

JUSTIN WARNER THE LAWS OF COOKING*

FOREWORD BY ALTON BROWN

*and
how
to
break
them



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PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANIEL KRIEGER

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DAD-ICATION



FOREWORD

By the time Justin Warner walked into my studio, I was already grouchy and burned. Grouchy because I'd been auditioning cooks all day for my *Food Network Star* team without a lot of luck and burned because what I wanted was teachers and had assumed the best way to find them would be to have candidates teach me to make a dish, literally talking me through the paces while I did the cooking. For some reason I'd chosen Bananas Foster and after following ten sets of faulty instructions, my arms had been flambéed to the elbows.

Then, in walks this scrawny kid with Clutch Cargo lips wearing a flat-brim cap jutting off-angle like a rapper, which it turns out he actually was. He looked fifteen but when he spoke there was a smooth confidence in his voice that told me he'd seen some stuff, yo. Sure, he knew the whys, whats, and hows of the dish, but he also understood what actually mattered. Like a hacker, he'd considered the laws of Bananas Foster and had decided which of these laws were going to pertain to him and which weren't. When we were done, a perfect Bananas Foster had been prepared without sacrificing a single arm hair or eyebrow. As Warner's bright red clogs walked out of the room I remember thinking, *The (culinary) force is strong with that one.*

Justin Warner made it onto my team, and with each challenge he displayed a rebellious legerdemain that continuously beamed out one message loud and clear: I know the rules and I know exactly how and when to break them. His kitchen chops, specifically his ability to create and combine unexpected flavors, gave him the edge, but I think it was his experience as a fine dining waiter that provided the crux around which the contest turned. He won the competition with style and (although he might argue the point) ease.

With the competition over, I was finally able to visit Justin in his restaurant, Do or Dine, in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn. Although his Foie Gras Doughnuts and Lamb Breast with Coriander, Cumin, and Lime were already famous, it was his Cold Cantaloupe Soup that made me realize this kid had a touch of Mozart, a kind of crazy genius that doesn't come around very often and when it does it often takes decades to find its proper expression.

But not for Justin.

The Laws of Cooking ... and How to Break Them is exactly what I expected . . . the unexpected. From its playful but totally rational organization (by Law rather than simply ingredient or course) to its playfully mouthwatering photos to Justin's proselike recipes, stories, and explanations, this is a cookbook unlike any other. This kid may be an outlaw but, like I said, the culinary force is strong with this one. And now he's sharing a bit of that crazy magic with us all. So hang on, kids, it's going to be a tasty ride.

—Alton Brown



Painting by Alex Paozols

INTRODUCTION



Thanks for my first chocolate, GMA!

Our first interactions with food, from baby mouthfuls of mushy peas to little slurps of apple juice, are characterized by likes and dislikes. Every person I know loves some foods and is not so crazy about others. But why do certain dishes almost always inspire wild amounts of pleasure while others are pretty much guaranteed to be disappointing? As with Legos, Social Security, and the Genetic Sequence, there is a system that governs what makes food tasty. In fact, there are *laws*. These laws have been around for as long as cooking itself.

We know that rich, salty peanut butter (a fat) is complemented by grape jelly (sweet and fruity), and the combination is best experienced when spread evenly between two pieces of bread (the canvas). This primal truth is the Law of Peanut Butter and Jelly. We know that a mixture of lemon juice (something sour) and sugar (something sweet) becomes refreshing lemonade, after being diluted with water to make it palatable. This primal truth is the Law of Lemonade. Even those who don't feel confident in the kitchen know how to make a PB&J sandwich or a pitcher of lemonade. These aren't just a lunch and a drink: they are archetypes. And, as such, they provide a path to create countless recipes. As just one example: What's Peking Duck if not a PB&J? The fatty duck is the peanut butter; the sweet bean sauce is the grape jelly; the pancake or bun is the bread.

I considered other classic and beloved combinations, and came up with eleven powerful flavor systems, each of which serves as a law. I discovered that by following these eleven laws, I could create an endless number of things people would love to eat. The trick was simply to substitute and riff on ingredients and components within the recipes to create new and tasty dishes. Suddenly, ingredients and techniques that were previously intimidating became a piece of cake (or, in this case, a piece of a PB&J).

Working for years as a server in restaurants taught me what people want to eat, and how often they're drawn to the same familiar dishes over and over again. But what if we could convince even the most unadventurous diner

to try Escolar with Strawberry Salsa ([here](#)) by tapping into a collective culinary consciousness formed by the Skippy and Smucker's jars from our early childhood? What if we could confidently combine foods we've never paired or even cooked before, knowing that *by law* they will taste delicious? This is what this book is about.



THE ELEVEN LAWS

- LAW OF PEANUT BUTTER AND JELLY: *Fat meets Fruit*
- LAW OF COFFEE, CREAM, AND SUGAR: *Bitter meets Fat and Sweet*
- LAW OF BAGEL AND LOX: *Smoked meets Acid and Fat*
- LAW OF THE HOT DOG: *Salt meets World*
- LAW OF THE WEDGE SALAD: *Funky meets Fresh*
- LAW OF GUACAMOLE: *Meet Vegan Fats!*
- LAW OF CHEESE FRIES: *Sharp meets Mellow*
- LAW OF LEMONADE: *Sour meets Sweet*
- LAW OF PESTO: *Herbs meet Fat*

- LAW OF GENERAL TSO'S CHICKEN: *Spicy meets Sweet*
 - LAW OF GIN AND TONIC: *Aromatic meets Aromatic*
-

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Each chapter of this book is named for a law, and each law is named for a dish we all know and can easily prepare or acquire. I trust that I don't need to tell anyone how to make a gin and tonic, or order General Tso's chicken from the local Chinese restaurant. These eleven archetypal dishes each represent the clearest articulation of the flavor combination that defines a particular law. In the chapter introduction for each law, I explain exactly why these iconic dishes taste the way they taste. Then, in the recipes that follow, we explore the power of each law in action, showing how eleven seemingly different dishes have the same familiar flavor backbone. Each chapter begins with canapés, and ends with dessert, with eight courses in between.

The dishes in each chapter are presented to stand alone. It's a cookbook—make any dish you like from any chapter. Or you can build a square meal out of a few recipes from one chapter, or one each from different chapters, which will put more variety on the plate. If you are feeling ambitious, each chapter can be its own ten-course feast. If you are feeling incredibly ambitious, you can create a multicourse menu with one dish from each chapter, for a choose-your-own-adventure ride through all eleven laws.

I don't want to eat foams and microgreens for every meal, and I do not want to eat three bowls of mac and cheese every day either—but there are dishes on both ends of the complexity spectrum in terms of both preparation and flavor. Context is the key to enjoying a great meal. The food in this book is not restaurant food, but I'm hoping it will be as delightful to eat as anything you'll get outside your home. Actually, I'm hoping it will be more so.

While I wholeheartedly believe in these laws, I do ask that you take them with a grain of salt. These are not hard and fast; they are a flexible system that I created to show you some interesting patterns in food and cooking. For example, you might notice recipes under one law that could be categorized under the jurisdiction of another law, but I chose each recipe for each law for a reason. It seems like the Apricot and Habanero Wings ([here](#))—which fall under the Law of Peanut Butter and Jelly—could instead be an example of the General Tso's Chicken Law, because the wings are both spicy and sweet. But the Law of PB&J better highlights why the recipe works: the most important thing about that recipe is not the hot and sweet interplay, but the comingling of the butter (fat) and the apricot (fruit). The habanero (also a fruit) is a spicy bonus in this recipe—it's not the focus.

Also, these laws are not all-encompassing. You might have had some dish prepared by a monk in Bhutan that doesn't follow any of the laws covered

here. (Congratulations!)

These laws simply show you the underlying mechanics of these recipes. Further, by following the laws, you can construct your own variations and create original recipes. You may have to experiment to get a dish you love, but this is the creative part. Enjoy the experimentation: it's what cooking is all about.

Of course (knowing me), after I named these laws and immersed myself within them, I wanted to break them. Not all the time; just occasionally. What if you don't feel like following a law? This is where my rebellious sensibility, which certainly shows up in my restaurant's food, comes through. I realized that by combining elements of one law with another, I could "break" the law and create even more complex dishes. For example, introducing a sharp or funky flavor into a recipe that was designed to take advantage of the play between fat and fruit (the Law of PB&J) has the effect of disrupting the combo, but in a good way. At the bottom of each recipe, I give my advice and guidance on how to break the law that governs that dish, but my goal is to get you to eventually feel confident enough to level up on your own.

In a restaurant, all of the components of a dish are "mised out," which is kitchen jargon for the fancy French *mise en place*, meaning "held in place." To help you fit cooking into your daily life, you'll see that I've provided a note in just about every recipe showing when and how you can "HOLD IT?" Most dishes you eat in a restaurant are not prepared from scratch the second the order hits the kitchen. Some components may have been made days in advance. If you apply this logic to your kitchen, you can prepare components of a dish in advance and hold them until it's time to finish the food and serve it. The great thing about this is that if life happens, you don't have to scrap your plans for dinner. The vast majority of these recipes can be prepared a day in advance and cooked "on the fly" (quickly) when the situation demands it. There are, however, a few that need to be prepared and cooked straight from start to finish. (In professional kitchens, this is called *à la minute*.) There's no "HOLD IT?" note for these. Of course, you can cook every recipe in the book start to finish and skip the "HOLD IT?" note.

Hendrix wouldn't take the stage without his Strat, so you'll need some gear. You'll find a list of exactly what gear you will need for each recipe at the beginning of that recipe. I assume you have a chef's knife, cutting board, fridge, freezer, stove, oven, basic utensils, a wooden spoon, plastic wrap, aluminum foil, and paper towels. The list is a guide to let you know what other implements you'll need. When possible, I list substitutions and also let you know what's optional. If there's no substitution and it's not listed as optional, it's because I think the juice won't be worth the squeeze with anything else. In the back, you can find an Appendix on Gear ([here](#)) with a list of tools that I think are worthwhile investments to step your game up.

Most of the food in this book—from the fancier Sardines, Their Skeletons, and Sumac ([here](#)) to the modest Adzuki Bean and Kale Soup ([here](#))—are just

as good for a family dinner as a dinner party. You'll find tips on cooking for parties in the entertaining appendix ([here](#)). It's common knowledge that all good parties end up in the kitchen, so I see no problem with cooking in spurts, hanging out, and cooking some more. Your dishes will become a set list, and your friends and acquaintances will become your *fans*. Nothing beats the rush of feeding someone something tasty from your very hands, and having them make the “dude-are-you-magic-or-whut” face. When you find yourself in this situation, like a culinary Hendrix, take a bow.

There are a couple of other appendices at the end of this book: one of them concerns texture ([here](#)). Texture is a big deal in cooking, but I would never put it above flavor. If you find a recipe that you like, and can execute it with confidence, I would certainly hope that you would customize it. The texture appendix deals with various techniques for transforming the size, shape, and even sound of the components of a dish. For example, you could make the escolar with the salsa as listed [here](#), or you could turn the salsa into a gel, which could be applied to each bite with laser precision. For that matter, you could also turn it into a foam, which would provide the opposite sensation. You could even dehydrate it, to make crispy shards of salsa. The texture appendix is the game after the game, an epilogue that doesn't end. If you find yourself there, congratulations—you are the most curious of all, and I've done my job.

Finally, here's a secret: all of the recipes in the chapter called the Law of Guacamole are vegan. There are other vegan recipes throughout the book, as well as easy ways to transform many of the rest of the recipes so that they become vegan or vegetarian. The vegetarian/vegan appendix ([here](#)) lists all the vegan recipes and explains how to turn various other recipes vegan.

HELP, I'M IN A NUTSHELL

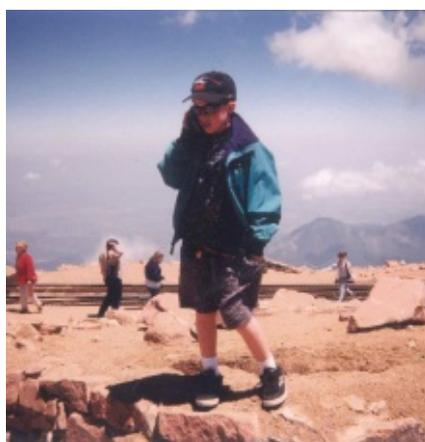
By all means, feel free to skip ahead to [here](#) if you just want to get on your way. I would.



my first cookout



my second birthday



calling home from Pike's Peak on a giant cell phone.

Peanut Butter and Jelly is the first law I learned to follow, because a parent showed me how to follow it. Cliché as it may be, I owe most of my relationship with food to my mom. I had a weird family. My dad was born in 1927, my mother in 1951, and myself in 1984. Dad used to chew on tar when he couldn't afford gum. Mom hid under her desk during fallout drills. I remember the day we got cable TV. Mom didn't toil in the kitchen as much as some, but whatever she didn't do in the kitchen, she exposed me to outside our home. When I was three, I summoned a waiter to order some calamari for myself; far from telling me to pipe down, my mother let me. When I was around five, I was impressed (as I now recall) when she read the riot act to a guy who didn't have lox at his bagel shop (see [here](#)). Instead of taking me for McDonald's after a doctor's appointment in Baltimore, my mother (and father) splurged and introduced me to sushi. By the time I was six, my mother had taught me to set a table, which is really the only truly marketable skill I have. My mom told me that to do most anything, you just have to read and follow instructions and be willing to learn along the way.

With this in mind, I applied for a work permit around the age of fifteen,

and began working at Oliver's Pub, in Hagerstown, Maryland, as a dishwasher. I intentionally failed at dishwashing in order to get redeployed as a busser, which was much more exciting to me, as I could interact with guests and not have to listen to the senior dishwasher's *KISS* album on repeat. Plus, I knew how to set a table, which set me apart from most of my colleagues (to this day!). I got addicted to the hustle of service. I loved walking home with a wad of singles, which I would use to buy big packs of gum from Sam's Club, only to resell the sticks to boys at school or give them away to girls. Around that time I competed in the National Spelling Bee in Washington, D.C. I bombed in the first round, but conned my dad into taking me to extraordinary chef Michel Richard's restaurant Citronelle. I had read a review in the paper and was intrigued by the descriptions of squab, and a "mood wall" that changed colors as the dining room bustled. The servers treated me like an adult.



In high school, I hung out with a couple of dudes (the lamb guys, [here](#)) at a coffee and bagel joint called Bentley's from time to time before school. We'd get jacked up on forty ounces of sugar-laden coffee and subject our first-period teachers to the secondhand effects of caffeination. Eventually, I started working at Bentley's, which was owned by a dude named Bill Eichelberger, and staffed by his family. Bill used to say that we were "there to make friends, not money," which has been a motto I still try to apply to all aspects of life. One day I got a wild hair and decided I wanted to work in the kitchen, making sandwiches. It wasn't anything too heady, but the boss always let me experiment and try new combinations. I even launched an ad campaign to sell scones: "Everybody must get sconed." That was risqué as heck for a business across from the County Courthouse, let me tell you. Then I moonlit at a joint called Roccoco [*sic*], where I had the privilege of serving the nightly canapé, a snack they offered for people to enjoy while they pondered the menu. I wore a tie, which was a very big deal to me. As a server, I got to see what people ate while also broadening my own palate. The kitchen served me kidneys and sweetbreads once, half-snickering in anticipation of my revulsion. Instead, I couldn't fathom that something so "weird" could be so tender and full of flavor. I'll never forget that bowl of guts.



During this whole time, I was kind of a hellion. All through high school, I was in and out of detention, “borrowing” chemistry equipment, building fermenters in the back of class, and making my first mojitos ([here](#)). It didn’t help that my father’s health was declining; had he been in his prime, he could have smacked some sense into me. My uncle (see [here](#)) lived in Estes Park, Colorado, and housed me for a few summers before I graduated, just to get me out of my mom’s hair. I bussed at a sweet little Italian joint called the Dunraven Inn. I fell in love with the open-mindedness, the blue skies, and the general “high” associated with the Rockies. When my dad died, the decision to move there was pretty simple. I was nineteen.

I plunked myself down in Fort Collins, Colorado, and set out with a resumé. As you enter Old Town Fort Collins from the south, on College Avenue, the largest patio is attached to Sushi JeJu; I walked in and gave them my paperwork. By the time I got home, they had called. I was to be a full-fledged waiter! Within a few months, most of the senior staff was gone. Brian Yoo, the boss, made me the general manager before I could legally drink. I hustled the heck out of every college kid in that town. Pretty girls got free sushi rolls, which I would buy with my discount. They’d tip more, and I’d make a profit and get requested the next time they came in. The head chef, Masa Suzuki, tasked me with articulating the nightly specials, which were generally pretty tough to sell to guys who had just rolled into town from a two-week gig on a rig in North Dakota. I learned that with the right descriptive words, any muddy boot could appreciate monkfish liver, salmon roe, or sea urchin. Masa ended up rooming with me, and I learned more about Japanese and Korean foods than I ever thought possible. One day he slipped me a nugget of something yellowish and green to try. He wouldn’t tell me what it was. Without looking up from the Nintendo, I told him it was mustard, miso, and a tiny eggplant. His reaction of “Whoa. You are good!” put the idea in my head that I had a working palate. Around then, I met George McNeese, who would become my drinking buddy, grilling companion, future business partner, and all-around friend.

It was during this time in Colorado that I read an article in *Esquire* about a dude in New York City named Danny Meyer, who made his fame and fortune as a restaurateur. I knew there were famous chefs, but Danny became a legend, and not for lifting the pan. He’d even written a book about restaurants, service, and life. I bought a copy and gulped furiously at the Kool-Aid within it. I applied his teachings to another management gig, at Sushi Tora in Boulder, where I curated the wine and special fish list. In its

heyday, Sushi Tora would have twenty to thirty kinds of sea creatures on the menu. I maintain to this day that I've eaten more kinds of sushi than most Japanese people. Cod milt. Enough said!