

## #261 - The Recipe Decoder

Hey there! You're listening to The Lazy Genius Podcast! I'm Kendra Adachi, and I'm here to help you be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't. Today is episode 261 - The Recipe Decoder. In my book that released last week, The Lazy Genius Kitchen, I shared something kind of revolutionary. A cooking formula that could change how you approach recipes forever. It's called The Liquid Index, and it is your recipe decoder. It is the thing that can help you have way more confidence when you come across a recipe and know that you can, in fact, cook something. Or you can look at a recipe that looks pretty complicated, and you can easily break it down to its essence through the lens of this Liquid Index. It's kind of a big deal, big enough that I want to spend an entire episode on it today. So if you're a recipe person or a riffer, this will be insanely helpful for you to see some of the meals you cook more clearly for what they are.

Before we jump into that, speaking of The Liquid Index, tomorrow's episode of The Lazy Genius Kitchen Show is with Andy Baxter and his wife Sarah, and it focuses a lot on The Liquid Index. Andy is half of my favorite band, Penny and Sparrow, so that was a treat, and I went to Andy and Sarah's house in Alabama and helped them figure out the kinds of meals they could cook in a busy season of life they were in, and The Liquid Index was a big part of that. Plus, you get to see me describe it to humans for the first time and how chaotic it became. I made them both laugh in confusion as I tried to explain The Liquid Index which - to be fair - isn't in itself confusing, but the name could've been better. That's why this episode is called The Recipe Decoder instead of The Liquid Index because while The Liquid Index is a perfectly great name, you'll hear in a second why it maybe should've been workshopped a little more. No matter. It is in print now. We will go forth and rename this episode. So I'm going to explain the magic of The Liquid Index and how it can decode your recipes and also give you some structure on creating your own with what you have. It's kind of a riffer's paradise, so I'm going to explain it now but I wanted to remind to watch that episode tomorrow. It releases Tuesday, May 10 at 2pm ET, and the best way for you to not miss it is to subscribe to the Lazy Genius YouTube channel, and also links are at [thelazygeniuskitchen.com](http://thelazygeniuskitchen.com).

Side note, if you are on the west coast, Penny and Sparrow is touring in your neck of the woods for the next couple of weeks before they had to Europe for the European leg of their tour. Tonight they're in Phoenix, tomorrow and the few days after, they're in various parts of California. They're so much fun live. Just two guys, one guitar, a drum machine, and the best rapartee and environment that exists in a music venue. They are so much fun, and their newest album Olly Olly is a delight and maybe my favorite of any they've ever put out which is saying something. So if you're a fan of music and tend to like music I like and live in the western part of America, just know that Penny and Sparrow are close by.

Okay, let's decode some recipes! If you have your copy of The Lazy Genius Kitchen, I kind of want you to go grab it and look at the charts and stuff with me! You don't have to, but if you ever want to listen to this episode while you look through it, that might enhance your experience. But

you don't need to see the lists for any of this to make sense, so keep walking or driving or folding your laundry or whatever you're doing.

So here's the general problem with recipes. Let's start there. I'm actually going to read an excerpt from the book because I love this analogy too much to not use it here. This is on page 75. "Here's where we've gotten recipes wrong. We think of them as individuals, that they're all unique and beautiful and have nothing to do with each other. Make this thing, and you're done. Make this other thing, and you're done. The way we approach recipes is as if they're government spies unwilling to share any information. We don't let our recipes talk to each other and share how they're alike. We haven't yet noticed that recipes are the same general instructions in the same general order, just using different ingredients." Okay, let's stop there.

Does this ring true for you? I think when we read a recipe, we're reading it as a singular story. It's got its own plot, we close that book, and then we look for another story. But recipes are way more interwoven than that. All the stories impact all the others. Kind of like the Marvel universe. And I'm realizing I don't have the energy to expand that metaphor, so we'll just stop. But the point is we can start learning to read our recipes as though they're all speaking the same language and are in the same universe, and the Liquid Index is a very helpful key in doing that.

Now the Liquid Index only works for meals that have most of the ingredients together. The Liquid Index does not code-break for "meat and three," for a big piece of meat and sides of things. That's not the kind of recipe we're trying to decode. But also - and I say this in the book, also on page 75 - that meat and three could be killing you. Actually, I'll just read that, too.

"The expectation that every meal needs to have a main course of meat and three sides is unsustainable. I'm just shooting you straight. I've heard from hundreds upon hundreds of you over the last few years about how your partner grew up with a mom who cooked "meat and three" every meal, so that's what he or she expects from you. Now listen, if you and your partner decide together to prioritize meat and three as what matters most in your meals, go for it. But you also have to talk about what you're willing to trade for it. You will trade time: other tasks will have to get dropped or delegated. You will trade money: sustaining variety across consistent meat and three meals will definitely cost something. You will trade responsibility and in this case, I mean literally trade - one person cooks, the other cleans up. However, if that way of eating doesn't matter most, let go of the expectation that every meal must have multiple components. It does not. You do not have to cook dinner like you're Martha Stewart."

I hope those words give you a little permission to ease up on your expectations around the meals you cook on a regular basis. Again, it all comes down to what matters to you.

Now, if you don't cook meat and three all the time, the Liquid Index is going to be a hugely helpful tool for you. And here's one of the things I love about it the most. If you know how to cook one kind of soup, the Liquid Index helps you realize that you can cook pretty much all soups. If you know how to make homemade spaghetti sauce or meat sauce, you can cook a million other things. I'm always fascinated by people who say that they only know how to cook

three things, and when they tell me that one of their three things is something like their mom's meat sauce recipe, I think "you can make so many other things! You have the skills to make so many other things!" because our recipes follow pretty much - pretty much, not entirely, but pretty much - the same formulas. So knowing the formulas can help you see recipes differently and help you realize you can cook a lot more than you think you can.

So here's the order. Here's how the Liquid Index works. You cook certain foods in a certain order, and that order and lists of ingredients for each step are in *The Lazy Genius Kitchen*. They're in book, laid out really well, easy to grab and reference. It's great.

But here's the basic recipe order that starts out the same way and then diverges.

So step one is to saute aromatics and bite-sized protein in fat. So aromatics are things like onions, carrot, celery, bell pepper, garlic, ginger, that kind of thing. Bite-sized protein is cut up pieces of chicken, ground beef or pork or turkey, anything bite-sized. And fat, oil or butter or whatever. But that's where you begin. You might do the aromatics first and then add the meat, but a ton of recipes start this way. So that's step one.

Step two is you add bulk. There is a complete list of bulk foods in the book as well, but these are things like potatoes, beans, other vegetables, tofu, lots of things. And one of the great things about adding bulk is that you can use food that is prepped. Roasted or steamed vegetables, leftover vegetables from *Change Your Life Chicken*, beans from a can because those are basically prepped... this is kind of the dream of a meal-prepper, even if you have one thing prepped. But you add bulk to your pan.

Step three is to add liquid. Now here is where the liquid index gets its name and also where Andy and Sarah laughed at me the most when I explained it to them in their episode. But the idea here is that you have a pan with aromatics, bite-sized protein, and something that bulks it up. You now have the option to add liquid. You can skip that option and not add any, you can add a little liquid to the pan, or add a lot. Very scientific. But all three of those options have a very non-creative name in the book. If you don't add liquid, I call that a saute. If you add a little liquid to just bring it all together and thicken it up, I call that a stew which is not the greatest choice in hindsight I realize that. But like a bolognese sauce is a stew. Curry is a stew. Chili might even be a stew. Liquid exists and is an essential part of the recipe, but it's still a pretty thick thing, you know? And then when you add a lot of liquid, it's called soup. We know what that is.

### **We'll be right back...**

So that's step three. Add or don't add liquid. Step four is that you can eat that food, that collection of ingredients by itself - that's obvious - or you can put it in something or on something. And again there are major lists in the book of possibilities here. But you can serve something on rice, in a taco shell, in a hollowed bell pepper, in a piece of lettuce like a lettuce wrap.

And then you can add toppings. Fresh herbs, cheese, nuts, sauces, whatever.

This way of making a meal is so versatile based on what you have, the flavors you like, your skillset. But I think the power of this is that it will help you understand recipes better. You will be able to look at a recipe in a cookbook that looks a little complicated maybe or at least the photo does not look like the food you normally make. But when you scan the recipe, you can see that this recipe that's called "crispy ground pork with broccoli rabe, polenta, and gremolata" is really just a saute served on polenta, topped with this parsley situation. You don't have to think about all of those components separately or be wiggled out because you haven't made polenta before or all of that feels really complicated. You can see that in the recipe, you saute ground pork and garlic in olive oil. You can do that. Then you add bulk with steamed broccoli rabe. You could do that, too, or you could think "eh, I don't like broccoli rabe, let's substitute another bulk item" and then you go look at the list. And for the record, there are also lists in *The Lazy Genius Kitchen* of ingredients by cuisine, so if you're cooking something is more Italian in nature, like garlicky pork and polenta, look at the Italian list in the book to get ideas of what goes together. But you see that the recipe follows steps one and two of the Liquid Index. It doesn't have liquid in it which means it's a saute, and it's served on polenta. Now let's say you don't have polenta. You could pivot that recipe. You could make it a stew instead of a saute by adding a can of crushed tomatoes and serve that on pasta. You could keep it a saute but serve it in hollowed out roasted zucchini because you have way too many zucchini from your garden. Now the recipe you're reading says there's a gremolata. Gremolata is a combination of usually parsley, lemon zest, and garlic. It's a bright punch to a meal. And you could totally make it. But you can also go "oh, they're adding a topping to add freshness" which I talk about the purpose of balance flavors in the book, but you can say to yourself, I don't have gremolata or the ingredients to make it. What topping do I have that might work? A few shreds of basil from your yard, a drizzle of storebought pesto, a sprinkle of Parmesan, a squeeze of lemon juice, or leave it as is. A topping does add a different component to a recipe depending on what it is, but you can still go without. You can make the entire recipe from that cookbook and just leave off the gremolata, knowing that the meal won't be quite as fresh or poppy with it, but that's also okay.

The Liquid Index helps you create your own recipes with more confidence, it helps you decode recipes that feel a little complicated or intimidating, and it helps you know where you can adjust an existing recipe to meet your own needs. You can add a different liquid. You can add more liquid to an existing recipe and make it a soup. You can add variety to something you already make and love by putting it in or on something new. It's the best choose your own adventure vibe with your meals, and as you pay attention more and more, you'll see it more and more. You'll see it everywhere, and you'll feel more and more confident in your ability to make food.

So you can take these steps and honestly go forth and play, but if you would like more detail, more guidance, more lists, they exist in *The Lazy Genius Kitchen*.

And real quick, I just remembered an Instagram post I did forever ago that highlights *The Liquid Index*, and I didn't even realize it at the time. It's in my IGTV, and it's a tan text box and says

“how to use the exact same ingredients to make two completely different meals.” I saute bite-sized chicken with a bell pepper and onion aromatic. I added bulk with sweet potatoes. And then in that video, to one pan, I add red curry paste and coconut milk which was a little liquid and made a stew that we all know and love as Sunshine Curry. And that goes on rice. In the other pan, I add chipotle peppers for flavor and more bulk with black beans and no liquid. That is a saute that I also served on rice. But that could’ve gone in a tortilla or on a plate of cheesy microwave nacho chips or in a quesadilla. So in that video, I’m showing the divergence of the Liquid Index. A lot of things start off similarly, and depending on when and how you add flavor and liquid, you can have wildly different meals with similar ingredients and transferable skills. I really think this thing is going to give you a lot of life and confidence in moving through recipes and learning to riff if that’s something you want to learn. I’m super pumped about it, and I’ll try not to be too mad at myself for calling it the Liquid Index instead of something a little better maybe like The Recipe Decoder. But I guess it’s also not just about decoding existing recipes but giving you permission to play around with your own from your baseline, from what you already know.

I hope this episode gives you some inspiration today, and if you’re looking at the lists in The Lazy Genius Kitchen, I’m excited about the combos you’re going to put together! So fun. Anything to help us enjoy our kitchens more, right?

Before we go, let’s celebrate the Lazy Genius of the Week! This week it’s Karin H. who wrote “Hi Kendra! I’m so excited about The Lazy Genius Kitchen arriving in my mailbox on Tuesday! (I’m excited too, Karin, and you have gotten it by now and I hope it’s been amazing!) I have a Decide Once that I want to share. I was watching the show with Erin Moon (she’s talking about The Lazy Genius Kitchen show) and she mentioned that she does charcuterie on Sundays and I do something similar that is my Decide Once. Thank you for that magic language that’s added so much authority to my decisions by the way. I have what we call Salad Bar Sunday where I basically throw every kind of cheese, condiment, veggie, and cured meat out and add in whatever cold leftovers from the week might work, and everyone just makes what they want. I find my kids eat a lot of good-for-them foods and I can clean out the fridge for a solid start to the week. Just thought I would share.” Karin, I think this is a fantastic idea. I love that it’s doing a couple of jobs for you. First, it’s giving you a plan for dinner every Sunday so you don’t have to think about that anymore. I also love that it’s a way to use up leftovers and clear out your fridge. One of the biggest parts of The Lazy Genius Kitchen book is prep. And not prep like things cut up in your fridge but the flow of your life in the kitchen, the rhythm it has. This kind of meal is a great way to keep that rhythm going because it’s impacting your space, your meals, your plan, the food you have because you’re using what you have, and your flow. It’s a really great idea, so thank you for sharing it and for being this week’s Lazy Genius of the Week!

Okay, you guys, that is it for today. What a week it’s been. I am recording this from the past, from a couple of days before my book actually released, and when you’re listening to this, I will have launched it, I will have had a launch party in my hometown, in Greensboro NC, and I will have taken a trip to New York City with Jamie Golden. I imagine I am very tired but very happy and grateful, and you all are a huge part of that. You’ve been so supportive through this entire

book launch, we have more things this month, and this book will be part of our language and rhythm forever. This book will never not be relevant to your lives and to this podcast when we talk about anything in the kitchen, so I'm excited to talking about it and hearing from you in how it's helping you have what you need, use what you have, and enjoy your kitchen like never before. Don't forget we have two more episodes of The Lazy Genius Kitchen show! I already mentioned that tomorrow is The Liquid Index with Andy and Sarah Baxter. It is so funny and fun. There is also a bonus episode where Andy and I share our favorite movie scenes that occur at a dinner table, and it is a surprisingly riveting conversation. And then next Tuesday will be our final episode with Terrance Jackson who many of you know from the PMG, from the Popcast family. The Popcast with Knox and Jamie is my favorite, Jamie Golden is one of my favorite people in the whole world. I mean, I love Knox too, but you know. And Terrance works for their company and is just a delight. His episode is so fun, it's so Terrance, and we build him a Meal Matrix in real time, a single guy meal matrix. It's a lot of fun.

Okay, speaking of fun, you guys are fun and lovely, and I couldn't be more grateful to have this be my Internet family. Thank you for coming along on this book launch journey, thank you for buying the book, I hope you're loving it, and if you've not gotten it, I really hope you check it out, not because I want to sell books but because your life to be easier and feel more like you, especially in the kitchen, and The Lazy Genius Kitchen will do that. I am very confident. I'm guessing at this point there are probably reviews on Amazon and Goodreads if you want social proof. That is a risky thing to say at this exact moment because the book isn't out when I'm recording this and there are no reviews, but I think there will be some and probably mostly good ones by the time you're listening. Wouldn't that be so sad if you went and there were like two reviews and they were both terrible. That won't happen! This is getting sad, let's stop. The book is great, I hope you love it, I hope it helps you feel like yourself in your own kitchen and make it work for you. Thank you so much for listening, and until next time, be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't. I'm Kendra, and I'll see you next week!