

Hi there! You're listening to episode #13 of the Cook Smarts podcast. I'm Jess Dang the Founder of Cook Smarts and I'm here to help you become a more confident and organized cook in the kitchen.

Oh my gosh friends, how is it mid September already? I don't know about you, but 2019 has just flown by for me. I had my 3rd kid back in late April and any parent knows that a new baby wipes away several months off of your memory -- like you have no idea how you survived all that sleep deprivation but somehow you do, and you just forget all about it, probably because your brain wasn't functioning at its best during that time.

There are days that I still don't quite believe that I have 3 kids. To be honest, there are actually days that I still have trouble believing that I am a mom to any kids. 4 years in, it all still feels kinda surreal but my kids have brought me just an infinite amount of joy -- much more than I thought they would -- but on the flip side, they have taken up a lot, and I mean a lot, of my time. Before kids, I used to think I was a busy person, and I was. I was trying to get Cook Smarts off the ground and there was a never ending to-do list, but add on the needs of 3 kids to a business -- there are really no words to describe the to-do list anymore. I've just accepted that I will not be able to get to it all and every week is just a big exercise in prioritization.

And the number 1 priority every week is, "How am I going to get everyone fed?" Right? Because eating is a non-negotiable. Everyone has to do it multiple times a day, even the little human beings in our lives. And while pre-kids, I was happy to spend long languid days experimenting in the kitchen, that's just not a luxury I have anymore. These days, I'm all about saving time in the kitchen while still producing home made meals on a daily basis, and I'll be sharing some more tips for how I get that done today.

Now this is part 2 of our Strategies for Saving Time. If you haven't checked out part 1, which was last week's episode, please make sure to queue it up too at some point. I shared 3 ways to cut down on your prepping and cooking time by being smart about your tools, skills, and ingredient choices. It's full of actionable tips, so whether you start with that one or this one, after listening to both, you will have a full game plan for being the black belt kitchen ninja that I know you can be!

And speaking of kitchen ninjas, a little plug for our meal plan service, which has been on a mission to create more masters of dinner since 2013! As a subscriber, you'll receive a new organized meal plan every single week featuring 4 doable, delicious, and good-for-you dinners. You can add and swap meals from our Archives, which has thousands of recipes for whatever you're craving. And best of all, once you make your selections, a grocery list is automatically generated for you. With that huge piece of emotional labor taken care of, you'll have more time to just enjoy life. Plus with the help of our bite-sized videos that focus on knife skills, you'll have ninja like chopping skills in no time, saving you even more time week after week.

If this is the kind of help your life could use, just head on over to [cooksmarts.com](https://www.cooksmarts.com) and grab your free 30 day trial and start saving more time today. And if it's not quite what you're looking for, we make it easy to cancel too because nobody has time to sit and wait on the phone.

Alright, now back to time saving strategies, part deux.

I know that each and every one of you listening is a busy person and would love to have some extra time in life. I also know that the phrase "life hacks" is widely used these days as a strategy for saving time, and I have to admit that I'm not sure how I feel about it. The phrase seems to imply that there are like secret magic tricks or shortcuts one can use to be more productive, but I think that's misleading. We all have the same 24 hours in a day and there's really no way to "life hack" more time into our day.

So instead of "hacks," I simply want to help you be smart about how you use your time. Let's come up with a plan for making home cooked meals but just doing it faster. And with most things that are worth doing in life, you will need to put in effort up front. You can't just say, I want to have a home cooked meal every night and I want it to happen quickly but then just sit back and wait for that to happen without making some changes in your life first. Yes, you can put your intentions out there but it takes energy behind those intentions to really make it happen.

Cooking more and cooking quickly require habit changes and the first step to habit change requires mental change. You have to want it and put in the work. And the work in this case really is about planning and prepping. Some of you might be tuning me out right now, thinking Jess, I hit play today for you to give me time-saving shortcuts, not more work. Yes, there are lots of shortcuts you can take in the kitchen and we even covered some in the previous episode, but I think you know how to buy bagged salad mix or can easily Google how to use your Instant Pot to cook rice quickly. You don't need me for that. I'm the lady who's here to give you that extra motivation you need and the ex-consultant who can help you with the larger strategy.

So like I said before, the first step is a mental shift. I want you to be always in the habit of doing your future self a favor -- like what can you do to not let that person down? Think about the time you put towards cooking in the same way that you think about money and budgeting. When you're budgeting, some months will be tight and you might save less, and some months you'll be able to save more for a rainy day. The same concept works for time spent cooking. During weeks or even nights that are less busy, think about ways you can plan, prep or cook ahead for those busier weeks and nights.

I know that it's tempting to just watch Netflix when you find yourself with some free time but instead, ask yourself, "What can I do now that my future self will thank me for later?" Just like you won't regret having put away more money in your emergency fund, you won't regret getting into the habit of getting ahead on all of those cooking to-dos.

Every time you find yourself at home with 15 to 20 minutes, instead of scrolling through your Instagram feed, put on your favorite podcast, pull out your cutting board and knife, and get a little prep done for a later dinner or if you're not a member of a meal plan service, pull out your calendar and start planning some meals for the following week.

The reason I specifically chose 15 to 20 minutes is because that's often the amount of time that people get lazy about utilizing. You don't think it's enough to do anything -- it's not enough to watch a full show, it's not enough to cook a full dinner, it's not enough to do a mentally taxing task, which is why we often just turn to our phone and open up Instagram or Twitter. And while I admit that it's the perfect amount of time for catching up on social media, it's also the perfect amount of time to get at least 2 or 3 things done for a meal or come up with a few meals you want to make down the line and the latter examples are tasks your future self will thank you for. Your future self is not going to thank you for going down the rabbit hole of a Twitter thread but it will thank you for marinating that chicken for the grill, boiling the noodles for a pasta dish, chopping the vegetables for the soup or planning what you'll make next Monday and Tuesday after soccer practices.

If you have a little meal prep banked away for a meal, it makes all the difference after a long hectic day. Not only are you more likely to cook versus just call for takeout, it of course means it'll take a lot less time to get dinner on the table. If you've done a bit of prep, in most cases, it'll take longer for dinner to get delivered to you than for you to just finish cooking the meal that you already started.

But if you really want to save time in the kitchen, I recommend that you meal prep the entire week's worth of meals in 1 chunk. And when I say meal prep, I don't necessarily mean cooking entire meals. I know that the hashtag meal prep is something you see a lot on Instagram and you'll see photos where people will cook 5 huge meals and then portion individual meals into those black plastic takeout containers. You can of course totally do that, but what I'm talking about today is really just getting your "mise en place" in order for the week. If you've never heard of this French term, it just means "everything in place" so by the time you're ready to cook, you have all the ingredients in place. For example, if you're making a chicken noodle soup. It means that you have your veggies and chicken chopped and noodles cooked so the night of, it's really about assembly vs. starting the meal from scratch.

The reason that meal prepping once can save you so much time in the kitchen boils down to efficiency. It's much more efficient to chop all your veggies at once than doing it piecemeal each day. You just get more in the groove of chopping and are able to execute faster. Plus, instead of washing your cutting board, salad spinner, knife every night, you can do it just once. We have lots of members that carve out 1 to 2 hours on a weekend to just get all their prep done, and then it's just cook and clean on the weeknights, when you're much busier after work and possibly school pickups and after-school activities. Like I mentioned before, use those less busy times to make life easier during busier times. When we batch tasks, we are more efficient but

also when we're stressed, things just take us longer. Even with good knife skills, I know that at 5:45 my chopping ability is a bit hampered with 3 hungry kids all needing something from me.

And speaking of kids, I know a lot of you listening are parents and thinking, "Jess, how the heck am I going to find 1 to 2 hours of time, even on the weekend, away from my kids to meal prep?" Someone just posted something funny about this in our Facebook group, and it was basically a conversation between a parent and a non-parent. The parent says, it's really hard for me to cook healthy meals. The non-parent responds, oh you just have to meal prep the night before, and then the parent responds, Oh, I guess I wasn't clear. The kids live here at night too. So I get it, kids are not always asleep when you want them to be asleep, which means there isn't always the kid-free time you need to get things done.

But if your kids are still young and nap, a lot of our members use that weekend naptime to be incredibly productive in the kitchen. Plus, this time can still be self-care time even though you're doing a chore. Remember you're caring for your future self by avoiding a stressful weeknight dinner situation. And it doesn't have to be a solo slog. Queue up an old movie or TV show you love on your tablet -- you already know what happens so you don't have to be following it super closely but you have some fun, familiar company with you while you pound out your chicken, make this week's salad dressing, or mince the garlic you'll need for the week.

If you want to include your kids in some kitchen work, save a few easy things that you can do together after they wake up.

Now, if your kids have stopped napping or like my kids, don't reliably nap, there are still lots of ways you can make weekend prep happen. In our house, my husband typically takes the kids out for a long neighborhood playground outing so he's getting playtime with them, and I'm getting some peace in quiet in the house. If that's not an option, then I'll set them up with an activity that they won't need my help with like Playdoh. It's not as efficient because they have short attention spans but I also find my kids are at an age where they can play independently for quite awhile so they might start with Playdoh and then move onto something else on their own. So much of it is just communicating that I'm doing something important for our family's health and budget and won't be available to play with them for awhile. It doesn't mean that there isn't some whining still, but I've at least made an attempt to set up expectations.

If none of those options work for you, it may even be worth hiring a sitter. This may seem like a total extravagance, but 2 hours of a sitter probably ends up being a lot less expensive than a few meals of takeout that might result without that head start. And of course, if you need to rely on screen time to do some babysitting, I think this is the best reason for it. I have absolutely no guilt in putting my kids in front of Sesame Street on the weekend if it means we're going to be eating healthy home cooked meals during the week.

Now we've talked about why you need to meal prep and how to change your mindset so that you'll actually do it, but I know we all love a set of tips, so I've got 8 meal prep tips that you can implement immediately and save even more execution time.

Number one. Get ahead from the second your groceries make it through the door. Again, this is a bit of mindset shift but the foundation of meal prep are the ingredients so the second those ingredients enter the door, you can start the meal prep process. How many times have we started dinner only to have the washing and drying of ingredients weigh down our process or make us not want to cook? So after grocery shopping, pull out your salad spinner and wash and dry the stuff that needs to be washed. Like your cilantro for instance -- that's not something you need to fumble around with on a busy weeknight. Instead wash and dry the cilantro before you put it away and even better, plant the whole bunch into a container with some water and then cover it with a plastic bag. You can secure the plastic bag with a rubber band around the glass and that cilantro will last you for 2 weeks easily and is also ready to go when you need it. If you've got meat in your grocery haul, don't just stick the tray of meat into the fridge. Portion out what needs to be frozen. If you really want to get ahead freeze and refrigerate it with the marinade.

Number two. Batch your meal prep to-dos by type of task. So make all sauces together. Chop all veggies together. Boil one big pot of water and anything that needs to be boiled and blanched can use that same pot of water. So let's say I'm blanching broccoli and also boiling pasta, instead of dumping the broccoli and water out into a colander after the broccoli's done cooking and then refilling the pot and waiting for it to boil again for the pasta, I would use a strainer spoon to fish the broccoli, so the boiling water remains in the pot and I can just dump the pasta into it. If you don't know what a strainer spoon is, just search for it on Amazon. It's a great small tool to have in the kitchen. If you are boiling multiple batches of ingredients in the same pot of water and one of those ingredients is pasta, you do want to cook the pasta after the veggies because the water will get thicker with the starch of the pasta.

Number three. Keep your knife sharp and learn how to use it. If you learn how to use a knife and keep it sharp, your prep will go much faster. If you need more reason to be convinced, listen to the previous episode.

Number four. Use time-saving tools. I use my food processor a ton for prepping - it slices and grates way faster than I can manually. Yes, it's heavy but if I batch all the meal prep to-do's that require it for the week (per tip above), I can get it out - and clean it - just once.

Number five. Order your prep to minimize washing. Sure you might need to rinse between ingredients or tasks but ideally you won't need to be doing a real soapy wash. So if I was planning on using my food processor to grate carrots, cheese and make a pesto, I would start with the carrots because they'll easily come out of the food processor bowl, then cheese because sometimes cheese can stick a bit to the blades so it might require a rinse, and then finally the sauce and then I would just put all the food processor parts in the dishwasher. For

chopping, I typically chop driest ingredients first, like carrots or mushrooms and then do the wet stuff, like tomatoes, and then meat last. And if you have a plastic cutting board, you can then again just put that right into the dishwasher. However, I would not put your knife in the dishwasher though -- that's best washed by hand, dried and then put away immediately.

Number six. Double up on components and meals that are easy to scale up -- that really is doing your future self a solid. If you love chicken, cook up a few extra pieces - you can use what the recipe calls for in your first meal and throw the rest into things like lunches and salads for the rest of the week. If you're making meatballs, it doesn't take that much longer to roll out a few more. If you're Instant Potting a pork shoulder for carnitas, that literally isn't any more work for you to scale up -- just buy the bigger pork shoulder, pressure cook it, and freeze half of the cooked pork or eat it two different ways during the week. At Cook Smarts we call that repurposing leftovers, and it's something you'll see in lots of our menus. So you might see it as carnitas for tacos one night and then later on in the week, you might use the meat in a Latin-inspired soup. Same for sauces. It doesn't take you that much longer to double a chimichurri or pesto sauce. Plus they freeze easily too. If you're worried about remembering that you froze that extra cooked pork shoulder, get a magnetic white board for your freezer, and list out everything you put in by category. I've got carbs, proteins, meals, sauces, miscellaneous. When it comes out, I simply erase it so at all times I have an inventory of what's in my freezer. It saves me so much time and headache because I'm not searching through my freezer while meal planning to see what I already have in stock.

Number seven. Chop ingredients more thinly. It's just simple science, but the smaller or thinner you slice something, it will have a higher surface area to volume ratio and it will just cook faster. If your knife skills aren't fantastic, it might not be worth small dicing that carrot - although you could just take it as a challenge to improve those chopping skills - but halving something like a chicken breast is simple and will allow it to cook faster and be a lot less likely to dry out.

Number eight. Make a "master" sauce. This is a sauce that can be used on everything and that can serve multiple purposes: it can be a marinade, a dressing, a sauce for a grain bowl, etc. If I chose recipes that require different marinades, I will just for the sake of convenience just choose 1 or use my standard master marinade, which is just soy sauce, garlic, a little bit of brown sugar, and oil. You can always add some spices to the different batches if you want to differentiate the flavors and be more true to the original recipe. So let's say you were making tofu -- one for an Asian grain bowl and one for tacos. In the first one, I would just just soak the chopped tofu in the master marinade and maybe add some Chinese 5 spice to play up the Asian flavors. For the tacos, I would use the same marinade but add some chili powder, cumin, and/or coriander to make it a more Latin-flavored sauce.

And I'm gonna throw in a bonus tip here since we're talking spices so here's number nine -- don't worry too much about measuring. A lot of our prepping time gets sucked up when we get too stuck on the recipe and measuring, especially items like spices which can definitely be more subjective and wide-ranging in potency. When the recipe developer decided on those amounts,

it was based on whatever spices they owned and your spices may be more flavorful or more often, less. So just throw in some amount and use your taste to guide you rather than feeling like you have to go back to the recipe 4 times to make sure you got the exact measurements for the 4 spices it calls for.

Alright, I'm done, I promise. I know that was a lot, but don't worry, it's not as daunting as it sounds. If you're a part of our meal plan service, a lot of the work is done for you in that we've split out prep in all of our recipes to help you get ahead and have incorporated a lot of these time saving tips into the steps. For those who want to try doing it as one big chunk on the weekends, make sure to check out the weekend prep steps where we've basically collated everything that you could do ahead of time to really set you up for weeknight dinner success.

When I created our meal plan service, I made a very conscious decision to write out our recipes differently. I hate that traditional recipe writing doesn't split out the prep steps and assumes people have read through the recipe and have figured out everything they should have ready for cooking. How many times have you been in the middle of the recipe and realized that you didn't chop something or didn't have the sauce that you need right now ready to go? It happens to all of us, so even though including prep steps often lengthens the text in our recipes, I really believe it reduces error and encourages people to prep ahead and get their mise en place ready -- that's such a great habit to get into for cooking and saves you a lot of time and stress in the long run.

Just for that reason, you should sign up for the free 30 day trial to our meal plan service at cooksmarts.com. It'll ease you into a more organized routine in the kitchen, and combined with our Facebook Kitchen Heroes Group, you will have the direction and motivation you need. Our Facebook group has plenty of members who swear by their weekend meal prep routine. Rachel Lynn has been a member for 4 years now. I love her, she is also the founder of the Cook Smarts Instant Pot group. She recently took on a super demanding job and started doing weekend prep, and here's what she has to say, "It is amazing how much more smoothly dinners go when I do weekend prep. I also almost make one meal completely ahead, so we start out Monday on the best foot possible. Even though work has been busy, we are still consistently having home cooked meals." I know you can do it too, and if you need a team of cheerleaders to motivate you, head to our Facebook group.

So shift that mindset and use those small pockets of time to get ahead of your planning and prepping. Carve out a chunk of time for weekend prep and incorporate some or all of our time saving meal prep tips and you'll soon find yourself able to kick back and relax a lot more and still get weeknight dinners on the table. I am always here for you so please leave questions or share a victory on the show notes page, which is cooksmarts.com/podcast/13 or connect with us on Instagram. My personal Instagram is @jessdangcs and the Cook Smarts Instagram account is of course @cooksmarts (remember that s!). And if you haven't, check out last week's episode for even more time saving tips.

We have been growing our podcast audience so thank you if you've told a friend or left a review on iTunes. I want to thank C the RDN for her review: "As a dietitian nutritionist I find many folks (patients in my case) need some great ideas for what to cook for dinner. Cooks Smarts fits the bill! Love the recipes, the graphics, and now the podcast!" C, we're so glad we're able to help your patients out. You have just won yourself a beautiful and informative Cook Smarts tote bag to hold all your dinner ingredients. Just reach out to us at hello@cooksmarts.com so that we can get it sent to you.

If you want to be a Cook Smarts cheerleader and spread the joy of home cooking, give us some stars on iTunes and leave a review too. If we share it on a future episode, you too will be like C the RDN and be the owner of an awesome tote bag? You can also support us by sharing this episode and the podcast with your busy friends. This short 20 minute episode can hopefully save them lots of time in the future.

Before we wrap, I want to share another quick dinner idea with ya'll. This is the type of dinner you make when you have nothing meal prepped. You don't have to turn to takeout or delivery. Simply chop up some chicken or tofu or open up a can of beans. Dump it into an Instant Pot, dump in a jar of premade sauce (or even frozen sauce -- just microwave it for a minute to loosen it up from the container) and pressure cook it and then dump in some frozen veggies after it's done, stir, and you have dinner. I recently did this with a jarred Indian butter masala sauce and chicken thighs in the morning before I went to work so I didn't have to go out and buy lunch. After it pressure cooked for 6 minutes, I did a manual release, and dumped in some frozen peas (a great no-prep needed veggie) and had lunch for the next few days. Whether it was lunch or dinner, the meal was done in about 15 minutes, which is definitely less than delivery time.

So I hope you enjoyed today's episode and with your new prep ahead mentality and game plan, you'll be saving lots of time in the kitchen so that you have more time to exercise, relax, play with your kids or just binge watch that next show on Netflix. Thank you for letting us join you in your kitchen or wherever you're listening to this podcast, and until next time, happy cooking from your kitchen cheerleader!