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How to Adapt a Recipe for America or Great Britain

Localizing British recipes for an American audience and vice versa is no cakewalk. The two countries have very different culinary cultures and conventions. They use different systems of measurement and have different names for the same foods, and some ingredients that are common on one side of the pond are almost impossible to find on the other.

Systems of Measurement

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Some ingredients may also be measured according to the standard packaging size. For example, a recipe may call for 1 (28 oz.) can of tomatoes or 1 pint of blueberries. Ounces, pints, quarts and gallons are all also US customary units.

When weights are given in American recipes, they are according to the avoirdupois system (i.e. in pounds). The only place where we commonly see ingredients measured by weight in the US is with meat and fish (probably because it would be difficult to fit a chicken or a steak into a measuring cup). Recipes for professional bakers and pastry chefs usually give measurements in weight because it's supposed to be more precise, but a recipe aimed at an amateur baker will be in cups. Many homecooks in the US don't even own a kitchen scale.

Temperature is measured in degrees Fahrenheit, and length is in inches (e.g. "use a 9×13-inch pan," or "chop into 1-inch pieces.")

UK

The conventions for measurements in British recipes are less standardized. The UK officially adopted the metric system in the 20th century, but the imperial system is still used in some occasions. Most new cookbooks are now published in metric, meaning they use grams for dry ingredients and milliliters for liquids, in addition to tablespoons and teaspoons for small quantities.

If you encounter a British recipe in imperial units, watch out! Many imperial units have the same name as US customary units (ounce, quart, gallon) but are not the same thing. A US fluid ounce is 29.6 ml, while an imperial fluid ounce is 28.4 ml. And a US pint is 16 US fl oz, whereas an imperial pint is 20 oz, meaning it's about 20% larger.

Temperature is in degrees Celsius. Some British recipes also provide a gas mark, which is a temperature scale used for gas ovens. If you are following the metric system, length should be in centimetres.

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measure dry ingredients in weight, and there is no one rule you can follow to convert volume into weight. One cup of flour doesn't weigh the same as one cup of grated cheese or one cup of grapes.

It's easy to find volume-to-weight conversions online and in many cookbooks for the most common baking ingredients, like flour, sugar and butter. However, when you get into more niche foods, it can be a lot harder to find a reliable conversion. One of our favourite sources for conversions is [howmany.wiki](https://www.howmany.wiki/). Another site that has a very comprehensive database of ingredients is aqua-calc.com. Ideally, when converting a recipe from volume to weight or vice versa, you would test it yourself, but this is not realistic or possible for every situation. One thing you can do to improve accuracy is to check multiple resources and take the average of the results you find or the mode (the one that appears most often).

An important decision you have to make when converting any measurements is how to round the numbers. One US cup is equivalent to 236.588 ml, but that's an oddly specific amount to call for, and few measuring jugs are designed for such precision. Rounding your conversions to the nearest multiple of 5 will be close enough in most cases.

Vocabulary

One of the biggest differences between American and British English is in the words used for foods. In the table below you will find a compilation of some of the main culprits. Keep in mind that this is a non-exhaustive list that is only intended to give you an idea of the number of differences. There are many others not listed here, as well as many that depend on context.

This is why it's essential to work with an adapter who is deeply familiar with the target market.

There are also words that are the same word but spelled differently, which we haven't

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US	UK	Comment
a head of lettuce	a lettuce	Lettuce is uncountable in American English but can be counted in British English.
all-purpose flour	plain flour	
arugula	rocket	
beet	beetroot	
candy	sweets	
chips	crisps	
cilantro	coriander	In the US, “coriander” refers to the seeds and “cilantro” to the leaves, whereas in the UK it’s all coriander
cookie, cracker	biscuit	Biscuits are generally small, hard, dry and come from a box (like digestives). Soft, gooey homemade chocolate chip cookies, for example, would still be called cookies in the UK.
corn starch	corn flour	
cotton candy	candyfloss	
dark chocolate	dark chocolate, plain chocolate	
eggplant	aubergine	

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green onion, scallion	spring onion	
ground meat	minced meat, mince	Not to be confused with mincemeat
heavy cream	double cream	
molasses	treacle, black treacle	
popsicle	ice lolly	
snow pea	mangetout	
soy, soybean	soya, soya bean	
wholewheat	wholemeal	
zucchini	courgette	

Kitchen Equipment

US	UK	Comment
baking sheet, sheet pan	baking tray	

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oven mitt	oven glove	
plastic wrap	cling film	
silverware, flatware	cutlery	In the UK silverware is made of silver, whereas in the US it is used for any cutlery
skillet	frying pan	
stovetop	hob	

Substituting Ingredients

Some ingredients are common in one country, but difficult to find in another. In this case, it can be a good idea to suggest a substitute when adapting the recipe.

If the substitute is somewhat equivalent but not really the same thing, leave the original ingredient and add the substitute in brackets or as a note somewhere. For example, “500 g graham crackers (or digestive biscuits).”

If the substitute is essentially the same thing (maybe just a different brand, for example) or so similar that the end result will be indistinguishable, you can replace the original ingredient. For example, “500 ml half-and-half 250 ml milk and 250 ml double cream.”

If an ingredient would be considered exotic or hard to find by the original target audience (think kaffir lime leaves, black garlic, gojuchang), you don't need to adapt it, just leave it as is.

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Common US>UK ingredient substitutions

US ingredient	UK substitute	Comment
granulated sugar	caster sugar	“Granulated sugar” exists in the UK but it is coarser than what would be called “granulated sugar” in the US. Caster sugar is the closer equivalent.
saltine crackers	cream crackers	Saltines are saltier and flakier.
graham crackers	digestive biscuits	
half and half	1:1 mix of milk and cream	

Common UK>US ingredient substitutions

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golden syrup, light treacle	corn syrup, honey, brown rice syrup	Golden syrup is made from refined sugar cane or sugar beet.
self-rising flour	1 cup of all-purpose flour + 1 ½ tsp baking powder	Many UK recipes call for self-rising flour. This is just regular flour with baking powder already mixed in.

How Can OXO Help You with Culinary Localization

As we hope this guide has shown, culinary localization is a specialized field that requires expert knowledge. We have extensive experience with this kind of content and recently had to adapt close to 2 million words from US to UK English in video scripts for a major e-learning client. Since around 30% of the classes were given by master chefs, we acquired quite a taste for this. Next time you can entrust your menus, recipes and cooking classes to OXO for translation or adaptation. We will serve them as a banquet to your global audience.

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