

Hi there! You're listening to episode #19 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.

Hello friends, I don't know about you but October totally flew by for me. I was busy getting ready for our meal plan meetup which was a huge success. Our core meal plan team met up the week of October 7th and we planned 228 meals, which is 57 weeks worth of menus in 3 days. Totally crazy, right? We were very productive but I think it took my brain like a week to recover. For those who want a little behind the scenes look at how the meeting goes, I did tape some really great conversations we had -- it really gives you a sense of how much thought goes into each week and how much Tetris we have to play to make sure everything flows correctly. So I will create a little behind-the-scenes episode so look forward to that for season 3.

But of course, preparing for that meeting took a lot of work, and I am behind and feeling a bit anxious that there are only 2 months left in the year. The next 3 months are big months for Cook Smarts as we head into the holiday sale season and of course New Year's resolution time. And while I know that people are waiting for the new year for that fresh start in the kitchen, I think reaching health goals are so much easier if you already have a plan in place to help guide and support you. If you're not a member of our meal plan service, right now is a great time to sign up before the holiday hecticness of November and December hit. You will be so glad come January that you already laid down a solid foundation. Yes you may be traveling or won't be doing your regular routine every single week during the holidays, but our meal plans are not homework. You're not expected to do every single week or cook every single meal. They're there to provide comfort and ease when you need it, so regardless of how busy the week before was or if you were out of town, it's always there to provide a helping hand.

And if you are already a member, our big Thanksgiving gift sale is coming up, so think about all those people on your gift list who could really benefit from having a meal plan service and get them a gift subscription! It's not only a no-waste gift, but it also helps people reduce waste and their mental load. Lots of our members have been introduced to Cook Smarts as a gift, and they've gone on to gift it to others because it's made such a difference in their lives, so give a gift that keeps on giving this holiday season with a Cook Smarts meal plan gift subscription.

Speaking of gifts that keep on giving, that's exactly what I hope today's episode will do if you put my pantry advice into action. Today I want to talk about what you need to stock in your pantry to ensure that a home cooked meal is never far away. What we won't talk about today is pantry organization or containers or what to do if you don't have space for an official pantry. I think that is a whole other topic that needs addressing and I have it on my list for a future season to invite a professional organizer onto the podcast so that we can go deep on that topic with someone who organizes pantries for a living.

Now I understand that we all have different tastes and preferences, so the exact items that I stock in my pantry may be different than yours, which is why today I'm speaking more about the

category of items you need and within each category I'll provide ideas for some really versatile ingredients that can help you make a variety of meals. The reason why this is so important is if you're always stocked up with these functional and versatile ingredients, you can start meal planning from your pantry, which is way more time and budget efficient. But most of us don't do that -- we often start our meal planning from recipes. Many people start their weekly meal planning by searching through Pinterest but most people don't have a structure, a system, or limitations when they do this and so they might end up with 4 very different dinner recipes that require them to buy an assortment of ingredients that aren't in their pantry already. These ingredients often turn into one-off ingredients, where you buy them for that 1 recipe and you don't really know how to use it again, and then it just sits there, taking up space.

And when you repeat this sort of behavior week after week, year after year, you start to have a pantry that's just got a lot of stuff in it and it becomes harder and harder to meal plan from your pantry because you simply don't know what's in it. But if you have a streamlined and functional pantry full of ingredients that can be used in a variety of ways, week-to-week, you only need to buy a few fresh things during your weekly grocery shopping trips and then you're set for many meals throughout the week.

Now you might be wondering, Jess are you telling us we should be meal planning from our pantry and not from Cook Smarts? No, definitely not. One of the best parts about Cook Smarts is that we create our recipes based on the versatile ingredients that I'll be sharing with you today. We don't want you to buy a bunch of new things every single week -- in a way our meal plan service ends up managing your pantry for you and keeping it pretty streamlined. Now every once in awhile, we will introduce something new. In the past it's been items like za'atar, harissa, or miso paste. For those who don't know za'atar is a Middle Eastern spice mix, harissa is a North African chili pepper paste, and miso paste is made from fermented soy beans to add saltiness to sauces and soups. When we introduced those ingredients, we asked ourselves how are we going to use this again in a future Cook Smarts meal, and we always do because we don't want your pantry to be filled with these one-time use items. So that's another of the many benefits of using our meal plans -- since we're a single source for recipes, we end up basically managing your pantry for you and making sure it's stocked with all the items I'll be sharing.

We also have great pantry infographics you can download on our site and I'll make sure to link to those in the show notes. Now before we begin, I just want to quickly define the word pantry. When I say pantry, I don't necessarily mean a specific space that serves as your dry goods storage. I really am referring to any space in your home that houses food so this could be a few drawers and cabinets where you put your spices, canned foods, plus vinegars and oils. It definitely includes your fridge and your freezer because those spaces house lots of items that we will use over and over again throughout many meals. For those lucky enough to have a real designated pantry, of course it includes that space and if you have a smaller home and you store food underneath your bed, that's also included in today's definition of pantry. Basically I'm using the word pantry more as a synonym for the inventory of food you keep vs. a specific space.

So now that we have that established, the first category I'll cover are carbs and the first group of items within that category I want to talk about are our grains. They're budget-friendly, they keep really well, and they can add texture, bulk and comfort to just about any dish. There is such a wide variety of grains with different health benefits, so it's good to stock a mix of whole-grains and quicker-cooking grains. If you're gluten-free, just make sure to Google if a grain is gluten-free if you're not sure.

Some really versatile whole grains that I like to stock are farro, barley, wheat berries, brown rice, and steel cut oats. For those who love our infographics, we also have a Guide to Whole Grains Infographic if you want more ideas and tips for cooking them. Typically if I am making a whole grain, I will make enough to have throughout the week or make extra for freezing since it's not any more work to cook 4 servings or 8. So even if the recipe calls for a different grain but I've already cooked a pot of farro, I'll use the farro instead, save myself some time and avoid cooking up something different.

If you are freezing grains, I let them cool after cooking and put them into a freezer-friendly Ziploc bag. To get as much of the air out as possible, my new trick is I put a straw into the bag and then I zip the bag closed around the straw and suck the air out using the straw and then I zip it close. It's my poor-woman's version of one of those vacuum-seal machines and it works really well, and then I get to reuse the Ziploc bags again too.

So for quicker cooking grains, I keep white rice, quinoa, rolled oats, and bulgur in my pantry. I love those because I can get them started before cooking the rest of the meal, and it's done by the time I'm ready to serve. And if you have a rice cooker, you can actually cook all grains in them, which is what I do, so I don't have another pot I need to watch. I just set it with the right amount of water, and then I can walk away and not worry about it until I'm ready to eat. I know the Instant Pot can also cook a lot of grains incredibly quickly so that's another option. And of course you can freeze quicker cooking grains as well the same way you do for whole grains.

Now what if you're paleo? Well because the paleo diet doesn't do grains, what I would do is stock a lot of grain substitutes like cauliflower rice. These days fresh or frozen premade cauliflower rice is available in just about every grocery store, so it's easy to stock up on a few extra bags in your freezer, especially if they happen to be on sale. I also love that these days, we've gone beyond cauliflower rice -- I've also seen riced carrots, sweet potatoes, even beets.

So whether you're paleo or not, you can still stock up on these items so that you have a variety of items to use as grains (even if they're vegetables and not actual grains) which you can then turn into a multitude of meals, like a grain bowl, which is always a favorite of our meal plan members. Roast up some veggies and protein and spoon them over a bowl of grains, drizzle with a sauce or a vinaigrette and you have a hearty meal.

If you have some stock and veggies, you can add some grains and some beans and you have a simple soup. Or combine grains with some veggies and beans and roll them up with a tortilla for a burrito. Clearly grains can go with everything but a grain bowl, soup, and burrito are simple meal templates that you can make with items that are probably already in your pantry.

Now next in the carbs category are our pastas. When you have nothing else planned, pasta is one of the most reliable backup meals. Dried pastas keep for a long time, they cook up quickly, and it's usually quite a crowd pleaser for those with kiddos. I love that these days with so much more access to ethnic foods in our grocery stores, pasta doesn't just have to be just your Italian varieties. I like to also stock up on Asian rice noodles, buckwheat soba noodles, dried ramen, Israeli couscous, regular couscous, and orzo.

And speaking of variety, stores now stock up on so many gluten-free pastas made from a wide variety of ingredients like rice, quinoa, and beans. Our family is not gluten-free but we keep a couple of bean-based pastas just for variety. My favorite are Explore Cuisine's black bean and adzuki bean pastas. They're not exactly the same as a noodle with gluten but they're pretty close and definitely a lot better than the gluten-free pastas you could find 5 years ago. I know it can be really hard to have a food sensitivity or allergy but one good thing that's come out of this is innovation for all these new products.

Now if you're on the paleo diet, none of these pastas will work but you can easily create paleo-friendly noodles out of your favorite veggies. Just purchase a spiralizer and turn sweet potatoes and zucchini into noodles. I've also seen plenty of spiralized veggies sold in the pre-chopped veggies section of grocery stores like Whole Foods and Trader Joe's to make it even easier for you.

So regardless of what kind of pasta you keep in your pantry -- the standard Italian ones, Asian ones, gluten-free ones, or veggie-based ones, it means you're never far from a simple meal.

You could make a noodle stir-fry with some frozen veggies and whatever protein you have on hand. That's one reason that I always have frozen shrimp in my freezer because it cooks up fast and it works with just about every cuisine.

You could make a meat sauce with some ground meat, crushed tomatoes, and dried herbs. If you're vegetarian, pulse up some lentils and you get a really similar texture that really helps coat the pasta.

Another idea is to make a comforting noodle soup. Just boil up some stock and frozen veggies, add in the noodles, and there you go!

Last in our carbs category are our legumes. Whether you buy dried or canned, legumes are a healthy, versatile and inexpensive vegetarian protein to have around. I stock both dried and canned in my pantry similar for the same reason I stock both whole grains and quicker cooking

grains. For weeks when I'm really on top of the meal prep, I'll cook up a huge pot of beans and freeze the extra in the same way I freeze whole grains. And for weeks when I really just need convenience and don't have any beans in the freezer, it is so easy to just crack open a can of beans. However, since I got my Instant Pot, I cook dried beans way more frequently because it's just so fast. I can go from non-soaked, dried beans to cooked beans in under 45 minutes when you factor in the time it takes the pot to get to pressure and then release all of its pressure. It's amazing.

So in terms of what beans to stock, it really depends on your preference. Since my husband is pescetarian, we go through a lot of beans as it's such an easy vegetarian protein. Our pantry usually contains black, cannellini, garbanzo, kidney, and pinto beans and also dried lentils. You can also stock black eyed peas and split peas or whatever your store happens to carry. If you have limited space or are trying to keep a really minimalist pantry, which I'm all for, you can just keep like 2. Black beans, kidney, cannellini, pinto, and cranberry beans all have subtle flavor differences but they're all creamy beans so they can be used interchangeably. If you're Latin, it might seem sacrilege to make refried beans with kidney beans but the Latin food police isn't gonna make a visit to your kitchen so I promise you'll be ok.

Some of the legume-based meals we whip up regularly are adding beans to soups, chilis, enchiladas, burritos, tacos, and salads. I also like to mash up beans with some good olive oil, herbs, and garlic and you have a creamy side dish. If you've got tahini, you can make hummus by blending up garbanzos, tahini, lemon juice, garlic, and olive oil. Speaking of blending, I really like adding a can of white beans to pureed vegetable soups like pureed butternut squash soup or carrot soup. It adds a bit of body to the soup and if you're vegetarian and need a bit more protein, that's an easy way to get it.

Legumes also make up half of one of my favorite dishes, and I'm almost embarrassed to admit this as a professional recipe developer, but one of my go-to comfort meals is just rice and beans. I'll cook up black beans in the Instant Pot and then just spoon the beans and the juices over a bowl of rice and it's one of my favorite things in the world. It is a classic budget-friendly meal and even though I'm not a poor college student anymore, I just love it.

Now we're going to move onto the next category, which I like to call our crunchy fats and these basically are our nuts and seeds. Nuts are full of good fats and make filling snacks, but they're also a great supplement to meals like salads, sauteed veggies, and grain bowls.

Keep your favorites on hand, such as almonds, cashews, peanuts, which is technically a legume but acts more like a nut for cooking purposes so we're going to slot it in here. There's also of course, pecans, pine nuts, pistachios, walnuts, and even macadamia nuts. You can stock them whole or as nut butters though they'll serve different purposes or stock them whole to make your own nut milks or butters. Speaking of nut butters, I recently got a Vitamix and before this, all I had was an immersion blender and oh wow, I did not understand the difference.

I thought they both blend! Why do I need a real blender but now I get it. We now buy our peanuts in bulk and make fresh peanut butter and it's fantastic.

Whole nuts clearly make great grab and go snacks, like we mentioned. They can be combined with dried fruit for a quick trail mix. You can add them to salads, yogurt, or oatmeal for an extra boost of good fats. However, one of my favorite ways to enjoy them is crushed up in a food processor -- from there you can add in herbs or another leafy green, some garlic, a few glugs of olive oil for an easy pesto. Pine nuts are the traditional choice but pestos made out of cashews, walnuts, almonds or even pistachios are lovely. You can also use finely chopped nuts as a coating or a topping for a protein to add some crunch. Like a pistachio or almond crusted fish is actually quite easy to make but feels so fancy, like you just made a restaurant meal.

These days I also add nuts or nut butters to my smoothies. My favorite smoothie base is actually a Cook Smarts smoothie that uses rolled oats, peanut butter, bananas, and your preferred milk, but I also add in spinach and an apple, and it's super filling and our whole family enjoys it for breakfast.

Nut butters also make great creamy, salty dressings. You could make a cashew or peanut dressing by whisking or blending in some soy sauce, Tamari, or aminos, some rice vinegar, something that's a bit sweet, and some water. Toss that dressing with some kale or noodles or drizzle it over some seared tofu or chicken, and you have yourself a delicious dinner.

Just like grains, nuts are great for purchasing from the bulk aisle. In my house, we go through nuts incredibly quickly but if you don't, just buy enough for a few weeks or store them in the fridge or freezer so that they don't get rancid.

Next in the crunchy fat category are seeds, which is another way to add healthy fat, protein, fiber, and texture to a variety of meals. Crunchy seeds like sesame, sunflower, and pumpkin seeds (aka pepitas) are great for adding to salads, soups, or even tacos. There are also finer seeds like hemp, flax, or chia, which are great for smoothies, baked goods, granola, or oatmeal. One of my go-to snacks these days is actually chia pudding. I just soak chia seeds in soy milk overnight, using a 1:4 ratio and then add in nuts and fresh fruit for a filling midday snack. Some people add sweeteners but I just like using fruit as the main sweetener.

Also in the seed categories are seed butters like sunflower seed butter and of course, tahini, which is made from ground sesame seeds and used in hummus and creamy dressings. If you're on a paleo diet but looking for a way to add some creaminess to dressings, I highly recommend making sure you have tahini in your pantry. Whisk it with some lemon juice, garlic, and good olive oil, and you have a luscious sauce to use for salads and to coat those veggie noodles.

The next category is a big one -- it's all the items that add flavor to your meals but this is often the category that's filled with all those one-time use items I mentioned at the top of the episode. People will buy a very specific spice or paste for a particular recipe and then they're afraid to

use it again without a recipe telling them to but here's a secret, you don't need a recipe to tell you to use something again. You just need to figure out the original intention of that ingredient -- like if you bought harissa paste for a Middle Eastern recipe, its intention is to add spice to something -- you can then use it again any time you want to add some heat to a dish. Like I will put harissa on my scrambled eggs because I like a little spice with my breakfast. The more you reach for these ingredients, the more they get incorporated into your ingredient repertoire, and it doesn't feel as foreign to use them even when a recipe isn't telling you to.

So the first section in the flavor category are our sauces and soup bases. These would be your canned tomatoes, coconut milk, broths, stocks, miso paste and bouillons that become the foundations for sauces, braises, and soups.

If you've got cans of stock, any time that you've seared a piece of meat and have some meat drippings in a pan, you can just pour some stock in there, scrape up those drippings, and then let it reduce and you have yourself a quick pan sauce.

Stock is also a great way to flavor up grains so instead of using water, switch it out for stock instead. If you're making rice pilaf, start with some onions and herbs, add the rice and stock, and you have something that's more flavorful than white rice, though of course, there's nothing wrong with plain old white rice either.

For those with limited space, you might not have the room for cans or boxes of stock, especially if you have a big family and need like 2 quarts of stock to make a single meal. If that's the case, then try using bouillon. I am actually a huge fan of the Better than Bouillon pastes over the traditional bouillon cubes. The Better than Bouillon pastes come in glass jars. I buy the chicken and veggie flavored ones from Costco and whenever something calls for stock, I just use the paste instead and because it's just a jar of paste, you can scoop up exactly what you need. All bouillons are high in sodium so if you're on a low-sodium diet, just use them sparingly but they can also add a lot of flavor to your meals.

However lately I have been using miso a lot too to make my own miso soup but also just to add flavor to any soup. If you are vegetarian, use miso in any of your soups or sauces and it will add another layer of depth and flavor. Don't worry if it isn't Japanese. The intention of miso is to add a salty and umami element to a dish so whenever you think this dish tastes a bit bland, consider spooning in a bit of miso. And for those who are Cook Smarts members, you know that people love our miso butter and it's because it adds more flavor and of course a lot of richness with the butter to the final dish.

I always keep crushed and diced tomatoes in my pantry too. If you have diced tomatoes, beans, and a little bit of stock, you have the base for a veggie bean chili. Add some spices and veggies, and you're all set. Of course, you can buy jarred marinara but I've never found one that I love, so I just make my own with a can of crushed tomatoes, a little bit of sweetener to temper the

acidity of the tomatoes, some chopped garlic and dried or fresh basil and then I just season it to taste with salt and pepper. That's really all it takes!

If you're doing any Asian cooking or want to do more Asian cooking, keep a few cans of coconut milk in your pantry. Combine coconut milk with some fish sauce, curry paste, and stock, and you have a curry sauce or curry soup base. Going back to what I said earlier about figuring out the intention of an ingredient -- coconut milk adds both sweetness and creaminess to dishes, so any time you want to add either to a dish, consider pulling out some coconut milk. And if you have extra leftover in the can, you can freeze it or make a smoothie out of it. Nobody is going to complain about a coconut milk-based smoothie in your house, I promise.

Next in the flavor category are our condiments, and I know your fridge is full of them, and you should be using them a whole lot more. A few drops or spoonfuls of your favorite condiments or perhaps long forgotten condiments can add flavor and body to any dish.

Clearly if you walk down the condiment aisle in the grocery store, there will be hundreds of options but here is what the Cook Smarts pantry rotates through. For sweetness, we use honey, maple syrup, ketchup, jellies, jams, or preserves, and hoisin sauce. Some items that add saltiness or that umami element are anchovy paste, bouillon, capers, fish sauce, soy sauce, oyster sauce, tomato paste, and Worcestershire sauce. For spice and heat, any type of chili pepper based sauce, like harissa, Sriracha, or all your Mexican hot sauces, horseradish, mustards, and salsas. And for body or richness, creme fraiche, mayonnaise, sour cream, and yogurt.

So if you want to amp up your regular old stock, add a bit of anything from the salty or spice category or both, and you have a delicious soup base that everyone will be slurping out. For example, Cook Smarts has this chicken noodle soup that we finish with salsa, and I remember lots of members questioning us about that, like salsa doesn't belong in chicken soup. But if you think about the intention of the salsa -- which is really to add saltiness and heat to a dish (even if the dish is just tortilla chips) -- then you really expand the opportunities for using it. Don't think of it as a Latin condiment even. Just think of it as something that adds flavor, and that's exactly what it did for our chicken soup. People loved it and hopefully got a bit braver in using salsa in more dishes.

If you want to add some umami or sharpness to a vinaigrette, just whisk in some mustard or anchovy paste. I promise you that you won't taste the anchovy but just that brininess that it provides. We also love making flavored mayos in our house. Our go-to is curry mayo but you can add any flavor you want but it makes for a great dipping sauce for the kids.

So go and catalog your inventory of condiments and at every meal, just ask yourself, "Could this meal be more flavorful with a condiment?" and then just go for it!

Next in the flavor category are our spices, which add so much fragrance and flavor to meals in a simple, healthy way. It is likely that you have a lot of spices and probably more spices than you need. If your spice drawer is out of control or you just don't even know what's in there, I encourage you to do a cull. Consolidate all those jars of Italian seasoning you have and then divide it up into 2 categories. One is stuff you use frequently and the other is those spices you bought for the 1 recipe and now don't know what to do with. I want you to put those items into an easily accessible area, like right on your countertop if you have the space. This will force you to see them and figure out how to use them again, even if a recipe doesn't call for it.

Easy opportunities to use your spices are by sprinkling some on roasted veggies or into soups, vinaigrettes, and marinades. Again, think about the intention of the spice -- is it to add earthiness, heat, saltiness, sweetness and then any time you want to add those flavor elements to a dish, consider pulling out a spice that does that and just see where it takes you. The kitchen after all is so much more fun when you let yourself improv a bit, and spices are an easy way to practice that skill.

The next set of pantry ingredients in the flavor category are ethnic bases, which can easily be turned into quick, flavorful dinners just by adding your choice of proteins and veggies. They are wonderful shortcuts to have on hand, and every functional pantry needs some heavy-hitting shortcuts and I don't want you to feel the least bit guilty about relying on these as often as you need to. Some of these ethnic bases are your Indian sauces, Italian pasta sauces, Japanese miso pastes or curry sauces, or Latin enchilada sauces.

If you have a jarred Indian sauce, you can add some chicken or chickpeas and some frozen veggies, like peas or spinach and you have a meal that's much faster than Indian takeout or an Indian frozen dinner. When you stock enchilada sauce, you just need to add some black beans and cheese, and you have vegetarian enchiladas. If you want to add some veggies, frozen spinach will work great in a pinch.

Speaking of frozen, that's the last category in my pantry overview today. The freezer is such an important part of the pantry and there are so many ways to stock it so that you can maximize sales and also have like a mini store in your house. So every freezer should have some frozen proteins, veggies, starches, and meals stored in it.

Keeping a stock of frozen proteins means you always have something to cook after the simple act of defrosting. Clearly the proteins you stock depend on what your family likes to eat most so if you're all about the chicken, stock up on chicken when there's a sale. However, don't just put 5 pounds of chicken breasts straight into the freezer. Portion it out into amounts that you typically use so you can just defrost what you need. I also like to make sure that I have quicker defrosting proteins like bacon, shrimp, and fish in there too for emergency nights. And don't forget about vegetarian proteins like edamame, tofu, seitan, tempeh, and cooked legumes.

One of my go-to meal templates is a protein, grain, and veggie so if you always stock those items, you can just easily pull together a meal. Put the protein in the oven or an Instant Pot with some of those spices you need to start using. Cook up or defrost a grain. Add some veggies and get out one of your condiments to add a boost of flavor and you have a very balanced dinner that you might not have had to do any shopping for, meaning that your pantry provided everything you needed for that meal. Now that is a functional pantry!

So we just mentioned having veggies in that last meal and one way for you to always have veggies on hand is to keep a stash of frozen produce. Frozen produce allows you to enjoy your favorite fruits and veggies out of season, and in most cases, they're just as good as fresh so don't get all hung up on, I need to only eat fresh vegetables. Plus one more really awesome thing about frozen veggies is that it can save prepping time and allows you to easily include veggies in every meal.

As for what to stock, there are so many options so just choose the ones that you have in your regular rotation anyway. It's definitely worth taking a stroll down the frozen veggie aisle and see what your store carries -- you'll probably be pleasantly surprised by the options. If you're a Cook Smarts member, broccoli, butternut squash, carrots, cauliflower, cauliflower rice, corn, green beans, mushrooms, peas, spinach, and sweet potatoes are all convenient to have on hand, plus of course any fruit. We also freeze our own fruit too for smoothies.

So if you have frozen veggies, they can be stir-fried with rice and an egg for a quick fried rice. Throw them into soups. Saute, roast or air-fry them. We eat a ton of air-fried frozen veggies in our house. I just dump the entire bag right into my air-fryer and air-fry on 375 for 10 minutes. Take it out and then toss with some oil, spices, salt and pepper and air-fry for another 10 minutes, shaking the basket once or twice. I feel like such a resourceful super mom when I do this because I literally do no prep work but we still manage to have really good veggie dish with items that came from our freezer.

My freezer is also full of frozen starches. Most starches freeze and defrost easily, which means they never have to get moldy on your countertop and you can always have them at-the-ready. So if you look in my freezer, I have frozen bread, buns, pancakes, bagels, uncooked fresh noodles, raviolis and tortellinis, and tortillas. A lot of the time, hamburger buns come in packages of 8 and we may only need 4, so the other 4 just go straight into the freezer. I don't even put them in the breadbox because I would just forget about them and then find moldy buns a week later. Instead, I freeze the extra and put a note on our freezer white board, which I'll talk more about in just a bit.

So if you have frozen starches, you are just a quick defrost away from a quesadilla with frozen tortillas, a breakfast sandwich with frozen egg muffins or bagels, or a satisfying udon noodle soup. For items like bagels, I will make sure to slice them in half before freezing and then put them all into a Ziploc bag. I just pull out the halves and put them straight into my toaster and in a few minutes, they're toasty and ready for a delicious topping.

Lastly in the frozen category are our frozen meals. Having a few back-up meals whether they're leftovers, fully prepped meals or even store-bought frozen or boxed meals means that even on nights that you're too lazy to "cook," you still have something in the bank.

Dishes like meatballs, soups, casseroles, slow cooked meats like pulled pork, or cheesy bakes are all meals that freeze very well. If you're a meal plan member and looking for more inspiration here, check out the freezer-friendly tag in the All Meals Archives. I'll also link to our top 10 Freezer-Friendly Meals download as well in the show notes. But next time you're making a meal, just ask yourself, does this scale and freeze easily? If it's something you like, go ahead and double it and put the extra away for a night when you need that insurance. One of our meal plan members recently had her 4th kid and she put away a ton of freezer meals just by scaling up on the meals she was already cooking and it made a huge difference during those early weeks of managing a newborn but also having to feed her 3 kids.

Once you start using your freezer as part of your pantry, I recommend putting a white board on your freezer. There are magnetic ones or easy stick on ones and start keeping an inventory of what you have in there. I have one of these on our spare freezer and I have a column for each of these sections -- proteins, veggies, carbs, meals, and miscellaneous, like sauces -- and every time something goes in, I write it down in the appropriate column with a tally mark and when it goes out, I erase a tally mark. This makes it easy for me to see what I'm running low on and what's in there because my freezer is not particularly well organized but having that white board means that I always know what's in it, which allows me to meal plan very easily based on what's in there.

I know that was a lot and I didn't even get to mention all the sections we cover in our Pantry Essentials Infographic, so I encourage you to find that link in the show notes to get our full pantry coverage because there's a lot more good stuff there. However, I covered a lot today and there were lots of small details but really I want you to come away from this episode with 3 big takeaways for how you view your pantry. One is that if you stock your pantry with these versatile items, you're never far away from a lot of different meals, which will save you money. Instead of resorting to takeout the next time you're stumped about what to make for dinner, draw from your pantry instead. Takeaway #2: When you have a functional pantry, you can start meal planning from your pantry. It doesn't mean you can't consult recipes but if you've got coconut milk you want to use or 5 lbs of frozen chicken, let that be the first input into your meal planning and recipe searching for the week. And like I said before, if you're a Cook Smarts member, that is largely done for you. And the last big takeaway, which is one of the pillars of Cook Smarts, is don't be afraid to veer away from recipes. There are likely lots of items in your pantry that you're not taking full advantage of so find more opportunities to use everything. Any time you want more flavor, reach for a condiment. Any time you want more than plain tofu or chicken, open your spice drawer. Any time your salad is missing a little crunchy, go to the crunchy fat section of your kitchen or maybe those are kept in a dresser drawer because I know we don't all get to have real kitchen pantries.

I really hope today's episode was helpful. Being the keeper of the food is a big job. I totally get it, so if you want to outsource this mental labor to someone else, I know of this company called Cook Smarts that would love to take this load off of your brain. Our meal plan service makes sure you keep a streamlined pantry and helps you use the items in there in a variety of different ways. Head to cooksmarts.com for a free trial if you're not already a member.

If you loved today's episode and want to be a supporter of more smart home cooking, please make sure you're subscribed to us in your preferred podcast player and leave us a review in Apple Podcast just like Debdebdebbo. She said that "Not only do I learn something new every episode, but this podcast just makes me feel great. Jess and team create content that is accessible, inspiring, empowering, and so helpful. Their meal plan service has helped me take better care of myself for years now, and this podcast is no exception!" Thank you Deb, you are the winner of a Cook Smarts tote bag -- just reach out to us at hello@cooksmarts.com. If we read your review in a future episode, you too will get a tote bag, perfect for carrying the versatile pantry ingredients mentioned today.

So go and create a streamlined and functional pantry and never be far from a home cooked meal. If you have a question, an idea for a future episode or just want to leave us some love, leave us a voice or text message at 650-386-0290 or send us a message on Instagram [@cooksmarts](https://www.instagram.com/cooksmarts) or [@jessdangcs](https://www.instagram.com/jessdangcs). 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!