



BATTLE CHEF BRIGADE – *Battle Chef Brigade* has given me the inspiration I need to keep cooking through the pandemic. Even though the gorgeous hand-drawn art makes this a special world to spend time in, cooking is the game’s main draw.

In the game’s Challenge Mode, you cook increasingly difficult dishes until you ultimately fail. The featured ingredient in each round is random, as is the element you must highlight. What that means is that sometimes you need an ingredient you can only get from a boss-level monster and just *fighting* to get it will take most of your time. Without it, there’s no moving forward.

Then you must prepare those ingredients such that they are fiery, earthy, or watery, based on the game’s system of colorful elemental nodes. Sometimes that means a fire-based ingredient must be balanced or even overpowered by water or earth. In some situations, this ends up being mechanically impossible – you can’t forage enough of one element for it to dominate. You can alter ingredients with specialty pans or upgrades, but these are offered randomly and involve a trade-off or a gamble. Just like in real life, a key sauce can transform your dish – but someone with the right pantry can excel with any ingredient.

This is where *Battle Chef Brigade* begins to overlap real life. Chicago writer Dennis Lee

recently **made bread** with Red Lobster cheddar bay biscuit mix instead of flour. New Yorker food writer Helen Rosner – who reviewed *Battle Chef* for Polygon in 2017 – **mentioned** making “ersatz kedgeree,” a make-do version of a centuries-old make-do dish from India and Britain. Likewise, without sugar, I’ve ended up conducting science experiments with Splenda and molasses. I’ve squeezed a wedge of tangerine into soup instead of lime, mixed coffee with protein powder rather than milk and sweetened leftover-bread pudding with blackberry jam instead of sugar.

There’s one critical flaw in my analogy, however. While I have a time limit in the game, the plants and creatures – which provide the resources I need – rapidly respawn in this universe. Unlike reality, nature here is akin to a never-empty vending machine. Even so, the ingredients harvested from a dragon, wolflike *lupir*, or flying *cheepchi*, are random and you still must make do. Did you want a liver? Not going to happen. Have a horn instead.

Hunting in *Battle Chef* is like shopping at a closeout store, at a time when *every* store, in real life, is a little like a closeout store already. And back in my kitchen, with a new bag of sugar, some eggs, leftover black beans and a can of pumpkin, I’m already scheming about what to cook next.

– CAROLINE DELBERT