

Tools for Puréeing

Knowing the task is key to selecting the right implement

BY PRISCILLA MARTEL



The oldest puréeing tool, the mortar and pestle, has been used since antiquity for grinding and mashing. Look for a deep-bowled mortar and a heavy pestle, which will lessen the muscle needed to do the job. The author's mortar and pestle (shown here) came from Greece.



The immersion or hand blender is the newest kid on the block. It's great for puréeing soup or mashing potatoes right in the pot.

Puréeing is a technique used for making all manner of delicious things, from airy fish quenelles to vegetable side dishes (like the sweet-potato and turnip purée we have every Thanksgiving) to raspberry sauce. Purées form the bases of sauces, soufflés, and many soups as well. Most creamy soups rely on puréeing to produce a uniform texture. Some soups have an entirely different character depending on which puréeing tool is used. An Italian soup made of wild mushrooms, pancetta, potatoes, and beans is rough and hearty when I spin the cooked mushrooms briefly in a food processor, but silken and delicate when passed through a fine sieve.

Whether I need to mash a potato or purée salmon for a mousse, I know I can lay my hands on the perfect tool. As a former restaurant owner and chef, I've had ample opportunity to use all of the possible implements for making a purée, and while certain tasks require specialized items, most need only the basic equipment I have in my kitchen at home.

Automation has conquered the kitchen as it has everything else. For the majority of puréeing jobs, the food processor is the easiest and fastest tool to use. But each of the other tools has its special use. For very small quantities, I prefer my mortar and pestle. To get the smoothest, most silken results, I'll use a drum sieve. To strain a sauce and purée the vegetables used to flavor it, a perforated conical sieve is ideal. When I want to purée and strain out skins or seeds in one process, I opt for the food mill. And when I want to purée soup or vegetables right in the cooking pot, I reach for my immersion blender.

THE MOST BASIC TOOLS

I learned the hard way that a waxy new potato is better when mashed manually. The new potatoes I put through a food processor turned to Silly Putty. I urge everyone to try mashing an unskinned, boiled red potato with a plain old *fork*. The potato mashes

easily, and the flecks of red skin give an interesting texture to the dish. But one or two potatoes at a time is about the limit.

A *wire masher* produces a smooth purée every time, no matter what kind of potato I'm using, albeit with a little effort. And it's the most convenient tool of all for chunky purées of soft, moist ingredients that practically fall apart anyway, like apples or winter squash.

MORTAR AND PESTLE

In my book, everyone should have a mortar and pestle. They're invaluable for mashing small quantities of garlic, anchovies, capers, and herbs—pungent foods I like to keep away from my cutting board. The weight and shape of the mortar and pestle are the keys to its effectiveness. Mine is marble. The mortar is ten inches high with a narrow, six-inch-deep bowl that keeps the ingredients contained. The pestle weighs two pounds—perfect for crushing with minimum effort. I like the control I have when using my mortar and pestle, and it's easy to clean.

SIEVES

A *drum sieve*—also called a *tamis*—is made of a piece of mesh stretched taut over a circular wooden frame. The drum sieve sits conveniently over most containers and bowls. Since the sieve surface is flat and also larger than that of a typical household sieve, a *tamis* is infinitely more efficient—both faster and easier—to use. To force food through its mesh, I use a hard, plastic scraper.

Drum sieves can be difficult to find. My set of four came from a Chinese market and cost about \$2 each. For making fine purées of small quantities of soft-cooked apples, squash, tomatoes, turnips, and other watery foods, this is an easy tool to use. I frequently use mine to remove lumps in custards. In addition, you can purée firmer foods (such as chopped meat for pâtés) in a drum sieve. This takes patience, but the results are velvety smooth.



Drum sieves, or tamis, can be hard to find, but they make the finest-textured purées. They're made to sit flat over a bowl. The cook works the food through with a plastic scraper.

Two conical sieves—the fine mesh of the smaller sieve, foreground, removes all traces of fiber from soft foods. A small kitchen ladle makes a good tamper. The perforated steel sieve, background, requires a wooden pestle for pushing food through its basket.

There are two types of *conical sieves* that I find useful in making purées. One is made from a solid sheet of perforated steel and comes with its own wooden pestle. After braising lamb shanks or a pot roast, I'll strain the cooking liquid through this sieve and then push the soft carrots, celery, and onions through to thicken and flavor my sauce. This sieve is also good for making tomato purée and applesauce. Lightweight, inexpensive aluminum versions, complete with wooden pestle and wire stand, are sold in hardware stores along with canning supplies.

The other type of conical sieve has a fine, dense wire mesh. I use this sieve most frequently to refine a purée made with a machine, working the food through with a two-ounce kitchen ladle. It's especially good for removing fibers and seeds from a fruit purée. You can use a *household sieve* in much the same way. As a last resort, you can even make a purée by forcing the food through a conical or regular sieve, but it takes muscle and time, and it's almost impossible to purée firmer cooked foods, such as mushrooms or meat.

RICERS AND FOOD MILLS

Slightly more automated than the drum sieve are ricers and food mills, which force cooked foods through perforated metal. The *ricer* is limited because it accepts only small quantities of food at a time; it's best for cooked tubers and root vegetables. Ricers produce perfectly smooth mashed potatoes with little effort.

The food mill, on the other hand, is one of the most versatile of tools. It will purée anything a food





Ricers and food mills require less muscle-power than sieves. Food mills are versatile and can purée nearly everything except firm meats. The best ones have interchangeable plates for coarse to fine purées.

Food processors do all the work of puréeing with little effort on the part of the cook. Usually the biggest job is cleaning up.



processor will, at the cost of a bit more effort, and it's especially useful for any food with parts you want to segregate, like skin, seeds, or fibers. I always use one to crush tomatoes and remove their skins before freezing or canning.

The food mill also gives more control over a purée than does a machine. The only problem I've found is cleanup: the several parts include a plate with holes that clog easily.

Better food mills offer interchangeable plates with holes of varying sizes to make coarse or smooth purées. I use a Mouli. I've found that cheaper mills are more trouble than they're worth. In inexpensive models, the paddle that pushes the food through the metal plate often buckles or refuses to stay in place.

THE MACHINE AGE

My full-size food processor can purée just about anything. It's the only piece of equipment in my kitchen that will turn nuts into a creamy spread or transform tough-skinned olives into a smooth paste for tapenade. Its powerful motor can also make fine purées from boneless meat, poultry, and fish; however, friction caused by the action of the blade heats the meat slightly, which can toughen it.

You can pulse a food processor to make coarse purées. By turning the machine on and off for a few seconds, you can get a coarse tomato purée or a chunky fruit sauce.

A food processor doesn't work for tiny quantities: you need enough food in the bowl to reach the blades. Even in a mini food processor, a few cloves of garlic bounce around and never get puréed until you add a bit of olive oil.

My standard two-quart blender produces an exceptionally smooth

Blenders are great for puréeing fairly liquid foods. Some models have a removable base, making cleanup easier.



Photos: Susan Kuhn

purée, provided that the consistency of the food is fairly liquid, such as soup or soft fruit.

Dry foods—chickpeas, for instance—will stick to the sides of the bowl and won't come into contact with the blade.

To purée a large quantity of soup, I use my immersion blender, plunging it right into the pot. The immersion blender has a small motor encased in a heavy plastic handle. A blade at the base of a narrow wand does the work. The model I use, a Braun, is about twelve inches long, weighs about a pound and has a single blade. It's almost as powerful as the best traditional blender with the bonus of portability, and it's easy to clean. I simply douse the wand and blade in soapy water and rinse.

WHERE TO FIND THE TOOLS

Most of the items described are sold locally at hardware, department, cookware, and restaurant-supply stores. They're also available by mail from the following companies:

Bridge Kitchenware, 214 East 52nd St., New York, NY 10022; 800/274-3435, stocks all the items discussed, although its catalog (\$3, refundable with purchase) only lists a few. Call for information.

Broadway Panhandler, 520 Broadway, New York, NY 10012; 212/966-3434, has most of the tools mentioned. No catalog. Call for information.

Sur La Table, 84 Pine St., Pike Place Farmers' Market, Seattle, WA 98101; 800/243-0852, carries most of the items, including the drum sieves, although not all appear in its free catalog. Call for information.

Williams-Sonoma stores stock most of the items and will ship. Call 800/541-1262 for the store nearest you.

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