

# Cooking Up a Computer System

by Tricia Santos – the Computer Chef®



In developing my new brand, I've been contemplating the similarities of cooking and technology. They both start with a bunch of ingredients. Where you go from there depends on your skills, interests, needs, and budget.

## What Kind of Cook Are You?

Way back in high school one of my jobs was as a cook at a fast food place. Everything was spelled out and ready to cook. I didn't have to know anything more than the difference between a burger and a bun. In college, I moved up to jobs in restaurants where I was a short order cook and a prep cook. Those required more skills but not a lot of creativity. I mostly followed recipes or instructions (as well as I ever have followed instructions!).

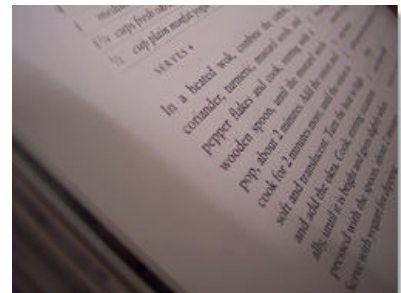
While it's been a long time since I've worked in a restaurant, cooking is my favorite hobby. I'm not a gourmet chef (although I have several generations of those in my family) but I do try to be creative in my dishes. I often start with a recipe and then adapt it to suit my tastes and ingredients.



What kind of cook are you? If you have eggs, cheese and a few other ingredients, what are you likely to make? Would you just scramble the eggs and toss in the cheese? Would you expend more effort and make an omelet? Or, would you get creative and make a crepe?

For me, it will depend on who I'm feeding and how much time I have. If I'm just feeding myself, scrambled eggs are fine. If I'm feeding others, I'll either make an omelet or a crepe depending on the circumstances.

Are you likely to just do what you already know, the tried and true, even if it doesn't make the most of the ingredients? Or, would you get down the recipe book and see what else you can do? Do you like to experiment? Are you likely to get new recipes from friends and colleagues (and actually try to make them)? Do you take an occasional cooking class?



Hopefully, by now you're seeing how this analogy works. The question to ask yourself is what kind of computer user are you? Do you like to have a few simple skills that let you follow the instructions and get your work done? Do you like to be a little more creative and come up with new things to do? Or, do you want to create totally unique systems? It's not just a matter of skill, but of time, interests, and needs (well, and budget, of course!).

There is no right or wrong in this. It's about knowing your skills, interests and needs, and deciding when it's better to do it yourself and when to get help. Recently I was watching a show on the Food Network called Party Planners. That's where a chef and party planner come to someone's home and help them put together a party. One suggestion the chef made was to not try and make everything yourself. Go to a bakery and buy the deserts. What great advice! Baking has always been my weakest area of cooking so I usually do just buy deserts. It's always good to get that validation.

## Who Are You Feeding and What Do They Want to Eat?



Any good chef will start with what they need to create – an entrée, a dessert, a full-course dinner? How many do they have to feed?

For your computer system, look at what you need to accomplish. Do you provide professional services so client relationships are where you spend the most time? Are you a retail store so your inventory/sales system is at the heart of your business?

When you're planning a meal, you typically start with one main item and prepare the rest of the meal around that. For example, a typical American meal will have a meat as the main item with side dishes that complement that meat. You would also choose a main style (Southwestern, Chinese, French, etc.) and have dishes that enhance the flavor of the meal as a whole.

You want to do the same with your computer system. You want hardware and software that work together so the sum of the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Tricia's Rule #1 is Never Retype! That means your contact manager which stores all of the contact information, history, etc., should be able to use your word processor and email program. Your POS system should talk to your customer database. You want to be able to move information among the different applications. And, you want hardware that provides enough "gas" to run the software.

Another area to consider is information access. How many people need to have access to the same information? How current does that information need to be? Where are you and your employees? In the office? Around town? Here, there, and everywhere? How often and from where do you need to access your information?

The answers to those questions will determine what software and hardware you need. It will also help you figure out what support you need – in-house and externally.

What else do you need to do? Do you want to create information products to complement your services? How do you want to produce and distribute those products? Again, the answers inform the choices you make on what hardware and software you need to buy. Or, help you get even more return on the products you already own.

A good chef will then figure out what kind of crowd they're feeding. Are they a scrambled eggs kind of group? Are they a little more sophisticated and prefer an omelet? Or, are they high-end and prefer a crepe?

For you, that means looking at your business, what you need to accomplish, and your level of reliance on technology. If you are in the trades (a plumber, electrician, etc.), your customers don't expect everything to be computerized. They just want their drain cleared. Back in your office you'll want to have a functional system that gives you the information you need and prints out some reports and customer statements.



If you provide professional services like accounting or consulting, your clients' expectations are much higher. They expect you to have high quality printed materials. They expect you to be able to communicate with them in a variety of ways very quickly. They expect you to have immediate access to not only their information, but the latest information in your field. No scrambled eggs for this crowd. They want crepes. Preferably with a lobster filling and complementary wine.

## What Ingredients Do You Have?



Finally, what kind of dish you have will ultimately depend on your ingredients. For your computer system, that means looking at the hardware and software you already own as well as what you are prepared to buy.

It also means looking at the support you require. Evaluate the quality and cost of that support. Do you have an in-house employee who can manage things? Will you rely on a custom software vendor? Are there consultants in the area who can support your choices? Do you have choices? What are your options for training?

One suggestion I make to clients is to find local support (including training) for any software you buy. If the company providing the software has one office across the country, and that's the only training and support you have, it will usually be slow, inadequate and/or very expensive. Sometimes that has meant I've learned the software well enough to provide training and to set up custom templates, reports, and procedures.

It's the same with the computer. My approach with clients is to suggest if they only need to do something once, or so infrequently they'll forget, let someone else do it. If they're going to do something repeatedly, learn to do it themselves (or someone on their staff).

Finally, one of my talents is I'm able to read a recipe or ingredient list and know what it will taste like (and if I'll like it). When I go out to dinner with friends, they often ask me to pick something for them. It seems I'm pretty good at figuring out what they would like based on my knowledge of what they do like.

How do you decide what new things to try? Can you look at the options and know what works together to best satisfy your appetite? Are you likely to just try whatever someone suggests? Do you order the most familiar item on the menu? Do you listen to someone with similar tastes?

When it comes to computers, I see people with the same variety of decision-making perspectives. If you're going to get advice, you want someone who will get to know your skills, interests and needs, evaluate the options available, and make recommendations based on what will work best for you – not based on what they like. The goal is to get the most value from your ingredients.

## Let the Feast Begin

Obviously, a few eggs can end up in very different dishes depending on the crowd as well as the cook. Assess your needs, skills and ingredients, and then blend them together into a dish that tastes right for you.

And, don't forget – those eggs are going to get broken in the process of preparing that dish!

