

Hi there! You're listening to episode #16 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.

Ya'll, I'm turning 38 in a few days and if you're listening to this podcast after October 1st, I already am 38. I started this company shortly after I turned 30, and the last 8 years have just flown by.

For today's episode, there won't be any cooking tips. Instead, in honor of my birthday, I thought I would be totally self indulgent and talk about how the heck this all happened because if you asked me even 9 years ago what I thought I would be doing at this point in my life, running a meal plan service wouldn't have ever crossed my mind but here we are and there's no other thing I'd rather be doing.

So I was someone who grew up always loving food and eating, and I was always known among my friends as both a garbage disposal and glutton, and definitely not a picture of health. As a kid, I loved McDonald's, Popeye's fried chicken, and Dairy Queen and was just an avid eater with a huge appetite. Luckily, those meals were not the norm. My paternal grandma lived with us and pretty much raised me, and she cooked a traditional Chinese meal every single night so we always had lots of fresh vegetables, lean proteins, Cantonese herbal soups and of course, white rice. I don't think there was ever a dinner served at home that did not have white rice accompanying it. It's just such a huge part of Chinese culture and my parents who spend a lot of time with my family now think it's like child abuse that I don't serve white rice every night to my kids.

Needless to say I loved white rice growing up. My favorite way to have it was with some butter and Maggi sauce, which is similar to soy sauce but so much better, but I was also one of those kids who was happy to eat anything and everything that was put in front of me. But despite the fact that we cooked every day, I didn't grow up helping my grandma or mom in the kitchen and they were not very interested in teaching me any kitchen skills. Like a lot of Chinese households, my job as a kid was to study and do well in school, which I always did and their jobs as our elders was to make sure we always had a homemade meal and also eat lots of white rice.

I think that loving food was in my nature, but I also think that growing up in a very Chinese household with a grandma who enjoyed food with great gusto and appreciation really influenced my love of and connection to food. Even though I just have 1 younger brother, my dad is 1 of 6 and my mom is 1 of 8, and we just grew up having a family gathering every single weekend where there was always a buffet of food out, and the kids would be left to their own mischief making while the adults played Mahjong. My father also managed a restaurant, and some of my favorite childhood memories were of our large extended family celebrating Chinese New Years over huge banquet style dinners that would last well past our usual bedtimes.

So food, family, and love were always these intertwined elements of my childhood, and I cannot imagine thinking about family and love without connecting it with food. And as I left high school and entered college, I became even more obsessed with food. I spent the summer after my junior year abroad in Florence, Italy studying painting and figure drawing. While that may seem random, I had started art lessons pretty early on in life and was actually accepted to a magnet art program for high school but ended up going to a regular high school because I also really loved math and science. But Italy was the perfect backdrop to get back into art and also just eat my heart out. During the 6 weeks of my program, I gained 12 pounds, which was more than a tenth of my weight when I arrived in the country. I ate gelato multiple times a day. I indulged in all the pasta and all the pizze, and I do not regret one single ounce of those 12 pounds.

My time in Italy was also the first time I didn't have someone cooking all of my meals for me -- there wasn't a dorm cafeteria I could just swing by for prepared breakfasts, lunches, and dinners, and as a poor college student, I definitely did not have the money to eat all my meals out so I was actually forced to cook. Can you believe it? I was 20 years old, and for the first time in my life, had to figure out how to cook dinner for myself! But as someone who has always been curious about food, I loved stopping into all the various markets on my walk home from class and just exploring. I started picking up some fresh pasta, a few cans of tomatoes, tubes of polenta (yes, even in Italy, you can buy tubes of polenta), maybe some salad greens and turning them into super simple meals. I was definitely all about starting from a very basic level. I don't even think I ever attempted something like trying to cook chicken but I felt comfortable enough like dumping a can of tomatoes over fresh pasta, but it was a start and by the time I got back to California, I had the cooking bug.

And this was a very good thing because for my senior year at college I had chosen to live in a co-op house. Unlike a lot of colleges, most people live on campus at Stanford for all their undergraduate years. For one, the campus is huge and has housing for everyone but also because it's so expensive to live in the Bay Area that living on campus is your most affordable option. So there are lots of dorms, apartments, and also huge mansion-sized houses on campus. The houses have like 20 bedrooms that can accommodate 40 to 60 people. They have huge kitchens with industrial stoves, fridges and dishwashers, and each house has a student manager who hires a chef to make all the meals and keep the pantry stocked with snacks and also a cleaner. However, in a co-op, all the residents rotate through chores to keep the house running, and I really wanted to be in a co-op my last year of school. I loved the idea of communal living and also because it was much cheaper than a regular house. Plus, if you signed up for extra dinner shifts, you could earn more money to offset your room and board, which was a huge help for me. Each meal had 2 slots for people to sign up for because cooking a meal for that many people is a lot of work but what I would do to make even more money was to sign up for both spots and just do it all by myself. Yes, in case you haven't realized this, I'm also a bit of a controlling over-achiever.

So basically I went from barely cooking to meal planning and cooking for 50 people a few times a quarter by myself, and I loved it. It was so fun to get to think both creatively and operationally

at the same time during the meal planning phase. First you had to come up with your menu, which also had to contain a vegetarian option too, and while you wanted it to be delicious and something a lot of people would want to eat, it also had to be a meal that you could execute for that many people with the tools we had in our kitchen. We had a kitchen manager who did all the shopping for us so once you were done with the menu creation, you had to figure out how to scale the ingredients to feed that many people and then pass on the list to your kitchen manager and make sure they didn't have to like go to 5 stores to get everything you needed. I wish I had kept a journal of the meals I made, because I was pretty proud of them and it was definitely my first foray into meal planning. Now looking back on that experience, I should have known then that I was going to become a professional meal planner, if I knew that that could be a real job. I was someone who always had creative strengths -- exhibited for my love of art -- but also was just a huge efficiency and operations nerd, and recipe development and meal planning were the perfect intersection between the left and right sides of my brain.

One of the other reasons I loved my co-op was we had a house tradition where after most of us had sat down to dinner, everyone claps for the cooks. Like what a great tradition right? I think we should be teaching that to all our kids. Instead of the whining, the, "I don't want to eat that tonight", that dinner often starts with, wouldn't it be nice if it started with a round of applause for all the hard work that went into planning and creating the meal? Ok, done, that is going to happen in my home. I'll let you know if it sticks with my kids and please send me a video if you end up doing this in your house. It'll make my day.

So going back to being thrown in the deep end of cooking ... there was of course a huge learning curve, and it wasn't like today where there were millions of free recipes up on the internet or one could just go to YouTube or Google how to chop this or that. This was the early 2000's, and the internet was still very much a new thing, so I basically taught myself how to cook by looking through cookbooks and understanding the common threads between recipes. My knife skills were pretty bad because like most people, I had never been taught to use a knife properly. I think the only strength I brought into the kitchen was the fact that I loved making to-do lists so before every big dinner that I was cooking, I was pretty diligent of creating a list of all the things that needed to be done and created a schedule by working backwards from when dinner needed to be served.

I think at this time it really dawned on me that even though I grew up with a family that made homemade meals, I had no cooking skills and pretty much everyone around me was in the same boat. I knew a lot of folks who baked because it's much more common for people to grow up baking with their parents than it is to cook dinner with their parents. Yes, I saved a lot of money by living in a co-op my last year of school but I think the biggest gift that year gave me was it forced me to develop a really important life skill that has gone on to serve me quite well.

After college, I continued to improve my cooking skills and even though I worked in the corporate world, cooking was always in the background. I competed on Season 2 of the Next Food Network Star when I was 24. To learn more about that experience, you can listen to

episode 9. I started a food blog in the early days of food blogging. I even had 2 side hustles -- I started a small catering company called Clementine Culinary Production and we would basically bring the restaurant experience to people's homes for special occasion dinners like anniversaries or birthdays and I also ran a supper club in my apartment in San Francisco. People would pay some amount of money to enjoy whatever meal I was making and some of them I knew and some of them I wouldn't know. My 20's were a great time, and I continued to really push my cooking skills.

So I'm gonna pause the timeline here and rewind back a few years. If this was a real memoir and I had a real editor they would help me do this in a more elegant way, but I don't. At this point, we've established that I was born loving food and this love transformed into a love for cooking (and I guess meal planning, though I don't think I knew it at the time) but if all I had was a love for cooking, I don't think I would have started Cook Smarts. I had a lot of other things I loved to do but around the time I was 17, I experienced a life altering event.

I was a senior in high school, and our school was hosting a blood drive. It's probably not a surprise but I was the president of my senior class, and I was that ra-ra, yay school spirit type of kid, and of course I was going to participate in the blood drive. I honestly didn't think anything of it as I filed into our cafeteria with dozens of other students and donated blood but then a few weeks later I got this letter in the mail from the company that ran our blood drive. I almost tossed it because I thought it was just going to be a thank you letter or something along those lines. Instead the letter said that they would be unable to use the blood I had donated because it had tested positive for Hepatitis-C, a blood borne virus that damages your liver.

I remember just being confused. Like what was Hepatitis-C? Could my donation have gotten mixed up? And did I just get a potentially life altering medical diagnosis in an impersonal form letter?

So this was 1999, and again I cannot remember what search engine was available to us then -- maybe Yahoo Search? -- and how much you could have even found on Hep-C on the internet then but I started to do some research. Again, I can't recall how much of it was internet based vs. other sources but everything I could find just sounded terrible and scary. This was a time when Hep-C was just starting to be researched. It was showing up in baby boomers, including many Vietnam vets, and because of this, it was getting a lot of media coverage. They dubbed it the slow, silent killer. I have a clear memory of being in a Barnes and Noble shortly after I was diagnosed and seeing a Time Magazine cover with like a bunch of blood cells on it and a huge headline that said just that: Hep-C -- the slow, silent killer you've never heard about it. I of course read that cover article, and they likened Hep-C to the next AIDS epidemic. Because it was still a relatively new virus from an awareness level, there weren't a lot of good treatment options yet.

But instead of being scared, the more I read, the more I just didn't believe that this could be happening to me. Some of you may know about the 5 stages of grief defined by Elisabeth

Kubler-Ross a famous psychiatrist. The first one is denial followed by anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. And I definitely started out in the complete denial phase -- like something so bad could not be happening to me. I was a 17 year old and my life up until this point wasn't without its own pain and challenges. Even though I had an amazing family, we were also a family of immigrants who lived paycheck to paycheck. My dad was a really loving person but was also high-functioning alcoholic who often wasn't around to do the things you want a parent to do with you.

So because of all that I had always believed that if I worked really, really hard in school, I could get into a good college and then get a good job to help support my family so we all wouldn't have to be so stressed financially. I don't think I had been admitted to Stanford at this point, but I had done well in school -- I was on track to become our class' valedictorian -- and I was just one of those really determined kids, who had a lot of dreams.

And with this diagnosis, all of those dreams and expectations felt completely upended. A potentially life threatening illness was not in my overachieving plans, and so it was much easier just to pretend that this couldn't be happening to me. But that phase could only last so long. Even before this diagnosis, I had begun to have some health issues. I was often fatigued. I was on the cross country and track and field teams and my times were getting worse instead of better. I had been tested for mono a few times since that seemed like a normal thing for a teenager to contract but of course no one had ever thought to test for Hep-C. It just felt so out of the realm of possibility.

But clearly it was. While I was definitely not in the at-risk population for the virus, I had had a blood transfusion when I was born in 1981 before donated blood was ever screened for any virus. Plus, I was born in third world Vietnam. My mom gave birth in a hospital that didn't have reliable electricity. There were rodents everywhere. The tools were not sterilized. A few days after I was born, I contracted a high fever from an infection, and my parents think it was from the forceps that were used to get me out during childbirth but who really knows? And the doctors said that I needed a blood transfusion for the fever, which doesn't quite make sense to me, but apparently I did get better after it happened but I also got Hep-C from that blood. Kind of ironic right? A blood transfusion that saved my life might also be the cause of the end of my life.

After we brought the letter to my doctor, he referred me to a gastroenterologist who performed a series of tests. Unfortunately each test came back with bad news so we had to just keep moving forward and the final test was a biopsy where they had to take a snip of my liver to see how far the virus had progressed. I remember being pretty nervous about it because they did have to put me under, and also because I had never really had any medical procedure, let alone one that might tell me I was gonna die or something! That weekend I was supposed to go to a Tom Petty concert with some of my good friends but of course I had to skip it and I just felt so angry and resentful -- I was in phase 2 of the Kubler-Ross' grief cycle. I wanted to be doing normal things a teenager was supposed to be doing in her final year of high school and not getting tests to see if I had a damaged liver.

When we got the results back, I was told that the virus had started damaging my liver, and I would need to start a course of treatment soon. Basically I could start right away but at this point, I had gotten into Stanford with a full financial aid package and I just couldn't imagine not going so I decided to go and enjoy my freshmen year. I figured if I was gonna die of this, at least I would have enjoyed 1 year at a great college that I had worked so hard to get into. My parents agreed so off I went from Maryland to California, and I had a great first year at school despite having the specter of treatment looming in my future.

Treatment started right when I came home that summer, and it was a combination therapy of Ribavirin and Interferon. The therapy had ok results but it had really bad side effects but again this was early on in Hep-C treatment research, and there wasn't much more available. I can't remember which one was pills and which one was shots but now I had pills to take and shots to give myself. I was never scared of needles but there's no one out there who enjoys giving themselves shots of medicine, but it's also amazing how routine and ordinary it becomes, just like brushing your teeth.

It didn't take long for the side effects to kick in -- the two that were hardest on me were the fatigue and the hair loss. Some days I was really tired and some days I was ok. I remember watching a movie called Smoke Signals at this time and there's a line it, "Some days are for breakfast and some days are meant for dying," and I completely understood what they meant by it. There were some days where I felt good enough to have breakfast and just start the day and get on with my life but there were some days where you just felt like you were dying, either physically or emotionally. One of the hardest things about illness is the uncertainty you face. You just have no idea which way you're heading -- back towards health or well, the other way.

I did go back to school that fall, but I was just a little less of who I normally was. I didn't have the same amount of energy so I took a lighter course load. I had lost weight and didn't have my usual humongous appetite. I'd watch all my friends around me going about with their lives fully ahead of them while I was wondering if I was nearing the end of mine. There were many moments when I felt a bit sorry for myself but I also knew there were so many others who had it worst. I decided to volunteer at the local children's hospital playing with kids who had terminal illnesses. Going through treatment as a 19 year old was hard, but it was nothing compared to what these kids were going through, and being with them helped me keep a healthy perspective on life.

Despite wanting to be my usual cheerful self, there were definitely times I felt depressed and anxious -- it's unclear how much of that was caused by the treatments vs. the emotional impact caused by illness. I felt like I was able to manage these emotions but then one night during the end of my winter quarter, I ended up in the ER with a panic attack. After that, I just felt like I needed to take some time off, and that was an incredibly hard decision to make. Part of me felt like I was giving up by not returning for the last quarter of my sophomore year, but I also knew

that I wasn't doing myself a favor by staying. Instead I went back to Maryland and finished my year-long treatment from home.

And at the very end of that year, after my last dose of pills and shots were done, I got tested to see if the treatment had worked. And it did but it was still early to be celebrating and think that I was in the clear. Again, these were early treatments for the virus and there wasn't a huge amount of data to show that it wouldn't return some day but at that point, I had good news.

I think everyone who goes through an illness suffers some level of trauma. For me, I just wasn't ready to believe in the good news or that the good news would stay. My diagnosis came as such a shock to me, I was always in this really tentative state of just waiting for the other shoe to drop. I would have to continue with blood tests to ensure that the Hep-C virus remained dormant and was always bracing myself for the doctor to say, "It's back."

And though I remained anxious during the years that followed, I also knew that I couldn't just live waiting for bad news. I was excited to feel healthy again and prove to myself that my body still worked. I trained for and ran my first marathon less than a year after I finished treatment. I could eat with gusto again, likely because I was training for a marathon and had a very large appetite.

I started to feel like myself again, and even though I had no idea whether I would live to 25 or 95, I was just going to take one year and one blood test at a time and made a promise to myself -- If I lived to 30, I was going to try to do something to help others lead a healthier life because I knew how hard it was to feel unhealthy and helpless. I have no idea how I picked 30. It was just a nice round number and honestly, there was a part of me who was not certain I would see that age.

But spoiler alert I did and here I am on the cusp of turning the ripe old age of 38. I quit my job at Visa shortly after turning 30. It was a huge leap of faith and also craziness. I was getting paid very well and I was doing pretty cool things to spread financial access to developing countries. In my last few years there, I had traveled to Rwanda, Tanzania, and Dubai and my last year was actually spent traveling back and forth to Singapore. My boss asked me if he should ask me to name a number to stay, and I said no. I had something else I needed to do.

And that something else eventually grew into Cook Smarts. I knew that I loved cooking and truly believed in the power of a home cooked meal to heal and to connect. Helping more people navigate the kitchen just seemed like the perfect intersection between something that I loved -- cooking -- and my goal of helping others live healthier lives. The actual meal planning part came together a bit later but I'll save that story for another episode.

Most people who survive illnesses get to take the positive spin on it, and I'm glad I'm in that camp. Part of me is grateful for this thing that happened to me. It's given me such a greater appreciation for life, my health, each birthday I get to celebrate -- I don't take any of it for

granted because I know the story could be so different. It's given me a great perspective on life and not sweat the small stuff and focus on what really matters.

Ok, I'm gonna try to pull myself together here even though these are happy tears. So if it wasn't for this totally unexpected diagnosis, you wouldn't be here listening to this podcast episode today. I don't think I would have started Cook Smarts if it wasn't for my experience with Hepatitis-C. The last 8 years of running this company has filled me with unimaginable joy. I've gotten to be a part of people's dinner tables, a part of their kids growing up, a part of their health journeys, and I hope we're just getting started.

If you want to send me some birthday wishes or ask a question, leave me a message at 650-386-0290 or send us a message on Instagram @cooksmarts or @jessdangcs. I would love to hear from you. Thank you for letting me indulge today and listening to my story and until next time, happy cooking from your almost 38 year old kitchen cheerleader!