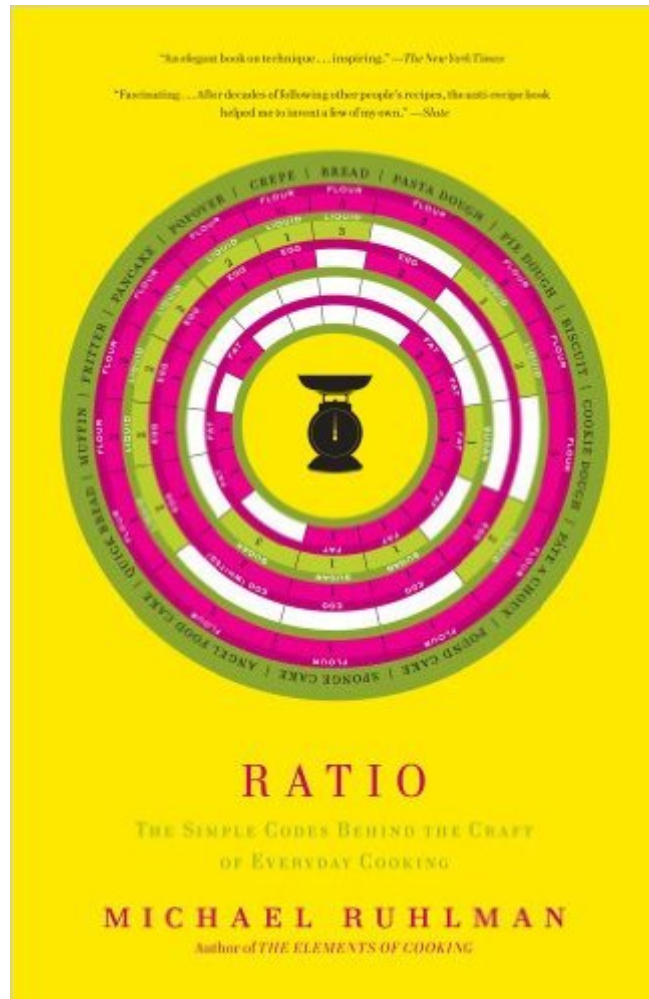


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Ratio: The Simple Codes Behind The Craft Of Everyday Cooking



Synopsis

Michael Ruhlman's groundbreaking > bestseller takes us to the very heart of cooking: it is not about recipes but rather about basic ratios and fundamental techniques that makes all food come together, simply. When you know a culinary ratio, it's not like knowing a single recipe, it's instantly knowing a thousand. Why spend time sorting through the millions of cookie recipes available in books, magazines, and on the Internet? Isn't it easier just to remember 1-2-3? That's the ratio of ingredients that always make a basic, delicious cookie dough: 1 part sugar, 2 parts fat, and 3 parts flour. From there, add anything you want—chocolate, lemon and orange zest, nuts, poppy seeds, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, almond extract, or peanut butter, to name a few favorite additions. Replace white sugar with brown for a darker, chewier cookie. Add baking powder and/or eggs for a lighter, airier texture. Ratios are the starting point from which a thousand variations begin. Ratios are the simple proportions of one ingredient to another. Biscuit dough is 3:1:2—or 3 parts flour, 1 part fat, and 2 parts liquid. This ratio is the beginning of many variations, and because the biscuit takes sweet and savory flavors with equal grace, you can top it with whipped cream and strawberries or sausage gravy. Vinaigrette is 3:1, or 3 parts oil to 1 part vinegar, and is one of the most useful sauces imaginable, giving everything from grilled meats and fish to steamed vegetables or lettuces intense flavor. Cooking with ratios will unchain you from recipes and set you free. With thirty-three ratios and suggestions for enticing variations, Ratio is the truth of cooking: basic preparations that teach us how the fundamental ingredients of the kitchen—water, flour, butter and oils, milk and cream, and eggs—work. Change the ratio and bread dough becomes pasta dough, cakes become muffins become popovers become crepes. As the culinary world fills up with overly complicated recipes and never-ending ingredient lists, Michael Ruhlman blasts through the surplus of information and delivers this innovative, straightforward book that cuts to the core of cooking. Ratio provides one of the greatest kitchen lessons there is—and it makes the cooking easier and more satisfying than ever.

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Customer Reviews

I've been cooking without recipes for 20 years now, pretty much since I could reach the counter, and I thought I had a pretty good grasp of the fundamentals of home cooking. Still, there are certain things that remained mystical. For some reason, we think of dough as something only a baker can make. It's not. It's 5 parts flour and 3 parts water. Home-made pies are too much trouble, right? Wrong. I can make a pie dough in less time than a typical TV commercial break (and now I know where the term 'easy as pie' came from). Homemade mayo is great, everyone knows that, but emulsions are hard to make and easy to break, right? Wrong. Just make sure you have the proper ratio of water to oil and you'll be fine (and you can easily re-emulsify if it does break). If you're a novice in the kitchen, this book is going to really do a lot for you. You'll walk past the cake mixes and straight to the bags of flour. You'll find yourself never throwing leftovers away because $\text{leftovers} + \text{stock} = \text{fantastic soup}$. You'll transcend simple bread baking (which is still quite enjoyable) and discover the splendor of choux paste. More importantly however, if you're very comfortable in the kitchen as I was, but still see a division between home cooking and fine cuisine, this is even more so the book for you. It will help bring things to your plate that you thought were reserved for the outer world. The best bread is the bread you bake. The best sauce is the sauce you dream up. The best soup is the one you made from scraps. Of special note is the very important fact that everything in this book is not just possible, but it's easy as well.

After reading through the book, I was left feeling that it should have offered me a lot more. Perhaps Mr. Ruhlman should have given the basic ratio, and then gone on to explain what the results would be. After that, he could have discussed how changing each ingredient in the ratio would change the results. For example, a cook will get some decent bread by using the 5:3 ratio in the book and a standard breadmaking technique. However, if she reduces the water, the bread will be better for bagels and pretzels. If she increases the water, it will tend toward a ciabatta or pugliese. Changing the salt and yeast will affect the rise time and flavor. That's how knowing a ratio becomes useful. The cook knows altering it little in one direction will change the results in a predictable way. Some of

this information was haphazardly indicated in the chapter introductions, but it would have been much more effective if it were thoroughly explained and organized in the context of the recipe ratio. To me, this was the information missing that would have made this book an invaluable resource. It's not just knowing the ratios - it's knowing how to tweak them to get the results I want in each particular instance. I think any mid-level cook knows that adding a few herbs and spices to their homemade biscuits won't break the recipe. But if she wants to be able to tweak her basic biscuit recipe so that just a little more moist and tender to go with fried chicken, or a little more sturdy to stand up to a lot of sausage gravy, this book doesn't offer anything. Many problems with recipes can be solved by altering the ratio slightly: cookies spreading too much, cakes collapsing, biscuits not rising, bread too dense, pie dough overbrowning, etc.

(This review originally appeared in a somewhat different form at my blog, OffSeasonTV at Blogspot.) This book purports to be the latest and greatest in books claiming to teach how to cook without recipes, a trail blazed not all that successfully by authors such as Pam Anderson. Derived from a chart Ruhlman acquired from Chef Uwe Hestnar, at the Culinary Institute of America, it actually does a fairly creditable job of showing how certain aspects of cooking (particularly baking, charcuterie, and saucemaking) are based heavily on ingredient ratios (weight, by the way, not volume ratios, which are somewhat useless due to differences in ingredient density). Hestnar felt quite strongly (and presumably still does) that these ratios were the most critical things a professional chef needs to know, and that pretty much anything else is secondary. As is often the case with books of this sort, Ratio oversells itself; anyone who's spent a great deal of time studying politics can tell you that something that claims to be the utmost in simplicity seldom really is, and truthfully this book has a tendency to downplay technique (entire books can be and have been written on the subject, which really isn't a very simple subject at all), as well as hyperfocusing on classical Franco-international cuisine. The question really comes down to this: how valid is Hestnar's point, and can a non-cook learn to cook from Ruhlman's book? Well, Hestnar's not wrong.

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