

Chapter 16 - Culinary Arts

"Take ingredient, put here," Mr. Shori instructed, gesturing toward one of the large, bubbling cauldrons set on a sturdy makeshift stove on the ground. His eyes crinkled in a reassuring smile, as if silently encouraging me to take the next step.

Given their surprising lightness, transporting the algae didn't pose much of a challenge, but it became increasingly clear just how carried away I'd gotten with the slicing. By my fourth trek between the cutting board and the cauldron, I couldn't help but worry that my zeal had translated into wasted ingredients.

Once I'd transferred the final batch of algae, the pot seemed ready to burst. Its broth, once freely bubbling, now surged upward, some of it even spilling over the edges in a futile attempt to make room for the invasive algae.

I paused, pondering the capacity of the cauldron and whether I had overstepped. Yet, Mr. Shori hadn't issued a cease-and-desist on my enthusiastic addition of ingredients.

So, I reasoned, if I was doing anything catastrophically wrong, surely he would have said something by now. How could he expect an underfed teenager like me to have the expertise of a seasoned chef?

Handing me a formidable plasteel ladle that was gratifyingly less hefty than if it had been crafted from steel, Mr. Shori pointed toward the simmering cauldron once again.

"Stir. No burn," he tersely advised, leaving me to contemplate the culinary physics of algae and boiling broth before turning to attend to a new customer.

The task seemed straightforward enough: Stirring a cauldron brimming with what was essentially flavoured water and fibrous plants.

'Alright, the mission is simple: Don't let the algae burn in a pot already full of liquid. How hard could it be?' I thought, gripping the ladle as I prepared to stir my way through this new, uncharted territory.

As I soon discovered: Quite hard.

Once the algae encountered the boiling broth, they underwent a transformation into a substance closely resembling pasta in texture—the mystery from my previous bowl now conveniently solved.

However, this new algae-pasta displayed an alarming tendency to adhere to everything it touched: The bottom of the cauldron, its rounded walls, and yes, even the seemingly innocent plasteel ladle.

The process morphed into a full-scale athletic event, with me wrestling to keep the algae from sticking and burning, constantly agitating a cauldron that now seemed more like a witch's brew of stubborn pasta.

By the time Mr. Shori returned from his sequence of customer interactions, I was drenched in sweat and gasping for air, regretting every extra slice I had made earlier.

Mr. Shori wore a crinkled smile that seemed to wordlessly say, "You brought this upon yourself," as he relieved me of the ladle. I didn't hesitate for a split second before surrendering it and collapsing onto a small footstool, using it as an improvised seat to recover my breath.

"Good. No burn. Well done, Stick!" Mr. Shori declared, after a cursory round of stirring. He then gave me a thumbs-up, laden with the particular brand of earnestness that only an elderly Asian man could muster.

Struggling to catch my breath, I managed to utter, "My name is Sera, Mr. Shori."

He shook his head. "No, no. Go mirror. You stick. Eat food. Be Sera. Now? Stick," he responded, gesturing toward a mysterious, solid-black pane situated at the far end of the stall.

Intrigued yet bewildered, I made my way toward what Mr. Shori referred to as a "mirror." I was already well aware of my malnourished physique—no need for visual confirmation—but the enigmatic black panel beckoned, piquing my curiosity enough to see what insights it might reveal.

As I approached, the dark pane flickered briefly, like the rebooting of a forgotten machine.

Nanoscopic particles embedded within the solid black surface seemed to rearrange themselves with an uncanny fluidity. The black melted away, revealing an iridescent backdrop that rapidly crystallised into a pristine, hyper-realistic mirror.

It was as if a layer of reality had been peeled away, exposing a slice of the world that was truer than true—a cybernetic transition befitting the surrealism of my current life.

Seeing my reflection now, as opposed to when I'd first gotten home from the hospital, was a stark confrontation. I was still greeted by the same vibrant green eyes and untamed brown hair that desperately needed a salon intervention. My skin was still porcelain pale, made even more ghostly in the artificial light of the food stall.

But what struck me most was the gauntness that had settled on my features.

My cheekbones seemed too prominent, casting harsh shadows that deepened the hollows of my eyes. My collarbones were sharply defined, protruding like ridges on a barren landscape. My arms, devoid of any noticeable muscle mass, looked like they belonged to a fragile porcelain doll rather than a living, breathing person.

I was skin and bones, literally.

The anorexic state of my 154cm-tall frame became glaringly evident now that I was standing, a truth I hadn't fully grasped while confined to a wheelchair. My clothes draped over me like a tarp thrown haphazardly over a scarecrow, lacking any semblance of shape or form.

Mr. Shori's term "stick" wasn't just an offhand comment; it was a painfully accurate, albeit crude, descriptor of my current condition.

'He's right. I am definitely a stick,' I conceded internally, the weight of the term settling in.

For a moment, I was grateful for the brutal honesty of the mirror; it was a sobering wake-up call. If I was going to survive, let alone thrive in this world, I had some serious work ahead of me. Work that I had already begun with that full-body workout of stirring the pasta cauldron.

I opened the stored up notifications from the System that had chimed in during the excruciatingly exhausting process of stirring, figuring that I had gotten at least some kind of Body experience, but was very surprised when I saw the deluge of notifications flood in.

[System]: *[Cooking] Skill unlocked.*

[System]: *100xp gained for [Cooking] Skill.*

[System]: *100xp gained for Body Attribute.*

[System]: *100xp gained for Tech Attribute.*

[System]: *100xp gained for [Cooking] Skill.*

[System]: *100xp gained for Body Attribute.*

[System]: *100xp gained for Tech Attribute.*

[System]: *100xp gained for Intuition Attribute.*

'Wait a second, [Cooking]?'

Though I'd grown somewhat accustomed to Skills manifesting at the most unexpected moments, the appearance of [Cooking] in particular gave me serious pause.

The backstory here was a bit tangled: [Cooking] wasn't a Skill present in the original game but had been part of the pipeline for an upcoming DLC. The developers had included some rudimentary files related to it in the initial release, but due to time constraints, they had chosen to postpone it.

The idea was to flesh out the Skill's mechanics, then introduce it later as a robust feature in a separate DLC, bundled with a bunch of other Skills and features.

By the point in time I'd been transported to this world—this real-life version of the game, or whatever it was—only teaser content for the [Cooking] Skill had been released. The previews described it as a hybrid Tech/Intuition crafting Skill, and yet here it was, suddenly unlocked in my Skill set.

The question that promptly bubbled up in my mind, causing my brief hesitation, was straightforward yet puzzling: Was this [Cooking] Skill the very same one the developers had originally planned to integrate into the game? Or was it a completely new entity, much like the [Juggling] Skill had turned out to be?

After the initial jolt of surprise, I found myself positively thrilled about this newfound Skill.

The prospect of being able to level up my Tech Attribute—which essentially governed every single type of crafting in the game—at this early stage, without having to drain my non-existent stash of creds on expensive tinkering materials, felt like a godsent.

Furthermore, if this version of [Cooking] bore any resemblance to what the developers had hinted at for the upcoming DLC, then I was potentially looking at a skill that could offer me some *serious* benefits as I levelled it up.

By the time I had savoured the last mouthful of the unexpectedly scrumptious algae-ramen, I had already made up my mind: I was going to become a regular at Mr. Shori's stall.

Now, however, I resolved to integrate visits to the stall into my *daily* routine, nurturing the hopeful thought that Mr. Shori might let me lend a hand in the kitchen again.

It would be the ideal way to grind out my [Cooking] Skill and Tech Attribute progress without breaking the bank—on top of playing the physical manifestation of Karma and repaying the kind old man for his good deeds.

With a newfound sense of purpose, I pivoted away from the mirror and rejoined Mr. Shori, who was deeply engrossed in his culinary arts.

He was adding an intriguing blend of spices, an assortment of mystery ingredients, and a sticky substance that almost resembled a runny version of deep-crimson jam to another large cauldron. This particular pot simmered with a deep orange-brown concoction that emitted an intoxicating, mouth-watering scent that wafted through the air.

"What are you making now, Mr. Shori? Would you be willing to teach me some of the basics? Unless, of course, it's a closely-guarded family secret," I inquired. My tone was a blend of genuine curiosity and a smidge of exaggerated enthusiasm.

On one level, I was genuinely captivated by the entire process of cooking—a skill I had never mastered in my previous life. On another level, though, my interest wasn't so much in the specific dish Mr. Shori was crafting, but rather in the general mechanics of cooking: The methodology, the measurements, the timing, and other nuances.

And of course, the experience.

So while my query wasn't a fabrication per se, it was somewhat embellished. I was hedging my bets, hoping to maximise my chances of being invited back to assist in Mr. Shori's culinary domain for the upcoming days.

Mr. Shori paused, ladle in hand, and cast a sidelong glance at me. For several weighty seconds, he remained still, his eyes narrowing as if he were appraising a rare artefact.

I stood my ground, doing my best to maintain a facade of eagerness and readiness, even though my still-weakened state meant that I had to sneak in a few extra gasps of air to keep my composure.

Finally, he let out a noncommittal grunt and sidled over, making room for me at his culinary station. Pointing at the array of ingredients laid out in an almost ritualistic fashion, he began to list them off one by one.

"Salt," he started, gesturing toward a simple shaker. "Pepper. Garlic," he continued, nodding toward familiar jars.

Then his finger landed on small vials filled with iridescent liquids. "Fulnectar," he said, almost whispering, as if the ingredient itself were a secret. "For sweet and kick."

He moved on to another container that seemed to be vibrating slightly. "Mushflakes," he declared, lifting the lid momentarily to reveal a shifting, pulsating mass.

Finally, his eyes settled on the crimson-red jam-like substance. "Umami," he simply stated, as if that single word encapsulated a world of flavour complexities that could not be described any other way.

Though I was well-acquainted with staples like salt, pepper, and garlic, and had often heard the term "Umami" thrown around in culinary circles in my past life, the peculiar ingredients like Fulnectar and Mushflakes piqued my curiosity to new heights.

These didn't strike me as real-world ingredients, heightening my suspicion that they were unique to the Neon Dragons universe. Of course, there was the slim possibility that I was just out of the loop, that these exotic items had existed in my previous life and I'd simply never encountered them.

But honestly, that didn't matter one bit to me.

What was crucial at this juncture was understanding the role each of these ingredients played in Mr. Shori's cooking. I needed to fathom their flavours, their properties, and most importantly, why, specifically, Mr. Shori deemed them indispensable for his recipes.

As I inched closer to examine the Fulnectar more intently, Mr. Shori bestowed upon me a satisfied nod, as though I had just cleared some unspoken culinary initiation merely by leaning in for a closer look.

"Try. Very sweet. Strong kick," he articulated, extending an opened vial toward me with an encouraging glint in his eyes.

Intrigued, I reached for the vial of Fulnectar, my fingers barely brushing against Mr. Shori's calloused hands as I took it. I hesitated for a moment before bringing it to my lips, keenly aware of the foreign world I was in and the unexpected surprises it had offered so far.

As the liquid touched my tongue, a sweetness like nothing I had ever experienced before flooded my senses. But it wasn't just sweet—it had an effervescent quality that tingled, followed by a warm, spicy kick that contrasted the initial sweetness and lingered on my palate.

"Wow, that's—wow," I stammered, my taste buds still grappling with the complexity of the flavour profile.

"Next, Mushflakes," Mr. Shori announced, thrusting forward a small dish filled with what appeared to be soggy, squirming mushrooms tinged with a kaleidoscope of iridescent hues.

I hesitated for a moment, mentally steadying myself—the incessant wriggling sensation as I picked one up was deeply unsettling. Nonetheless, I committed after taking a deep breath, closing my eyes tightly and took a tentative bite.

To my astonishment, the texture was a complete betrayal of its soggy appearance, delivering a satisfying crunch instead. I found myself torn over whether this surprising consistency was a relief or an added layer of weirdness—the stark contrast between its visual presentation and actual texture only amplified the unsettling aura that enveloped this bizarre ingredient.

The flavour was nothing short of a gastronomic rollercoaster, however.

It began with an earthy richness, swiftly cut through by a metallic tang, and rounded off by a subtle smokey note that seemed to wrap around my taste buds like a warm blanket. It was simply 'taste' on steroids, disconcertingly surreal but somehow still tethered to culinary reality.

"Good for broth. Add thickness," Mr. Shori explained with another one of his nods, seeming pleased with my reactions.

"This," he paused, holding up a jar filled with a crimson-red jam-like substance, "Secret."

"Secret?" I repeated, already curious from his simplified yet captivating introduction.

"Flavour essence. Many things. Old world, new world—mix. You try."

I scooped a small amount of the jam-like paste onto my finger and tasted it.

Instantly, my mouth was awash with a blend of flavours so complex and intricate that it felt like an entire symphony was being conducted on my tongue. Salty, sweet, sour, and a deep, robust savoriness—it was all there, mingling in harmony.

"Mr. Shori, this is incredible," I uttered, almost overwhelmed.

It was as if a gateway to an uncharted realm of culinary adventures had suddenly flung itself open, irresistibly inviting me to venture into its depths. With my newly acquired Skill in hand, I felt a surge of excitement to delve into this untouched territory.

The so-called 'secret' ingredient was particularly captivating, boasting a labyrinthine tapestry of flavours that left me utterly stumped. I couldn't even begin to fathom how I'd incorporate it into my own cooking—assuming, of course, I could ever get my hands on it outside of Mr. Shori's stall.

At my exclamation, I noticed Mr. Shori's eyes narrow for a moment before they twinkled with what I could only interpret as satisfaction. Swiftly, he ladled some of the simmering broth from the main cauldron into a smaller pot, scooping just enough for four or five servings similar to the bowl I had received earlier.

He set it before me on a more diminutive heating plate, the golden liquid bubbling softly as it began to boil.

He then reached for a handful of spoons, and with a gesture that suggested more ceremony than I initially understood, he handed them to me.

"Taste. Then Spices. You cook," he uttered, his voice terse but resonant, and just like that, he stepped away, leaving me alone with the pot of mystery broth.

For a moment, I felt bewildered.

Had I just been promoted from a casual observer to an apprentice in Mr. Shori's stall?

The pot in front of me was boiling gently, wafts of fragrant steam rising and teasing my senses. It felt like a test, an initiation maybe, and I couldn't help but feel the weight of the opportunity mixed with a sprinkle of anxiety.

Was I really prepared for this? Did my newfound Skill include the intuition required to master this mysterious dish? My eyes darted to the assortment of spices and ingredients lined up beside the stove—some familiar, some alien—and I felt both daunted and exhilarated.

"You: Salt, garlic, pepper. Rest good. Only three," Mr. Shori enunciated, deliberately pausing between each word as he gestured toward the trio of shakers that contained the specified seasonings.

Upon closer examination of the broth, it was evident that several ingredients had already been integrated into the mix. The enigmatic 'secret' ingredient was undoubtedly present, as were the Mushflakes. My astute powers of deduction led me to surmise that Fulnectar had likely been added as well.

The realisation clicked: Mr. Shori's aim was for me to grasp the rudimentary skills of seasoning, all while working from a pre-prepared, sophisticated base. Since I'd already sampled his culinary concoctions, he must have reasoned that I could approximate the flavours—if he supplied the essential building blocks, that is.

My respect for Mr. Shori had soared to new heights in that exact moment.

The man was unequivocally a genius in the realm of culinary instruction.

His method was, without a doubt, the most effective way to capture the true essence of cooking, at least from my vantage point. In my past life, the subtle art of seasoning had remained an enigma, decipherable only when I had a recipe to follow with unyielding fidelity.

But there, enveloped by the rich aromas emanating from Mr. Shori's culinary domain, a mental switch had finally flipped.

The neurons in my brain had aligned in an epiphanic "aha" moment. Seasoning wasn't about slavish adherence to written instructions. A recipe was merely someone's attempt to codify their initial culinary explorations, a preliminary sketch aimed at capturing a transient gastronomic experience.

My newfound insight clarified why a dish I had sampled at a friend's home during a rare international vacation had tasted so markedly different from my own version, even though both had been based on the same recipe.

My old-world self had meticulously followed the prescribed steps, never daring to deviate or innovate.

My friend, on the other hand, had likely approached the recipe as a foundational outline, a springboard from which to experiment, tweaking and calibrating until the flavours resonated with their own culinary preferences.

The revelation was a culinary watershed: Cooking was as much an art form as it was a technical science, a fluid dance between flavours and technical know-how.

Suddenly, the developer's decision to classify [Cooking] as a hybrid Skill of Intuition and Tech resonated with profound clarity. The Tech aspect encompassed the technical nuances, the precise calibrations of heat and time needed to elicit specific outcomes. Meanwhile, the Intuition aspect embodied the more nebulous facets of cooking, like seasoning, which relied heavily on a chef's individual artistry and flair.

As the epiphany fully coalesced in my mind, a sequence of chimes from the System resonated, one of them distinctly prominent, and I felt a torrent of knowledge abruptly flood my consciousness.

[System]: *100xp gained for [Cooking] Skill. (First time taste bonus.)*

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[System]: *100xp gained for [Cooking] Skill. (First time taste bonus.)*

[System]: *500xp gained for [Cooking] Skill.*

[System]: *[Cooking] has reached Level 1.*

The influx of knowledge was like a crash course in Cooking 101, saturating my mind with a wealth of culinary wisdom.

It covered an array of techniques, from the basic knife skills for different kinds of cuts, something that hadn't been part of the [Knives] Skill, as that one was more focused on actual combat or handling, rather than technical knowledge of specific cuts, to the correct usage of pans, pots, woks and other utensils.

It elucidated proper heat management, underscoring the significance of controlling temperature for specific dishes—whether to maintain a slow simmer for a rich broth or to crank up the heat for a quick stir-fry.

As for seasoning, the information corroborated the realisation I had just come to: That it was less about strict adherence to a recipe and more about understanding the palate and adjusting flavours accordingly. A touch of salt here, a sprinkle of pepper there, a splash of olive oil to carry it all; it was about creating harmony within the dish.

Further still, the knowledge delved into the chemistry of cooking—how different ingredients react under heat, why acids and fats balance each other, and how to make emulsions or reductions.

It touched upon food safety, stressing the importance of proper food handling and storage, from preventing cross-contamination to the ideal temperatures for refrigeration and freezing.

Lastly, it even provided insights into the world of baking, highlighting the delicate balance of wet and dry ingredients, the impact of different leavening agents, and the science behind achieving the perfect crumb structure in breads and cakes.

The course was comprehensive, to say the least.

It left me momentarily stunned and I had to steady myself on the nearby wall of the stall to not topple over and fall into the boiling pot of broth before me. It was truly astonishing just *how much* could be condensed into a single Skill Level.

Even [Programming], the only other Skill that had imparted such a significant amount of knowledge upon levelling, couldn't hold a candle to the intricate culinary universe that had just been downloaded into my brain. While it definitely had its own complexities, the realm of [Cooking] was a multi-layered tapestry of techniques, chemistry, and artistry that made everything else I had attempted so far seem straightforward in comparison.

As I scanned the area for Mr. Shori, apprehensive that he might interpret my momentary loss of equilibrium as a sign of frailty—thus sending me back home to recuperate—I was relieved to find him back at the front of the stall, energetically assembling bowls for a small crowd of customers.

'Hmm... I have a mission ahead of me, but first... I need to check the Perks. I just have to.'

In a flurry of deft navigational moves, I accessed the G.E.M.A. System interface and pulled up the Perk Tree for [Cooking]. Now that I'd reached Level 1, it was high time to get a glimpse of the opportunities that awaited me down this Skill's path.

[Recipe Detective] [Requirement: Level 3 [Cooking]]

One bite is all it takes! You gain the ability to instantly deduce the recipe of any dish you taste, adding it to your list of known recipes.

[Resourceful Chef] [Requirement: Level 3 [Cooking]]

Waste not, want not! You gain the ability to elevate the quality of cooking materials, treating them as if they were one grade higher for crafting purposes.

[Meal Planner] [Requirement: Level 3 [Cooking]]

It doesn't have to be a Sunday! You gain the ability to access an ethereal pantry where you can store up to five self-crafted meals. Accessible at any time outside of combat, this intangible inventory prevents your stored food from spoiling, getting lost or otherwise messed up.

[Cooling Concoction] [Requirement: Level 3 [Cooking]]

The cold never bothered you anyway! You gain the ability to craft a special drink from Tier 3+ cooking materials. Consuming this elixir regulates your body temperature to match the ambient environment without affecting your biological functions. Additionally, the concoction offers a degree of protection against heat-related damage, up to a set limit that is based on the Tier of ingredients used in its creation.

[Gourmet] [Requirement: Level 3 [Cooking]]

A true connoisseur! You gain the ability to craft dishes that feature up to two distinct effects at the same time.

'Incredible, some of these Perks are straight up game-changers,' I mused inwardly, my eyes carefully dissecting each option on the screen.

If the [Cooking] Skill in this realm functioned like its DLC counterpart was rumored to, every self-crafted dish would bestow a temporary buff effect. That was a tantalising proposition, particularly given my current fragility in just about every aspect.

Crafting basic dishes to bolster my weaker stats could serve as a crucial springboard into this new existence. And who knows, perhaps I could even turn a modest profit in the process?

Among the plethora of Perks, [Recipe Detective] struck me as immediately invaluable, promising to expedite my accumulation of a vast array of recipes.

Equally compelling was [Resourceful Chef], which could alleviate my creds crunch by enabling me to transform mediocre ingredients into palatable meals. I speculated that once I mastered the art of Mr. Shori's bowls, this Perk might let me enhance them even further.

After all, the description just mentioned 'elevating the quality of cooking materials,' without stipulating a specific tier requirement.

The remaining Perks looked so irresistibly beneficial that I felt a familiar pang of indecision, much like when I first discovered the [Programming] Skill tree.

I found myself yearning for every single one...