

Jess Dang:

Hi there, you're listening to Episode #27 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.

Jess Dang:

Friends, it is the end of March. Seriously, how is that possible? Oh, gosh. I feel like 2020 just started and now Q1 is already over. In one month, my youngest, the baby, Charlie, she's going to be turning one. Still not sleeping through the night, so if anyone has suggestions I will take them because I am so sleep-deprived. Charlie started off as an amazing sleeper and was sleeping through the night on her own at two months, but then around the four or five-month mark she had a regression, we traveled, and she has not slept consistently through the night for the last seven months and it's been really taking a toll on me. So I am open to suggestions. Let me know.

Jess Dang:

You know, thinking back a year ago, I was super pregnant, preparing for baby #3. This podcast hadn't launched yet, and look at us now a year later! We're 26 episodes in and today, for our 27th episode, I have a real treat. At least it was a real treat for me because I got to talk about one of my favorite topics of all time, kitchen organization, with Sam Pregoner, the founder of SO Home, Simply Organized, a residential professional organization company based in the San Francisco Bay area. Sam is also a mom of three kids and her specialty is creating organizing solutions and systems for families, because it is so easy to just feel like you're drowning in stuff when you start having kids. She's been featured in lots of big publications like Redbook, Family Circle, Oprah.com, and is a field editor for Better Homes & Gardens. You can find her in all those places, but my favorite thing is just to look at her Instagram, which is @simplyorganized, because there are just so many great before and afters, and I could spend all day looking at organization projects.

Jess Dang:

I know a lot of you know that I'm a bit of a chronic organizer myself and I could only wish that I had Sam's skills, or at least the means to hire her, and have her finish all the many outstanding organization projects I have going on in our house right now. But the next best thing was to bring her on the podcast and get her tips for organizing the space I certainly spend the most time in at home: the kitchen. We had a pretty long chat, so this week I'm going to skip the Cook Smarts business and take you right there. So here's Sam, organizing extraordinaire.

Jess Dang:

Sam, I am so excited to have you on the podcast today to talk about my favorite subject of all time, organizing!

Samantha Pregoner:

Well thank you for having me on. I'm excited to talk to you about it!

Jess Dang:

Yes. Okay, so I'm someone who just loves the process of organizing, so much so that my two oldest kids, they play organizing by themselves because they see me organize so much. But you know, when they do it, it usually involves them making a bigger mess than actually organizing, but their hearts are in the right

place. So while the two of them and I are like pretend organizers, you are a professional one, and I'm just so interested to learn how you knew that that's what you wanted to do for a career. Were you someone that would see a space and immediately want to start making it better?

Samantha Pregoner:

I didn't always know that I wanted to be a professional organizer. I think that realization came when I was about 20. But I have always had a heart for helping people and listening to people, and I have a hobby of working with tools and fixing things and figuring things out and problem-solving issues, and that kind of all ties in together.

Samantha Pregoner:

It was around my third year of college that I knew I wanted to be a professional organizer, but I didn't know how to get started. So I focused my college career on counseling and I graduated with a degree in human services with a counseling emphasis. What I learned in college kind of molded more of that helping heart, and after I graduated I went into the nonprofit world for my first job and there was a lot of helping and organizing in the role that I had with that organization, which was a program director.

Samantha Pregoner:

And then ultimately I still knew that I wanted to be a professional organizer, but I was stuck on the "how do I get started?" And it wasn't until after the birth of my third and final child that I was really feeling like, "If I'm going to do this, I just kind of want to get started." I was seeing my oldest child at the time was five and starting school, and I knew that it would just go just as fast with our final child. And I wanted something that was mine and I really wanted to start building it.

Samantha Pregoner:

And I was obviously doing a lot of organizing and designing and home improvement projects in my own home, but I started to branch out a little bit and help some friends. And then one day, one of my friends told me that I should start a blog and I was like, "What? What's a blog?" And this was back in 2010, and starting that blog was what really sparked me finally being able to get started as an organizer, but for sure, I've always been a person that saw space differently, and I wanted to help people and I loved organizing. Everybody has that calling, everybody has that thing, and sometimes we ignore it and we go into a different path, but ultimately I just chased it down until I figured out how to finally get it started.

Jess Dang:

That's so interesting to me that you were saying, you know, your background in counseling and then your skill of listening is actually maybe what told you that you should be in organizing. Because I didn't think about it before but it is such a form of counseling for people because I think so many people, you know emotional baggage manifest in their stuff and their physical space, and having someone help them clear that and put it in, I don't know, a more zen way, I think really clearly does, it is such a therapeutic thing for folks.

Samantha Pregoner:

It really is. We can have a whole other podcast interview where we talk about the dynamics behind that. And I work for families so I'm not only working with the mom, I'm also working with the dad, and then

they come together, sometimes in a positive way, sometimes not in a positive way. A lot of stuff kind of comes to the surface. So for sure, I tap into that counseling background quite a bit. It's really helpful.

Jess Dang:

Yeah. So once you decided, you started this blog in 2010, you decided you were going to just go for it, how did you become a professional organizer? What kind of practice did you go through? Because I imagine with any skill, a lot of it just takes practice, and I'm sure some sort of certification and all of that.

Samantha Pregoner:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). So, to be honest, it's totally different now than when I was digging in and trying to get started. It seems like now, overnight, I'm seeing new organizing businesses pop up all the time. And I have to say, I think me and a few other key organizers in this career have kind of paved a little bit of that way through the Instagram community and that platform to help people realize you can follow that dream of becoming an organizer and start kind of marketing yourself that way.

Samantha Pregoner:

But honestly, to become a professional organizer, there isn't a certification. There's NAPO, which is our big professional organization that I'm a member of, and you can go through some of their certifications, but that's not going to make you an organizer. Really, to become an organizer, you have to just get started. I started the blog, and that kind of helped mold me a little bit and helped me niche down just a little bit more within the industry and find my sweet spot, but really what I did was, I just put myself out there and I took on as many projects as I could for a year and I did lots of different things, and I figured out where I didn't like organizing and what I did like organizing and who the people were and what the challenging spaces were.

Samantha Pregoner:

And ultimately I landed where I'm at, which is families, challenging spaces where families are in the accumulating phase of life, and so I deal with a lot of stuff. I find that that's where I fit the best. I'm able to use the tools, I'm able to troubleshoot, and tap into the things that come naturally to me. And it makes your job so much easier when you're not, for example, if I was going to organize for somebody who's in the empty-nester phase of life, I don't think I could really relate to that. I'm more focused on the kids, you know, we've got a lot of kids things, and moms that are stressed out and trying to figure out how to contain it all and keep it all organized and still be able to find it and still easily be able to put it away, too.

Samantha Pregoner:

So honestly, becoming an organizer, you just have to get started. And there are organizers who have a training program you can go through, there's a few of them. You can read good books, you know, there are some training programs I've seen online. I haven't done any of that, I've chosen to just stay in my own lane and stay true to what comes naturally to me.

Jess Dang:

I think that's great. I mean that's our philosophy, too, here at Cook Smarts where we talk about, you know, we are constantly trying to encourage people to meal plan or get these systems in place. But you can read our, we have lots of .pdf downloads and all these things you can read and watch videos, but

really, you just have to start doing it and seeing what works, what's not working, and tweaking. And I think, yeah, so much of any skill you build in life just clearly, you just have to practice. You have to just be in it.

Samantha Pregoner:

Right.

Jess Dang:

Well, speaking of that sort of philosophy of just getting started, when you are getting started with a client, do you have an overarching organization philosophy that you sort of start them with?

Samantha Pregoner:

I do. I mean, I definitely, over the years, I have a lot of philosophies, but the one at the top of the list is, less is always going to be more. And it is always going to be your best option in most cases. So, buying a bin or a shelving system or a container doesn't solve the organizing problem. There is a lot that needs to happen before that factor of pretty comes into play. You have to kind of take a step back and consider what is your overall space that is available to you, because we can't pull out more space from our sleeve. This isn't like, we can't make that magic trick happen. We need to know what are we containing in that space, and have we taken a hard look at the items to determine what we really want, you know, do we want to keep them. We need to talk about a system that's actually going to work and something that lines up with your habits and your tendencies so that it's easier to maintain and it's not more of like a burden or a struggle.

Samantha Pregoner:

So, my philosophy is always we're going to think about it, we're going to look at everything, we're going to plan it before we even start doing anything else. I also like, one of my philosophies is I like to edit the space as-is and try to make it better with just a few adjustments instead of investing in something that's expensive right off the bat. I don't like to waste anything and I also don't like to buy anything until we really need to. And if a system is complicated, it isn't going to work. So again, that's why "simply" is a part of the blog and the business name. It's because organization should just be very simple and it should be approached that way, and not complicated.

Jess Dang:

I love that philosophy because the best system is the one you're going to use, and clearly, like with people's lives, it needs to be a simple system. Otherwise, people are just not going to do it. I've never worked with a professional organizer, so I would love for you to walk me through your process. So it sounds like a lot of it at the beginning is just like the listening, like really assessing the space, listening to what the client needs. What are the different stages you take your clients through and especially it sounds like there's a bit of counseling involved.

Samantha Pregoner:

Yes, there's a lot of talking and figuring things out. But again, because I focused on one niche, it makes my job easy because I know this is my zone of genius and this is where I'm staying. And so a lot of the messaging I hear from family to family, it's kind of the weave is the same. So the process can look a little different depending on what we're doing, but in general, it starts out with them reaching out to me for

help and then figuring out if the project is a good fit for me and what I do, and if I'm a good fit for them. And again, being on board with my philosophy and the fact, you know, are we on budget? What's that? What's the timeline?

Samantha Pregoner:

And then I'll see the space, take measurements, I'll meet with them, talk about what their ultimate end goal is. But I'm also very quiet. That's the one thing I'm super... like, I like to walk into a space and take in the space and let it talk to me. So it's so great for me to walk into a home and kind of take in the feel and the energy, and I can take in so much without them even saying a word to me. Because all I have to do is look around and see where they drop things naturally, where things were placed, and I can find out their point of entry to the house quickly. Most of the time it's through the garage.

Samantha Pregoner:

So I'll take the time to meet with them, and then at that point, once I know what their end goal is, sometimes we just start with decluttering and organizing the space as-is. Sometimes we declutter and then I have to go home and do some design work and some product sourcing and then I come back later to organize the space. Sometimes it's a custom design, so if we're doing garage cabinets, new closet system, new or updated pantry shelving, it really depends on what it is. But for me, personally, in my business I offer a full service model where I just need the client with me during the decluttering process and then I take everything from there. Again, I can do that because I focus on one niche, and it's all families. And you kind of get to know how a home is set up. And again, based on their aesthetic, I'll always make it look like them and the system will always fall in line with their habits.

Samantha Pregoner:

But that's pretty much how it looks. I mean it's fun, it's easy, it's light. They always feel relieved and a burden off their shoulders when the space is organized and set up for total efficiency.

Jess Dang:

Yes. Efficiency, I love that word. That is a big word around here.

Samantha Pregoner:

Yeah. But a lot of the times the client isn't very involved, only with me understanding their end goal. And this would look a lot different, for example, I know organizers who only work in an office space and they're doing paper. In that, you're going to have way more client contact and you're going to be working through all that paper together. So that's how it looks for me.

Jess Dang:

So when working in a kitchen space for a family, what is usually the typical end goal for most families when they bring you on and be like, "Help! Clean up our kitchen space!"

Samantha Pregoner:

Right. Well, for sure, it's ease and function, you know, being able to find everything. But also, you know, making, again, you have to come in and take in the space. What is the available space we have? And where are you spending most of your time in the kitchen? I know I've seen in the past there's like that triangle in the kitchen, where there's that one little zone. You know nowadays, kitchens, and we work a

lot in kitchens that have been just remodeled, and I feel like that isn't so helpful anymore because kitchens are so spread out, at least in the East Bay where I'm at. People are renovating their kitchen and everything is spread out and so that triangle has widened and things are not being placed in the location they used to be. Garbage and recycling may be in a different section of the kitchen.

Samantha Pregoner:

So it's all about taking in your available space and then figuring out what makes the most sense to have in the kitchen versus in the pantry and maybe, you know, a lot of families have a shelf out in the garage where they keep lesser-used items, like holiday platters and things like that. Can things be relocated to kind of thin out the kitchen to give you more space for other things? But for sure, the main goal most of the time is, "I can't find everything, I can't get to it easily," and then also trying to help them figure out a system for easily putting it all away. Or when they get home from the market, having somewhere to put everything in the pantry so unpacking your groceries is easy and fast.

Jess Dang:

Yeah. That's so interesting. So much of it sounds just like work flow, like how does that, as the work you do in the kitchen, the dropping off of the groceries, unpacking everything. So what are some tips, or what are some of the things you really look for when assessing these work flows, or like helping people reorganize where they would put their prep tools but like move them somewhere else to make it so that when they are getting into that stage of cooking everything is within arms reach, for the most part?

Samantha Pregoner:

It's just taking in what space they have available and the stuff that they have, and then what is the end goal. It's really simple.

Jess Dang:

So how much of it do you think is, in the kitchen at least, decluttering versus just moving stuff around so it's in the right place?

Samantha Pregoner:

I think it's some of both. A lot of times I see duplicates. Duplicates can be removed. They don't need to be in that space. Let's pick the one can opener that works the best and get rid of the second one. There's always, in most kitchens, there's more than one of the same item. Or, something can be used to serve multiple purposes. For example, I can use the back of my knife to smack a garlic clove to get it opened; I don't necessarily need a fancy thing, I don't know what they're called, you know those little rubbery things that peel the garlic?

Jess Dang:

Oh, the little silicone tube thing?

Samantha Pregoner:

Yeah.

Jess Dang:

Yes, yes. I had one of those and I never used it and I was like, "This gadget is not working for me," yeah. And if it's like, it is hard, there's such the mentality of like, "I've bought this, I should keep it," and I feel like just helping people let go of things is, I think, probably a large challenge.

Samantha Pregenzer:

Yeah, I mean, it's a good conversation point. And again, I keep it light. I am not the organizer that pushes somebody to get rid of something. I already know at some point in the process they're going to get rid of a few things, which means we're going to gain space somewhere, that I will then have more space to use when I'm organizing them. But it's always a good conversation, and ultimately, because people have contacted me, they're motivated to make a change. That's already done, so we already know we're motivated. You have me here, we're working through it, so I already know I have your buy-in on getting rid of stuff because you're motivated to do it.

Samantha Pregenzer:

But it's just a conversation point, and again, they will get rid of stuff. It may not be the garlic silicone thing, but they will ultimately get rid of stuff. It's a conversation and it doesn't have to be so serious. The other thing, if you need it again later, you can always find it and repurchase it. So, getting rid of it now does not mean later on you may not want it back. But more often than not, you're probably not going to ever want it back again.

Jess Dang:

I totally agree with you on that. I find that every time I'm kind of like, "Oh, do I really want to get rid of this?" But once I do, I never miss it. I got rid of two slow cookers like two years ago when I got my Instant Pot and that really was hard because I had used them a lot and it was like, "Well, can I really replace these two things with this one single gadget?" But yeah, I've never had a time in the last two years where I've been like, "Man, I really miss those slow cookers. I wish I had them again." But if it came to that, I could easily get another one on Craig's List or Amazon.

Samantha Pregenzer:

That's right, that's right. I tell clients that all the time, especially when it comes to books. Let the library store your books for you. You can always find the book you need by going to the library. You don't need to have 500 books. I know some people love books and that's their thing, and I totally get that, but if we're cramped on space it's like, "Don't worry, you can always go find that Crock-Pot somewhere else." You can always go get it later. But let somebody else store it for you.

Jess Dang:

So, speaking of getting rid of stuff and spaces that are limited, the pantry, I feel like, is one of those spaces. Everyone feels like they don't have enough pantry space, or even if they do have enough pantry space their pantry is a total disaster. So one of the reasons I just really love your Instagram is because it doesn't feel unrealistic to me. When I look at some of the professionally like the photos from professional organizers, especially the pantry ones, I don't feel like they're real life. And I understand it's also Instagram, like everything has been just like, you know, prettied up. But I feel like when I see those pantry photos, a lot of them exclude pantry or fridge items to make it picture perfect. But with your photos, I'm really convinced this is someone's real pantry, it's not just a snapshot of only the perfectly uniform items. But everything still really looks neat.

Jess Dang:

So, how do you do that, like when you get to that pantry portion of the project, how do you just take stock of everything and then put it in a place where you reorganize it so that it looks good and it is actually usable and like a real person's pantry still? And don't tell them like, "Get rid of like these 50 things that are not going to make your pantry look nice"?

Samantha Pregoner:

Right, right. I have to say, of all the questions you asked, this one's like my favorite.

Jess Dang:

Oh, good.

Samantha Pregoner:

And that is such a compliment to me because I've heard it before, not just from you, but thank you so much because that really is like my ultimate goal is. I think social media has totally skewed our view into a lot of things, but also into organizing, and you do see those perfect Instagram images and you're like, "Huh? But what about...? Where's that thing? And where's that thing?" And I think, for sure, items have been removed to make them appear as airy as they do, and it makes me sad because I don't ever want a family or a mom to feel like that's the end goal or feel the pressure that they have to make it look that way and stay that way. Because we all know our homes are lived in and they should have that look and appearance.

Samantha Pregoner:

So, personally, how I organize a pantry is I would do in categories, and then you can use bins and things that somewhat conceal the more unsightly or un-uniformed items. That's what I do. So, everything is in there. The prettier items or the more symmetrical items would be outside of a bin, whereas everything else is just kind of in its own category, but in bins where you may not see it all. So, for example, all the different types of pasta boxes or different types of mixes like the packets for seasoning or things that would look messy or un-uniformed, I just put them in a basket that's either on brand to how the Simply Organized brand looks or something close to their own aesthetic. But everything's in there. We keep everything in the pantry.

Samantha Pregoner:

And then I also do a lot of space planning. So, the things that are like the top shelf of the pantry, we try to keep it entertaining items, vases, platters, stuff like that that's not heavy that can go up top. And then on the floor, we could put some heavier items or baskets that would organize like all the grocery bags or reusable shopping bags and stuff like that.

Jess Dang:

So, when you put things in bins, I love seeing everything like compartmentalize, how do you then help people remember where stuff is? Because I can see that also being a problem like oh when it's in a bin, things might just get lost or you forget like where you put the cans of this, like sardines, that type of thing, that type of challenge.

Samantha Pregoner:

It's labeling. So I'll either label the front of the bin or I'll label the shelf front. And I'll even label the shelf front if I think the family would be more prone to maintain it. For example, if all the cans could be in one area but I separate the cans by, "These are baking cans," like, "Here's the condensed milk," you know, that type of stuff, and I'll label the shelf front so that they know when they get home from the market this is where I'm going to take this so I'm going to put it there.

Jess Dang:

Got it.

Samantha Pregoner:

So it's labeling.

Jess Dang:

I think a challenge for a lot of people with their pantries is just inventorying all the stuff. So, like remembering that you have extra baking soda in your baking bin. Like, how do you help people just remember these things and not end up buying like four cans of baking soda that ends up then lost in the baking bin?

Samantha Pregoner:

So, for me, I would call that back stock, like extra items. And what I do is, I put them in bins. Again, closer to the top, like in an area of the pantry or an area in your kitchen cabinets that's not easily accessible, but you have to label the front so that you know. So you could either label it specifically so you know exactly what's in that bin, if that's going to help you. Or, if you're super organized, I know a lot of families and I know you, obviously you have a meal-planning business, using something like a Google Docs, and Evernote, something where you keep your recipes, your menu plans, maybe keeping a list in there of all of your extra items. That could also go for items that you may have out in the garage because a lot of families buy in bulk and some of their stuff is stored out in the garage on a shelf or in a cabinet.

Samantha Pregoner:

So, if that helps you, keeping something actually typed out. The one reason I love doing it digitally is because then, when you're at the grocery store or you're out and about, you know, "Oh, I already have that. I don't need to buy that."

Jess Dang:

Oh, that's such a great idea. Because I have a white board, just for my fridge for my spare freezer, like I have a spare fridge freezer in the garage, so when I buy chicken in bulk I write it on the white board. And I do consult it before I go grocery shopping, but it would be helpful for things like canned goods or something to have some like cloud inventory so that, yeah, when you are out, because I do find that I, even I do a lot where like, I think just the other day I bought my like third can of red curry paste and I was like, "Why can I not remember that I already have this?" Just like not doing the shopping before.

Jess Dang:

But yeah, that's so interesting. I never thought about like doing like a baked good bin of things that you're in the middle of using versus a back stock bin that is up a little higher or, like you said, in the

garage or somewhere else. But yeah, that's always a question we get. It's like people don't have either they just don't have enough pantry space and have to use all these random spots and don't remember how much that they have of the various things that they have bought extras of.

Samantha Pregoner:

Right. Yeah, I think it's really helpful. And it helps, just as an example in my business, whenever I have measurements for a client, all of those measurements go into either my Evernote or my Google Drive. And so if I'm out and about and I'm shopping for another client and I see something, I have those measurements with me and I'm never in a pinch. It's kind of the same idea. Just make it easy for yourself to access. And you can have Evernote on your phone; you don't need to be at your desktop typing this stuff out. You can just have it on your phone and go to your list, add it in, or remove items as you use them. It can be really helpful.

Jess Dang:

Yes. I wonder, I've never looked into this, I'm sure there's an app out there where you can basically just scan things, too, as you buy them to be like, "Scan this into my digital pantry," you know, in the cloud, so you always have access and know what you have and what you don't have.

Samantha Pregoner:

Well if there isn't an app, somebody hopefully hearing this, there you go. There's your job. Go for it.

Jess Dang:

Yes, every mom or head of household will be using that app, I'm sure.

Samantha Pregoner:

That's right, that's right.

Jess Dang:

So you mentioned, you know, space is finite, like there's no magical ability to create more space, but there are clearly different tools you can use to optimize your current space. So, do you have any things that you typically, you know, when you walk into someone's pantry, it's like you immediately know like if they have these extra things, these little organizing tools, we could really make more use of this space?

Samantha Pregoner:

I think, again, going back to we have to take a hard look first and find out what are your most used items, what can be stored somewhere else? That automatically is your #1 tool to give you more space and give you a big impact. Because a lot of the times, I come into a kitchen and I see, there is so much of it, I hear the story, "Oh, I only use that once a year," "Oh, I only use that during the summer," or, "Oh, I only use this in the winter." Well, we can remove those items. Also, the duplicate items, that's another, I just think again, getting back to simplifying it. That's your biggest tool.

Samantha Pregoner:

I think a lot of us have a junk drawer, and there's nothing wrong with that. But can we relocate it to another space where we're freeing up some room? I think some other great tools, like if you're looking for actual organizing tools for a kitchen, if we're organizing in a drawer, for example, I like the spring-

loaded drawer dividers as opposed to bins in a drawer because trying to compartmentalize items that may not fit into a bin or a container can be tough. But if you just add the drawer divider, and if you want I can send you a picture of one of those that you can add to your show notes or something, but it just divides the drawer and compartmentalizes it without having to have a bin for everything to fit perfectly into. So those are great.

Samantha Pregoner:

I love canned food risers where you're getting the cans kind of more organized where you can see them. And I love turntables, the little Lazy Susans, those are great for bottles of oils and vinegars and sprays, and those work in a pantry but also in a cabinet. On either side of your stove you can have those, so you can get all of them kind of bundled together in one group. And then you can just spin it to get to the things that you want and you're not having to like pull one out from the back and knock everything over.

Samantha Pregoner:

And then when possible, and of course if this works on your budget, pullout drawers for the bottom cabinets. A lot of homes that I work in, some of them are new and beautiful, but some of them are old Bay Area homes, and there's a lot of lower cabinets and it's really hard to get to the items in the back. And you can have pullout drawers installed, there's a few companies that I tap into. And it's quick, it's designed specifically for your space, they come out and measure and give you, you know, you can have them mounted as far apart as you want if you have like shorter items versus taller items. And pullout drawers help a lot to help you get to everything and nothing gets lost in the back.

Jess Dang:

Yeah. I think those are amazing. We did a kitchen renovation about three years ago and have a lot of pullout drawers in these spaces and it just makes such a huge difference. Before our renovation, when we moved into our house our drawers, our bottom cabinets, were just pits. There was not even a shelf and they were just like this huge box. And so we finally did bring someone in to get custom-made. It was not cheap, but it also wasn't so expensive when you thought about like the value they created and how much it really cleaned up that space and made it so much more usable, it was totally worth it. Yeah.

Samantha Pregoner:

It is worth it, it's so worth it.

Jess Dang:

I just think even if people live in an apartment, if you think you're going to be there for a while, it might just be worth getting that done. And there are some that are not custom that you can just buy off the shelf, too, if you have a very standard cabinet.

Samantha Pregoner:

Yeah, there is.

Jess Dang:

Yes. But those are totally, totally worth it. But I do encourage like I think when you mentioned about measuring, it is so important to measure. When we did our kitchen renovation, because one of my pullouts is all of my condiments, so oils, vinegars, I measured the tallest bottle I had and made sure that

that could clear the drawer above it, the pullout above it, because if you just assume like, "Oh, it will be fine," but if you are going to get into like where you're getting something custom done, it's worth doing all the measurements and making sure everything is at the levels that you need them so they can actually fit the stuff that you actually use.

Samantha Pregoner:

Right, right.

Jess Dang:

Okay, so our community was so excited that we were having a professional organizer on and I asked on Instagram Stories what kitchen organization questions they had for you, and I got a lot of responses and I'm not going to ask them all today or we'd be here forever. But it basically felt like there were just a couple of problem areas that a lot of people face with the kitchen, so I'd love your advice on how to manage these three that kept coming up time and time again.

Jess Dang:

So the first one was spices, and the second one is Tupperware, and then the third is kid items. So can you walk me through any tips you have about these three categories?

Samantha Pregoner:

These are, I mean, your community nailed it, these are three of the top most challenging. So these are great, these are totally relatable and I love them, I think I have some good answers for you.

Samantha Pregoner:

So, #1, spices. This is such a challenge, I know. I think you need to keep only those that you use all the time most accessible in your kitchen cabinet or a drawer for the ease of access. And I think all of your other spices can be stored up higher in a cabinet or even in your pantry. Or, if you have a pantry and you have a door to the pantry, one of those over-door organizers if you're the type who really loves spices and oils and adding things like that. I'm sure a lot of your community members have seen the alpha version of this from The Container Store.

Samantha Pregoner:

And there's also another great product for organizing spices that sets them up in a stadium-style setup, which is where all the little shelves line the perimeter of the cabinet and then you put all the spices in and then you can see them all, so it looks kind of like a stadium. And I can send you a link to share with your community, but it almost looks like spectators in a stadium if you can imagine that, but it's going to be all your spice bottles.

Jess Dang:

Oh, I've never heard of this one!

Samantha Pregoner:

You're going to open that door... Yeah! So that's a good way to do it if you're trying to make the most space and you love spices and you want them right there in that cabinet next to the cook top, that's a good product for organizing them.

Samantha Pregoner:

But I think one of the more important pieces for spice organization is that people buy them in all different sizes and either too large of a size from a bulk store or too small. And I think going back to the main philosophy I shared, which is how much space do you have, we can't magically make a cabinet bigger, but you can make your contents a little smaller or more capable of fitting. So, personally, what I would suggest is keep your main spices like salt and pepper, you can do that in a bigger container, but your other spices should all be purchased in smaller quantities and in more uniform sizes because that's going to help you with organizing them.

Samantha Pregoner:

And I don't say that because I mean for people to be wasteful or have to spend more money, really. Because if you're buying smaller I understand you may have to go out and buy it more frequently, but let's keep in mind it will always be fresher when you do it that way. And, more often than not, I'm throwing away spices that are expired. That is what happens, in my expertise. So I think keeping the jars similar in size is going to help you a lot.

Jess Dang:

Yes. And I think we've seen, so every month someone posts like, "I need help with my spice drawer!" And I've seen the people's responses for help is really just like they have, because some of them have invested in some new sort of storage, but a lot of the times folks just have bought, like, uniform cans and are just buying loose spices.

Samantha Pregoner:

Yeah. I'm going to lie, I'm not a huge fan of doing the whole decanting into the new jars. I kind of think that's wasteful. That's just me personally. Do I think it looks beautiful to have them all in uniform jars with beautiful handwriting on the side? Sure, it looks really great. But just buy the same brand. I always go for the same brand of spices every time. It's the same jar, it's round, it's not square. They do offer a square version, but I just have started investing in that brand and I just stick with it, and it keeps it uniform and it just makes for ease of organizing when you're not getting these big huge containers that you're never going to go through anyway.

Jess Dang:

Yes. No, that makes total sense.

Samantha Pregoner:

And then trying to make it all fit and look nice.

Jess Dang:

Yes. I think with all these challenges, you can't everything. So in my case, I just buy it loose and put it into the uniform cans that I have bought, but it does mean that I have to find a store that sells spices in bulk versus most stores. I just can't now walk into like a Safeway and get it in the cans because I've decided I'm going to go buy them in bulk so that they can fit in my nice uniform jars that I've purchased at The Container Store.

Samantha Pregoner:

Yeah. Okay, so for Tupperware. I think-

Jess Dang:

Yes, because that's another thing where, similar to spices, it's like you have stuff that's come in at all different sizes and you've bought different brands and now you're left with this huge pile of stuff that you don't know how to organize.

Samantha Pregoner:

Yes. So that is exactly the same thing. You need to invest in Tupperware that is all uniform so that they can nest together neatly. That is #1, is if you're buying one brand that looks like this and one brand that looks like that, and you're buying a round container and a square container and a rectangle container, that's when it's like, "Oh, okay, well my Tupperware drawer is a mess but it's because we just can't nest it neatly together."

Samantha Pregoner:

So I personally go with square or rectangle all the time because they fit nicely also in a fridge. Round containers tend to waste space so I always go with square or rectangle, which means they not only fit nicely in the fridge, but when they're clean and you want to put them away they nest together and they look nice. Also, I think putting them in a drawer, as opposed to putting them in a cabinet up high, is the best option. Or, if you have a pullout drawer in a lower cabinet, putting them all together in a pullout is a good idea.

Jess Dang:

Yeah. We have two dedicated pullout drawers right next to our fridge. That's our "putting away" zone. So we've got our Saran Wrap, masking tape, markers, all that stuff, so when we're ready to put dinner away into... we put our leftovers into Tupperware, it's all there in that "putting away" zone. Over like 20 years of buying Tupperware, we have so many different brands but I just try to nest shapes together, even the takeout containers. So it's like there's rectangular shapes but of like three different brands, or three, you know, some of them are takeout containers and we just try to stack them all up, so we just do it by size. And then I have a bin for the lids because like what to do with lids is also a big problem, like people want all the lids to go together, where I'm just like, "No, the lids just need to live in their own little bin," and I'm just going to find the right lid for each of the things.

Samantha Pregoner:

Yeah. Just do what works for you.

Jess Dang:

And so our last thing is kid items. So kid items, again, it's like, oh gosh, there's all these small parts and... oh, yeah, I mean, three kids who have like very three different needs of stuff and so, yeah, there's just a lot of kids stuff.

Samantha Pregoner:

Right. So these can be annoying and, like I remind my clients, those big bulky annoying toys that take up a lot of floor space, this is a short-lived season of life and it will pass and it will be gone in a blink of an eye. So just keep in mind that it's a short amount of time to deal with the frustration.

Samantha Pregoner:

But the way to organize them is to try to keep them contained to one drawer, or within a few baskets in a pantry. And again, going back to that simple tension-mounted, that spring-loaded drawer divided. Because often times, the kids items are all different shapes and sizes and the little plates and the bowls that have like the character shapes to them, they're all off-sized, so keeping it with those spring-loaded drawer dividers is going to help quite a bit. Or nesting them in baskets in the drawers is what I've found to be the most helpful for containing kids items.

Jess Dang:

And I really like your point that is it just a short season of life. I am so looking forward to in a few years of having, like I have two drawers for kids stuff. One is for the baby and the other one is for the older two. But in a few years, I'm going to get those two drawers back and I am so excited about that!

Samantha Pregoner:

I know, I know. It's exciting but I know it's sad, too.

Jess Dang:

Yes.

Samantha Pregoner:

Because I know you're going to miss it. So I know it's not always the best answer to give, because I get this question a lot, but trust me, it's going to be gone before you know it and you're going to kind of wish you had those little... I mean, I still have a couple of plates, even though my kids are way older now. They would never dream of eating off of those. But I just personally have a couple I keep in the kitchen.

Jess Dang:

Aww. That's so cute we keep ours as a bottom drawer so the older kids can get their own plates and stuff and that's made a huge difference where they can, like, it's easy access for them.

Samantha Pregoner:

Yeah. Yeah, it gives them some independence, makes them feel like they can do something to help themselves.

Jess Dang:

Yeah. But I will be sad when those little plastic cups and all their little cute little plates are gone completely.

Samantha Pregoner:

I know, I know.

Jess Dang:

And so, what are some of the small things that people can do today to make their kitchen space feel a bit more organized? I'd love you to leave us with some lasting tips you have, any kitchen organization

tools that create a great impact, or just anything else that you can send people off with to go do in their kitchen maybe today to make that space feel a little bit more organized.

Samantha Pregoner:

Sure. So again, I think, going back to that philosophy, just take a hard look at what is your available space and what do you most want to have in your kitchen? And take it slow. Go drawer by drawer, cabinet by cabinet. Take things out that you just don't use that often and also ask yourself the hard question, "Do I really need it? Do I really use it anymore? Can I pass it on? Can I donate it to somebody else? Can I relocate it to the garage shelving?" Also considering duplicate items. Try to remove the duplicate items.

Samantha Pregoner:

And then I think a big piece, especially for families, is that we tend to have a lot of paper, you know, the kitchen is where we live. And so we get a lot of stuff, paper and otherwise, that doesn't necessarily belong in a kitchen but it ends up in our kitchen and it takes up a lot of counter space. And maybe finding a better system for corralling everything to get it off the counter, there's something that makes you automatically feel better when you walk into your kitchen and your counter is cleared.

Samantha Pregoner:

So, for example, a great idea would be to get a basket that's large enough to contain everything from school papers to work papers to coupons, gift certificates, random little things that you need to access it, you need it to be there, but you don't need it taking up a drawer or sitting on top of the counter. Put it all in a basket and designate one day a week, or one day every other week, where you're going to go to that basket and you're going to flip through it. Is there anything that can be tossed? Did that field trip already happen and you don't need that paper anymore? Just getting yourself a system to clear off that counter clutter is going to make you feel great in an instant.

Samantha Pregoner:

And then putting items away that don't belong in the kitchen. There's a lot of random tools that creep in, or batteries, or other things. Find a different home for those items. That's going to help a lot. I think those are probably my most valuable tips to start feeling more organized today. Because doing that isn't going to cost you any money.

Jess Dang:

Yes. And it's like a system. I think people just need systems in place. Especially that paper one, that's a great one, and like every week, do it with your meal planning. When you're doing your meal planning, also go through that bin of stuff. Because that's my problem, it's like I just put the paper in a drawer and then I forget about it. Or it's like something I really don't, because the time has passed for it like that field trip or like picture day form that I just got yesterday that I'm like, "Oh gosh, I'm going to lose this or forget about it." But yeah, just clearing out that stuff I feel like is a huge-

Samantha Pregoner:

Yeah. And there's so many cute and stylish containers that you can do that with nowadays. There's so many cute baskets or filing boxes that actually look appealing and they can sit on a counter. But it means nothing is exploded all over your countertops.

Jess Dang:

Yes. Bins, just corralling things into bins makes a huge difference, you are so right.

Jess Dang:

So Sam, before we let you go, we have a rapid fire round that we always like to ask our guests. Do you mind doing that with us?

Samantha Pregoner:

So fun! Yes, let's do it.

Jess Dang:

Great, okay. Your most important kitchen tool.

Samantha Pregoner:

Knives and a good cutting board.

Jess Dang:

Your go-to breakfast.

Samantha Pregoner:

Oatmeal and egg whites.

Jess Dang:

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

Samantha Pregoner:

It will always be salad with grilled chicken or tuna.

Jess Dang:

What's one meal you never get sick of?

Samantha Pregoner:

I never get sick of a really good fish with vegetables and a salad.

Jess Dang:

Well you are a healthy lady!

Samantha Pregoner:

I love it. We just had that last night! I love it.

Jess Dang:

Oh, that's such a great... I think those types of meals where it's like it's basically it's just a formula. It's like a fish and a vegetable, that type of thing, you can make-

Samantha Pregoner:

So good.

Jess Dang:

There are so many possibilities with that. I think so many people need just the template and then you can go off and be creative with the template.

Samantha Pregoner:

I agree.

Jess Dang:

One ingredient you always have in your pantry.

Samantha Pregoner:

Vanilla extract.

Jess Dang:

Guilty pleasure food or not.

Samantha Pregoner:

Oh. So it's going to be my peppermint creamer. That is my guilty pleasure.

Jess Dang:

What do you put it in? Drinks?

Samantha Pregoner:

I put it in my coffee. I love coffee, so I guess coffee is kind of my guilty pleasure, but I have this creamer, it's a peppermint mocha creamer, and it's the one bad thing that I do every day.

Jess Dang:

Oh, that is not a bad thing. You enjoy your coffee with your peppermint creamer! Your favorite life optimization or organization app.

Samantha Pregoner:

My favorite app is Todoist.

Jess Dang:

Oh, I need to check that one out. Hardest thing you've done.

Samantha Pregoner:

Oh. So, I've done a lot of hard things, but I think one recent is when I gave a keynote speech.

Jess Dang:

This transcript was exported on Mar 19, 2020 - view latest version [here](#).

What was it for?

Samantha Pregonzer:

It was for the Professional Organizers in Canada conference. I am not a public speaker, it was hard.

Jess Dang:

Oh, I'm sure you did great. I would love to just be a fly on the wall at the Professional Organizing conference. I would just feel like these are my people, I would love to just hear the conversations.

Samantha Pregonzer:

You should come! I'm actually going to be speaking in the opening panel of our NAPO conference in April. You should come!

Jess Dang:

Oh my God, I would totally geek out at something like that!

Samantha Pregonzer:

Oh my God, yet again I'm going to have to speak in public and this is like, it's so hard to do it. It's one of the hardest things I have to do.

Jess Dang:

Well that is so great that you just make yourself do it, you know? That is great.

Jess Dang:

The proudest thing you've done.

Samantha Pregonzer:

The proudest thing, for sure, is being a great mom.

Jess Dang:

Last book you loved.

Samantha Pregonzer:

The last book I loved is called Unsubscribe and it's by Joselyn Gleib.

Jess Dang:

Oh, I have to check out that book.

Samantha Pregonzer:

It's a great book.

Jess Dang:

Is it nonfiction? Is it what it sounds like, unsubscribing from lots of things in life so that you can declutter?

Samantha Pregoner:

It's how to kill your email anxiety, avoid distractions, and get real work done.

Jess Dang:

I love productivity books. I will have to check that one out.

Jess Dang:

Last TV show you loved.

Samantha Pregoner:

So I have to admit, I do not watch TV.

Jess Dang:

That is amazing! You must have so much time! That's great.

Samantha Pregoner:

I just have too much energy. I have too much energy and I can't... like, as soon as I sit down and watch something, I am thinking of 20 things I could be doing. One of my goals, though, is to kind of start learning how to decompress more and just sit down and enjoy the time. But I love country music. So the last show that I did watch that I loved was the Country Music Awards. I was like, "I don't know if that counts," but it is the last time.

Jess Dang:

That counts.

Samantha Pregoner:

And I watched the Super Bowl this year because the 49ers were in it, so. And I loved the halftime show, I thought it was awesome.

Jess Dang:

Yes, those ladies can dance. Those ladies can dance, certainly.

Samantha Pregoner:

Yeah. So those were the last two shows that I watched that I loved.

Jess Dang:

That's great. Okay, so thank you so much for all the great tips today.

Samantha Pregoner:

You're welcome.

Jess Dang:

I hope that folks go into their kitchen and kind of see it with a new light with some of these tips and kind of your philosophy that you've offered. But before we sign off, can you tell everyone where they can continue to follow you for more great organization tips?

Samantha Pregoner:

Sure. Well, in real time, the easiest way to follow is on the Simply Organized Instagram feed and it's just @simplyorganized. And the other platform would be the blog, which is simplyorganized.me, and that's where the blog lives and that's where I talk more about organizing topics and we go in depth and I'm sharing a lot of portfolio projects, and we have a lot of fun over there.

Jess Dang:

Oh yeah, that blog is something I could spend all day reading. And just seeing your evolution is also just really fun, too.

Samantha Pregoner:

Yeah, so that's good. I mean I'm also on Facebook and Pinterest. I do have a YouTube channel and that is actually, I'm just starting now to work with a videographer so there's going to be some regular video content, which I'm really excited about. But that's going to take a little bit of time to get up and running.

Jess Dang:

Well, you let us know when that's up in running and we'll make sure to tell everybody about that.

Samantha Pregoner:

I will, thank you!

Jess Dang:

All right. Thank you so much, Sam. It was great chatting with you!

Samantha Pregoner:

You too! Thank you for having me on.

Jess Dang:

All right. So are you ready to take some of those tips and tackle some of those problem areas in your kitchen? I think if we take Sam's two really simple, straightforward steps of getting rid of duplicates and moving things we just don't use that often somewhere else, we will all discover a lot of space in our work area. If you're interested in some of the organizational items she discussed today like that stadium style spice rack, make sure to head to the show notes at cooksmarts.com/podcasts/27. I myself was inspired to organize my kitchen junk drawer after this episode. That drawer is like the place where I toss things like paperclips and rubber bands and random Ziploc baggies, and now it's very clean and organized and super tidy and I just feel so much happier every time I open it now.

Jess Dang:

And once your kitchen is organized, the next thing you need to organize is your meal planning system. If you use our meal plan service, it's pretty much done for you and it will ensure that you end up using all those items in your kitchen so much more. But if you're not a member yet, just head to cooksmarts.com and grab a free trial. For those who aren't members of the service, we just went live with two new e-books that you might be interested in as well. One is an e-book of spring meal plans, and the other is a completely updated meal plan toolkit that gives you the rules and process for how to start meal planning efficiently on your own. And I will make sure to link to those in the show notes as well, or you can just go onto our site and just search for "spring meal plans" or "meal plan toolkit e-book" and you will find it as well.

Jess Dang:

Okay, so before we say goodbye, I have a favor to ask. If you are a fan of this podcast and Cook Smarts, please head over to Apple Podcasts and leave us a review and some stars, and then share this episode with somebody who needs some organizational help. That's the best thing you can do to support our little show. And if you have additional questions about kitchen organization or meal planning or anything food or cooking related, just shoot me a text at (650) 386-0290.

Jess Dang:

Okay, we'll be back with a new episode in two weeks. But until then, 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.