

Jess Dang:

Hi there. You're listening to episode number 30, 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. So life in quarantine, yeah, so that's still happening. It's been over two months of shelter-in-place in California and I am so, so ready to get back to normal life, clearly in a safe way. My kids' preschool has reopened back up to essential workers and I love my kids and I really have enjoyed this time that I've gotten with them, it's been so special. But I was also seriously on Whole Foods' website looking for a job so that I could send them back to school as an essential worker and be like, "Hey, take my kids back." Plus I could really use that Whole Foods discount right about now because with everyone at home every day for all the meals, we are spending a lot of money on groceries these days.

Jess Dang:

So our shelter-in-place order is through the end of the month here in California or maybe that's just the Bay Area, I don't even know, I can't keep track of like what's what between our county versus the state. And I honestly, do think some parts of normal life will resume, fingers crossed. I do think the daycares and preschools will reopen with lots of new rules though I am very curious as to what social distancing for a group of three year olds will actually look like. But I know that so much of our previous life will not be around for a while, especially when it concerns food.

Jess Dang:

I really am looking forward to the day that we can all gather with friends at a restaurant again or when grocery shopping is no longer an anxiety filled experience. But because of that, I'm sorry to report that we're still going to be cooking at home for a while with hopefully, some breaks of takeout sprinkled in here and there.

Jess Dang:

So I know that life at home has been turned upside down for everyone. So I thought today we would check in with one of my favorite Cook Smarts Community Members, a true kitchen hero, Gabrielle Smith. Gabrielle is the kind of customer that business owners just dream of. She's one of the most helpful members in our Facebook group. She just so generously offers tips and suggestions when others need it and routinely shares, not only photos of her meals, but the comics of the food critics she cooks for. During the time she's been a part of our community I can also tell what an incredibly organized, process-based person she is and those skills have come in very handy during this pandemic. In our chat, she shares with us how she's had to adapt her weekly meal planning and grocery shopping process to accommodate all of this whole, entire new normal.

Jess Dang:

She also shares some tips for eating more meatless meals. She's not a vegetarian, but she tries to eat meatless when she can. And she also just shares just so much great life and mom wisdom. We chatted the day before Mother's Day and it was such a delight to not only talk to one of our most devoted members, but a real life mom who's going through all the real life challenges right now. So let's get to it. Here is Gabrielle.

Jess Dang:

Gabrielle, welcome to the podcast. I'm so excited for our chat today.

Gabrielle Smith:

Thank you. I'm so glad to be here.

Jess Dang:

So we haven't had a member on this entire year, but with everything going on with the Coronavirus, I knew we just had to bring a member on to show us how we can still make it work in the kitchen, even with all the new challenges and constraints that have been put on us. And I immediately thought of you because from your Facebook posts I've just seen just how capable you are, how you can just roll with it. You really are one of my Kitchen Heroes. So before we dive into all of your wisdom, I would just love for you to introduce yourself to our listeners. Tell us where you live, who you feed, and what you do.

Gabrielle Smith:

Okay, well, I'm Gabrielle and I live in Fort Worth, Texas, which is a little bit west of Dallas, Texas for those who aren't necessarily familiar with Texas. I feed myself of course, my husband, Ramon, my seven year old son RJ. I have to think because they both just had birthdays, and my four year old daughter, Isabelle. Work-wise, I'm an attorney but not the litigation type. I do a lot of writing, so I write and edit a lot of documents, which is perfect for me because I love to write.

Jess Dang:

That's great. And do you work from home normally or you used to go into office but now we're all working from home?

Gabrielle Smith:

I work from home about 80%, I only go to the office once a week typically. So even before all of this started, I'm pretty much home-based.

Jess Dang:

That's great. Before you probably didn't have your kids and your husband home all the time, so I'd love to know-

Gabrielle Smith:

Exactly.

Jess Dang:

Yes, it's different working from home without anybody there. So I'd love to know what life has been like for you guys under quarantine. What's been the hardest thing and what's been good about it if there has been anything good about it?

Gabrielle Smith:

The hardest thing has just been like you said, the fact that we're all here at the same time sharing the same space. So just trying to navigate, everybody has their kind of place where they need to work or which devices they need to use and what times people need to work because some things are time sensitive or have to be done at a specific time and then some things are not. So I think the first probably month or so just trying to get into some type of rhythm with all of that was the most challenging. But

probably by April I think we had settled into the fact that, "Okay, this is kind of the new normal. We're just going to roll with it." And since April it's been a little better.

Jess Dang:

That's great. I mean, the fact that, like you said, you can just roll with it. I mean, it's just been hard. I mean, even I think I've gotten to point where like, "I'm going to roll with it," But every day at the end of the day I'm like, "Oh my gosh." I just collapse exhausted because there's just so much, the day just flies by for me I don't know if it does for you, but it's-

Gabrielle Smith:

It does.

Jess Dang:

Yeah. I think when you're trying to jam at work and just helping the kids with something and just entertaining them. It's like, "Oh my gosh, I cannot believe it's the end of the day and I feel like I didn't get anything done but yet I'm so tired."

Gabrielle Smith:

You feel like you've got everything done and nothing done at the same time. I would say, I guess to answer the other part of your question, I think the good part of it has been those moments that you would not otherwise have. Like those stolen away lunch moments when we all get to have lunch together, that rarely happened except like on a weekend. But sometimes it does happen that all of our schedules kind of collide and we get to have lunch during the week. So that's kind of nice. And just stealing away those family walks where we just kind of walk through the neighborhood and we go feed the ducks and things like that. So that part has been good.

Jess Dang:

Yeah, I totally agree. I don't know what there would have been anything in this world that would have forced me to be at home with my kids for this amount of time, right? So it's great to have this opportunity. My kids are also really young and so it's really nice to have this time with them now because I feel like they just grow up so fast.

Gabrielle Smith:

I agree with that statement definitely.

Jess Dang:

Well, so there's been all these additional lunches and stuff, so clearly you've had to do some meal planning to figure out how to feed everybody multiple times a day since everyone is home. So I just like to just kind of do a little rewind and learn about when you started the habit of meal planning and how you've refined your process over the years you've been doing it because I'm guessing, well, before Cook Smarts, you already had a process in place for meal planning.

Gabrielle Smith:

I did, but it wasn't as, I guess, detailed as it is now. Even when I was a kid on Saturday morning, my mom and I would go to the grocery store and get what we needed for the week and we always had a list and

that was just kind of what we did. So I've always kind of shopped by the week, but I would say that sometimes things would get bad or go to waste and things like that. And over the years as you have your meals that you make you kind of figure some of that out. But also along the way I also got married and I had kids and so those things also add additional variables into the equation. I guess a defining moment would probably be when my son, when he was about 15 months old, we had him tested for allergies because he kept having ear infections. And so when he got tested he came back positive for wheat, yeast and eggs.

Jess Dang:

I didn't know that. Is he still allergic to all those things?

Gabrielle Smith:

Yes. He is not thank goodness-

Jess Dang:

Okay.

Gabrielle Smith:

... but for that period of time until he turned five when we had him retested and then he tested negative for all of those things and we were rejoicing because it's a lot to have to deal with. But that was probably when I started doing more planning and so I had to pretty much plan all of his meals, I had to make his food and send it to daycare with him and everything because those are quite a few restrictions. So it has to be very detailed because of all of those different allergies and those things are in everything. Because he was so small too, kids, there are only certain things that they would eat. So a lot of times they can be kind of picky and things. That's probably about when I started doing more planning and prepping mostly for him. We still kind of followed the week at a time shopping theme but his meals kind of required a little bit more planning, if that makes sense.

Jess Dang:

Yeah. And I find that that happens to so many parents where it's like really, having kids clearly is already a big life change. I've talked to so many parents who are like, "I was totally fine eating cereal for dinner, but then I had a kid and realized I didn't want us to be serving them cereal every night."

Gabrielle Smith:

Right.

Jess Dang:

That's when people really kind of get into this, "I need to change up my current process for how I'm planning meals and how I'm feeding the family." But when you add a food allergy on top of things, that's really stressful, but it also is such a great forcing function to be like, "Okay, now I have to get serious about this and really think through the process of it." Because you are having serious implications if you don't do it. And it's really hard to fly by the seat of your pants with allergies.

Gabrielle Smith:

Right.

Jess Dang:

Yes.

Gabrielle Smith:

Exactly.

Jess Dang:

You can't just wing it. You guys seems like type of folks that were already eating in mostly, and so you've really planned out your meals and then the addition of adding his meals and getting the grocery list written down and all of that. But it just sound like as you did it you just get used to it, right?

Gabrielle Smith:

Right. And even when we did eat out, there were only certain places we were comfortable eating out. So we had our standby favorites and it kind of made food a little boring now that I look back on it because it was really hard to think through all of that too because I would tend to just fall back on the same maybe three or four weeks of meals planned out and I had stuff saved on my computer. I had checklists for the stores that we shop at the most often. And I just kind of went with that because both my husband and I both work full time. We had our son and then I also had my daughter along the way too. So the time to be creative was just not really there so to speak.

Jess Dang:

Yeah. And that is totally okay. I think when people tell me about their meal planning challenges, they feel like they need to be doing better. And I was like, "If you have a process and you have dinner on the table, that's all you need to be doing." And I do feel it sounds like, especially with the allergies rotating through those same couple of... If you have, you said, three to four weeks, I think that's great. A lot of people don't even have the three to four weeks. So I feel like having three to four weeks gives you enough variety and minimizes the energy, the mental energy, you need to put into it.

Gabrielle Smith:

Right.

Jess Dang:

And so it sounds like you guys had a couple of weeks worth of meal plans or maybe your recipes lined up, recipes that were okay for your son. Did you guys make separate meals for him? For dinner, at least? I know for lunch he had his own meals, but for dinner did you also try to accommodate for his allergies during those couple of years?

Gabrielle Smith:

We normally just kind of ate what he ate most of the time. Sometimes if there was something that we knew that he liked or if there was something that we wanted, like if we wanted to go out somewhere to eat as parents and have something we would enjoy, then we would either bring something along for him or feed him before. So that's kind of how we handled that.

Jess Dang:

So I'm really curious that the allergies disappeared. I know that happens with a lot of kids, but during those years where he was allergic to these things, were you still introducing them, like you still offering small amounts or did it just kind of disappear on its own even without kind of micro dosing of it?

Gabrielle Smith:

Yeah, we didn't. We just kept those things out as best as we could. And early on we tried to reintroduce about at six months but we could already see that he was having those symptoms and things again and we just stopped. It was actually our pediatrician that recommended that he get retested when he was five. And we were like, "Okay, if you say so." And I mean, he got retested and that was that. So he's all good now.

Jess Dang:

What was that change like for you? I feel like that must have been just a huge mental burden lifted off of you to go from, "I can't cook with all these things that are in so many things." To like, "Now I can cook anything again."

Gabrielle Smith:

Right. It was like a huge weight lifted off of me so to speak, because I'm primarily the one that prepares the meals and everything in our house. So I was packing up their lunch and sending it every day. It's like the ability to just send them to preschool and not have to pack his food it probably saved me like 20 to 30 minutes in the morning or the night before. Especially, for him socially too like when he would go to birthday parties and things like that, he didn't have to be left out. He could eat all the stuff that all the other kids were eating. So it was a big deal for him too.

Jess Dang:

Yeah, I've thought about that a lot for little kids where, especially with wheat and egg allergies, going to a birthday party, especially when you're young and trying to explain to them you can't have the cake that everybody else is eating.

Gabrielle Smith:

Right.

Jess Dang:

That's hard.

Gabrielle Smith:

Yeah.

Jess Dang:

So you have just seriously impressed me with how you've really stepped up your planning process during the pandemic, everything you've shared in our Facebook group, I'm like, "How does Gabrielle do this?" So can you tell me what the biggest challenges have been during this time and how you've had to adapt, switch from how you would normally meal plan to basically quarantined meal planning?

Gabrielle Smith:

I think just piggybacking off something you mentioned earlier about everybody being here all the time. Well, that means everybody also needs to eat here all the time, right? And so since I still have my own work to do myself and everybody has different schedules. To me, meal planning and prepping has kind of been a lifesaver during this time because I can plan ahead, I can cook something ahead and then I don't have to worry about when everybody eats. Everybody doesn't have to necessarily sit down and eat at the same time every day. The food is there, it's ready. If I'm in the middle of something sensitive for work or critical or if I'm trying to wrap something up nobody necessarily needs me to do it since I prepare most of the meals.

Gabrielle Smith:

I guess the biggest challenges though have been kind of blocking out the time and getting past the roadblock that it has to be at a specific time because I like to schedule my week out and I like to say, "Well, I'm going to do this on this day at this time." Well, that's not always feasible under these conditions. So I have now said, "At some point on the weekend I'm going to take three hours to get as much meal prepping done as I can." And so that's kind of the way that I've approached that piece of it.

Gabrielle Smith:

And then I would say the second thing in terms of challenges would be just dealing with the fact that I don't do a lot of going in the store, in grocery shopping myself. I do store pick up. And so a lot of times, these days especially, there may be shortages of things or things may not be available. And so kind of navigating and dealing with the fact that somethings might not be available that fit within the plan. So adjusting to that has just been adding a few more meals on that require just kind of shelf stable ingredients so that in the event that this meal that I plan to have on this day, I don't have all the ingredients for it. I know that I have these two or three things in my back pocket that I can whip out and we'll still be able to eat.

Jess Dang:

Yeah, I think that's so important right now. It's just to have a backup plan, right? Because there's been so many surprises during this pandemic. And clearly, I know it's been really frustrating for folks. People don't get pickup times that they want or delivery times, and then not getting the exact ingredients, but yeah, we just have, it's important to adapt and have a backup plan because nothing is really going as we expected right now.

Gabrielle Smith:

Exactly.

Jess Dang:

I know meal prepping, I know you said it's been a little bit harder to find that in your schedule, but it is so great that before this you had it on your schedule. So I think for folks you just have to schedule it in, right? If the time is on your calendar, you will make time for it but if it's more just like, "Oh I'll try to meal prep this week." And you're not as motivated to do it or you don't have that sort of accountability that it's like a calendar event type of thing. So are you meal planning for weeks at a time and doing grocery pickup for a week's worth of groceries or more than that? How is that process working?

Gabrielle Smith:

What I do is I plan for two weeks and the first week I will order everything that I need for that week and I'll try to order all of the proteins that I need for the next week. Because normally, it's the proteins that are not in stock. If I need shrimp or if I need fish or whatever because I can just throw that stuff in the freezer, it's going to be fine there. And then the following week I just do the produce and the fill ins for the stuff for that week. And then if there were any proteins missing, I'll try again. And normally, I'll hit that mistake a week.

Jess Dang:

That's really smart. Just to go ahead and maybe get it in there just in case and fill in with the second week for anything that didn't happen. Have you, on the second order, like you haven't quite gotten everything you needed. Have you had that happen?

Gabrielle Smith:

I had that happen maybe once. And I guess that's when at that point, either my husband will run into a store that's a lot less busy that we've noticed that tends to have whatever it is that we can't get at the first store. Or I'll just fall back on one of those tried and true meals that I know everybody's going to eat like lentil tacos or sweet potato quinoa chili, everybody eats that whenever and we always have things on hand to make those. So I will fit those in if need be.

Jess Dang:

Yeah. And I really think that people need those meals even outside of a pandemic, right? That's like a good strategy to have. Those couple of standby back pocket meals that the whole family can enjoy, that you have usually the ingredients for anyways, and they don't take long to get to the table. That's a good shortlist that everybody should have whether we're dealing a pandemic or not.

Gabrielle Smith:

I definitely agree with that because it takes some of the stress off too because you're not floundering around. It's like, "Well, if my plan doesn't work out then we're going eat."

Jess Dang:

Yes. So it sounds like you're planning for two weeks and still doing kind of two grocery orders, so you're not having to really consider too much about produce, right? Because I know of some people that try to shop for like two weeks of produce at a time and then they really like to think about spoiling produce for second week. So they have to make sure that their meal plan contains a lot of less perishable goods that second week.

Gabrielle Smith:

Right. I tried it in April and it went okay doing the whole, the first two weeks in April I literally did place a pickup order for everything that we needed for the first two weeks. It was okay but I guess if you're going to do it, the items that last the longest, like your cabbage or your potatoes and things like that, save those for the second week rather than the first in terms of whatever meals you try to fit in. Like the first week out the meals were kind of produce-heavy and then the second week more freezer and more long-life produce kind of meal emphasis, I guess, if that makes sense.

Jess Dang:

Yeah and that's exactly what we're telling people do. Planning for two weeks and also buying for two weeks is exactly saving the freezer broccoli for the second week or the cabbage or the beets or sweet potatoes, all that stuff will be still fine on week two. But your lettuces or anything more fragile enjoy it that first week because if you try to stretch it to the second week it will not be good anymore.

Gabrielle Smith:

Right. Living lettuce though, I found-

Jess Dang:

Oh, Living lettuce. I hadn't thought about that.

Gabrielle Smith:

... it lasts a while because that was one of the things that was still hanging around like three weeks later. I was like, "Why is this still in here and it's fine." But yeah, the Living lettuce, it'll hang around.

Jess Dang:

Oh, I mean, I guess it's still in its nutrients sort of-

Gabrielle Smith:

Right.

Jess Dang:

Yeah. Oh that's really smart I haven't thought about that. We'll have to share that tip. And so where do you grocery shop, seems like everything mostly from one store. Has it been the case even before the pandemic?

Gabrielle Smith:

Well, there were a few weeks that were a little off, but we pick up most of our items at Kroger.

Jess Dang:

Oh, that's amazing. Yeah. I really want to get my shopping down to one store and I have been in this quarantine, but unlike before, on a normal week, I always end up to at least two stores. I think I get really bogged down by the economics. I'm like, "I can get this cheaper at Costco, so I should."

Gabrielle Smith:

Yeah, I agree with that. I used to do Kroger and Aldi, but because Kroger has the pickup service and I guess I've gotten accustomed to it too and I kind of know what's available, and what's not, and what they kind of substitute and don't. So I was already comfortable with that before all of this started because I was kind of doing it anyway.

Jess Dang:

Yeah, you had your system down. So it's like, that's great that you've been able to kind of really continue on with it just because, if you have a system in place beforehand and you're not just panicked by the fact that things just are different now. You can pretty much kind of keep going right now with what we

had before and I know that... I've just been really impressed that you are one of our members who cooks the vegetarian versions of our meals and it makes me so happy to see that because I feel like then you people are taking full advantage of the range of options that Cook Smarts offers.

Jess Dang:

I think because you have that flexibility that you've cooked some vegetarian meals already, these potential meat shortages that have been happening because we had panic buying in the beginning where a lot of the, chicken was definitely cleared out. So how have you-

Gabrielle Smith:

Sold out.

Jess Dang:

Yeah, so it seems like you've just made that transition so easily because that was not something that you had to panic about because it was already part of your system already and doing a lot of meatless meals.

Gabrielle Smith:

Right. Well, me personally, I guess I'm kind of, sort of flexitarian. So I try to only eat meat once a day, most days. I mean, some days I don't eat any meat at all. So I guess the thing about Cook Smarts like you said that's so nice is that I can have the same meal and you've already done all of the work of transforming that meal into a vegetarian meal or a paleo meal and all I have to do is click and it's there. So I can look it over and I can say, "Oh, this is something that I can eat." Or, "This is something that everybody might eat."

Jess Dang:

Yeah.

Gabrielle Smith:

So when I see something that everyone can eat I just incorporate it in. I'm like, I think a few weeks back we had, what was it? The lentil quesadillas but everyone loved those. So I was able to meet my personal preferences and then feed everybody else too. And so that's definitely a win-win when I'm able to do that.

Jess Dang:

Yeah. So I'd love to talk more about that because it is hard feeding a household when people have different preferences, different diet needs. My husband's pescatarian, so we do a lot of vegetarian meals out here too. But everyone's still has different preferences, especially with kids around. So when did you start eating more vegan and vegetarian meals, what prompted you to do that and how did you get your family on board?

Gabrielle Smith:

Last year, I just try to be more, I guess, conscious of the things that I'm eating. I mean, because we eat at home, I think our meals probably turn healthier than other meals anyway, by just looking more closely at like, "How much fat is in this?" Or, "Am I getting enough protein?" Because I like to strength train at

home. Nothing crazy, I'm not a bodybuilder or anything, but it's one of my things that I do for stress relief and just something that I enjoy.

Gabrielle Smith:

So when I started breaking that down and also going to the doctor and the doctor saying, "Oh, you probably ought to look at your diet a little bit more based on these numbers I'm seeing." So last year was kind of really when I started keeping an eye on that and I was like, "Well, maybe I should start thinking about excluding meat because that's where a lot of this stuff that I need to be looking at, based on what my doctor is telling me, it's kind of coming from there." And I can't exclude it totally because I did that and I came back with some other issues but I think just by doing it once a day and keeping breakfast and lunch as close to vegan as I can has been working for me. It's been about a year.

Jess Dang:

And then how did your family respond? Were you making separate meals for yourself for a while, especially for breakfast and lunch? And then how did you figure out what they would enjoy that could appeal to everybody?

Gabrielle Smith:

I did and last summer was when I really started being more, I guess, not necessarily strict with myself, but just trying to be more intentional about the gym most of the days and meat only at dinner. And I did prepare my own meals initially and most of the time I would use a Cook Smarts meal because I was already using the meal plans anyway for dinners and I would just add a vegetarian option or two for myself for lunch. And then I almost eat the same thing every morning for breakfast. So there weren't too many changes for breakfast.

Gabrielle Smith:

And then I would try a few things and then I would say to myself, "Is this something I like?" Because I love salad and soup, my husband doesn't, my kids aren't necessarily fans of them either. So if I see salad and soup in a meal plan, I will make it, but for myself for lunch, and then I will add something else that they will like for dinner to kind of round the plan out for the week.

Jess Dang:

Oh, that's so smart. Okay. That makes so much sense that, yes, you can still get what you want and then figure out something that the family will also eat. So are there meals that you see sometimes whether it's Cook Smarts or outside that you're like, "Oh that looks interesting." And you're not sure if the family will eat it. Do you make it anyways? How do you kind of consider potential, I'm sure your kids are not picky eaters, but they have preferences, kids have lots of preferences-

Gabrielle Smith:

They do.

Jess Dang:

... and opinions on things.

Gabrielle Smith:

They definitely do.

Jess Dang:

How do you think about introducing new things but also make sure that they have something to eat?

Gabrielle Smith:

My strategy for that I guess is kind of two fold. I really don't try to force anything on them that I know they're not going to eat. Like I said, I'm pretty much the only person in my house that eats salad. I just don't make them eat salad. It's just not worth the trouble. But like I mentioned earlier, the lentil quesadillas, because I was like, "Well, they like lentils, they like cheese, we'll try this." Everybody likes chili. So there's chili, they like chili, you can add that and it's got cheese and chips. They like chips. Well, I don't have to eat that part of it and I will add avocado to my chili and that's fine for me.

Gabrielle Smith:

So I kind of look at meals that are close to things that I know that we like. Since we're in Texas, anything that kind of has a Tex-make feel to it, they'll try. And some soups and stews they'll try. They'll eat a Curry sometimes. So just kind of keeping in mind things that I know that they like that have a meat in them. And then if I see a vegetarian counterpart I'll just throw it in there. And my kids always know that if they don't like something, there are always beans and rice in the refrigerator, so they don't starve.

Jess Dang:

Oh, that's the backup meal. So do you make a pot of beans and rice every week?

Gabrielle Smith:

I make a pot in the crock-pot, I'll leave them either Saturday night or Sunday night. I just leave them in the crock-pot overnight for six hours.

Jess Dang:

Yeah, I would love-

Gabrielle Smith:

That's the backup.

Jess Dang:

That is a great backup to have. Because that's still a healthy meal and it's not like you can have cookies if you didn't eat the dinner or something, I don't know. Not that there's anything wrong with eating cookies right now because my kids and I have eaten a lot of cookies during this quarantine.

Gabrielle Smith:

Right.

Jess Dang:

Yeah.

Gabrielle Smith:

Cookies, fruit snacks, all of that.

Jess Dang:

So I know right now people are feeling nervous about potential meat shortages or the fact that they're already having, we've been going through meat shortages, but now I think they're more related to things that we cannot help in the sense of like there's systemic problems with the meat packing plants. So for those nervous about meals without meat, what are some of your tips for easing into it because I'm sure you had a transition to, for someone that had meat at most meals to just only having meat every once in a while or just once a day.

Gabrielle Smith:

Right. I would say it doesn't necessarily have to be all or nothing, just kind of to get over that mental hurdle that, "Oh I have to eliminate meat altogether." And maybe start off with things that maybe have less meat, like a chili can have beans and meat in it or even the, I guess Chimichangas from a couple of weeks back. They had chicken and beans. So maybe you can start there or maybe you can just eliminate meat at one meal or maybe even just for one meal on one day.

Gabrielle Smith:

I don't think it's to the point where right now if you start now, at least, it's an all or nothing thing. And the other thing I would add to that is there's probably already a meatless protein that you eat that you enjoy. So I would say find a few recipes that kind of build off of that and start there.

Jess Dang:

Totally.

Gabrielle Smith:

As opposed to just picking up this tofu when you've never had tofu ever in your life and feeling intimidated by the fact that you've got to get something on the table that tastes good with this tofu.

Jess Dang:

Yes. Exactly.

Gabrielle Smith:

If you like black beans, maybe you try a black bean and rice bowl with avocado instead of cheese and add some cilantro, make your own sauce at home, those types of things. Take an ingredient that you probably already eat anyway and just leave out the meat. And you figure out that it can still taste good, and also expanding the spice rack for sure.

Jess Dang:

Oh, definitely. Adding that flavor elsewhere.

Gabrielle Smith:

Right. Anything can taste good if you know how to season it. There are spices out there that if you can get beyond the salt and pepper you'd be surprised at how good some vegetarian and vegan meal options can be, I think.

Jess Dang:

Yeah, I totally agree. And I don't think we're going to go from, "There was meat at the grocery store." And be like, "There's no meat at all." You said things like chili where you could reduce, you can stretch your chicken out a little bit more if you're able to get some chicken over a couple-

Gabrielle Smith:

Exactly.

Jess Dang:

... of a few meals and then adding other things like beans. We eat a lot of those plant-based meats and I know there's a little of some controversy like, "Well, those are kind of processed foods." But they are really great to have on hand for substitutes if you want to, like for us sometimes my kids eat these chicken nuggets that are basically like tofu nuggets and they taste just like chicken nuggets. That's amazing.

Gabrielle Smith:

Oh wow. I don't really do a lot of meat substitutes, but we do sometimes. There's a few meals that we like that have plant-based sausage in them, kidney bean-

Jess Dang:

We have like a gumbo.

Gabrielle Smith:

Yeah, it's one of your meals.

Jess Dang:

That's the gumbo?

Gabrielle Smith:

There's the gumbo too, the gumbo is awesome. But I was thinking about the one that, it was the week that there were mussels. It has sweet potatoes and I'm actually supposed to make it next week. It has sweet potatoes, it has a plant-based sausage. It might even have some zucchini in it.

Jess Dang:

I think it does have zucchini. It does, yes. Sometimes it's like one of those specials like it doesn't really make sense in there, but we're like-

Gabrielle Smith:

Right.

Jess Dang:

"But zucchini is such a good innocuous vegetable that we wanted to add a green vegetable." And it's like cauliflower these days where it can masquerade into as anything.

Gabrielle Smith:

Right.

Jess Dang:

So yeah, sometimes you'll see zucchini in things you're probably like, "Why is there a zucchini in here?" But it's like, "Well, we needed a green vegetable and it just absorbs whatever sauce and it's fine."

Gabrielle Smith:

Right. But I can't think of it for the life of me right now, but we love it. Even my husband loves eating, he talks about how great it is.

Jess Dang:

Well, I just love your Facebook group posts about your kids because you often do share how everybody reacts to the meals and I just love those comments from your little peanut gallery. And I would just love to be a fly on the wall during your family's dinner time. So can you share some of the dinnertime traditions you all have? It sounds like clearly home cooked dinners has been something that's been part of your kids' lives since they were born. I would just love to know what dinner is like at your house and how you've gotten your kids to be open to all these new meals you're constantly cooking.

Gabrielle Smith:

I would say that probably to keep them open to new things is I try to involve them when I can. So if I'm planning a meal, I might say, "Well, RJ, is there something that you want to eat that we haven't eaten in a while because I'm planning the meals and I can put it in?" Or if I'm starting dinner a little bit earlier and my daughter says, "Mommy, I want to help with that." Then I let her, even though she's four and I know it's going to take a little bit longer. It's fine because they're vested in it at that point. They're like, "I know on Thursday we're going to eat baked potatoes." My son loves baked potatoes or, "I got to help make the chimichurri sauce," which is what my daughter did earlier this week and she loved it.

Gabrielle Smith:

So I think keeping them engaged in a age appropriate way is a way that you can kind of get them to, I guess, get off the fence in the sense of whether or not they might want to try something because it's like, "Well, I helped make it, I have to try it now, right? At least."

Jess Dang:

Yeah.

Gabrielle Smith:

And I guess in terms of traditions, we have this thing and my husband started it and I don't even know how long we've been doing it, but part of our dinner time conversation is for all of us to share one good thing that happened over the course of the day, one not so good thing that happened over the course of

the day, and something nice you did over the course of the day. So we all kind of go around the table and do that at dinner time.

Jess Dang:

Oh, that's really great. And do you find that with your son, with RJ, his ability to contribute to that conversation has improved over the years? I definitely, with my three and five year old, it's pretty much the same thing every day. Their conversation skills, they come up with really interesting things, but sometimes are a little bit lacking in variety.

Gabrielle Smith:

I think so, but sometimes, and here's something I think happens too. I think they know that that conversation is coming. So sometimes over the course of the day they may do things so that they all have something to say at dinnertime.

Jess Dang:

Oh, that's great.

Gabrielle Smith:

So like I noticed my son sometimes will hold the door open for a large number of people when we would pick my daughter up from preschool and then at dinnertime he'd come back and he'd say, "Well, I held the door for 10 people today." And I'm like, "Oh, okay. That's what that was about?"

Jess Dang:

He's a smart cookie. That's great. And do they always provide reviews of the meals at each dinner if it's a new meal at least?

Gabrielle Smith:

Oh, they always do. It doesn't matter if it's a new or old, they'll always comment, "I like this." And, "Oh, I don't like this." And I'm like, "Well, I made this three weeks ago and it was fine then." So I mean, I-

Jess Dang:

Yeah, that's so great.

Gabrielle Smith:

I don't know, but at least they're talking to me and telling me so I can adapt.

Jess Dang:

Yes. And also it's a skill to be able to offer negative feedback, but I think that is a very useful skill that people could learn as early as kids.

Gabrielle Smith:

Right. And like I say, if they don't like it, they know there's beans and rice, so they can put those in microwave and that's that.

Jess Dang:

That's great. So Gabrielle, it just seems like you have figured out how to fill your life with the things that you love, family and home cooking your strength training. And I know you do a lot of yoga because we're also in another Facebook group, a yoga group, together, and also work. So I would love, and if any organization tips you have to offer busy parents trying to fit all of life into life. "This is Gabrielle". My daughter is in the background now. So yes.

Gabrielle Smith:

Hi there! (to Neko)

Jess Dang:

Organization tips because I think so much of Cook Smarts' really, we are a meal plan service but a lot of it is like the philosophy of how to live an efficient life because we can help you plan and organize.

Gabrielle Smith:

I have to be so flexible a lot because my husband's schedule is kind of unpredictable sometimes. But I guess my biggest thing is I plan what I can. And I do most weeks, some weeks I don't, but the weeks that I don't I wish that I had. Most weeks I sit down at the end of the week before and I kind of lay out the calendar for him. I use a pencil because like I said, the plan never quite goes exactly the way I want. But I kind of pencil in how I think the next week is going to go. And so if RJ has a soccer game on this day, at this time, I know it's going to take this long because we have to get there and get back. And it might be our week to bring snacks, so we need to pick up snacks the day before or whatever.

Gabrielle Smith:

Because I mean, pandemic or not there are always things that kind of happen that we're not prepared for, but if we at least kind of have a grip on those things that we know are going to happen, we know how long they're going to take, and just focusing on those and making sure we have a challenge for those things. I think that helps a lot because if everything is just kind of floating up in the air, then it's really easy to feel overwhelmed and, "I'm not going to get everything done. I'm not going to get everything done." But if before it happens we at least have everything on the paper then maybe we can just rearrange the things on the paper when something unexpected happens.

Gabrielle Smith:

And some things might have to get tabled too and that's fine too but that helps me personally a lot, just to have it on two sheets of paper where the time goes.

Jess Dang:

And is it like a calendar or do you just have a list? Like how does it look? I'm always so curious about how people organize their lives. Even as a kid that was something that I was obsessed with. So how does it look?

Gabrielle Smith:

It's a calendar. I use The Inner Guide planner-

Jess Dang:

Oh, inner guide. Okay.

Gabrielle Smith:

Yes. And it literally just has the day from 6:00 AM to 10:00 PM, and it's a two-page spread and it has all the days of the week on it. And it has a little place where you can put priorities and reflections and ideas, things that I'm grateful for. It has a little quote or a thought to help you stay on track, and it has an intention at the top. A place where you can put an intention for the week. This is my second year using this planner.

Jess Dang:

That's so great. I know lots of people use paper planners and I was trying the paper planner this year, but then the pandemic happened and I was like, "Well, I have no plans anymore." So it's like my schedule is like, "I don't really have the schedule anymore." I'm really curious about this intention part. So can you give me an example of what like a week's intention might be for you?

Gabrielle Smith:

Sometimes it's just, stay on track. Sometimes it's focused on family where I'm really trying to make sure I get in at that time to play with the kids or to incorporate them with dinner because I may have felt a deficit in that area the week before. So for me, I use it part to just kind of balance myself, like if I did a lot of work and I didn't spend as much time with the kids or if I missed work and I need to get caught up on work or if I have something else I need to get done. That's the way I kind of use that feature of it for myself.

Jess Dang:

And then you also mentioned that there are some weeks where you could not find the time to plan. So what does those weeks look like? What is the backup plan from when you don't have time to plan?

Gabrielle Smith:

I take a lot of deep breaths. I try to make sure I at least get the yoga in so that my brain doesn't feel like frazzled. But you just kind of have to be patient and just kind of go with it and focus on those things that have to get done. Like, "I have to get work done at this time on this day, I have to get the kids back and forth to school, I have to let go all of those things that aren't necessary." And then maybe the following week some of those things you missed you can make those a priority the following week or two weeks later. But it's hard to get it all in all the time but I feel like if you get some of it in most of the time you'll be okay.

Jess Dang:

Yeah, it's all about priorities and being flexible I do feel like, yeah. Because there's just no way that, especially, as a working mom, that you can fit everything in all the time and still be sane.

Gabrielle Smith:

Right. Yes.

Jess Dang:

I mean, I don't fit everything in all the time and I'm not sane so... Oh, Gabrielle it was just so great to talk to you and just hear more about your life and all the great tips you shared. Before we go we have always a rapid fire round that I love to ask people to go through if that's okay with you?

Gabrielle Smith:

Okay.

Jess Dang:

All right. So your most important kitchen tool?

Gabrielle Smith:

Probably measuring spoons.

Jess Dang:

Hmm. You might be a woman of precision then. Your go-to breakfast?

Gabrielle Smith:

Oh, oatmeal, fruit and nuts.

Jess Dang:

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

Gabrielle Smith:

Probably meat roll-ups, which is just like deli meat wrapped up in cheese, and hummus and crackers and a piece of fruit.

Jess Dang:

What's one meal you never get sick of?

Gabrielle Smith:

Probably oatmeal, fruit and nuts because if I don't eat it for breakfast I normally eat it as a snack at some point during the day.

Jess Dang:

One ingredient you always have in your pantry?

Gabrielle Smith:

Green lentils.

Jess Dang:

Guilty pleasure food or not?

Gabrielle Smith:

Oh, lately fried plantains and ice cream.

Jess Dang:

Oh, like together?

Gabrielle Smith:

Yes.

Jess Dang:

Oh gosh, that sounds good. Because I'll air fry bananas and put them on ice cream, but plantains, those are so sweet and juicy. Now, that sounds so good. Your favorite life optimization or organization app?

Gabrielle Smith:

Probably the Kroger App.

Jess Dang:

That is great. Hardest thing you've done?

Gabrielle Smith:

Probably taking care of kids when they're sick. I just feel so helpless when they're sick and they want you to make them better and sometimes they just got to rest and sleep and it's just hard.

Jess Dang:

Yeah. Proudest thing you've done?

Gabrielle Smith:

Passed the bar exam the first time.

Jess Dang:

That is a huge achievement. Last book you loved?

Gabrielle Smith:

Becoming by Michelle Obama.

Jess Dang:

Oh, that was so good. I got to see her on tour and I was like-

Gabrielle Smith:

Oh gosh.

Jess Dang:

It was so good. It was such a special thing. Last TV show you loved? Don't know if you have the time to watch TV.

Gabrielle Smith:

Yeah, it's been a while. Probably the last one I just absolutely loved was probably New Girl-

Jess Dang:

Oh, I love that show.

Gabrielle Smith:

... with Zooey Deschanel. Yeah, I love that show.

Jess Dang:

Such a cute show.

Gabrielle Smith:

Yeah.

Jess Dang:

All right. Gabriella, it was so great having you on. I'm going to wish you a happy early Mother's Day and I hope you and your family get through the rest of this pandemic. I know they are in good hands because they have you.

Gabrielle Smith:

Oh, thank you so much and Happy Mother's Day to you as well Jess.

Jess Dang:

So now I wish I lived in Fort Worth so I could be swapping organization hacks and tricks with Gabrielle. As a business owner, it means so much to me to get to connect with our members and really get to know them through our Facebook group and it's an even bigger treat when they agree to take time out of their busy schedule, during a pandemic especially, to talk. I really appreciate it that Gabrielle invited us into her life through Facebook and now also a bit more through this episode.

Jess Dang:

As I mentioned in the interview, I am an organization nerd and just love to hear more about how others choose to organize their lives and make it more efficient. So if you have a good organization tip to share, please text it to me at (650) 386-0290 or just send me a message on Cook Smarts Instagram, I would really love to hear it. And if it's a great one I'll be happy to share it as well.

Jess Dang:

So I know that Cook Smarts' main business is meal plans, but really the heart of our business is people and the people we serve. Food and social connections are key to human life and that's really why we do what we do. I know our regular way of eating and connecting have been upended during this pandemic, but we really want you to know that we are committed to being there for you throughout this time so that food and connection, these essentials of our lives, remain a constant and still a source of joy.

Jess Dang:

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And if you're not a member of our meal plan service yet, grab a free trial at [cooksmarts.com](https://cooksmarts.com) and at the very least make sure to subscribe to our newsletter, which you can do from the bottom of any [cooksmarts.com](https://cooksmarts.com) page. I send out practical tips and recipes every Tuesday. And also if you haven't yet, please head over to Apple podcasts and throw us some stars and let others know why they should be listening to the Cook Smarts Podcast. It really helps us grow so please do it. You're stuck at home anyways so helping us out would be a very productive way to spend five minutes of your time.

Jess Dang:

So 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.