

Jess Dang: Hi there. You're listening to episode number 23, 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. Today, we're interviewing Ms Erin Romeo, a nutrition coach, expert meal planner and food prep specialist from Ontario, Canada. She's known on Instagram as the food prep princess and that's also where she shares her tips and tricks for healthy eating through meal prepping. Last fall, she published her first cookbook, The Visual Guide to Easy Meal Prep, which is full of easy meal prep recipes and her five step, foolproof plan for getting started with meal prep. She's also been featured on shape.com, health.com, the kitchen, BuzzFeed, Britton Co just to name a few media outlets. Today, we are so excited to be featuring her on our podcast. I asked Erin, to come on the podcast because I know that meal prepping is one of those habits that everybody knows is good to do, but it feels really hard to get started.

Jess Dang: As a nutritional coach, Erin has been working with clients for 10 years and helping them get over that hump by showing them how to do it and making it an integral part of their life and routine. If you have not checked out episode 21 please do because that's where I share my system for making any change stick. When you combine the tips offered in episode 21 with Erin's meal prep tips, you've got everything you need to make meal prepping, something you do every week. Not just something you watch other people share on Instagram. If there is one other thing you need though, it probably is a meal plan service and I know of a great one. You can head to cooksmarts.com to grab a free 30 day trial to our meal plan service and we include a list of weekend prep steps for all of our menus to remove any excuses or friction preventing you from getting ahead in the kitchen.

Jess Dang: Before I bring Erin in though one more piece of Cook Smart's business to share, we will be picking a winner for our reviews giveaway on Thursday, February 6th, is a review's giveaway for a \$100 Amazon gift card. If you haven't left a review for our podcast on Apple podcast, please do. If you do, just take a screenshot of it and text it to (650) 386-0290, if you've already left a review on iTunes, you can contribute a voicemail review at the same number, which again is (650) 386-0290. We'll pick one winner at random on Thursday, February 6th, and with that, here's Erin. Erin, welcome to the Cook Smarts podcast. I'm so excited for you to share all of your meal prep wisdom with our listeners.

Erin Romeo: Thank you so much, Jess, I'm so glad to chat with you one to one and share my knowledge with your audience.

Jess Dang: Of course. Before we get started, I know our listeners would love to learn more about you. You're a nutritional coach and a meal prep expert. Can you tell us more about how you ended up in these fields?

Erin Romeo: I actually studied food and nutrition and family studies back in university and then went on to get my teaching degree. I've done both coaching and teaching in tandem, but for years I've worked with my clients face to face, it was very individual work. Then I think it was about 2014 I moved into the online space as a nutrition coach and really Instagram is my hub. I've been sharing... I just started Instagram to share examples visually of my meals and meal preps and what I wanted my clients to copy and I wanted to do a few

days or a week at a glance. Then when questions started coming my way, that just fueled my page and my content. It was really, really just coming from the people that were on my page, is how the nutrition coaching on Instagram gained traction.

Jess Dang: That's so great to hear, because it's such a visual thing. People want to see what the meal prep looks like or what the meals look like, and I think that using Instagram was such a smart move for you.

Erin Romeo: Yeah, I've loved it.

Jess Dang: Before we dive into the world of meal prep, I want to spend a little more time just understanding nutritional coaching. What brings a client to see you and what's your process of working with them?

Erin Romeo: You know what, as I was saying, Instagram has been such an amazing platform for me, when I started posting for my individual clients. But then when health publications like Oxygen magazine and shape.com and POPSUGAR, they started sharing some of my meal preps. It drove a lot of people to my community page. Then I really started connecting one-on-one and including Instagram stories, that's been fantastic. It's there that I've been able to share video recipes and discuss food trends, provide advice and things like that. Usually what happens is that we connect a little bit more on a personal level and we move over to direct messaging and we start a one on one conversation. Actually, if you send me a note on Instagram, don't be surprised if you get a voice message from me along with the text message, in DM there.

Erin Romeo: But when it comes to the process of working with clients, basically, we just jump on a call and we chat just like you and I are here just so, I want to better understand what your needs are and wants and then we carve out a plan or a program suited to that. My nutrition coaching service is really custom, so the program doesn't always look the same for everyone. But generally I collect some data, we do a little healthy homework and then I create some meal plans and build some tools around your lifestyle and preferences. Every week we have a check in, to review the week and I outline marching orders for the week to come. I'll just say too, my coaching methodology is actually based on an educational model of learning called gradual release of responsibility. In these three blocks of time we work together, we move from ideally in the beginning, I designed the meal plans and meal prep directives, including some simple recipes and things like that.

Erin Romeo: I do the work and then in the second phase, we do some work together and the planning together and then we move more to, you do. My clients take on more of the controlling responsibility and I'm more of a review role, although we keep the weekly check-ins. This way, and I say this all the time on my Instagram page, but I see my job as to work myself out of a job with someone because it's not just about a start and stop program. But gaining the knowledge and confidence to continue on your own for your lifetime, that's really my goal.

Jess Dang: Yeah, I think that's so important because it's all about teaching the person how to fish and I feel like I feel the same way about our meal plans too. It's like I would love for people to not need our meal plans at some point because they just feel like, I got it, I know what I need to do this week in the kitchen. But of course we're always there for people if they need that.

Erin Romeo: Yeah, but making it their own. It's so true, that's really the key.

Jess Dang: What are some challenges you see when a client comes to you? Is it like mainly health things, are they trying to lose weight or what are some of their goals that they would seek a nutritional coach out?

Erin Romeo: The majority of people that come to me are women. Probably 90% of the people that come to me, they want to see some weight loss, but it's all those other benefits like being organized in the kitchen and getting organized for the week. We were talking about, Jess, you have three kids, you have to be organized. I can't even imagine, I've one little pumpkin and it's crazy enough but the organization piece comes along with it. Usually, yeah it's for better health, disease prevention but majority is weight loss.

Jess Dang: Got it. Well this is now the perfect transition into talking about meal prep because meal prep is all about organization. I see the meal prep hashtag all over Instagram these days and they're usually accompanied by photos of 10 whole meals put together. It's like often, you got chicken breast, broccoli and sweet potatoes because you see it a lot with fitness folks. They're all perfectly portioned out in those black plastic containers, they've got tons of likes. Clearly there's a lot of inspiration out there around meal prep and it's a habit that anyone who's tried cooking dinner on a busy weeknight knows that they should start meal prepping in some capacity, but they just don't. In your experience, what are some of the main reasons people don't do it and how do you motivate people to get past just scrolling on Instagram and actually taking action and getting started?

Erin Romeo: Yes. Oh my gosh, this is such a good question for this time of year as well. I love this question because so many of us spend time, myself included, consuming on social media and less time doing. Just speaking of meal prep in particular, I just looked it up this morning, there was 11 million hashtags dedicated to meal prep, which is crazy. I think when I started it didn't even hit a million when I started on Instagram, so it's really changed and it's really the evidence of the popularity of meal prep. But definitely, we're not lacking in the inspiration department, moving from watching to doing is really key and my number one tip for that is just to start small.

Erin Romeo: Don't try to emulate those massive meal prep spreads when you're just starting out. Just pick a favorite recipe for breakfast or for lunch or dinner and just make a few of them really. You and I were talking about this earlier, but if you need a little bit more motivation, I do have a guide for getting started. You can go hang out on foodprepprincess.com to check that out. It's a little mini ebook I've put together so that you can work through some specific guidelines and there's a few questions I have for you to ask yourself if you really want to get started. It's about that action step.

Jess Dang: Yes, I love that and I checked it out, so I definitely want folks to head to foodprepprincess to pick it up. What I love about it, is really it's about mindset shift because I think for so many folks, that is that first hurdle is just changing your mindset to be, I can do this. It's not impossible. With all habits in life, I think so much of it is just getting yourself, the brain warmed up to accept the challenge. Then once you get there, the rest, it's like, I think once you actually physically get started it's so much of it the momentum can help carry you forward. Even if you start small.

Erin Romeo: Oh you're so right.

Jess Dang: Exactly and earlier this month we just had our New Year's resolutions episode and we have lots of tips for how to adopt habits and I think what we said is same as you. Is just start small because I think sometimes we want to be like at the end already, we don't want to go through all the small steps of practicing. People just forget that everything in life takes practice.

Erin Romeo: It's so true and I share some before and afters of my clients and what they're saying about that process and I know you do the same. Everyone has to start at square one, that's where you have to start and that's how everyone gets there. Sometimes we don't see all the in between, but that's key and starting small, there's nothing wrong with that. You have to trust yourself and just get started, sometimes really that first step is the hardest, isn't it?

Jess Dang: Yeah, exactly. I'm sure on your Instagram page, if you scrolled back a couple of years ago, those earlier posts are so different than your posts now. Because you started square one as well, so that's where everyone has to start.

Erin Romeo: It's so true, don't even scroll back people, it's just ridiculous. But, it was like these clients that I was meeting face to face and I literally just wanted to snap a photo so I could say this is what we're talking about this week. In the beginning not having the intention and not realizing how big the Instagram page would be. Yeah, I thought once or twice about getting rid of some of those old posts because the picture quality and everything else isn't the best. But, the intention and really the desire to help people is there. That's what's behind that post and those captions so, I'm leaving it.

Jess Dang: Yes you should. I feel the same way when I go back to our first years, 2013 2014 I look at those meals, I'm like, "oh!".

Erin Romeo: Yeah, so same same.

Jess Dang: It's like the pictures and even the recipe writing, but I leave it up there for myself as well as for folks to be like everybody has to start somewhere and you can see the evolution and improvement. I think it's so important to see that, even people who you think are professionals had to start somewhere that's not where they are now.

Erin Romeo: Good point.

Jess Dang: I divide meal prep into two separate categories or maybe it's like more of a spectrum where there are some folks that will just prep a couple of things and there are some folks who will make the entire meal. Get it portioned out and go that whole way where they then just need to grab and go or microwave or whatever it is. For those who want to go that fully cooked route, they want to make the whole entire meal and get it portioned out so that they can just grab it or microwave it when they need it. Are there types of recipes that you like to recommend that just do better than others?

Erin Romeo: Yes. Years of practice, there are foods that are great for meal prep and some that just really aren't. No one wants soggy foods. I am going to plug my book here just for a second only because I want to talk about, I've compiled really the best meal prep recipes in there. My book, we just launched it in August, but it's called the Visual Guide to Easy Meal Prep. The point why I'm doing that is really because I hear this from people all the time and you know because you provide this beautiful service for people too hear this all the time. I'm searching, I'm on Pinterest, I think these are healthy meals, by the time I picked some recipes that I want to cook for the week. By the time people do that, they're already tired or out of time to do the work.

Erin Romeo: It's nice to have a bank or wherever you're getting it from. A bank of recipes that you know are made for meal prep because some just work better in terms of reheating in the microwave or the oven even freezing. You're right, some are better than others, that's for sure.

Jess Dang: Is there any specific criteria you tell people to look for if they're looking at other recipes to be like, this will be something that's good to prep ahead?

Erin Romeo: Well, work with a trusted source because these people that are putting it out there, myself and yourself included, have tried and tested the recipes. Look for a trusted source and also give yourself some grace and some trial and error period and figure out what works best for you. You have to do that, you have to put in the work.

Jess Dang: Exactly. For those things that had to be reheated. Do you do anything special with maybe the meat when you end up reheating it doesn't end up over cooked or rubbery or something that's not appetizing.

Erin Romeo: Yeah. Proper food storage is definitely going to help using the cook times from expert recipe writers, using your meat thermometer so you're not overcooking it. Some things are better heated up in the oven or on the stove top than the microwave. It takes a little bit of testing but if you seasoned it well and cooked it properly you're good to go when it comes to leftovers.

Jess Dang: Yeah, I find that I love leftovers and I find things like soups, that kind of thing works really well for me. I do find that even though I see the whole like big chicken breast and meal preps, I tend to avoid those unless I'm using them for salad just because the reheating, because for me at work, all I have is a microwave. I find that reheating a big thing of chicken breasts doesn't always yield the most appetizing lunch that I'm excited about.

Erin Romeo: It's true. I find if I shred the chicken and then you can use it for, you could do like Mexican style or Southwest style seasoning or even an Asian inspired seasoning. Shredded chicken tends to outlast just like a hunk of cooked chicken breasts.

Jess Dang: That's such a good idea and I think for folks that are doing that full week, trying to vaguely make meals for the entire week, doing probably like a big pot of this shredded chicken or shredded pork. Then using it in a bunch of different recipes so people don't get bored, that makes a huge difference.

Erin Romeo: I love that.

Jess Dang: Yes. I also want to give a plug for Erin's book. What I love about it, is it's not just like here are a bunch of recipes that are good for meal prep. You have also organized those recipes into some sample meal plans for people and as you know, I'm a big fan of meal planning. I think that's really great to not just be like here, take these recipes, but giving people that next step so that it makes it even easier for them to dive into meal prepping and be like, here's a week that's already organized, if you want to try putting these recipes together into a cohesive menu.

Erin Romeo: Yeah. I appreciate you saying that Jess, anything done for you, go for it. That was really a priority for me working with the publisher, good point.

Jess Dang: What do you say to people, because this happens for us all the time. We have a lot of members that say, "I really love cooking but I don't want to cook too many times because I don't have the time to do it. Because I don't love leftovers. Same thing, I don't want to meal prep because I don't like eating leftovers."

Erin Romeo: Yes. I do hear this a lot too and without a good food prep friendly recipe like we discussed, leftovers might not seem as appetizing. But truly 99% of the people I speak to and work with find that the ease of repeating just a few meals throughout the week trumps variety. It's just so much easier than cooking something different every single day. You have to give it a try. It really does, it trumps variety every day.

Jess Dang: I think that's true too and I think a lot of it, is just maybe scheduling maybe you, you just have to mix up the meals and not have the meals back to back perhaps. If you're doing the Sunday prep, you might want to say, "This is this meal I'll eat Monday and Thursday and these two I'll eat Tuesday." I think that's probably it too if you want to prep two or three meals ahead of time, just making sure. For me, I love lunch leftovers because I always try to make meals that I'm super excited to eat. Whether it's fresh or reheated up.

Erin Romeo: Mm-hmm (affirmative), I'm with you.

Jess Dang: I know, we were talking about the spectrum of meal prep. Some folks want to do the entire meal, but there are folks that just want to prep a few ingredients on a Sunday. Maybe they've got an hour or so they want to get some vegetables chopped up or

maybe make some of their sauces. Do you have advice for what they should prioritize as they're thinking about, what to prep in that Sunday, that one hour they have free?

Erin Romeo: I do. You bring up a good point because some people might not want to prep the individual meals and I talk about this in the book too. It's where that bulk prep comes in, you have an hour like you said, you could just cook a few proteins. Say for example some chicken, sausage or eggs and some veggies and another big container, some healthy carbs potatoes or whole wheat pasta or quinoa. Get some of those bulk prep items done, then you can mix and match your meals as you go and we already touched on this. Then you can mix and match and pick something from your different containers to make new meals, different sauces or spices or seasonings to keep it interesting. It is a great way to add variety to your meals through the week.

Jess Dang: You're almost creating a buffet line in a way with those... Probably getting the ingredients that probably would take a little longer on the weekdays that you wouldn't want to devote the time to. But if you get those ahead of time, you have a little buffet options or are just ahead on the recipe.

Erin Romeo: Yeah, then you're not lacking for anything. You mentioned chicken in your salad, if you have that done then you can mix and match. You have the chicken with the rice or quinoa in your salad or in a wrap, you have to see really, I do encourage my clients to try both. Try packing individual meals one week and see how that goes, then the next week do the bulk prep and the bulk prep is also nice when you have a family. I know your pumpkins are little, but as your kids get a bit older, they can go in and pick a little bit of pasta and maybe some meatballs. They can start preparing their own meals like that too, when everything's already cooked and ready to go. It's worth trying both and just see what fits for you.

Jess Dang: Do you find what folks prefer? The fully assembled versus the bulk prep?

Erin Romeo: Yeah, I think overall working with people all these years, people like the individual meals a little bit better. Unless they have big families, I find bulk prep sometimes works for big families better but for individuals and for your individual goals, the individual meals is easier. Especially like you said, if you're bringing it to work, you're just throwing something in the microwave. But if you work from home you might want to scoop from different containers to build your meal. It depends, but I find most people like the individual packed meals.

Jess Dang: Those individual packed meals or the bulk prep. You need something to put all the food in. Let's talk containers, because I think sometimes for folks just getting some new things, that can motivate people to get started. Some people just like, I don't have, whatever it is therefore I cannot get started on this. But they need some containers, are there specific ones that you recommend?

Erin Romeo: Yeah. I attribute it to getting new running shoes when you're starting at the gym type of thing. You do need proper containers and you need enough. That's half the battle and I know you mentioned earlier about those black containers. We do see a lot of that and

what's nice is it's individualized into portion sizing I guess you could say. But I do like glass, glass containers would be my number one go-to. You can reheat your meals in the glass containers safely, you can eat directly from them. They're easy to clean, they don't leave an odor, like plastic containers and they last forever. If you're investing a little bit more in the glass containers, they'll last forever. I think it's worth the investment. I personally like Pyrex and Anchor glass containers.

Erin Romeo: Pyrex actually supplies the containers in the books, that's what we went with. They have a nice simple design style and they're functional and it allows me to portion all my meals easily. If I get different sizes. You can get like a one cup or up to a five cupper and additionally I have varying sizes and shapes of containers. I do use plastic containers sometimes for salads and things like that, I use baggies for dried snacks. Getting into the reusable baggies is something that's a priority for me for 2020. You're going to see a lot of those on my page. I have a variety of things but for reheating I'm going to say glass as my number one.

Jess Dang: What size do you typically recommend for a good serving size for a meal?

Erin Romeo: A three to four cup.

Jess Dang: Got it.

Erin Romeo: You could do a nice big stir fry in there or a chili, you don't want it too big but you don't want it too small either. That three to four cup range is perfect.

Jess Dang: I have the Pyrex ones too. My sister-in-law got us a new set of glass ones last year for the holidays and I just love them. They're so great and you're right, to me the cleaning. Yeah, they're a little heavier, but the fact that you can put them in the dishwasher and they actually dry out versus the plastic stuff. It doesn't dry out if you put it on the top wrap and you still have to wipe it clean, with your drying rag. I'm a huge fan of the glass Pyrex containers.

Erin Romeo: Yeah, I'm with you.

Jess Dang: I'd love for you to walk us through your meal prep process for yourself and your family. You have a two-and-a-half-year-old, how do you set yourself up for success and make the magic happen every week?

Erin Romeo: You know what the magic is, food prep Sunday. You probably heard this if you're on social, either a meal prep Sunday or food prep Sunday, lots of us preppers, that's what we dedicate is our Sunday time. I'm no different. Every Sunday morning in a two or three hour block of time, I prepare six days of food, including lunches, dinners and snacks. I grocery shop sometimes the morning of or sometimes the day before, but on that food prep day I cut, wash, cook, portion size, my meals into containers. I put them into the refrigerator, into the freezer and the planning gets done beforehand. I plan with an appropriate combination of foods and I can stay on track with my healthy goals. It's taken me a long time to perfect, it's a little bit of a science, but it's really that secret to

consistency and success. I've really made it a priority for the family, I just go for it, I just dig in.

Jess Dang: Erin, you just mentioned that during your meal prep process, some things you do freeze. What are the things that you freeze versus not, how do you decide that?

Erin Romeo: That's a good question, that's a little bit of trial and error as well. You don't want to freeze eggs. They don't freeze very well, but something like a stir fry, I guess I'll interrupt myself and just say, "You don't want to refreeze something that's been previously frozen, just talking food safety stuff." If you're making a fresh stir fry with fresh chicken or fresh steak, you can refreeze that nicely. Something like a chili or soups, they refreeze and reheat very nicely. You can also do, and I do this with my clients, we did a bunch of testing. You can freeze your ingredients for smoothies or shakes ahead of time and that makes the morning really quick too. You can even freeze vegetables and fruits, then you can just throw it in your blender with any type of liquid you're using. That makes it really quick for the mornings, no excuses.

Jess Dang: That makes so much sense to have it all. All the combination in one baggy and then just dump it into your blender. For the things that you're saying, like the stir fries and the soups. Are you freezing to eat it that week? Are you freezing to maybe to save for, you've doubled a batch of soup and you're freezing for a month from now?

Erin Romeo: I do both. If I'm doing a big meal prep on Sunday and it's taken me until the next Sunday, for seven days. I'll freeze some of those items, I'll leave some items, let's say because we were talking about chili, that will be for the latter part of my meal plan. I'll freeze that and bring it out near the end of the week. Or sometimes if I'm making extra, a bigger batch of soup, say for example, I'll freeze that but I freeze it individually. I don't freeze that in bulk, I freeze it individually and then when I have those really busy weeks. Then I go back and use that, so I know I have that frozen. I'm saying I have some burritos frozen in my freezer and I know ahead of time they are there and it's going to be a busy week. I will add that to my meal plan when I know it's going to be busy week.

Jess Dang: I love, having insurance. I think that's so important for any meal plan, and I don't know how you do it. But I always recommend to people to get a magnetic whiteboard and put it just on their freezer and just write an inventory of, I put two burritos in or two portions of soup and just write it out. When you take it out, cross it out so that-

Erin Romeo: Oh, I love that.

Jess Dang: Everyone always knows what's in their freezer because that's my problem. I'll freeze things and then I'll be like, wait, I don't know, what's in there. Ever since I started doing that, it's been a much more streamlined process in my house.

Erin Romeo: Oh, I love that idea. I'm going to have to adopt that tip. I'm going to take that on for my own, I definitely have a Sharpie as a part of my meal prep routine. A Sharpie out and you can write it right, on the glass and it'll wipe off or write on your Ziploc bags and so you

know what's in there when you put it in. That you know when you consume that within three months to six months, definitely labeling is key.

Jess Dang: Actually going back to in terms of the food safety. If you were to make a soup on Sunday and you were going to eat it later on the week, you said you would freeze it. What is the threshold for the leftovers in the fridge that you would be okay with?

Erin Romeo: It depends what it is, but four to five days you're safe as long as you cooked it properly, it hasn't been sitting on the counter too long. You have it in a sealed, in an airtight container, you're good to go for four or five days. Some things that need a little bit of freshening up, if you're doing veggie sticks for example, carrot, celery, that type of thing to grab. You might have to replenish some of that hydration and just dunk it under water. Or if it's something like berries, say for example, it has a lot of water already, but you don't want that sitting in the fridge. Put a paper towel in your container and then just replace that paper towel after a day or so and just consume it within four or five days. I've never had an issue, none of my clients have ever had an issue with that.

Jess Dang: Things that are, you're going to do a full week of meal prep and you're going to consume outside of the four or five day window. That's the stuff you would freeze so that you can have it on that sixth or seventh day.

Erin Romeo: Yeah, or you do the little mini prep. If you're worried about keeping things fresh, that's on your mind. It doesn't feel comfortable to just do a little mini prep on Sunday and then Wednesday or Thursday prep again.

Jess Dang: That's great. How do you go from the plan to the preps? My question is, once you have your menu in place, you know you're going to make for the breakfast, lunches, dinners and snacks. How do you decide the order that you're going to do everything in order to make it most efficient.

Erin Romeo: It's such a good question, if you're starting out, and this is why I add this to the book, there's the meal plan in the book, but then the steps. Sometimes if you have the planning done, Sunday comes, you're like, okay, I've told everyone nine o'clock that's my kitchen time, 9:00 AM what do I do first? Instead of fumbling around, what you could do first is just pick the longest cooking item. Say for example, I have sweet potatoes on the menu. I know that's going to take the longest time to cook up. I'll wash them real quick, get them into an oven, safe dish, pop them in the oven and then I get started on the next item and I really just go down the line like that. When I have about two or three things, cooking, whether it's in the oven or some in the oven, some on the stove top. Then I go back and like wash some veggies and cut them up and get them in my salad containers, wash some of my fruits, maybe do some my overnight oats. I'd get the longer cooking items started first.

Jess Dang: How do you keep track of all the stuff that's going, because I imagine that's really hard for some folks who might be new to cooking and those folks will definitely start with maybe one to two recipes at most. How do you juggle, do you do it all in your head or

do you write things out? Because, I'm always just curious about people's process of execution.

Erin Romeo: Yes. I've been doing it for so long, to be honest I don't write it out step-by-step. Now, I go back for my clients and I do write it out step by step because you just want a plan to follow. I'm here, let's start at square one. This is the first step and move forward from there. I don't write it out, but if I have my meal plan in front of me, sometimes I'll just circle the priority that I want to do on that Sunday. Sometimes I'm prepping on a Sunday to get me through to Wednesday and then I do another little mini prep on Wednesday or Thursday to get me through the weekend. That's another little tip for people, if you're just getting started, you don't have to do the whole week. I do the whole week just because it's what works for me.

Erin Romeo: But, for a lot of people that I work with, they do a little mini prep on Sunday, they dedicate an hour maybe and then including cleanup and a mini prep on Wednesday. So, Wednesday you're prepping a few things to get you through the weekend and you want to do that, you want to prep ahead even on the weekend. That on your weekend you're not slipping backwards and slipping into old habits or something like that or eating takeout the whole entire weekend. Then Monday you're doing the start again, you don't want to do that, mini preps might work well for people too.

Jess Dang: I agree, I think for folks who just can't find the time to just get the whole three hour block, I think splitting it up like that. For me, I actually do my grocery shopping on a Thursday, then I get some stuff done for the weekend, maybe on Friday. Then it's just like I can have the weekend with my kids because I have three of them, they're very demanding on my time. I think whether it's splitting it up, but I do think that I like that Wednesday approach or Wednesday or Thursday. Just to be like the weekend is not always for all the chores that need to be done. I try to find time after my kids go to bed. I don't have a lot of time these days because they go to bed so late, but I usually will just pick one night where I don't clean up after dinner and I'll just continue prepping after they go to bed and then do a final cleanup.

Erin Romeo: Yeah, that's a smart way to do it. If you're prioritizing your health or it's a new year, you want to have better nutrition and that's a priority for you. Honestly, in the beginning it's not going to feel easy. It might feel like a bit of a part time job in the beginning, meal prep especially once you get the hang of it, it will be second nature I promise.

Jess Dang: I love that you said that, because it is work and I do find, it's not just like the people on Instagram who took the time to make these nice photos. All of that is work. A lot of work went behind all of that and I think we sometimes forget like, Oh, it should just feel easy and it will. I do think like it does become second nature once it becomes an ingrained habit, but in the beginning it takes work. I think as you said, now you don't have to write out all the execution steps because it is probably second nature to you. You can look at a bunch of recipes and just easily see like, Oh, like I do this first and then this and that. But, I'm sure in the beginning I think it's important for people to realize that's probably not where they're going to be and they probably need to write it out and be more explicit about it and that's why people hire you to be like do the work for me.

Erin Romeo: Do the work for me, at least in the beginning. Once you have a couple of weeks done and laid out and you can go back to the plans and you can circle some of your favorites or your family favorites. Go back and repeat it. You don't have to make it difficult. I repeat my favorite food prep recipes all the time. You might even repeat a whole entire week, put it on rotation, you don't always have to try something new every week. You don't have to do a brand new recipe, don't make it hard using ingredients you guys love make it easy for sure.

Jess Dang: Yes. I love that because I think sometimes when people sign up for our meal plan service, they are like, okay I need to make all four recipes and all four recipes at that point are new to them and it's hard. I always tell people set yourself up for success. Pick two recipes and then add two of your favorites that you can make in your sleep, don't try to do too much. I think so much of it is people think that to meal plan properly or whatever, everything has to be new every week. That's not the case, I think the folks that are really successful at it realize, okay, this is the stuff that I really like. How do I reincorporate that the next week. You still have a little bit of variety but you'll also have some standbys and some things that you can execute easily because you've done it before.

Erin Romeo: It's so true and just hearing you talk, I'm nodding my head here and this is why I do go through a little bit of a process when I'm first starting to work with people. So I can identify what's the lifestyle that you're living, what are your food preferences? You don't have to choke down raw eggs and salmon if that's not your thing, if that's not your vibe, we're going to pick from the foods that you like. You're not going to feel like you're on a diet, you're just, you're eating healthy, you're eating the foods that you love. You want to look forward to those meals that you're having every week. That's the key.

Jess Dang: Yeah, I think that last part is so key. You want to look forward to those meals so people need to pick meals that they're excited to eat as leftovers or whatever and I think that makes a huge difference. Because it's like even if you pick something that's easy to execute but it's not your favorite, you're not going to be super excited about it. I think, so much of it is picking recipes that you know you're going to be real excited to eat. Now we have the containers, we have the motivation, we have your great process. How do you help your clients make the habits stick or how do you in the process that you use, get it so that you extricate yourself from it and they can continue to be successful on their own?

Erin Romeo: We did touch on this a little bit, but truly what you can do is schedule that meal prep time in your calendar and you're going to stick to it like you would an appointment. It seems sometimes like one or two hours to meal prep on the weekend, it seems like a lot of time, but people truly underestimate the time they spend during the week prepping, shopping, cooking, and cleaning up from three meals a day. I've done the work and I've done the research on this, you're going to save about five to six hours a week easy. By dedicating this specific time to meal prep, it does seem daunting in the beginning. It does seem like a lot of time, but over all you're going to save yourself so much time. You're not going to be getting home from work or most people are working during the day nine to five, for example, coming home, getting all the food's ready.

Erin Romeo: Hopefully you have the ingredients you need, if you didn't do the planning before and then doing the cooking and no one wants to stand up their sink at seven o'clock at night trying to try to clean and wash the dishes. Many people are doing that and thinking, why am I in this position again? You've got to back it up, get yourself prepared. You have to commit to it, you know why? Once you start, you will truly wonder what did I do without this? Then you're going to start feeling and seeing the body changes you're looking for and getting those results, there's no going back after you've learn these skills, you really can't unlearn them.

Jess Dang: There are two things in your book that I felt hit that point home where one of them was I think it was the OECD stat that you had to say about how many hours people spend on cooking and cleaning and everything. Two to three hours or one to two hours on Sunday does seem like a big chunk of time. But, I think when you think about how much more time it takes when you do it during the week and the stress. People just need to think about the stress they feel like five o'clock coming home from work.

Erin Romeo: What am I going to make, and I'm hungry and this is a pitfall for people that are trying to shed some fat, for example. This is going to be a pitfall when you're getting home and you're hungry and you're just grabbing anything that's in plain sight and often times that could be cookies or processed food or whatever it is. You're eating that or munching away because you're hungry while you're trying to get dinner ready. That also eliminates that tricky time of day.

Jess Dang: Exactly, I think that's so true. The other point you had in the book was I think you said like, I used to think I didn't have the time to meal prep and then after you started meal prepping. You realize you didn't have the time to not meal prep because it does save you so much time.

Erin Romeo: It does and you have to just try it and you'll believe it.

Jess Dang: I totally agree. Before we let you go, we love having our guests go through a rapid fire round. Are you game to join us for that Erin?

Erin Romeo: Sure.

Jess Dang: Your most important kitchen tool?

Erin Romeo: Kitchen scissors.

Jess Dang: That's really important for meal prep a great little shortcut to have.

Erin Romeo: It's awesome, especially for kids foods too real quick.

Jess Dang: Your go to breakfast?

Erin Romeo: Probably smoothie.

Jess Dang: You have 15 minutes to make a meal. What is it?

Erin Romeo: Some type of burrito. You can throw just about anything in bake in the oven, you're good to go.

Jess Dang: What's one meal you never get sick of?

Erin Romeo: It's got to be burritos, you can put anything in it.

Jess Dang: That's true and very easy to meal prep ahead of time. One ingredient you always have in your pantry?

Erin Romeo: Pantry, beans, any type of beans.

Jess Dang: Guilty pleasure, food or not?

Erin Romeo: Ice cream.

Jess Dang: Your favorite life optimization or organization app?

Erin Romeo: Anything. Google, Google docs. Google surveys. I use it with my clients. That's my best tool, even for my meal planning.

Jess Dang: Hardest thing you've done?

Erin Romeo: I had a baby.

Jess Dang: Proudest thing you've done?

Erin Romeo: Having a baby? Really being a mom is my number one joy. Publishing the book felt like a second birth, I need to say that fits in there too.

Jess Dang: Yes. Any kind of big project like that is like having a child. When I launched Cook Smarts. I call Cook Smarts, my first born.

Erin Romeo: Did you?

Jess Dang: Yeah. Last book you loved?

Erin Romeo: Actually, it's a book that I read to my daughter. It's called Dear Girl.

Jess Dang: Oh, I haven't heard of that one.

Erin Romeo: For me, School of Greatness by Lewis Howes is awesome. It's great for internal motivation.

Jess Dang: Oh, I got to check that one out. Last TV show you loved?

Erin Romeo: Oh my gosh. I don't watch TV.

Jess Dang: No wonder you have time to meal prep.

Erin Romeo: Exactly. I have a lot of people that say they're watching the Netflix shows or something like that while they prep, listening to your podcast is a great thing while you prep or listening to music. I'm not a TV person, I have to be honest.

Jess Dang: That's great. Is there a recent podcasts that you love that you want to share?

Erin Romeo: I have to say your podcast is awesome.

Jess Dang: Thanks.

Erin Romeo: So full of wealth and knowledge. I just thought of Jasmine Star. Do you know Jasmine star?

Jess Dang: Oh, I've heard of her, yeah.

Erin Romeo: She's crazy. High energy, fantastic. It's a little bit more business related. She's a business strategist but she brings the fun. There's lots of podcasts I love, but she's great.

Jess Dang: Oh, I'll have to check that one out.

Erin Romeo: Of course, Cook Smarts, it's on my list.

Jess Dang: Thank you. Erin, Thank you so much for sharing such practical meal prep tips with us. I know so many people are still in that New Year's resolution mindset and I know with your help they can make meal prepping a longterm lifestyle change. For those who want to learn even more from you, I highly recommend your book, the Visual Guide to Easy Meal, which I'm a proud owner of.

Erin Romeo: Thank you.

Jess Dang: Erin, Where else can our listeners continue to follow you for your practical real life meal prep tips?

Erin Romeo: Sure, if you just go to a foodprepprincess.com you can get started with a couple of things there. I have a couple of freebies there for you. If you have some mom listeners I should say, I do have an eight week nutrition course that I'm launching for moms, you can find details on my Instagram. I'm always talking about that. If you're going to come visit me, come and say hi on Instagram because I'm there all the time. I'd love to hear from you and just honestly have to say I admire all the greatness you're putting out there into the world.

Jess Dang: Thank you so much. I've just loved talking to you and I'm so excited.

Erin Romeo: Me too.

Jess Dang: For all of our listeners to get these tips and put them into action.

Erin Romeo: That's it, that's the key. Thank you so much Jess.

Jess Dang: You're welcome. I hope that you're now ready to make meal prepping and a regular habit in your life. Don't forget to head to foodprepprincess.com to grab Erin's freebie, the three things you need to do to start meal prepping. You can also find her book on Amazon and we'll make sure to link to that in the show notes as well. For me, after writing a meal plan service for almost seven years, I know that the members who are least stressed out in the kitchen or have the most success in sustaining home cooked meals are those who put in some prep work. We discussed in this episode meal prepping doesn't mean that you have to cook everything from start to finish, but even getting some stuff done, like some dressings made, some veggies chopped. Some meats marinated, your greens cooked, whatever you can accomplish in an hour or two hours, whatever time you have on a weekend will make such a difference in the weeknight dinner routine.

Jess Dang: Because I am such an advocate of this habit, we are going to be doing a meal prep challenge starting the week of February 10th, this is just in about two weeks time in our Cook Smarts Facebook group. I call it a challenge, but it's really just all of us as a community cheering each other on, sharing what we're doing, exchanging ideas and just having meal prep be a real focus for three weeks. I wanted to wait until after the New Year's resolution craziness when people are starting to fall off the wagon maybe a little bit. I think this challenge is just what folks will need to keep pushing ahead with their healthy habits. I'll also be identifying members who do meal prep regularly already and have them serve as mentors to all of those who are trying to make this change. So, if you're not a member of our Facebook group already, this is an exclusive benefit to our meal plan members.

Jess Dang: You can just easily grab your free trial on cooksmarts.com and then request to join the Facebook group. Before we say goodbye, I wanted to share an Apple podcast review from Sarah who is a teacher and a mom. "I've been a Cook Smarts subscriber for four plus years and cannot imagine my life without it at this point. Before Cook Smarts we ate pretty healthily but had the same cycle of standby meals we always made week after week. After kids, variety and time management in the kitchen became more of a priority but without sacrificing value, health or most importantly taste enter Cook Smarts. We subscribed before my first born was eating solid foods and now I have two happy, healthy, enthusiastic eaters. I'm so excited for this podcast. Jess, is the best kitchen cheerleader." Thank you Sarah. We love getting to be part of people's families and their dinner table.

Jess Dang: 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've got a colorful

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and functional Cook Smarts bag waiting for you. To contribute a review via Apple podcasts or a voicemail for a chance to win a \$100 Amazon gift card by Thursday, February 6th, the number again is (650) 386-0290 to text a screenshot of your Apple podcast review. Or just to leave a voicemail review. With that, 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.