



# *What's Cooking*

*Cooking  
practices  
of Australia's  
main meal  
preparers*

# About the research

**M**eat & Livestock Australia (MLA) has commissioned a number of reports on the Australian main meal. These reports provide useful insights into main meal choices and practices including what meals are prepared, who prepares them and how and what drives meal choice.

The results of *Last Night's Dinner 2009* were surprising in that it found that Australians are mostly cooking healthy and well balanced meals and eating at home. It showed that the evening meal is the best opportunity for healthy eating since meals generally contained three or more serves of vegetables. The most popular meals were those that were easy to cook, healthy and a family favourite, such as spaghetti bolognese and steak and vegetables.

*Main Meal Repertoires 2011* showed that the main meal repertoire is based around a wide range of meals, with most meal preparers purchasing ingredients for familiar but unplanned meals. Meal choices varied by occasion but also by life stage, income and food involvement. It showed that the most confident cooks had the largest number of meals in their repertoire and served the most number of vegetables with the main meal. This correlation between confidence, size of the repertoire and healthiness of meals begged the question – was cooking skill important for increasing the healthiness of a meal?

To help answer this question, this study was designed to gain an understanding of how Australians cook their main meal.

*What's Cooking* is based on an online nationwide survey of 1,023 Australian meal preparers aged 18 to 65 years (47% male and 53% female) conducted by the research agency The Clever Stuff in May 2012. Quotas were set by State (including metro and regional areas) as well as gender and age to ensure a nationally representative sample. The survey questionnaire covered current cooking practices (with an emphasis on the evening meal), purchasing and preparation of the evening meal, use of ingredients and utensils, interest in learning more about cooking as well as important background information such as household income, employment status and ethnicity. The data was analysed by Professor Tony Worsley from the Centre for Physical Activity and Nutrition Research at Deakin University.

Dr. Rebecca Huntley from Ipsos Australia wrote the report, drawing from qualitative research which informed previous studies as well as her extensive work on Australian eating habits through syndicated and ad hoc research with Ipsos Australia to interpret the findings.



## Overview

- We take a simple, intuitive approach to cooking** 4  
Australians take a simple approach to cooking. They normally cook from scratch, without a formal recipe, based around a few simple cooking techniques and trusty utensils.
- We love easy, one-pot meals** 6  
Main meal preparers largely prefer one-pot meals which are in keeping with an approach to cooking which favour simple, tasty dishes.
- We have a formulaic approach to cooking** 8  
Protein choice invites particular cooking techniques and certain ingredients to the plate, with main meal preparers taking a formulaic approach to cooking.
- We make some meals with more vegies than others** 10  
The number of vegetables included in a main meal is partly by the recipe and partly by the health-orientation of the main meal preparer.
- New meal ideas don't need to be new** 12  
Main meal preparers aren't after new, exotic ideas. They want familiar meal ideas that draw from their simple skills base but enhance flavour.
- We want practical tips, not a master class in cooking** 14  
Main meal preparers want handy tips about cooking techniques and ingredients that they can add to their existing skill base.
- Conclusion** 18  
Main meal preparers want advice on improving the healthiness of their main meals and the best way to introduce this advice is to work within, not beyond, the current framework of cooking skills, habits and lifestyle needs.

# We take a *simple, intuitive approach to cooking*

Australians take a simple approach to cooking. They normally cook from scratch, without a formal recipe, based around a few simple cooking techniques and trusty utensils with some reliance on ready-made sauces for convenience and flavour.

Like *Last Night's Dinner*, this study also found most meal preparers cook from scratch with 46% doing so 'often', 28% 'sometimes' and only 2% 'never'.

Meal preparers seem to cook using intuitive knowledge rather than formal instructions or a formal recipe. The majority either rely on memory (56%), intuition (29%) or on available ingredients (41%). This reflects both cooking confidence, reported in previous surveys, and adaptability among the majority of meal preparers.

They predominantly use three core cooking techniques - roasting (both meat and vegetables), stir-frying and pan-frying. Steaming, stewing and casseroles are also well-used methods. Less popular is the use of a pressure cooker, deep frying, poaching and braising.

*Stir-fry made from meat I have already thinly sliced from the freezer. All cooked in [the] wok, starting with onion, ginger, garlic then adding meat finally. Add chopped carrot, celery, broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, capsicum, snow peas, bean shoots and Hokkien noodles. Cooked in soy sauce. Easy because if one of the ingredients is missing it doesn't matter and it is very quick.*

*Brown five hundred grams [of] beef mince and a chopped onion. Add 1 packet [of] chicken noodle soup mix, 3 teaspoons [of] curry powder, about a litre of water, some sliced carrots, shredded cabbage and simmer for about thirty mins. Season. Serve with mashed potatoes or rice.*

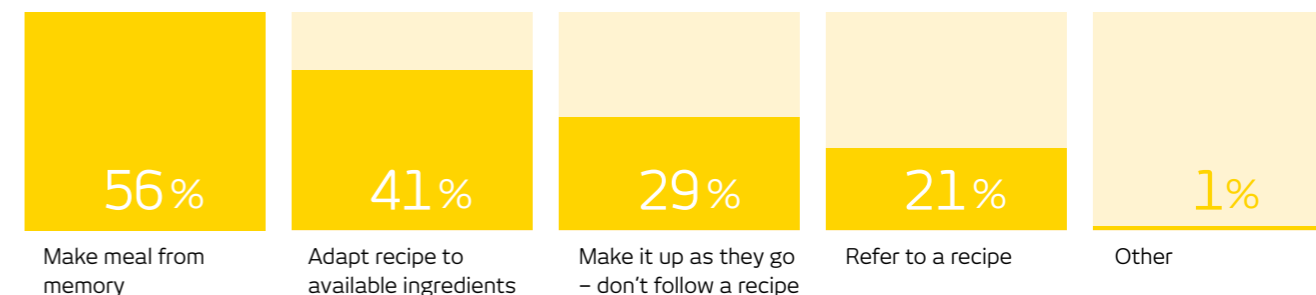
They rely on seven core utensils - a chopping knife, tongs, a vegetable peeler and a cheese grater. In terms of larger utensils, a large frying pan, large and medium saucepans and a roasting pan are also popular. Meal preparers use both the oven and the microwave. The least used utensils are a pressure cooker, juicer, food processor, roasting rack, slow cooker and weighing scales - though many respondents use them sometimes.

This simple approach to cooking carries through to flavourings as well; the most popular herbs and spices used are parsley, oregano, basil, pepper, curry powder and chillies.

They also rely on pre-prepared sauces such as tomato and pasta sauces, liquid stock and pre-made sauces. This reliance is driven both by convenience and the desire to add flavour. In the mind of main meal preparers, the use of these ready-made sauces is consistent with the 'cooking from scratch' philosophy; indeed they see them as just another ingredient used along with fresh ingredients to create a meal.

## APPROACH TO COOKING

When cooking meals that you regularly cook for dinner, would you usually...?



## POPULAR COOKING TECHNIQUES

How often would you use the following cooking techniques?

**MOST POPULAR**

Often Sometimes Never

**Pan-fry**



**Stir-fry**



**Roast (veg)**



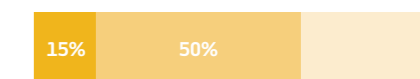
**Roast (meat)**



**Stew or casserole**



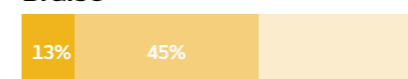
**Steam**



**LEAST POPULAR**

Often Sometimes Never

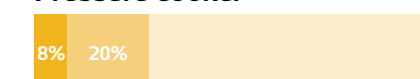
**Braise**



**Poach**



**Pressure cooker**



## POPULAR INGREDIENTS

How often do you use the following ingredients?

Often Sometimes Never

**Tomato sauce**



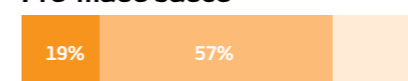
**Liquid stock**



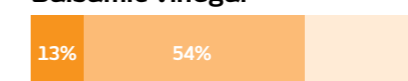
**Pasta sauce**



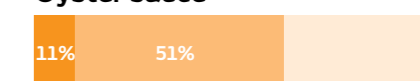
**Pre-made sauce**



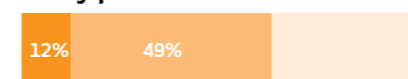
**Balsamic vinegar**



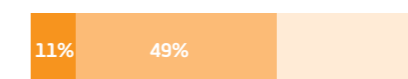
**Oyster sauce**



**Curry paste**



**Simmer sauce**



# We love *easy,* *one-pot* meals

**M**ain meal preparers largely prefer one-pot meals which are in keeping with an approach to cooking which favour simple, tasty dishes.

Respondents were asked to describe one of the easiest evening meals they cook. A wide variety of dishes were described with the most common being spaghetti bolognese; a portion of meat, fish or poultry served in a variety of ways with vegetables; stir-fries; curries or casseroles. Other meals were Mexican style meals; bread-based meals such as pizza and burgers; and egg-based meals such as omelettes.

These descriptions and the common use of roasting, stir-frying and pan-frying suggests a preference for one-pot meals by most main meal preparers.

As with so much to do with cooking, convenience is driving the one-pot cooking preference. It minimises use and cleaning up of utensils and simplifies the cooking process, with only one pot to watch. The outcome in terms of flavour is generally predictable – throw everything in; season; and wait for the results.

In *Last Night's Dinner*, meals which scored highest for convenience were steak and vegetables, spaghetti bolognese and beef

casserole. The most frequently consumed meals reported in *Main Meal Repertoires* were spaghetti bolognese, meat and vegetables, and stir-fry, with casserole a fortnightly choice.

This survey asked respondents how they cooked some of these meals – spaghetti bolognese, casserole and roasts. Their responses reinforces the importance of convenience - they prefer less fussy techniques (for instance, only 41% brown the meat) and many appear to work from available ingredients. For most, the need for convenience does not appear to override the need for health. Most add vegetables to casseroles; half to spaghetti bolognese; and majority (81%) use lean mince.



**This is how most Australians  
like to cook  
what they love to eat...**

## Spaghetti Bolognese



In this study, 94% of respondents cooked spaghetti bolognese often or sometimes.

Spaghetti bolognese was made in a variety of ways but the majority (88%) place all ingredients in the pot at the same time and break up the mince at the early cooking stage.

The core ingredients used by everyone are lean beef mince, canned tomatoes or sauce, onions and garlic. Half (49%) added vegetables such as broccoli, carrots, capsicum, corn, mushrooms, onions, peas and tomatoes and 65% of cooks used canned tomatoes. About 10% add something extra such as bacon, herbs and wine.

Casserole – particularly beef casserole – is another popular dish with 74% of respondents regularly making casseroles.

Casseroles are mostly prepared in a slow cooker (39%) or on the stove top (34%). The overall method is to brown onions and meat separately; and then to add liquid or sauce, flavouring and vegetables. Just under half of meal preparers (41%) brown meat in batches, which is recommended for tenderness.

Main meal preparers prefer inexpensive cuts of meat for beef casserole such as chuck or gravy beef, typically using between 500g to a kilo of meat in the dish.

Only 1% of those surveyed don't add vegetables to their casserole. The popular flavourings used include pepper (66%), garlic (63%), herbs (61%) and salt (52%).

## Casserole



## Roast



Many meal preparers reported roasting beef and lamb (76% and 88%, respectively).

Roasting was not only a popular cooking method for large cuts of meat but also smaller cuts. Popular cuts for beef roast are topside (38%) and rump (34%) and for lamb, the leg roast (78%). In contrast, the most common cuts for steaks are rump (30%) followed by sirloin/porterhouse and scotch fillet (17%).

In terms of cooking technique, over 50% of meal preparers indicate they cook at 180 degrees for 25-35 min per 500g meat i.e. medium rare to medium.

Roasting vegetables is a frequently used cooking technique as well. Roasts are a dish which is most likely to be prepared with three or more vegetables. Three-quarters of respondents (75%) used leftovers from roasts for sandwiches or salads.

# We have a formulaic approach to cooking

**P**rotein choice invites particular cooking techniques and certain ingredients to the plate, with main meal preparers taking a formulaic approach to cooking.

This survey confirms previous surveys which show the most popular protein choices were beef, chicken, fish, lamb and eggs. Half of all meal preparers base their evening meal around beef and chicken one to two nights a week and around 40% serve fish, lamb and eggs one to two nights a week. Fewer tend to base their meals around legumes.

As mentioned above, main meal preparers take an intuitive approach to cooking. They also take a formulaic approach to what cooking methods and ingredients they use with certain protein choices.

This study and past studies, including *Main Meal Repertoires*, found the usual approach to meal preparation is to base it on a particular protein choice and then consider the cooking method. It's clear that beef is the most versatile protein, connected to a range of cooking techniques (roast, casserole, stew, stir-fry and pan-fry) and a variety of Mediterranean and some Asian flavours. In contrast pork is almost always roasted and invites a minimum of flavouring. Chicken on the other hand is more strongly associated with Asian flavours and the most likely of any of the proteins to be cooked with pre-made or simmer sauces as it is most associated with pan-fry and stir-fry cooking techniques.

The other formulaic aspect of main meal preparers approach to cooking relates

to what proteins they choose and the frequency of those choices. The rule seems to be that, except for certain beef dishes, you alternate protein choices throughout the week. You wouldn't serve chicken or lamb two days in a row. Alternating protein choice fulfills the need for variety, which is connected in main meals preparers' minds with healthy eating.

## What portions are being served?

We asked what portion sizes were typically served for an average man and woman. Portion sizes tend to be higher for men than for women.

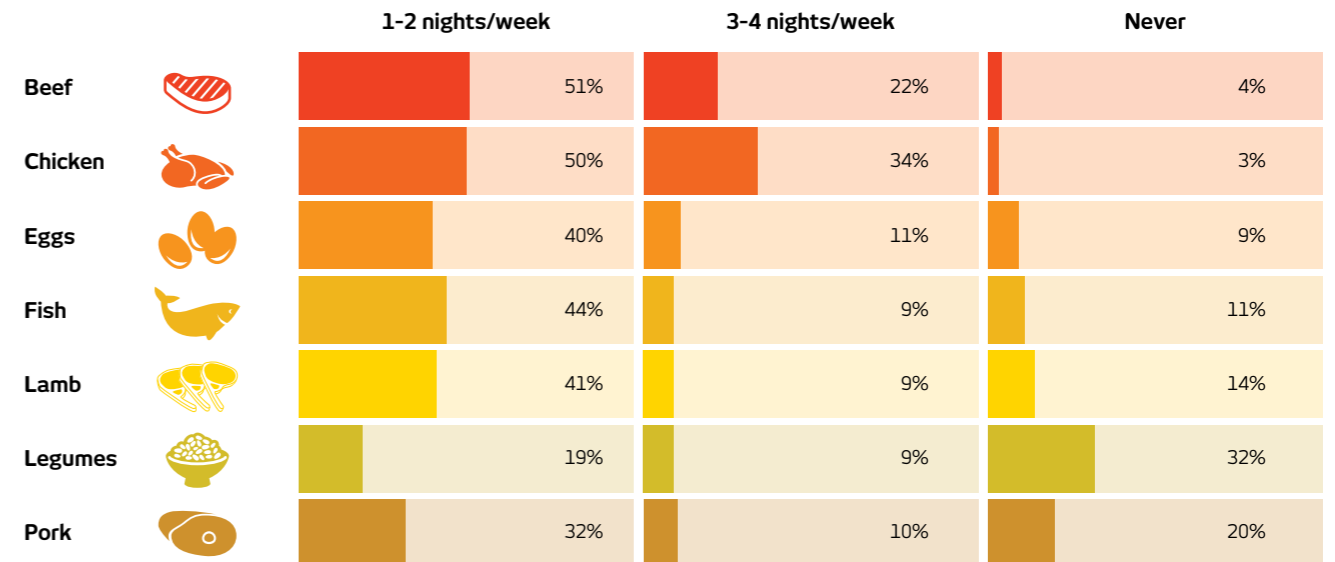
Almost three quarters said they would serve an average man a whole chicken breast compared to either a whole breast (44%) or half a breast (56%) for an average women.

For a roast meal, 44% reported they would serve an average man 3 slices compared to 2 slices for an average woman (52%).

When it comes to lamb cutlets, portion sizes varied from 2 to 3 each (44% to 38%, respectively).

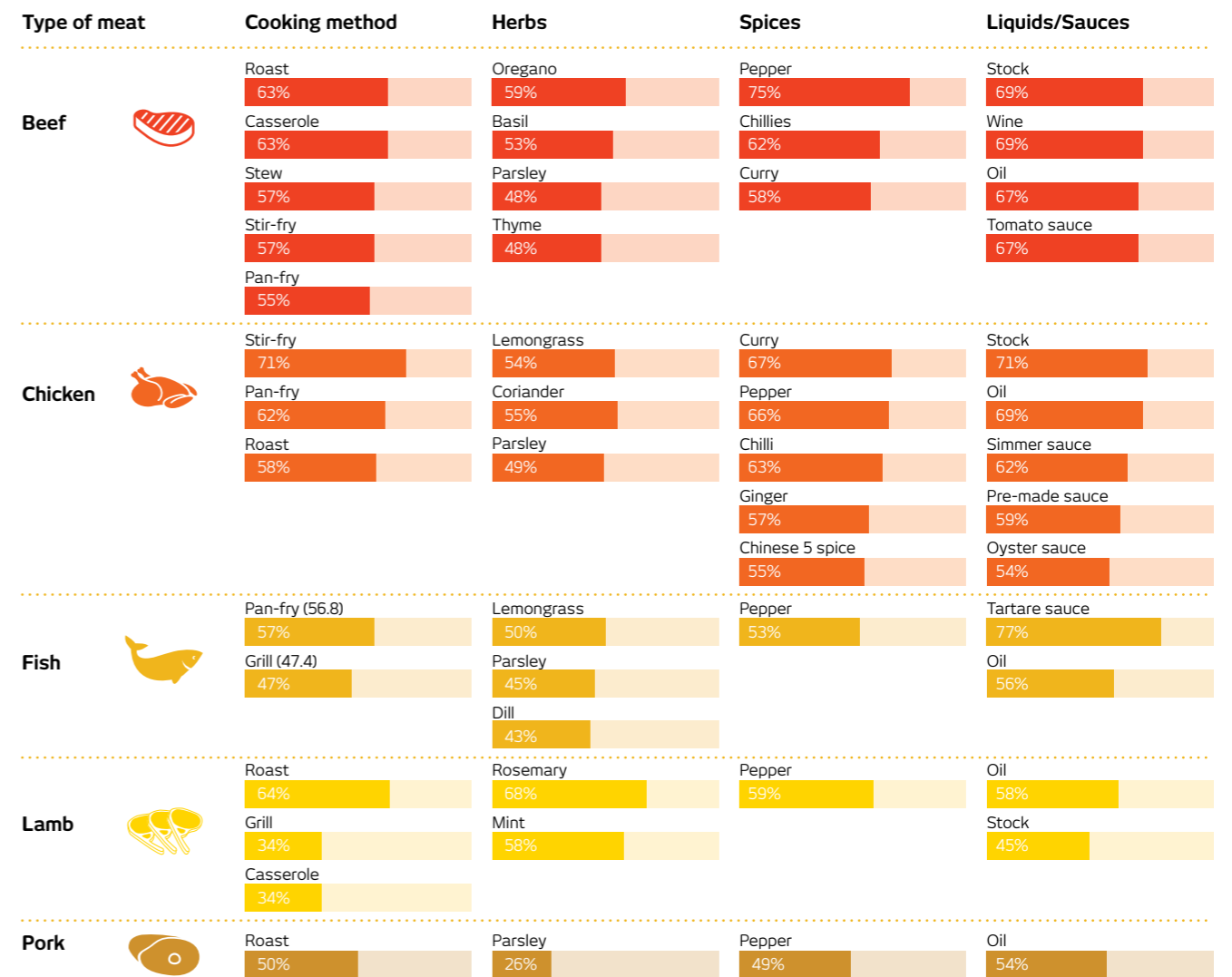
## COMMON PROTEIN CHOICES

How often would you base your evening meal around the following ingredients?



## FREQUENT\* COOKING METHODS & INGREDIENTS BY PROTEIN CHOICE

Which cooking methods, herbs, spices and sauces do you use for the following meat types?



\*often & sometimes (responses combined)

# We make *some meals* with *more vegies* than others

The number of vegetables included in a main meal is partly determined by the recipe and partly determined by the health-orientation of the main meal preparer.

The importance of the family sitting down to a healthy meal to reconnect and ensure at least one meal in the day is healthy has been a constant theme in our surveys and qualitative research.

*Last Night's Dinner* found that main meal preparers were making greater efforts to include more fresh ingredients in their meals. Nine out of ten reported removing most of the fat from the meat they prepare and over 60% of meals included three or more vegetables (excluding potato). It was evident from this survey that different meals invited a different number of vegetables to the plate.



This survey explored further the type of meals most likely to invite vegetables to the plate from the main meal preparers' point of view. What is clear is that certain dishes are always made with plenty of vegetables whereas others are unlikely to attract many vegetables.

Stir-fry, roast and meat and veg-style meals were most commonly nominated as meals usually made containing three or more different vegetables. These are recipes where the presence of more than three or more vegetables is an essential part of the meal.

By contrast, there is a category of meals – soup, pies, pasta and chicken dishes – where there are often fewer than two different vegetables served with that meal. These are meals which can still hold up without vegetables; they are a nice-to-have, not an essential element in the dish. In some cases – for example with omelettes or curries – there may be a perception that the dish would not taste as good if too many vegetables were added. With certain dishes, there may not be the habit of considering more than one vegetable for inclusion. However, for some dishes if the main meal preparer is health-oriented, the dish can open itself up to a greater than usual addition of vegetables. This is reflected by the fact that 21% of pasta dishes are served with three or more serves of vegetables.

Can you name up to three evening meals you usually cook that contain 3 or more different vegetables and up to three meals that contain fewer than 2 vegetables?

3+ VEGIES (%)		2- VEGIES (%)
<b>Meals which usually contain 3+</b>		
32%	Stir-fry	0%
29%	Roast	0%
25%	Meat and veg	0%
21%	Casserole/stew	0%
8%	Burgers/wraps etc	0%
7%	Salads/vegetable dishes	0%
<b>Meals which can either have 3+ or 2-</b>		
15%	Steak	10%
13%	Soup	9%
5%	Pie e.g. Shepherd's pie/quiche/slice etc	9%
21%	Pasta/spag/lasagne	56%
4%	Chicken dishes	16%
2% (fried rice)	Risotto/rice dishes	11%
1%	Baked dinners	2%
<b>Meals which usually contain 2-</b>		
0%	Fish and chips/fish/seafood	14%
0%	Curry	8%
0%	Sausages and mash	4%
0%	Omelette	3%
0%	Pizza	2%

# New meal ideas don't need to be new

**M**ain meal preparers aren't after new, exotic ideas. They want familiar meal ideas that draw from their simple skills base but enhance flavour.

Previous surveys and qualitative research has highlighted how important it is for main meal preparers to serve a variety of meals to their family. They associate variety with taste but also with excitement. They also perceive that a diet with variety equates with better nutritional outcomes.

Variety is achieved in different ways. Quite simply, they serve a range of protein sources over the week, such as beef, chicken, fish, lamb and eggs.

Introducing new meal ideas into the repertoire is another way of achieving

meal variety. However, the report *Main Meal Repertoires* found that for some main meal preparers, introducing new meals is difficult.

This research found that only 38% of meal preparers had introduced a new meal into their evening meal repertoire recently. The new meals introduced were in fact similar to those meals already established in the repertoire such as chicken dishes, pasta dishes, Indian dishes, casseroles and stews.

They were also similar to the meals described as 'easy meals'. Even when it comes to 'new' meals, main meal preparers are looking for easy cooking methods and familiar core ingredients, albeit but with a twist. They are searching for new flavours, particularly from Asia, reflecting a desire for different and improved taste experiences.

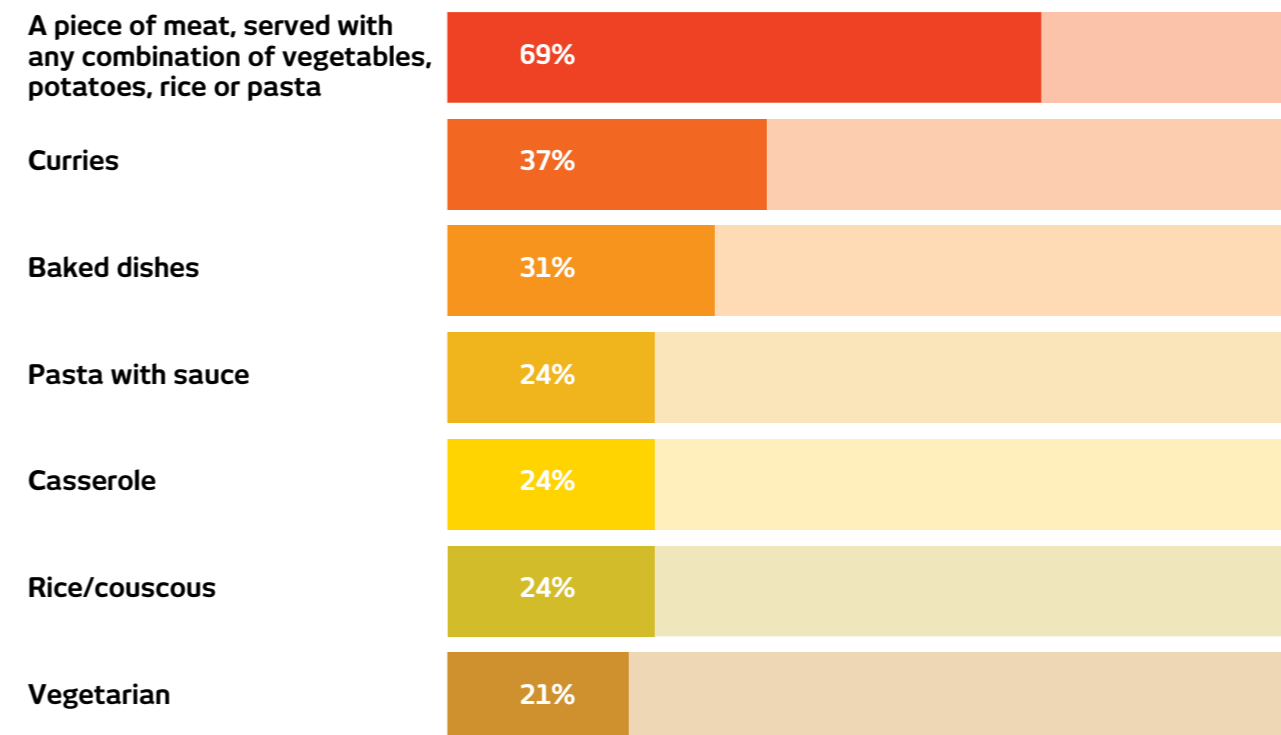
Taste, speed of preparation, inexpensiveness and being 'interesting' were key factors in the adoption of new meals. It's clear that when it comes to new meals, main meal preparers are looking for ideas that enhance taste and don't undermine convenience.

These findings suggest main meal preparers want tasty meal ideas that build on the familiar – a well-known dish with a twist. New meals don't need to be completely new to be exciting and attractive to meal preparers; familiar does not necessarily mean boring!

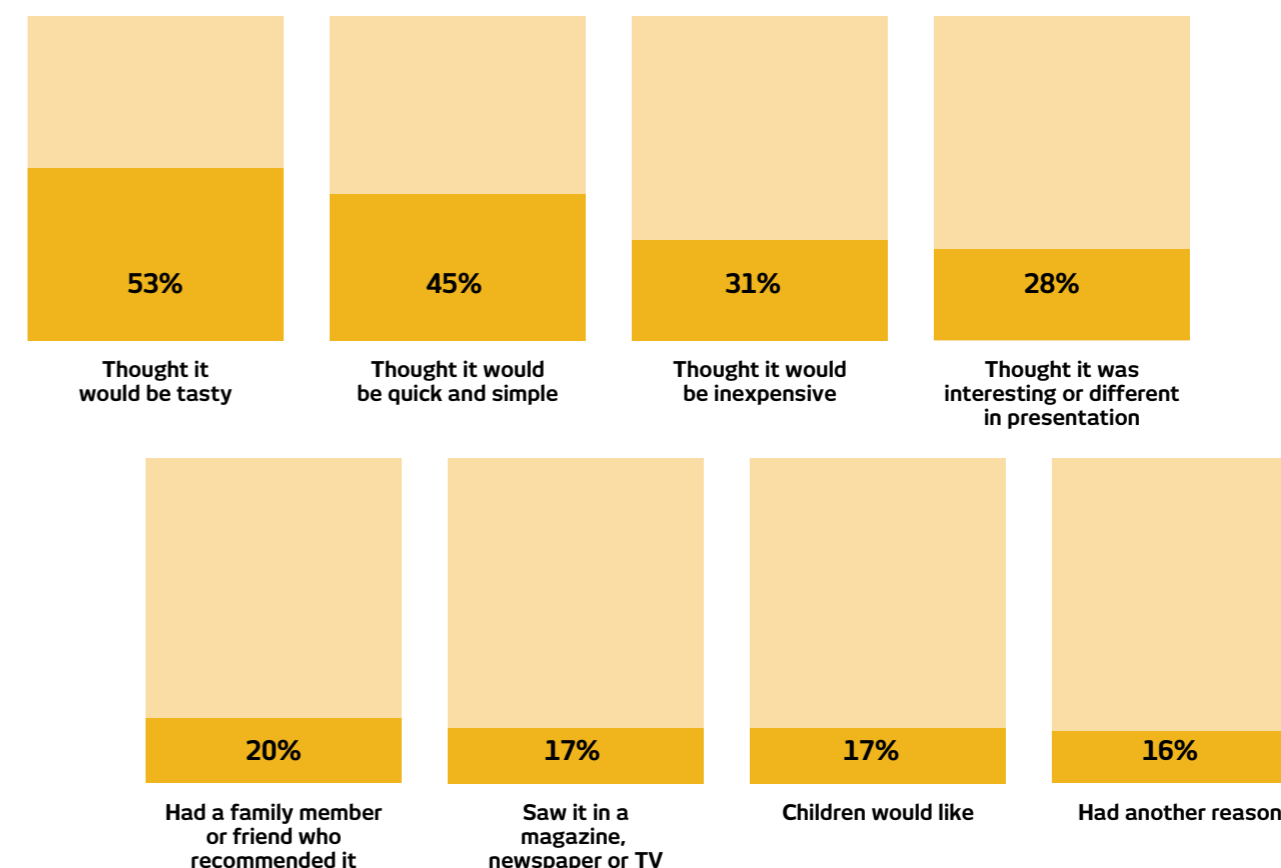


Have you recently introduced a new meal into your regular main meal repertoire?  
If yes, what was the meal?

## New Meals



What attracted you to this new recipe?



# We want *practical tips,* *not a master class in cooking*

## Main meal preparers want handy tips about cooking techniques and ingredients that they can add to their existing skill base.

In *Last Night's Dinner*, the majority of respondents said they enjoyed cooking. Only 18% reported not liking to cook. *Main Meal Repertoires* showed that on the whole, main meal preparers are confident cooks with 88% able to prepare and cook a meal in under 30 minutes and able to make a tasty meal using fresh produce in season.

Broad interest in food and cooking is reflected in this research which found that 71% of meal preparers want to learn more about cooking.

The importance of convenience and taste, but also health, is reflected in the strongest interest for information on tasty, easy meal ideas that are quick to prepare and also healthy. Although there was substantial support for all the proposed learning activities, there was less interest in learning

about meal planning and use of leftovers, potentially reflecting their more spontaneous and flexible approach to meal planning.

Their response to an open-ended question regarding the type of meals they would like to learn how to cook suggests an interest in learning to make various ethnic dishes. Asian and Indian dishes featured prominently on this list. However, old favourites such as stir-fry, casseroles, pasta dishes, chicken dishes and vegetarian meals also dominated the list. These findings suggest main meal preparers are looking for tasty meal ideas that build on the familiar – a well-known dish with a twist.

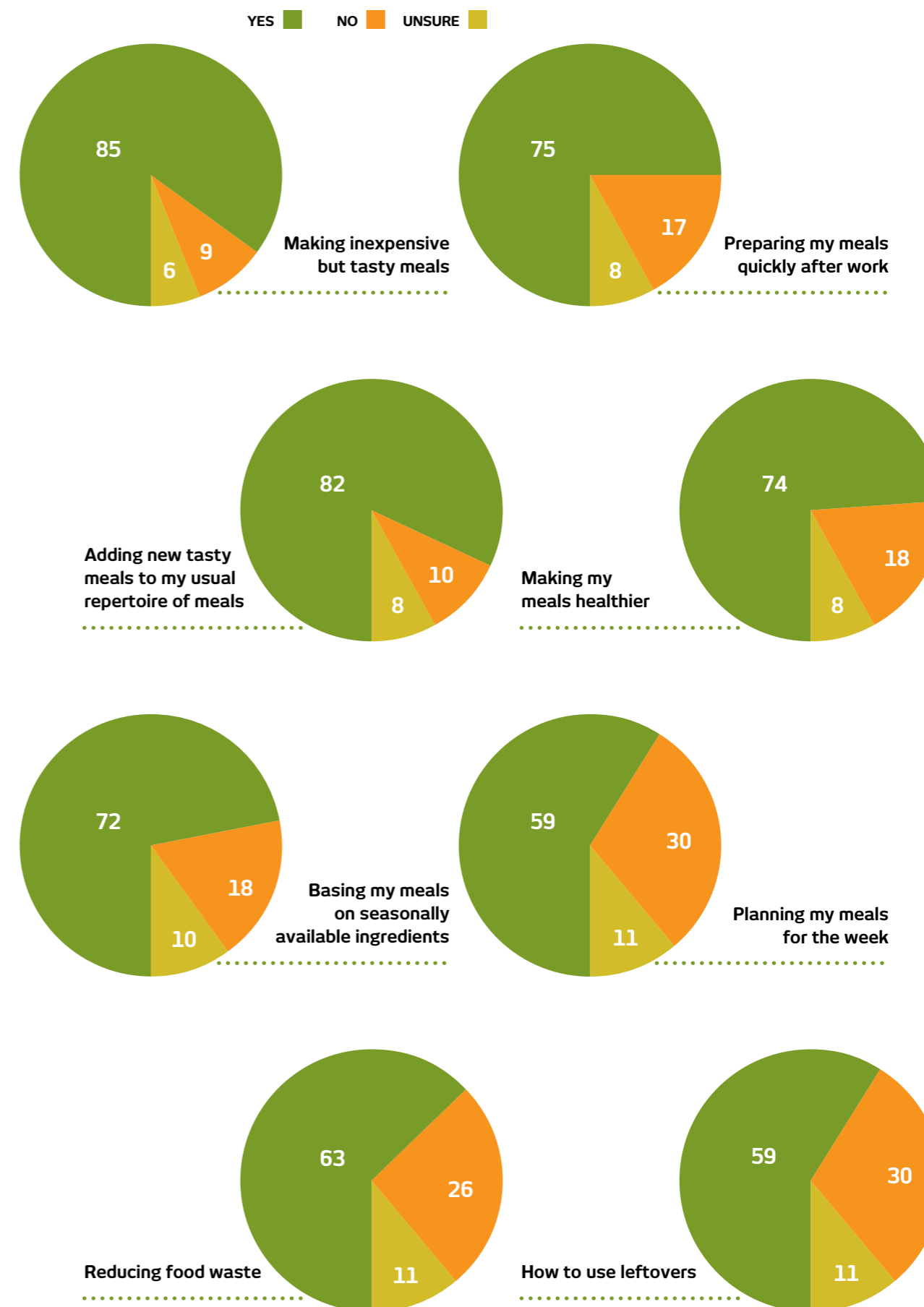
Interest in learning about different cuts of meat and how to perfect familiar cooking methods supports findings from the qualitative research which suggests main meal preparers find practical tips which they can integrate into their own repertoire particularly helpful.

The current research found that by far the most preferred ways to learn about cooking is via television. Newspaper or magazine articles and watching demonstrations online are also popular ways to improve cooking knowledge.

However qualitative research for *Main Meal Repertoires* showed that the most useful take-away from cooking shows and food media are handy tips on improving familiar cooking techniques, adding flavour and handling ingredients.



## Would you be interested in receiving information or advice on how to do the following?





Please describe **any meals** you are particularly interested in learning **how to cook?**

“Different types of casseroles as long as not too spicy”

“Easy to prepare with fresh food”

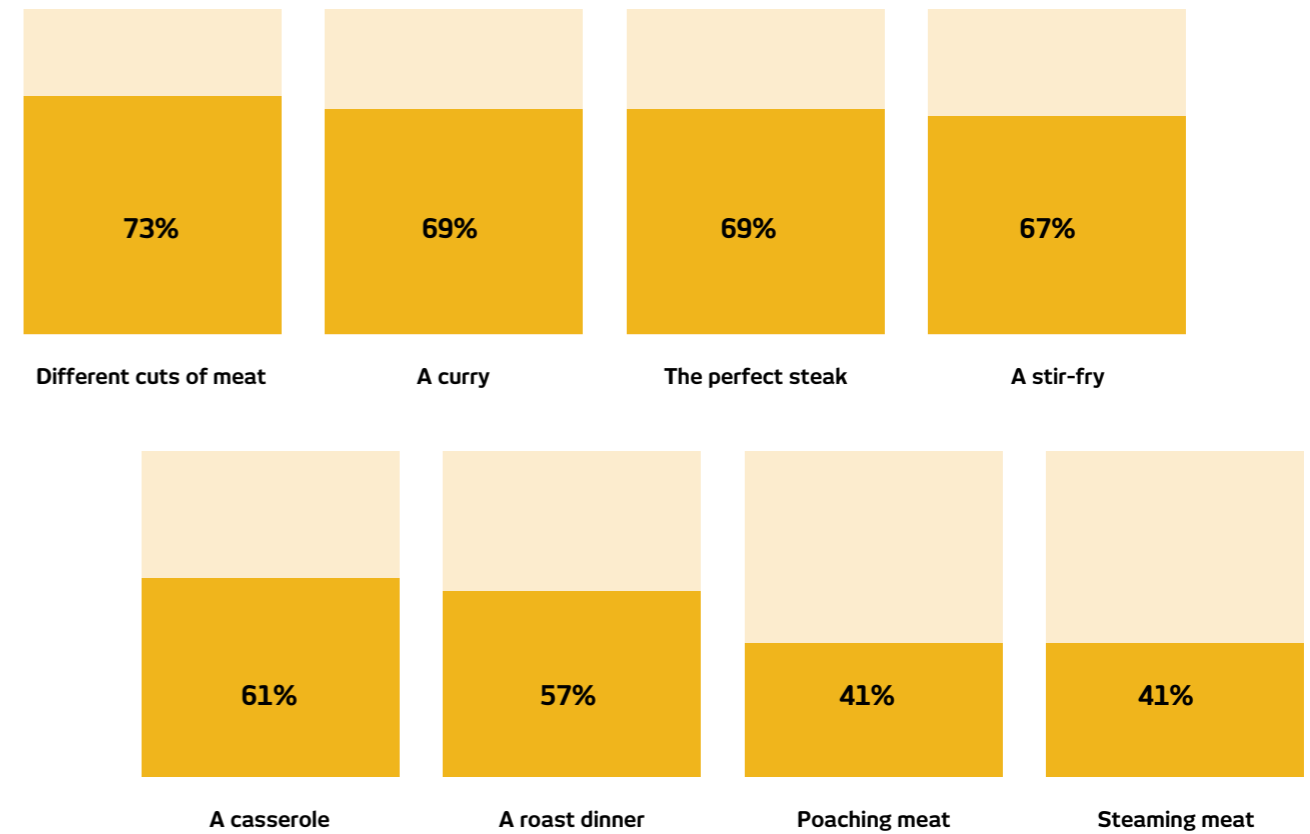
“Fast, easy for shift workers and healthy”

“Indian curry from scratch”

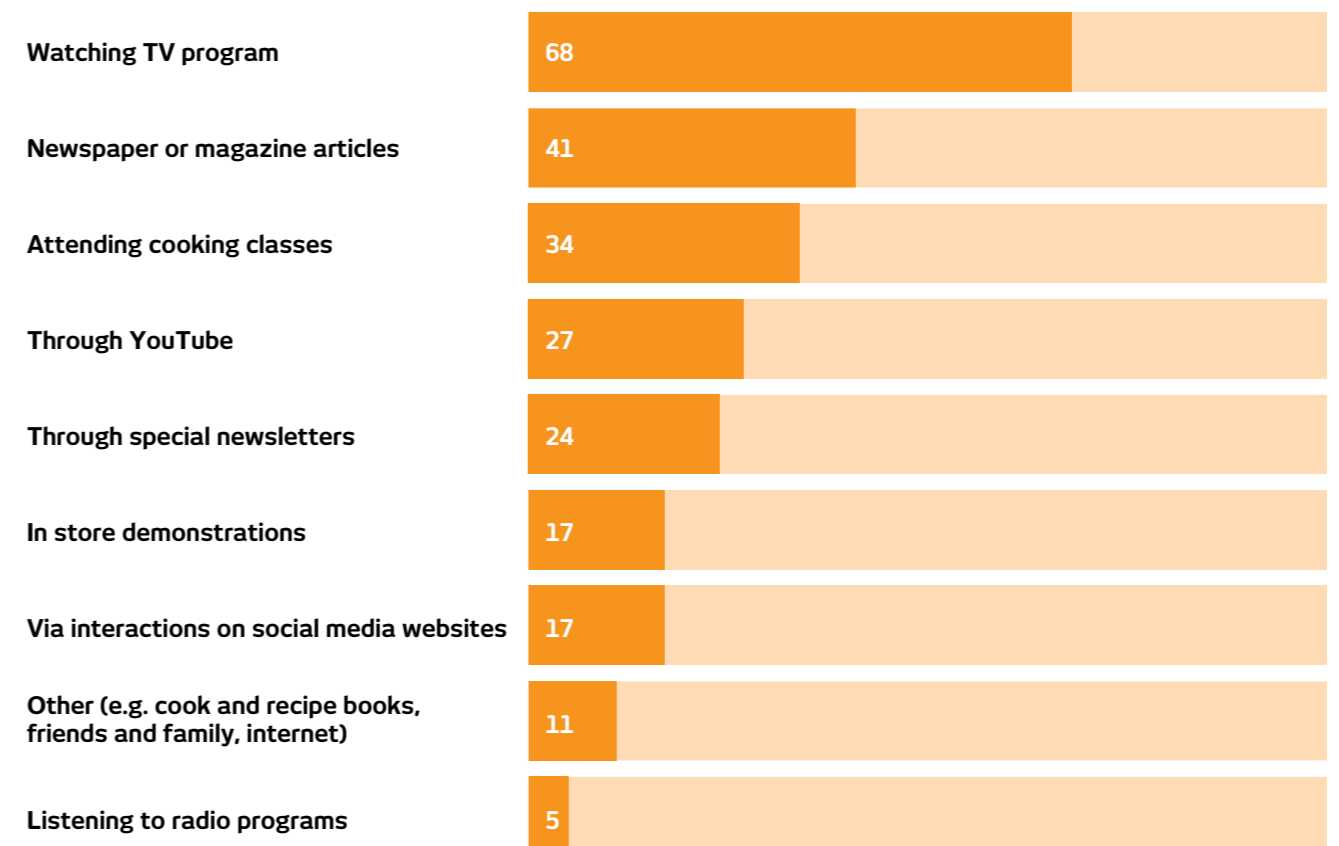
“Whatever is easy and quick to make”

“Any meals with plenty of taste and hardly any calories”

Would you be interested in learning how to cook any of the following?



In what ways would you like to learn more about cooking?



# Conclusion

**R**eturning to the central question of this study, is cooking skill important for increasing the healthiness of a meal? While enhancing intuitive cooking skills will always be welcomed by main meal preparers, the key to improving healthiness is in fact working within, not beyond, the current framework of cooking skills, habits and lifestyle needs.

Contrary to concerns around declining cooking skills, this research suggests that main meal preparers of all ages know how to cook. In the previous reports, main meal preparers consistently reported being confident cooks making a variety of meals for dinner from scratch most nights of the week.

This research shows that main meal preparers have a simple approach to cooking - their meals are typically made using a few cooking methods and ingredients based around beef, chicken, fish, lamb and eggs. Their confidence flows from the fact they can feed themselves and their family well using this simple approach.

This simple approach is reflected not only in the way they cook but in the way they plan. Whilst there is very little rigid pre-planning of meals and a desire for spontaneity and flexibility, they tend to stick to familiar, tried and tested meals, cooking methods and ingredients and seek variety by alternating protein source and introducing new flavours.

This research confirms that convenience is the most important driver of meal choice reflected in their 'no-fuss' approach to cooking and a strong preference for one-pot meals.

Most main meal preparers are making an attempt to make healthy meals - adding vegetables, lean mince etc - but the findings suggest that convenience and taste may be stronger drivers of the number of vegetables served with the meal than cooking ability.

The qualitative research suggests main meal preparers do want advice on improving the

healthiness of their main meals. This research suggests the best way to introduce this advice is to work within the framework of current cooking skills and commonly served meals and to draw on intuitive cooking practice. This means less of a focus on formal recipes and more on ideas based on popular cooking methods, familiar ingredients and utensils.

Advice should steer away from a focus on unfamiliar or hard to get ingredients, cooking methods and unrealistic meal modifications. Building on their repertoire of regular protein choices, familiar cooking methods, ingredients, utensils and meal styles which are already healthy, is more likely to be successful. Advice should build on the familiar, using intuitive cooking skills and promoting one-pot meals (such as stir-fries, casseroles, meat and vegetables) which already attract a higher serve of vegetables and meet the dual needs of taste and convenience.

Whilst variety is important to main meal preparers, it does not necessarily mean they are after entirely new meals. Rather than introducing new dishes, new ingredients, new utensils or new skills, they are looking for useful tips and easy to grasp practical advice to make their existing repertoire more interesting or tasty. Types of tips that would work well include tips in relation to planning weekday meals, measuring portion sizes, choosing cuts to match cooking methods, how to store food, how to add new flavours and how to perfect a familiar dish. Tips could relate to improving taste, speed of preparation, minimising food waste and maximising healthiness.

## Main meal preparers' tool box

A summary of popular main meal cooking practices.

### Cooking method

- Roasting
- Pan-fry
- Stir-fry
- Casserole

### Utensils

- Chopping knife
- Tongs
- Vegetable peeler
- Cheese grater
- Frying pan
- Saucepan
- Roasting pan



### Fresh ingredients

#### PROTEIN CHOICES:

Beef; Chicken; Eggs; Fish; Lamb; Legumes, Pork

#### POPULAR VEGETABLES:

Carrots, onions, broccoli, green peas, corn, pumpkin, tomatoes, green beans, cauliflower, capsicum, potatoes

### Pre-prepared ingredients

- Tomato and pasta sauce
- Liquid stock
- Pre-made sauces
- Simmer sauce



### Popular herbs

Parsley, oregano, basil, thyme, lemongrass, coriander, dill, rosemary, mint

### Popular spices

Pepper, curry powder, chilli, ginger, paprika, cumin, cinnamon, allspice, turmeric, Chinese 5 spice



### 'Intuitive' recipes

- Spaghetti bolognese
- Meat and veg (steak; roast; chop; sausage; rissole)
- Bread-based meal - sandwich; pizza; burger

- Stir-fry
- Casserole
- Curries
- Baked pasta/rice meal (lasagne)
- Egg-based meal - omelette



### Practical tips

- Best meat cuts for different cooking methods
- How to cook the perfect steak
- How to make quick and easy meals
- How to make meals healthier
- How to store food
- Inexpensive but tasty meal ideas

- Ideas for using leftovers
- New flavours
- Seasonal ingredients
- Portion control
- Planning meals for the week
- Adapting meals to suit different ages or dietary requirements



Published by Meat & Livestock Australia  
ABN 39 081 678 364  
Published June 2013

© Meat & Livestock Australia Limited 2013

ISBN 9781925045093

Care is taken to ensure the accuracy of the information contained in this publication. However MLA cannot accept responsibility for the accuracy or completeness of the information or opinions contained in the publication. You should make your own enquiries before making decisions concerning your interests.



Meat & Livestock Australia  
Level 1, 165 Walker Street  
North Sydney, 2060  
Tel: 02 9463 9333  
Fax: 02 9463 9393  
Email: [info@mla.com.au](mailto:info@mla.com.au)

[www.mla.com.au](http://www.mla.com.au)  
[www.themainmeal.com.au](http://www.themainmeal.com.au)