A Word on Searing, Sauté and Stir Fry

Searing usually refers to proteins, which are cooked in a pan (with just enough oil to coat it), on a very high heat to create a dark brown, flavorful, crusty exterior (all due to Maillard reactions). This is typically used before finishing the cooking with another technique, but can also be used to fully cook through thin cuts of protein. Searing is done at temperatures of well over 450°F.

Sauté *and* ***stir fry*** are two of the oldest and most common cooking techniques. Although these techniques were developed on opposite sides of the globe, the only real difference is the pan in which is used. They are both attempting to cook the food on relatively high heat, in a small amount of cooking fat, quite quickly. *Sauté* typically utilizes a sauté pan while *stir fry* employs a wok. Both pans have a curved shape that helps to flip or toss the items in the pan. Size of cuts of proteins or vegetables will dictate the actual speed of cooking (i.e. smaller cuts cook faster). The thinner the cut and the more surface area, or overall smaller size of the pieces, the quicker the items will cook through.

Sautéing or stir frying on a low heat to slow cook the food (without browning it) is called ***sweating***. This technique is helpful when *sautéing* or *stir frying* slightly larger items, so that they don't burn on the outside before they cook all the way through. ***Rendering*** is to cook the fat off of meat; typically done to be used as cooking fat for other items. Smaller cuts meats, such as bacon, should be rendered at more moderate temperatures (to allow time for the fat to melt before the meat becomes over cooked).

Considerations:

- Cut items into appropriate sizes. Not only should each item's pieces be the same size and cut, but the other foods should be cut to cook in the same time frame as all the other ingredients.
- Vegetables are often ***blanched*** (par-cooked in salted boiling water) to reduce the cooking time for a final sauté or stir fry. This technique is used on items that are hard to cut down small or thin, or you want them to remain a larger size.
- Ingredients that are too wet are a detriment to heat transfer and browning. Making sure to dry off excess moisture or marinades from proteins or water from produce will help to keep them from steaming or braising in the pan.
- Heat the pan up for a minute or so until it is nice and hot before adding the cooking oil (or fat). This allows it to spread evenly over the surface of the pan. It also helps to counteract the colder temperature of the food added to the pan.
- Make sure not to over crowd the pan. Overcrowding will both lower the temperature of the pan too much as well as not allow sufficient surface area contact between the pan and the items to be cooked. Cooking ingredients separately or in batches will decrease the risk of overcrowding.
- Adding a pinch or two of salt at the very beginning of the cooking process will help reduce the overall cooking time. Salt helps to extract the water to the surface of the food, letting it cook faster.
- Most proteins and produce cook at different rates. When cooking a dish containing both proteins and produce, it is best to par-cook each separately first, then fishing cooking them together. This will help to make sure that all items are evenly cooked through to desired doneness.
- Sauces should be added, or built into, a sauté or stir fry towards the end of cooking. If added too soon wet sauces can prevent foods from browning, and thick sauces can burn quickly.
- The brown bits that stick to the pan, or ***fond*** (remnants from Maillard reactions), can be easily removed from the surface by ***deglazing***: adding in liquid (water-based) to the hot pan and scraping with a wooden (or other stiff non-metal) spatula. This comes in handy to build pan sauces, keep fond from building up and burning during sautéing or stir frying, or just to clean out the pan.