for my "Powerhouse Polenta Fries."

10. **Natural, Creamy Peanut Butter** – I consider this protein source a staple even if it is naturally high in fat. While peanut butter should be consumed in moderation, I like to put it on a banana with yogurt, granola and a drizzle of chocolate syrup to make my "Chocolate Peanut Butter Breakfast Banana Split" or in my "Peanut Butter and Banana Waffle Sandwiches."

11. **Fat-free Vanilla or Greek Yogurt** – Yogurt is one of the most versatile ingredients in the fridge! I use it in baking, smoothies, parfaits, or for snacking. If you are really looking to consume as few calories as possible, opt for the artificially sweetened variety. For Greek yogurt, a thicker and creamier variety, drizzle with honey and top with fresh fruit, or use it for savory recipes like dips or as a base in potato salads.

12. **Egg Whites** – Jump starting your day with this essential protein will awaken your metabolism and prevent you from feeling hungry before lunch. For a quick breakfast, I often make an egg white omelet, or scramble egg whites in the microwave and toss with veggies and crumbled turkey bacon for a decadent breakfast scramble. Hard-boiled egg whites also make a great snack.

See even more of Chef Devin's **healthy kitchen must-haves** at [DietsInReview.com](#), or learn what are her **essential kitchen tools for healthy cooking**.

Chef Devin Alexander is the author The Biggest Loser Cookbooks, The Most Decadent Diet Ever! and the soon-to-release I Can't Believe it's Not Fattening.

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