

The System of Cooking for Dysphagia

The Master Sauce Guide

How to Get the Maximum Flavor, Texture and Nutrition into Your Puree

By Diane Wolff



Flavor and texture are the two most important elements for foolproof Pureed foods and other texture modified foods (e.g., Minced & Moist, Soft & Bite-Sized, or Easy to Chew foods – see IDDSI.org). This article is the sum of years of my work in the kitchen cooking for my mother. Please see my [Cooking for Dysphagia](#) cookbook.

The **biggest secret** to the art of cooking for people with difficulty swallowing (dysphagia) is the **sauce**, for the sauce carries the flavor. The idea of a sauce is to add liquid to food to let the liquid flavor the food. Imagine the liquid wrapping around the molecules of food, and suddenly the dish is singing with flavor. Adding sauce is also essential to make food moist and easy to swallow!

When I say sauce, I am not speaking of old-fashioned sauces made with a roux of flour and butter. Those do not freeze well, nor do they puree well.

Secret Sauce Ideas

You can make a homemade sauce from scratch, find great store-bought sauces, save the juices from a roast to make gravy, or use a soup as a base for a sauce. Regardless, you can have a great dish. The sauce may be tomato sauce, brown gravy, Alfredo sauce, barbecue sauce, or curry. Or the sauce may be as simple as a broth: chicken broth, vegetable broth, beef broth, seafood broth. John Holahan, another dysphagia cookbook author ([Modern Dysphagia Cooking](#)), recommends thickening sauces with a commercially available gum-based gel thickener. This works, too. There are many ways to create flavorful sauces, so I will share some of my ideas here:

- Two vegetables which I keep on hand frozen are fantastic additions to purees: frozen peas and frozen spinach. Each one can thicken the liquid of your sauce and each boosts nutrition. They also add color. Pay attention to color with pureed food, as color adds to visual appeal.
- My favorite sauce of the moment is sauce made from a soup with a vegetable base (e.g., mushroom, onion, celery, red pepper, butternut squash).
- A white sauce can be made from whipped cauliflower, saving on saturated fat.
- A mild curry sauce is a beautiful medium for puree. I use light coconut milk.
- If you have leftover gravy from the pot roast recipe, freeze it for making a sauce in the future. Same goes for leftover chicken soup: freeze it to save for a sauce later. The flavor boost of future meals will be fantastic, and you will not waste food.

- Make an onion and pepper smother gravy (a staple of Southern cuisine). This is pan sauteing vegetables in the leftover drippings from your meat. This can also freeze for future sauces.
- For miso soup-based sauces, I use a dashi, from the Japanese kitchen, made in minutes with dried kombu (kelp). Those who eat tuna can add dried bonito flakes (Katsuobushi) to flavor a soup stock.
- Pesto: I make my own with basil from my herb garden. Pesto can be used to flavor anything from steamed fish to vegetable soup. Please add it after cooking. ([See my recipe in *Cooking for Dysphagia*.](#))
- Tomato sauce: I make my own, and I buy store-bought with or without meat. ([Recipe in *Cooking for Dysphagia*](#)). Homemade or store-bought, it is good to have the ingredients on hand, as a good tomato sauce is essential for a variety of pasta dishes.
- Mushroom sauce is my favorite for a sauce without meat.
- Borscht is a traditional Russian soup made of beets. It is red! When it is pureed with boiled potato and sour cream, the traditional accompaniments, it is pink. In winter it can be served hot. In summer, it is traditionally served cold.
- If the primary care physician gives permission, alcohol may be used in small amounts to flavor sauces. I would add a quarter cup of red wine to a gallon of my pasta sauce. I poach a salmon filet in a Japanese Sake. This is a matter of an individual's medical history.
- Barbecue sauce: I am partial to low-sugar sauces. For my mother, too much sugar in her diet seemed to cause frequent urinary tract infections. In the south and in Texas, barbecue sauce is the culinary equivalent of a religious experience. People are very particular and guard the secrets of their sauces without apology. I am releasing my secrets for person-centered care! See my Barbeque Sauce in [Cooking for Dysphagia](#) cookbook (page 143).

Sugary Sauces?

I did not use refined sugars in my mother's diet. Instead, I used natural sugars, honey, maple syrup, molasses (which is often in barbecue sauce), and even barley malt syrup. One can make cherry sauce for ice cream or cranberry sauce for turkey, and honey can be added to these.

In her latest [Fed Substack](#) post, Lourdes Castro, MS, RD, quotes Jane Black (author of [Consumed Substack](#)). Both agree that sugar is sugar. It does not matter which form you use. What matters is the quantity or the amount you are using. This is another question for your primary care physician and your registered dietitian nutritionist (RDN). Learn more about dietitians and the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics [here](#).

American Classic Dishes

You want burgers and hot dogs?

I pureed good quality hot dogs, taking the meat out of the casing, thickening it, and piping it into hot dog shapes. I served the dogs with a side of pureed baked beans. As to the flavor of great American classic dishes, use condiments as needed, but, like sugar, use them sparingly and with attention.

To flavor the dog, I added the sauces during the pureeing process. When I pureed the hotdog, I added her favorite mustard and sauerkraut. It really tasted like a hot dog!

I followed the same rule for a burger: Once the burger was to be blended smooth to an IDDSI Pureed, Level 4 consistency, I added pureed sauces of grilled onion and pickle and ketchup in layers. These condiment sauces were thickened as needed. Note: [IDDSI.org](https://www.iddsi.org) has many resources for you to make sure you have a perfect pureed food. The right sauce will help your puree pass a Spoon Tilt Test.

Please see the [IDDSI Spoon Tilt Test](#) especially, as this helps to make sure your puree is not too sticky. The [IDDSI Fork Drip Test](#) can be used to make sure the puree is not too thin (i.e., not dripping through the tines of a fork).

Texture & Thickness

A great task of a sauce is to create a **pleasing – and safe texture** – in your food. It also must make the food moist, smooth and *cohesive*, meaning staying together in your mouth while you savor it and process it. The food without a good sauce might crumble and fall into your cheeks and throat. The sauce is thick, but

- **not too thick** (making a sticky-clumpy mess), and
- **not too thin** (separating into a mixed consistency, which can be hard to control for a person with dysphagia).

Without the **right amount** of sauce or gravy, a pureed, minced, or cut-up protein may be too dry, crumbly, and grainy in texture. If you have difficulty swallowing (dysphagia), dry and crumbly is NOT what you want.

Read more about safety for people with dysphagia in these United States IDDSI Reference Group ([USIRG](#)) FAQs:

1. Bread and **Mixed Consistencies** (i.e., dual textures, meaning one bite has a solid to chew and a lot of liquid to control and not aspirate):
<https://www.iddsi.org/images/AroundTheWorld/UnitedStates/faq/USIRGFAQExceptionsBreadsMixedConsistencyJan2025.pdf>
2. Sauces, Gravies, and Condiments:
<https://www.iddsi.org/images/AroundTheWorld/UnitedStates/faq/USIRGSaucesGraviesNov2024.pdf>

How much sauce is enough?

- You should have enough sauce and liquid in any dish to be able to pass the IDDSI Testing Methods for the person's IDDSI Level.
- A good proportion is to start: ½ cup of sauce/liquid to 1 ½ cups of the dish. Then, run the [IDDSI Testing Methods](#) (here is the [English 2.0 version](#) as of December 2025 ~ last revised 2019).

How can I thicken the sauce?

- This is where the mashed vegetable comes in. Use mashed vegetable for creaminess. Taste as you go. Experiment.

- I keep *Southland Butternut Squash* puree and mashed turnips on hand in the freezer. These can be defrosted and added to a puree, boosting the nutrition while creating a smooth texture.
- My mother adored baked sweet potato, so I used to soft bake four a week, mash them, and keep them frozen for thickening puree.
- One of my favorite secret ingredients is *Bob's Red Mill Potato Flakes* (vegan, Kosher, non-GMO). Simply follow the package directions to make excellent instant mashed potatoes with fabulous flavor. Mashed potatoes are a great comfort food, and they are excellent with my homemade gravy recipe. They are easy to make at IDDSI Pureed, Level 4; just make sure they pass the IDDSI Spoon Tilt Test. They should slide off a tilted spoon, showing they are not too sticky.
- Tofu, whether firm or silken, is an excellent thickener. Tofu is soy protein and will pick up the flavor of any dish. (See package for complete nutritional breakdown.)

What About Salads?

As for pureed salads, using a high-speed blender or a nutrition extractor. With these machines, the cell walls are broken down, and the vegetables puree into liquid. Salad ingredients are blended at a high-speed in a blender until they are completely liquid. Then, these salads make a nice puree when thickened to the desired IDDSI Level using the [Testing Methods](#) (e.g., use the IDDSI Flow Test if the product is to stay as a liquid or a liquidised food; use the Fork Drip Test and Spoon Tilt Test if Level 3 to Level 4 are desired). Thickened soup stock and/or a gel-based commercially available thickening agent will be needed to thicken the liquid.

I make a homemade Cole slaw. I use a scant amount of vinegar so that the end-product is not too harsh or acidic. If a person has risks for aspiration, that could really irritate the airways.

Please check out my recipes in the [Cooking for Dysphagia](#) cookbook. I make delicious Tuna Avocado Salad (page 92), Tomato Cucumber Salad with Red Onion (page 90), Celery Root Remoulade (page 94), and a Red Beet Salad with Ranch Dressing (page 96).

Salads, even when pureed, can be paired with homemade dressings. I recommend “homemade” because they taste fresh and do not contain the additives and preservatives found in most commercial dressings. See my dressing recipes in the [Cooking for Dysphagia](#) cookbook: Vinaigrette Dressing (page 91), Ranch Dressing (page 93), and Pink Remoulade (page 95).

A Good Morning Starts with Oatmeal that is Not Sticky!

My mother loved oatmeal in the morning.

- Homemade oatmeal, especially the kind you can make in a mini rice cooker, is much better than instant oatmeal from the grocery store shelf.
- For the oatmeal puree, add milk (dairy or non-dairy), wheat germ or flaxseed meal, and unflavored Greek yogurt.
- The fruit sauce recipe (page 213) from [Cooking for Dysphagia](#) makes a great topping and keeps the oatmeal from getting too thick and sticky.

- I sometimes use vegetable broth to make savory oatmeal. After it's cooked, I stir in a half teaspoon of miso and tear up nori flakes. The savory oatmeal can then be pureed.

Snacks & Smoothies

Snacks are critical for people with swallowing disorders of many kinds. They provide needed calories and nutrition. I made smoothies for my mother for a mid-afternoon snack, using a nutrition extractor – called the *Nutribullet*.

- I used fresh fruit or frozen fruit, choosing fruits that my mother loved: bananas, peaches, cherries, mango, papaya, melon, and blueberries.
- When I used blackberries or raspberries, I ran the fruit puree through a mesh sieve lined with cheesecloth to remove seeds.
- For a boost in phytochemicals, I added spinach and seedless cucumber. These vegetables have a bland taste and go unnoticed.
- For the smoothie, I used a non-dairy milk option (e.g., milks made from soy, rice, oat, cashew, coconut, hemp, or almond). One could use apple juice, apple cider, or coconut water. Depending on the other ingredients, I also used orange juice for sweetness.

Note: My mother's wound care doctor suggested adding liquid vitamins and liquid minerals to her smoothies. Sometimes he advised adding whey protein powder or other protein powders. Many seniors may not be getting enough vitamins, minerals, proteins, or essential nutrients. It is very important to **consult** your doctor, healthcare provider, and dietitian **before adding any supplements**.

Dessert

Desserts are also a great way to add calories! Here are some sweet tips:

- I use ice cream as a sauce for pureeing desserts, such as pie and cake and cobblers. A half cup of store-bought ice cream was good for 4 ounces of birthday cake that had been pureed in a mini food processor with 2 tbsp of simmering water.
- The *Ninja CREAMi*® allows one to make many different types of frozen desserts. One may create a sherbet or sorbet from frozen fruit (bananas, cherries, peaches, mango, berries). For ice cream and more complex desserts, one may add nuts, chocolate sauce, and dried berries.
- There are many smoothie and dessert recipes in my cookbook: [Cooking for Dysphagia](#) (pages 215 – 234).

Final Recommendations

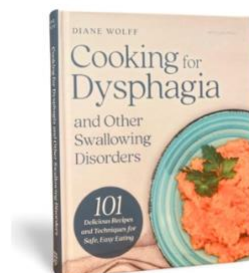
- According to a medical-based speech pathologist, [Karen Sheffler, MS, CCC-SLP, BCS-S](#) (contributing writer of [Cooking for Dysphagia](#) cookbook), it is important to pay attention to the temperature of the food you are giving your loved one.
 - In general, when liquids are cold (right out of the fridge), they are thicker than when they warm up. Thickness is temperature dependent, so retest at point of serving.

- Cold foods/drinks and frozen desserts can help *some people* with dysphagia to pay attention to the food in the mouth and potentially start a faster swallow. Cold-carbonated drinks and cold-sour foods also can help stimulate a faster swallow.
- For others, very cold foods can cause more difficulty with food clearing through the esophagus (tube from throat to the stomach), especially for a person with an esophageal dysphagia that causes spasms. They may find that warm or hot liquids can help.
- There is no one-size-fits-all, so ask your speech pathologist who performed a comprehensive dysphagia evaluation for options and ideas.
- As noted above, it is important to test foods/drinks as they are being made. But, since the texture and thickness changes over time, it is **important to retest right when you are serving**.
- This Master Sauce Guide does not consider all dietary preferences or food allergies. Please make a custom list to suit your own needs.

All Italicized brand names above are provided for reference only. Nothing to financially disclose.

Shopping List Options (See also *A Well-Stocked Pantry* handout):

Pesto	Japanese dashi	Onion Jam
Tomato Sauce	Barbecue Sauce	Honey
Chicken broth	Curries:	Applesauce
Vegetable broth	Tofu	Fruit Jams, Jellies, Preserves
Seafood broth	Coconut Milk, Regular & Light	Fruit Sauce
Carrot Ginger soup	Soy, Almond, Cashew, Oat, Hemp Milk (for Lactose Intolerance)	Fruit Glaze
Cream of Mushroom Soup	Yogurt	Ice Cream
Cream of Celery Soup	Cottage Cheese	Lemon Curd
Tomato Basil Soup	Cream Cheese	Puddings
Onion Soup	Condiments (Ketchup, Mustard)	Custard
Tabatchnick Frozen Split Pea Soup	Chutney	Mousse
Butternut Squash Soup		
Borscht		



For more information on dysphagia and recipes with **The System of Cooking for Dysphagia** to transform your kitchen,

Read: [Cooking for Dysphagia, Mayo Clinic Press](#)