

Making life easier in the kitchen



‘Chopped’ winner offers practical tips — and a recipe — for cooking with MS.

Chris Holland went from paralegal to restaurant chef and three-time winner of the cooking competition show “Chopped” in the span of about a decade. And he credits it all to multiple sclerosis.

Holland, who was diagnosed with MS in 2004, says his life “fell apart when I got sick.” But he put his life back together and, with encouragement from his wife, Marge, decided there was no better time to pursue his lifelong dream of becoming a chef. Today, he’s chef and part owner at DVine Bar in Rockland County, New York, where he specializes in what he likes to call “eclectic, weird fine-dining.” He concocts menu items that run the gamut from duck fat potato chips with cipollini onion crema to seared tuna and chanterelles.



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“I love it there,” Holland says. “I have a great boss who really understands about my MS.”

Holland figures he applied to be on “Chopped” about 10 times before he got the call. Since then, he’s had an impressive run. He notched his third championship in November 2019, donating the \$10,000 prize money to the National Multiple Sclerosis Society as a way to give back to an organization that he says has given so much to him and others. He’s also had a great response to his appearances on the show. He’s particularly happy when he hears from “the young people who were diagnosed. They say it’s so nice to see somebody who’s able to do something like I do.”

It’s not always easy. Standing for long hours in a hot kitchen, wielding knives and other cooking utensils while whipping up that cipollini crema can take its toll on somebody with MS. So, who better to offer a variety of practical tips for making life easier in the kitchen?

Here are chef Holland’s tips, along with a bonus recipe you can make while dreaming about being a “Chopped” chef yourself:

Get a Microplane grater

This grater is one of the most important tools in my kitchen and the best \$15 you could ever spend. In addition to providing the delicious zest from a citrus fruit, it has other uses for the quick processing of ginger or garlic. Simply grate the ginger or garlic and avoid the tedious task of chopping these aromatics. You don’t even have to peel them.

Get some help from the supermarket

While I encourage everyone to cook your food rather than buy it, there is nothing wrong with using precooked foods for a head start. Rotisserie chickens are available in most supermarkets and are very affordable. Use them in anything that calls for cooked chicken as an ingredient and save those bones for a stock. Check the salad bar for ready-to-go ingredients that you can use in your own culinary creations.



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Slow cookers are your friend

Slow cookers are a great way to stay out of a hot kitchen and avoid spending time on your feet. Many recipes call for 15–20 minutes of prep time, then set it and forget it. Just remember to start cooking early, as many recipes take hours to finish cooking. Slow cookers are also great for soups.

The microwave is not just for reheating coffee and for frozen dinners

This much-maligned kitchen tool does impressive work with vegetables. Hearty greens such as broccoli, green beans and carrots cook beautifully in a microwave. Just wash the vegetables (do not dry) and place them on a ceramic plate and cover with plastic wrap. Microwave on high for three minutes. Check for the desired doneness and add more time as needed. Season afterward with olive oil, lemon, and salt and pepper.

A salad doesn't have to just be lettuce

A salad is an easy vehicle for incorporating foods beneficial to those living with MS, such as avocado, whole grains such as quinoa or chia seeds (high in fiber), fatty fish such as salmon, trout and tuna (omega 3s), walnuts (omega 3s), and lean proteins such as chicken, turkey and pork tenderloin.

Mediterranean chicken tacos

Cook Time: 15 minutes

Servings: 4

Ingredients:

1 small rotisserie chicken
3 cloves of fresh garlic (grated with a Microplane)
½ teaspoon dried oregano
½ teaspoon ground cumin
Pinch chili flakes (optional)
½ cup extra virgin olive oil plus 3 tablespoons
Juice of half a lemon
Zest of 1 lemon
1 English cucumber (diced)
½ red onion (diced)
2 tablespoons fresh dill (chopped)
1 tablespoon red wine vinegar
½ cup Greek yogurt
Salt and pepper
8 flour tortillas (6-inch)

Directions:

1. Pull the meat off of the chicken and shred into a large bowl.
2. In a medium sauté pan, heat the olive oil over medium heat. Check the heat by putting one piece of the diced onion into the pan. It should sizzle immediately upon hitting the oil.
3. Once the oil is at the correct temperature, turn off the heat, and add the garlic,

oregano, cumin and chili flakes. Stir the oil for one minute or until the pan stops sizzling.

4. Add this oil mixture (reserving 3 tablespoons) along with the lemon juice to the shredded chicken. Season with salt and pepper to taste.
5. In a separate bowl, add diced cucumber, diced red onion, reserved olive oil, chopped dill, red wine vinegar, and salt and pepper to taste.
6. In a separate bowl, add Greek yogurt, lemon zest, and salt and pepper to taste.
7. In a small sauté pan, toast flour tortillas.
8. To assemble, spread one side of tortilla with the yogurt mixture. Top with chicken and the cucumber “salsa.”

For the leftovers, consider adding shredded mozzarella and making a Greek chicken quesadilla served with lemon yogurt and cucumber salsa.