WHY MASTER IT?

THE FRENCH HAVE a genius for cooking with eggs. They poach them, they use them in sauces, they whip them into soufflés. And they fold them into omelets, an excellent introduction to that great tradition.

Like much of French cuisine, the omelet represents the perfect intersection of a precise technique and a pristine ingredient. The more skilled the cook and the better the eggs, the more glorious the result.

The perfect omelet is such a holy grail that it's often held up as the test of a chef's abilities. But the dish is also regarded as one of the fundamentals, among the first recipes Julia Child made on Boston public television for French cooking neophytes to publicize "Mastering the Art of French Cooking." Whether it's made by a professional or a novice, it is undeniably speedy. As Child once said, introducing the dish: "How about dinner in half a minute?"

So what makes an omelet uniquely French? It is the exacting technique of folding the eggs to yield tender, loose curds in the center and a delicate but firm exterior. We give a classic recipe, and another for anomelet mousseline, a fluffy variation in which the whites are whipped and then added to the yolks.

An omelet can be made either savory or sweet, and although sweet omelets have fallen away these days, it may be time to resurrect them. After all, eggs can be seasoned with sugar and fruit or jam as easily as with salt, onions and cheese; think of clafoutis and soufflés. Once you have mastered the basic technique, the variations are limitless.

AN OMELET MOUSSELINE.

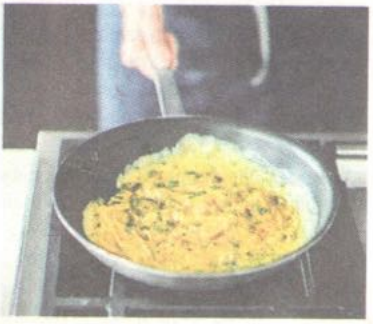
Choosing and Preparing Ingredients

- Always use unsalted butter, then add salt to the eggs, so you have greater control over the seasoning.
- Use good eggs, preferably from a local source. Eggs are the main component of this dish; the more flavorful they are, the more delicious your omelet will be. They should be at room temperature, to allow your omelet to cook quickly and evenly. Leave them on the counter for an hour before cooking, or let them sit covered in warm water for 20 minutes.
- Don't overbeat your eggs. Beat them lightly, just until the white and yolks are well mixed and uniform in color, but are not airy or bubbly. If you introduce too much air into the eggs by whipping them, you'll end up with something closer to an omelet mousseline rather than the classic dish.
- For fluffier eggs, add up to a tablespoon of diced cold butter to the beaten eggs before cooking.
- Use an absolutely clean frying pan. Don't cook the eggs in bacon fat or any singed leftovers that will alter the look and taste of your omelet.
- Be judicious with the butter in the pan. You just need enough to coat the pan lightly but thoroughly — about 1 tablespoon. Do not use too much, or the eggs will be heavy and greasy rather than light.
- For extra flavor, brown the butter in the pan before adding the eggs.

Cooking and Folding the Omelet

If you don't own a nonstick pan or a seasoned, carbon-steel omelet pan, now is the time to invest in a good one. It's difficult to master an omelet in a stainless-steel pan or cast-iron skillet; those heavier pans are too hard to maneuver. Buy something easy to handle that adjusts to heat changes quickly.

THE FORK METHOD.



THE SWIRL METHOD.

THE LIFT METHOD.

You've got three main technique options for cooking an omelet. While all will get you to the same end result — ethereal scrambled eggs encased in a gossamer shell — cooks generally prefer one method over the others. Try them, and see which one works best for you. Note that all are doing the same thing: introducing air into the eggs by beating them until they are fluffy, then letting the bottom set so it holds all those light, eggy curds.

As with any new technique, practice makes all the difference here. So after choosing the method you like best, practice it until you get it just right for your taste. You can fold your omelet either in half or thirds as desired. Both are traditional.

The Fork Method Pour the eggs into the hot pan, and immediately start beating them with a fork until fluffy. Once curds begin to form, stop beating and let the bottom of the eggs set for a few seconds before tossing the pan or using a fork to fold the eggs over themselves, either in half or thirds.

The Swirl Method Pour the eggs into the hot pan, then vigorously swirl the pan, shaking it back and forth to agitate the eggs until the center is fluffy and filled with large curds of eggs, and the bottom sets. Shake some more until the eggs start to flip over themselves, then slide the omelet onto a plate, either in half, or use a fork or spatula to fold into thirds.

The Lift Method Pour the eggs into the hot pan and let them set for a few seconds. Lift the set edges with a spatula or fork to let uncooked egg run underneath, pushing the cooked part of the eggs into the center of the pan to form large, fluffy curds. Repeat this until the eggs are set on the bottom and just cooked in the center. Then use the spatula or fork to fold the eggs, either in half or thirds.

Omelet

TIME: 5 MINUTES
YIELD: 1 SERVING

- 3 large eggs
- Large pinch fine sea salt, to taste
- Freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 1 to 2 teaspoons minced fresh herbs, such as parsley, tarragon, chives or a combination (optional)
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter

1. Crack eggs into a medium bowl. Add 1 tablespoon water and the salt and pepper to taste. Whisk with a fork until egg whites are incorporated into yolks. Mix in herbs, if using.

2. In an 8- to 9-inch skillet (preferably nonstick or seasoned carbon steel) over high heat, melt butter until bubbling subsides.

3. Pour in egg mixture and reduce heat to medium. With the back of a fork or a heatproof rubber spatula, whisk eggs around skillet until the bottom begins to set. This takes only a few seconds. Add any fillings, if using.

4. Tilt skillet and either bang or flip egg over itself. Use fork or spatula if necessary to complete folding in half or thirds. Angle the skillet and a serving plate together, and flip omelet onto plate.

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A BRIEF HISTORY

THE OMELET IS ANCIENT. Humans have eaten fried, beaten eggs since hens and other fowl were domesticated in the sixth century B.C. Romans had ovemele, eggs cooked with honey and pepper; Persians ate kuku, eggs cooked with copious amounts of herbs. There were tortillas in early Spain, and frittatas in what would become Italy. All were flat, fried cakes loaded with fillings — vegetables, meat, potatoes, spices and herbs — cooked on both sides until set, and then sliced so they could be eaten out of one's hand.

But the fluffy French omelet we know is different. With its barely set eggs, it requires a spoon or fork to be eaten. The word, and variations of it, date to the mid-16th century — around the same time Catherine de Medici of Italy, who was married to King Henry II of France, is said to have introduced the fork to the French. Historians have speculated that the emergence of the fork and the evolution of the omelet may be intertwined.

By the 17th century, the omelet had entered the canon, appearing in La Varenne's cookbook "Le Pâtissier François" as an aumelette. The arrival of better stoves with enclosed fires, in the 18th century, made it easier for cooks to prepare the dish because they could more easily regulate the heat. The omelet's popularity has only grown and endured, making it a staple today in restaurants and home kitchens alike.

STEFANO BIANCHETTI/CORBIS, VIA GETTY IMAGES

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