

Managing Editor Karl Frederick | (262) 656-6377 | kfrederick@kenoshanews.com

Planning the perfect pantry

BY MARI SCHUH QUAM | KENOSHA NEWS CORRESPONDENT

Tired of chowing on mac 'n cheese or Cheerios for supper? Maybe it's time to step it up and go a little gourmet in the kitchen. But where do you start? Three local chefs serve us their top 10 pantry essentials — staples that will help you slice and dice your way to culinary success. Grab an apron and read on. You'll be an Iron Chef before you know it.

Eric Flentge, head chef at Pazzo and Sazzy B in downtown Kenosha

Eric Flentge, head chef at Pazzo and Sazzy B in downtown Kenosha, says that when it comes to home cooking, organization is the key. Don't dive right in and start cooking. It might have you scrambling later on. Make sure you have absolutely everything you need beforehand. Organize all your ingredients and have them all ready to go before you start to cook. It all starts with an organized pantry. Store categories of food together for easy retrieval. Be careful not to overstock your pantry, which pushes items to the back. Out of sight and out of mind, the items can expire before they're used, Flentge says.



Eric Flentge

1. Salt, pepper and assorted spices

Essential to balancing flavors and making dishes stand out. "Spices really pull everything together," Flentge says. And don't just dump them in. Slowly sprinkle them to ensure you add just the right amount.

2. All-purpose flour and granulated sugar

Use flour to make your own pizza dough. Sugar can be added to vinaigrettes. Whisk sugar, salt and pepper into vinegar. Stir occasionally until the granules are fully dissolved in the vinegar.

3. Olive oil and extra-virgin olive oil

A great substitute for butter. It's packed with antioxidants that can help to lower cholesterol. Use extra-virgin olive oil only for garnishing or tossing in with cold pasta, for example, and not for cooking, Flentge advises.

4. Fresh garlic

A perfect component to numerous dishes, when used in the correct amount. Fresh garlic is best.

5. Assorted vinegars

A must for vinaigrettes, sauces and marinades.

6. Red and white wine

Less expensive wines work just fine for cooking, Flentge says. Full-bodied cabernets are great for red sauces; use chardonnay for white sauces to top over chicken. "For a lighter red sauce for eating on a hot summer day, I'll usually make a pomodoro sauce using pinot grigio," he said.

7. Stock/Base

Use for soup broth or to flavor sauces or grains, such as risotto or wild rice. Home-made stocks are the best — Flentge calls them "liquid gold." Boil water, scraps from chopped vegetables, and trimmings and bones from chicken or beef. Flentge suggests buying cooking base from the store. Keep stock and base in the fridge.



Eric Flentge, the chef at Pazzo and Sazzy B in Kenosha, prepares a dish.

8. Tomato sauce

A good start to a potentially amazing pomodoro sauce or any type of red sauce. Buy plain tomato sauce. Then you can season it exactly as you wish.

9. Liquid condiments

Buy Worcestershire sauce, soy sauce and Dijon mustard. Use them as marinades or to bind other flavors together to make savory sauces.

10. Pastas, grains and dried beans

Some noodles are better than others for certain dishes, so stock a wide variety. Flentge buys penne, angel hair, bow tie and pappardelle (a large, broad type of pasta).



Eric Flentge's pantry has a mix of spices, sauces and basics.

Tony Mantuano, internationally known, award-winning chef and partner of Mangia Trattoria in Kenosha and Spiaggia, Cafe Spiaggia, Terzo Piano and Bar Toma in Chicago.

Tony Mantuano, a Kenosha native, is one of President Barack Obama's favorite chefs.

Mantuano's wife, Cathy, is a wine expert and serves as the wine director at Terzo Piano and Bar Toma in Chicago. In their latest cookbook, "Wine Bar Food," they share recipes from their favorite wine bars in Italy and southern Europe and also include recommendations for 30-some pantry items. Here, they give us their top 10.

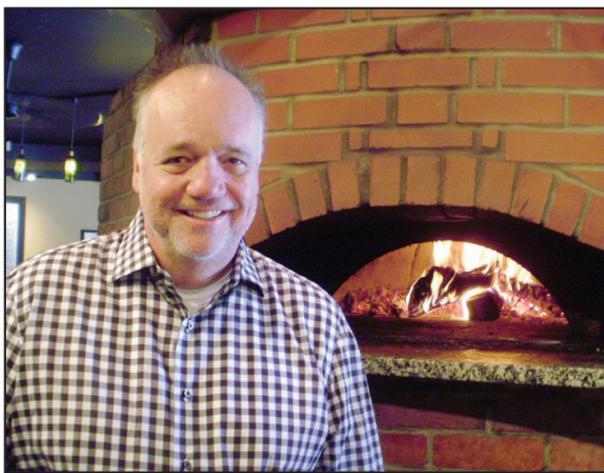
"We chose a lot of these ingredients because they're the best of the best," Mantuano says. "You can add these ingredients to almost any dish or combine them together to make something delicious."

1. Passato di Pomodoro (tomato purée)

Italian tomato purée with basil is hands down the best product for making any tomato sauce or tomato-based recipe. Mix it with olive oil, oregano and capers to create a fresh tomato dipping sauce for bread, says Mantuano. His favorite brand is San Marzano.

2. Olives

Be adventurous and try new varieties. Cerignola olives come in three different colors, while Gaeta olives are strong and black.



Tony Mantuano stands in front of a wood-fire grill at Mangia.

3. Capers in salt

Tuscan-style salad made with tuna, capers, olives and garbanzo beans. Capers in salt from Italy add layers of flavor and will make your recipes more interesting. (Capers are edible flower buds from a caper bush used as a seasoning or garnish.) Rinse well before using.

4. Mediterranean tuna in olive oil

For Mantuano, this is a perfect protein selection from the shelf. Choose tuna packed in olive oil instead of water, and you'll enjoy richer flavor and texture. Try it in a classic

With a mild flavor and great texture, garbanzo beans pair well with many ingredients. These versatile legumes can be cooked, puréed or simply used in a salad.

5. Garbanzo beans (also known as chickpeas or ceci beans)

One of the most important pantry items. When buying EVOO, check the expiration

6. Extra-virgin olive oil

Kosher salt is the best option for seasoning your pasta water. Tony likes the Diamond Crystal brand.

date, which is three years after its harvest. The fresher, the better. An expiration of 2014 means it's from the 2011 harvest. Use as soon as you open it—olive oil can go bad in just three or four months. Keep it in a cool, dark place away from sunlight.

7. Balsamic vinegar

When buying balsamic vinegar, make sure the only ingredient is grape must. If other ingredients are listed, then it's not true balsamic vinegar, said Mantuano. The best balsamic vinegars serve as the perfect steak sauce or as a topping — add a drizzle on strawberries or gelato.

8. Giuseppe Coco brand pasta

This unique brand of dry pasta costs a bit more because it's extruded through a bronze die. This results in a rougher edge that sauce clings to. He says it's well worth the splurge.

9. Pancetta

Pancetta, unsmoked cured pork belly seasoned with herbs and spices, adds just the right "porky-ness" to tomato sauces. Try it in salads. It's a tasty replacement for bacon.

10. Kosher salt

Not into making your own bread crumbs? Pawicz says store-bought ones work well, too.

James Pawicz, executive chef at HobNob restaurant in Somers

For four years, executive chef James Pawicz has prepared choice cuts of steaks, prime rib and fresh seafood dishes at the HobNob restaurant. When he's at home, Pawicz often opts for simple fare like pizza.

But when his schedule allows, he cooks traditional Polish recipes he learned from his grandmother. His home pantry is organized so that his most commonly used items, like coffee, are within easy reach.

1. Spices

Spices add much-needed flavor. Start with salt, pepper and the basic Italian seasonings of oregano, basil and parsley. Your taste buds will thank you.

2. Cooking oil

Pawicz's oil of choice is grape-seed oil because it doesn't change the flavor of vegetables or meats. Keep oils away from sunlight, as the sun alters their flavor.

3. Flour

An absolute must for baking and breading fish or poultry.

4. Vinegars

Keep several kinds on hand to make simple salad dressings or to boil eggs. Buy white distilled, balsamic and apple cider varieties. Be sure to store them out of the sun.

5. Corn starch

Pawicz relies on corn starch when he needs to thicken soups and sauces. "It doesn't change the flavor of foods and it's gluten-free," he said.

6. Rice and pasta

At home, the busy chef uses 90-second rice, which works well for simple stir-fry dishes. For pasta, he prefers wheat pasta from Barilla.

7. Canned tomatoes or tomato sauce

Keep these on hand for a quick meal. Sauté shrimp in oil or butter with some spices. Add canned tomatoes. Toss in some cooked pasta and—voilà! A hearty meal in just a few minutes.

8. Bread crumbs

Tuna salad is a snap to make on busy days. Or just enjoy some tuna right out of the can or pouch.

9. Canned tuna

Sip a cup of calming chamomile tea to soothe your frazzled nerves and wind down after a long day. Pawicz prefers loose leaf tea over tea bags.

10. Coffee and tea

James Pawicz stands outside of HobNob where he has prepared hundreds of steaks, prime ribs and seafood dishes.



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COMING THURSDAY: A little creativity helps give found objects new life, purpose