

Jess Dang:

Bowie, are you ready? Ready to do our welcome? Can you say, "Welcome to the Cook Smarts podcast."

Bowie Dang:

Welcome to the Cook Smarts podcast.

Jess Dang:

Do you want to say anything else?

Bowie Dang:

Yeah. I don't want to do a math lesson.

Jess Dang:

You don't want to do your math lesson? All right. Do you want to be on the podcast instead?

Bowie Dang:

Yeah.

Jess Dang:

All right. Thanks Bowie. Hi, there. You're listening to episode number 31 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. Okay, so I know you have no idea what day it is. I do not either. The only reason I know it's the weekend is because my husband is not on calls all day long, which means I can actually get some work done in the morning. Because otherwise you know, it all feels same with nowhere to go and nobody to see. I don't know what day it is anymore, we ended up doing an extra podcast episode.

Jess Dang:

Normally we say hello in your feed every two weeks, but we ended up with an extra episode, so lucky you, you get to hear from me two weeks in a row in your podcast feed. Unfortunately not a whole lot has changed for me since last week. My hair is a bit longer than it was, but definitely not the point where I'm ready for my husband to cut it. I did recently cut his hair. One thing you should know about me is I hate hair as soon as it's off the skin. It just gives me the heebie jeebies. It was a pretty big deal for me that I cut his hair. I literally spent the whole time trying not to vomit. One job I could never have is working at a hair salon.

Jess Dang:

There is actually a funny story about the haircut I gave him. We were using his clippers, but shortly after we started his clippers ran out of charge, so he had half of his head cut and then we had to wait for the clippers to charge and he had to be in a bunch of video calls during that time, with only half of his haircut. But since he's an engineer working with all other engineers, I'm pretty sure that nobody noticed. That was an exciting thing that happened to us recently. Also, I've been trying really hard to improve my sourdough game. Now, this is a pretty big deal for me, because for all the reasons that I'm a very competent and good cook, those are the same reasons that make me a terrible baker.

Jess Dang:

I am someone who doesn't like to make any meal the same way twice, and despite being a professional recipe developer, I hate following recipes. If I am "following" a recipe and I'm saying that with air quotes following with air quotes, I have trouble following directions as explicitly stated. There is just something inside of me that cannot read a recipe and do it the way they tell me to. I am just a real rebel that way. I always want to tinker with something or another. Also, I like to taste as I go and I don't want to wait for the very end of the dish to see if it turned out okay. I have so much more fun playing with flavors and adjusting throughout the recipe, which doesn't really work in baking, right?

Jess Dang:

You have to put everything in there to the batter or the dough or whatever it is, you stick it in the oven and then you don't find out till like 20 minutes later, an hour later whenever it is. Plus I am also so impatient in the kitchen; like *sista* does not have the time to wait for bread to rise overnight. The reason I would even before this quarantine have thought about baking bread, which I never have. But the reason I would think about baking bread is, because I would want to eat a slice of bread right now, and that's not really how bread works. There's a lot of waiting and poking and looking and just not enough tasting and immediate gratification for me.

Jess Dang:

For all these reasons, I'm a comically bad baker. I have a set of really great girlfriends from college and they're all amazing bakers and also really great cooks as well. I basically text them the silliest questions when I am baking or photos of all my baking disasters, and I think they all like probably really question my intelligence when I'm baking. But in my defense, I didn't grow up in a household that baked. To me, that's what my American friends did with their moms and dads, they baked cookies and brownies. That did not happen in my very Chinese household. My grandmother was butchering turtles in our kitchen. That's a true fact.

Jess Dang:

But I'll save that story for another time. The first time I baked cookies, I think was probably in home EC, which was in middle school. Instead of putting half a teaspoon of baking soda into the cookies, I put half a cup. Yeah, like I had some gigantic, disgusting tasting cookies. I think it's possible that I've set myself up to fail whenever I bake. I just can't follow the directions, and then I'm upset when the recipe doesn't turn out, which is silly because I didn't follow the directions. But recently, I've been trying really hard not let my natural desire to tinker, get in the way and I'm forcing myself to measure with a scale. I bought a scale. I had a scale but it's been broken for years, then I finally got another one this nice new OXO one that is fantastic, and I'm like, "Wow, this actually is fun to measure things on a scale."

Jess Dang:

I'm really also trying to force myself to be patient. It is all very uncomfortable to me, all of these things like reading directions, measuring very specifically, all of that, but it's making me very uncomfortable, but I'm baking some really delicious bread that has been very comforting to have during this time. Plus, it's something that is making me want to get out of bed in the morning, because two and a half months into quarantining, homeschooling my children and answering their five million demands every day, is just not doing it anymore.

Jess Dang:

But seeing if my dough has risen and giving it the final care that it needs to go in the oven, apparently that is the motivation that I need right now. If you're also on the sourdough train, I'd love to hear what you're baking and if you have fun recipes for all of that starter discard. Enough about my sourdough adventures. This isn't a baking podcast and if I ever host a baking podcast, you will know that the apocalypse has really happened. Let's shift gears now back to our regular scheduled programming, and talk about today's guest, Lauren Davis. Lauren is a longtime Cook Smarts member, and I reached out to Lauren to see if she would share her quarantine experience with us.

Jess Dang:

Because Lauren's husband is immunocompromised, and she has just been really extra diligent about staying away from grocery stores. This definitely requires some next level planning, which she has been sharing on our Facebook group. As you know, I'm a gal who loves hearing how people get organized. I was pretty psyched when Lauren agreed to be on the podcast, and we had a fabulous time chatting a few evenings ago, over a glass of wine after our kids went to bed. If you're in a place where you can pour yourself a glass of wine or your favorite drink of any type, it doesn't matter if it's alcoholic or not anything that'll make you a little bit happier, please do so and join us ladies for this fun chat.

Jess Dang:

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

Lauren Davis:

Me too. Thanks for having me.

Jess Dang:

Yes. Before we dive into everything related to meal planning and cooking during a global pandemic, I would just love for you to introduce yourself to our listeners. Tell us where you live, who you feed and what you do.

Lauren Davis:

Sure. I am born and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area. That's where I'm usually just feeding my family of three, which includes my husband, Rory, and my son, Gavin, who's four years old. But when we're not social distancing, I really love to host dinner parties and entertain and I'm definitely missing that through all of this. For work, I'm in strategic communications for a large global organization and I absolutely love what I do. I get to make what's important interesting every day.

Jess Dang:

That makes me really happy to hear, because that's not the case for everybody. That's so great that you love what you do.

Lauren Davis:

I do.

Jess Dang:

You've been a member of Cook Smart since mid 2017, so almost three years. I'm just curious, what was your meal planning process before Cook Smarts? How did you find us and how has it changed since you started with the service?

Lauren Davis:

Absolutely. It's changed a lot and I can't remember how I found the service way back when it has been a while, but beforehand I was using a lot of the meal delivery kits, where you get a box delivered each week and it has about 50 plastic baggies of ingredients. While it was certainly easy, it was not environmentally friendly. When I joined Cook Smarts, my son was about a year old and honestly, I was sleep deprived and I was in the middle of leading a huge multiyear project at work, and commuting two and a half to three hours a day and I just was just really-

Jess Dang:

Oh my gosh.

Lauren Davis:

... focused on speed, honestly going to the archives every weekend and using that as a great resource to find those really quick meals. I'll admit, I stopped meal planning for a little while in there and had meals delivered by a local mom. She runs a commercial kitchen locally, but as I started getting my bearings again, with being a working mom I came back to meal planning with Cook Smarts. Every week I start with the email every Thursday with the meals that come up for the week. I usually add a recipe or sub one depending on what I have on hand or what's on sale that week.

Lauren Davis:

After grocery shopping, I'm a big fan of meal prep, so on weekends, before the week ahead, while my son naps knock on wood that he continues napping forever, I usually chop everything and measure out all the spices and make all the sauces. It's definitely shifted a lot in the last three years.

Jess Dang:

You're basically like making your own meal kit almost on the weekends, that's so great. I just want to commend you for just cooking at all, because I feel in the Bay Area, which is also where I am, I find that so few people cook. I think it's just a matter of ... There's so many choices around here for delivery and so many of the companies feed people, feed their employees. A lot of my friends around here just don't cook or DoorDash and Grubhub everything, which I think is totally fine especially when people have long commutes and are working. I guess, how did you decide that you were going to cook, whether it was with meal kits before Cook Smarts? Was that just a part of your life growing up?

Lauren Davis:

Well, I will admit that I do work for a company that has a couple of cafeterias on our campus and I have been known, when I'm exhausted and know I'm going to get home late, to grab something and bring it home for dinner. But that's pretty rare. I find it really comforting to pick up my kid from preschool, which obviously isn't happening right now, and get into the kitchen and usually I have everything prepped. Everything's chopped, everything's measured and I can take that time to make whatever meal it is that I'm going to make that night, and my son usually sits at the kitchen counter and we talk about our day and we play this little game of two truths and a pretend for what happened for the day.

Jess Dang:

So Cute.

Lauren Davis:

It's two truths and a lie, but we don't lie in the Davis household. We play two truths and a pretend together, and we talk about our days. It's a really nice relaxing opportunity.

Jess Dang:

Oh, I love that tradition. I feel like I need to start doing that with my kids. I think that would be a fun way to strike up conversation. Kids just make up such fun things anyway.

Lauren Davis:

Right. Well, it started because he wasn't going to give me anything about his day at all, and I was trying to make a game out of it, because all he would say was, "I played or I had fun." We all fall into that trap, right? I did when I was a kid too.

Jess Dang:

Exactly. I just wanted to shift gears a little bit and talk about quarantine, which we're all like much too familiar with at this point, unfortunately. I'm just curious, what has life been like for you and your family under quarantine, and what have been some of the biggest challenges for you?

Lauren Davis:

Like many people around the world right now, there's certainly an added level of stress. Our income was cut substantially as my husband's consulting work slowed down pretty dramatically. But I do want to acknowledge that I'm pretty lucky. Our stresses are nothing like so much of what people are facing right now. If I could actually just give a plug to the local food banks and domestic violence shelters, who are helping so many people right now, during this time, every little bit counts. But back to your question, what has it been like? A few weeks after we started our quarantine, my parents invited us to move in with them actually and shelter in place all together as a family.

Lauren Davis:

I feel like I may be getting silent dagger eyes from people who are listening right now, but it's been pretty great. My parents have been able to help watch our son a lot and we've had a great opportunity for lots of family time, and every day I "go to the office" and you can't see my air quotes right now, because I drive for 10 minutes down the road to my house to work in my home office with some peace and quiet, and then head back at the end of the day to the craziness of five people under one roof at my parents house.

Jess Dang:

I'm so jealous of you right now.

Lauren Davis:

I'm sorry, I shouldn't have mentioned that.

Jess Dang:

No, I'm so glad that there are some parents out there getting some peace. That makes me really, really happy. Just because it's, yeah, I think any anyone that has like a little bit of mental space or can have the opportunity for that, you need to go for it.

Lauren Davis:

I'm very, very lucky, yes.

Jess Dang:

Yeah. I don't know how many times over the last couple weeks, I've said like, "I really miss my office. I want it to open back up again." Right now, you guys have five people that you're cooking for, meal planner for four different adults. I imagine that maybe your parents have their own routine going on before you, your husband and child moved in. How's that process or transition been for you guys, meal planning for four different adults? What is it looking like?

Lauren Davis:

Definitely ... At the very beginning, I was just getting whatever I could in a mad dash at the grocery store and then figuring out what to make when I got home. I'm a big fan of the archives for that, but I miss the meal planning. There are very few things in life right now that I can control and that's hard for my type A personality. But what I can control is how I choose to nourish the bodies and minds of my family. For me, that means creating meals that are from whole foods. Not the store but from whole rich foods with no ingredients that you can't pronounce, and prioritizing sitting down around the table each evening as a family.

Lauren Davis:

At this point, I actually go to the grocery store once every three to four weeks and then we get our weekly produce box delivered. I like to involve the whole family in the process, so I take sticky notes and I write down all the recipes that I want to make, and then I group them by red meat and vegetarian and fish and light meat, and then I give everyone a different color marker and each person gets to mark a star next to the meals that they're most excited by. Then what I do is I just use the add meal feature in Cook Smarts, then I add all the meals for the month and I print out my grocery list, and bam it's done for the whole month.

Jess Dang:

Oh my gosh. You basically have like meal planned twice during this time because we've been about two months into it?

Lauren Davis:

We've actually, my family has been quarantine for a little bit longer, so we've done it three times. But yes, yes. That's essentially it. It's very few times do I have to deal with it. I actually enjoy the process personally because it makes it so easy, but I haven't had to do much of it. Yeah, it makes it pretty simple.

Jess Dang:

Are you basically then because with the way that Cook Smarts works for those who don't know, every week we come out with a new menu. But then we also have these huge archives with well over 1,000 recipes, and you can add them to any week's menu. Right now, it sounds like you're kind of ignoring

whatever current week we're dropping, but you're really just digging right into the archives and adding like I don't know how many meals, many dozen it seems like?

Lauren Davis:

Yeah, I'm using the archives a lot. But I'm also part of the Facebook group. Every single day, when I see people posting something from that particular week's menu, I am like, "Oh, I have to make a mental note because I have to make that next month." I'm coming back to everything.

Jess Dang:

Have you been saving things, because we have a collections feature too, so how have you been collecting all these meals that you want to make in the future?

Lauren Davis:

Yes, I absolutely love using the collections. What I've done is when I started of course, I've got my favorites collection and I've got my easy weeknight meals collection and I've got my entertaining for a group collection, but when the quarantine started I also added a couple new collections like vegetarian. We are potentially going to see some meat disruptions. I added that one and then I also added one for really easy meals that you can do in quarantine that have fresh ingredients that last a long time. I'm really liking a lot of those. For example, I love the Lentil Nicoise Salad, or the Portobello Pesto Pizzas or pretty much any grilled cheese that's on there, but oh my goodness, you're killing me with the grilled cheeses, they're so good. I'm going so many pounds. But when it first started, when we first started going into this quarantine and produce was really tough to get early on, I also created this recipe collection with produce that lasted a long time, like a fresh cabbage and sweet potatoes. Those can last up to two months in the fridge, believe it or not.

Jess Dang:

Yes.

Lauren Davis:

Greens like chard can last up to 10 days in the fridge. One of my new favorites is the Baked Arctic Char which I tend to sub with salmon a lot, because it's easy to get with the raisins vinaigrette and polenta, that is one of our favorites of this quarantine, because everything except for the chard comes from a freezer or a pantry item. I also save things that can be bought frozen, like the frozen spinach, I can grab and put that into lasagna soup or any of the soups that Cook Smarts has.

Jess Dang:

Well, I really love how organized you are. That's so important. I feel at this time because we can only control so much, but the things like cabbage lasting a long time is something like, that's always going to be the case whether we're in a quarantine or not. It's really great to take advantage of these things and use that strategically to think through how you can still eat fresh produce a couple weeks in, after grocery shopping because there are lots of items that are just not going to spoil anytime soon.

Lauren Davis:

Absolutely.

Jess Dang:

Going back to your produce box, so how are you ... I guess like, I'm always really just interested in the details of operation. How are you guys planning that big grocery shopping trip versus the produce box, and do you get a choice when you get the produce boxes, as to what is going to be in there?

Lauren Davis:

Yes, I do get a choice. I did find a CSA that delivers. You can choose of course the fruit box or the vegetable box, and they choose what goes in there. But you can also create your own box and just put in whatever you want. For a while it was, they were so overwhelmed with people, new customers that it was like four or five days before they arrived. But in all honesty, we can make it four or five days because we're lucky enough to have pantries that are stocked. But now they're back to getting it within 24 hours, it's pretty lucky.

Jess Dang:

Were you experiencing any weird substitutions at any point, especially early on of like, you got something that was not exactly what you asked for?

Lauren Davis:

The one that I'm using, they don't substitute in the box but I have so many frozen vegetables that we of course do that and we substitute whenever we need to. I feel like we're pretty creative, so we figured it out. But there have been plenty of times where we haven't been able to get exactly what we're looking for, and we just move and shift and create something that's still really yummy. Or when you leave the freezer door open like I did last week ...

Jess Dang:

Gosh.

Lauren Davis:

... and you lose ... All of the fish that we had frozen, all the shrimp we had frozen, defrosted and we had to cook it all in one night. Then we ate fish and shrimp for four days straight. It was interesting.

Jess Dang:

Well, I think a lot of people have just been like, "Oh, I guess it's done for." I would have just given up. That's so great that you cooked it and spread it out.

Lauren Davis:

Well, we froze the salmon and I think I'm going to have salmon with my salads every day for the next six weeks.

Jess Dang:

Getting all those good omega threes.

Lauren Davis:

Yes, exactly.

Jess Dang:

What was it like for your parents when you're like, "Oh, I'm going to come." I guess, I'm curious also how you guys are all cooking in terms of are you taking turns? Or you're doing everything and they're just excited at Lauren's back and they have someone cooking for them, a couple meals a day? I guess not lunch if you're not around, but yeah I'm just curious how all that is working.

Lauren Davis:

It's working actually really well. My parents are great cooks and I learned from the best and I learned mostly from my mom. She has always kept a stocked kitchen growing up, and she has always opened up the fridge or the pantry around 5:00 or 6:00 and figured out what to make that night. That is amazing that she whips up with whatever was on hand, and my dad is a master at soups, and barbecuing, and Chinese food and he taught me all of my knife skills. So yes, they do cook. They cook twice a week, and I usually cook the rest of the time. We're trying to also incorporate some more restaurant pickups, to support the local restaurants we love too, and balance it all out, but I love ... I don't know, I love cooking in their kitchen. I'm pretty lucky.

Jess Dang:

That's great. I am curious about how have you guys decided ... You have all the meals on these sticky notes, and so is it all laid out in a calendar and then how are you designating who's cooking what each day and what lunch leftovers are going to look like and who's got dibs on those and all of that?

Lauren Davis:

Okay, I am type A, but I'm not that type A.

Jess Dang:

Okay.

Lauren Davis:

We do plan everything out by week because we get the produce delivered each week. We'll have seven meals planned for the week, and two will be designated for my parents, four or five designated for me and then sometimes there'll be a night, where we get to decide what we want to have delivered or picked up from a local restaurant. But it really varies every week. I do have a calendar because it was easier just to plan out for the month in advance, but every night it's, "What sounds good?" We have six more nights this week that we have ingredients for, what do we want to make? It's been pretty simple and easy and we like it.

Jess Dang:

Well, that's just so amazing. I'm sure with them they're ... It sounds like they're retired, is that right?

Lauren Davis:

Yes, they retired a couple years ago.

Jess Dang:

That's great. They have the time to play with your kid and do some prepping and probably leisurely cook, and if they're already really competent in the kitchen, it's there's something they're going to be doing anyways. I'm sure it's a joy to get to do it for their daughter and son-in-law and grandson.

Lauren Davis:

Yeah, definitely. This is not the first time we've lived in my parent's house. We did that about 11 years ago, and my husband helped them remodel their kitchen and so we get to live in the house that we were there for only three months and of course we lived through and helped them remodel this kitchen at the time. But it's just a luxury to be able to do it. Though the only problem is, I am five foot seven and I am the shortest person in my entire family, and so when they designed their new kitchen, they decided to build it so that the counters were three inches taller than the average countertop, and so being shorter than everyone else, it's actually pretty tough for me.

Lauren Davis:

I have to wear shoes that are thick and I have a standing mat that I brought from my standing desk, just so that I can not cut myself when I'm trying to chop my vegetables. You can picture me like as a kid trying to ...

Jess Dang:

Oh my gosh. Well, when they sell that house, they cannot sell it to someone short, because I was thinking if I had to cook in their house, since I'm only five one and I have like ... When we remodeled our kitchen we had thought about like should we have the counters a lower height for me, but then I was like, "Well, a person we're going to sell this house to is not going to want low counters." But I think it would be really comical if tried cooking at your parent's house. I feel like-

Lauren Davis:

You would hate it.

Jess Dang:

... we could do that after quarantine.

Lauren Davis:

You wouldn't be able to reach the microwave. It's even above my head.

Jess Dang:

Really? The microwave ... This is totally a tangent, but microwave placement was something we thought a lot about when we remodeled the kitchen, and we have ours super low so that ... Because I said, "I want my kids to be able to microwave their own things, warm up their milk and not bother me."

Lauren Davis:

That's brilliant.

Jess Dang:

Our microwave is very low, so even our three year old does all that himself. I'm so, just amazed because you sound like you're living the quarantine dream of everybody. It's like, "Wow."

Lauren Davis:

I think people are going to hate me after they listen to this.

Jess Dang:

I know, but it's so great. I wanted to go back to something you talked about earlier in the beginning when you guys had not, you probably you were just still getting your bearings around, like what does this pandemic mean and how is it going to impact my routine? You said you're going to just going to the store and then digging into the archives. I would really just want to talk a little bit more about that, because I think just because people that haven't used Cook Smarts, they just think like, "We're very like a meal plan service," so it's rigid and every week you get this menu, and that's what you're stuck with. I just want people to know that there is so much flexibility around it. Can you talk a bit more about how you were just bringing home a set of ingredients, and then using the archives to figure out what you would then make?

Lauren Davis:

Sure. The search feature is pretty great. Let's say I had salmon and there were a couple of other ingredients I wanted to use like, pesto and panko, I don't know, I'm just making something random up. I would search for those three ingredients into the archives, and there are thousands out there and so you have to make sure that you're finding a recipe that doesn't have, it's not tied to another recipe. For example, some weeks when you get your meals for the week delivered to you in your email, there are ... I can't remember what you're calling them, but ...

Jess Dang:

We call them dependencies.

Lauren Davis:

Yes, dependencies. You don't want to make three times the amount of pulled pork that you want because you're not making it for three nights. You just need to make sure that the amount that you're making is equivalent to how much you want to make that night, but it was really simple and easy. It is simple and easy to just find what I'm looking for and search through the recipes and say, "There's five options that had panko and pesto and salmon." I can go search through those see what other things I want to do, and make the one that I wanted.

Jess Dang:

Yes. It also sounds like despite your type A-ness, I think it's just the fact that you have been cooking so much, like having cooking so long and have parents that are really great cooks, probably needing something ... you didn't have everything on hand you would feel okay with still going forward with the recipe?

Lauren Davis:

Yeah. I'm not scared of the kitchen. I feel like the recipes are not complicated. They're simple enough to be un-daunting and interesting enough to be exciting to try something new every time. That is definitely me, but I think for the average person that may not love to be in the kitchen, I would just also start ... use the filters because you can search for quick meals. For example, you want to do something that's 30 minutes or under, that's easy to do.

Jess Dang:

Yes. Going back to this whole shelter in place thing, the recommendation has been, try to shop every two weeks and I know that's been hard for folks. The fact that you guys are stretching out to three to four is really amazing. What was your motivation behind that, making really less frequent shopping trips?

Lauren Davis:

Well, I'll be a little vulnerable here. My husband is severely immunocompromised, and so it was really important to all of us to be very, very careful when it came to the entire family's health and safety. I was honestly doing it out of necessity and fear for what would happen if I was going to the grocery store too often, or being in a store for too long and just wanting to make sure that we were being as safe as we possibly could for our family.

Jess Dang:

I'm sure that's just a huge motivation for you in terms of just your sheltering and cooking. Is there anything else that you look to when you're feeling like, "God, the situation, it doesn't feel like there's an end to it." How are you motivating yourself not just to cook but just to trudge on despite having a very good setup?

Lauren Davis:

Well, I really like the ... Was it your Facebook group or your last podcast ... I can't remember when you mentioned this but you said, "It feels like we are all running a marathon, but at this sprinting pace." It comes and goes for me too. I think for everybody it does, but for me as well, those meals with our family are those rest stops. I love the analogy because it really, really spoke to me and a moment to just breathe in, a sense of calm and hear about our days and just be together. You asked about motivation. For me it's to find that sense of calm in this out of control world. But when it comes to, for all of the rest of America that's trying to juggle full-time work and full-time childcare, homeschooling I just think we need to give each other the space and the flexibility to realize that perfect isn't the goal.

Lauren Davis:

We have a shirt, a T shirt from the Home Edit and it says, "Surviving not thriving," and that right now is my motto. I'm happy to live it right now, because I know when I lower my expectations, I'm more grateful, I'm less stressed and you need to break out the mac and cheese from a box by all means, by all means because we all remember how good that was.

Jess Dang:

Yeah.

Lauren Davis:

Forget the hotdog and the frozen peas, so you can do it properly like '90s throwback meal.

Jess Dang:

Oh, yes, we definitely have hotdogs. The hotdogs, there's a limit on hotdogs because it is like, it is a great shortcut meal for any parent right now with hotdogs. There's a lot of PBJ's going on in our house.

Lauren Davis:

I think my son and my husband had that tonight because I was working late. That's what they had for dinner.

Jess Dang:

Yeah, no, I think for me, it really is like I said that analogy just made sense to me. Because it's like we were being asked to run a marathon, where the finish line just keeps moving and has to be a sprint throughout.

Lauren Davis:

It does keep moving.

Jess Dang:

Yeah.

Lauren Davis:

It does.

Jess Dang:

You don't know. It's like, "Oh, you're like 25.9 miles," and like, "Well, actually, you're going to be running an ultra marathon right now, so-

Lauren Davis:

Surprise.

Jess Dang:

... hope you have the stamina."

Lauren Davis:

Maybe you're going to take a break, but then you're going to have to run three more marathons after that. It keeps shifting and changing the sand underneath.

Jess Dang:

Yeah. I've got young kids, so I feel like the homeschooling it's optional, right? It's like, they're not going to be behind, because they're preschool age if they don't ... If I don't give them lessons every single day. But it really for me is the meals that's just like, it's just like a reset for me for the next ...

Lauren Davis:

It's just great.

Jess Dang:

It just resets us. I can be like, "Okay, I can like breathe a little bit." Even though there are a lot of demands, there are little people that have very little empathy emotionally. But it is just nice to kind of ... Now, my husband's working from home that sometimes he's able to join us for lunch, and that's really

great. Yeah, I still really look forward to the meals. But I feel silly like telling people like, "Just cook. It'll make you feel better," when so much, real big stuff is happening, but I do feel for me it's my happy place still despite the fact that I've cooked so many meals, I don't even you know where we are anymore.

Lauren Davis:

But that's all you can do. It may not work for every single individual person but for me personally, it's very comforting to be able to nourish my family's bodies and their minds with time at the table, regardless of what you put on the table right?

Jess Dang:

Yeah.

Lauren Davis:

At the moment, I'm focusing on easier things to prepare.

Jess Dang:

Yeah. I guess how has everything ... How have your feelings evolved over the last couple months of sheltering in place? Because I feel there is like the six stages of grief, this whole cycling of first you were in denial that this was happening, and then you were angry. How are you right now and how has it been going through all the different stages?

Lauren Davis:

Oh, boy. It started with shock. I was supposed to be on a business trip in Switzerland when California started its quarantine back in March. It was just disbelief right? Then I was fearful. My parents were on a cruise ship at the time. We've since learned that a few people have passed away on the ship that they were on, and it was just scary. Then my husband as I mentioned, is immunocompromised. It was that fear shift from seeing it in the news and thinking it's never going to get here to, "Oh, boy, it's here, and it's in our backyard," and, "Oh we need to protect our family." In recent weeks, it's been more of gratitude. I've been very lucky and I need to recognize my privilege of being able to wear a mask in public and there's no fear of repercussions of that, and moving in with my parents. I'm so grateful for all the help that they've given us.

Lauren Davis:

But it's interesting that you mentioned grief, because that's exactly what hit this week. With my husband, I don't know when my family, my own individual family will be able to venture out and end own personal quarantine. It's likely to be longer than for most people right now. I am grieving because I'm grieving like what my son will lose by not being able to play with kids his own age for up to a year. I don't know what it's going to be like, and grieving the loss of for example, missing a couple of weddings of my two closest friends that were in my wedding. I think everyone's in a different place, and just hope that we can all be gentle with each other and with ourselves, no matter what everyone's going through.

Jess Dang:

Yeah, I know. I'm just thinking about what you just said about your husband and your son. I just feel for you. I have no better suggestions. It just like sucks right now. I think we just acknowledge like that sucks.

Lauren Davis:

We're just all doing our best, right? No matter what your situation is, we're all doing our best. We're lucky enough that I have a great job and we're going to be just fine. But there are a lot of people who aren't, so it is tough for a lot of people for a lot of reasons.

Jess Dang:

I definitely feel grateful for being in the Bay Area, because I feel we really locked down early that I'm hoping we come out of this soon in the sense in a safe way, I guess like in a gradual way where it made sense. I know we have not hit all the metrics that they want us to hit, but I feel really lucky that I actually don't know one person that has gotten Coronavirus in, not even in the Bay Area but just like overall.

Lauren Davis:

Wow, wow.

Jess Dang:

Yeah, I know. I'm just like ... I read this, I look at the Santa Clara County, that's where I am Santa Clara County dashboard, not every day but I'm just keeping track of things. But I'm like, "Oh, this has been ..." It feels we have very much flattened the curve around here and I feel happy about that.

Lauren Davis:

That's great. I don't think everyone is in that situation. I know several people who had it. I'm happy that they're all doing great.

Jess Dang:

Okay, that's great. I feel like I'm living in some bubble where I hear the stories, but it has not been something that I have had any direct experience with, like knock on wood. I'm happy about that.

Lauren Davis:

Knock on wood, definitely.

Jess Dang:

I know the quarantine has been hard on everyone. Can you just share one bright spot of it for you? Because there are bright spots clearly, or anything you've learned about yourself during this time?

Lauren Davis:

I think for me, I've realized that it's forcing all of us to be really creative, whether it be creative with the meals we try or the things we do with our kids or are the gifts that we give. My husband instead of buying me a Mother's Day gift this year, he compiled iPhone footage from our son from the last four years and he made a video a couple weeks ago, and it's probably the most meaningful, creative gift that someone's ever given me. I love that every weekend I have ideas of what we can do together, whereas before it was, "Oh, we have all of these errands that we have to run. We have all of these things that we have to do. If there's time at the end of the day, then we'll have some fun." My mentality has totally shifted and I love that and I don't want it to shift back.

Jess Dang:

Yeah, I feel the same way. As much I'm like, "I want my kids back in school." I'm like, "I would miss this time with them." I'm just like ... It's funny, I don't think we're getting out of this anytime soon, but I'm already grieving a little bit what it's like when we transition back to our regular life, and I won't have the mornings of bike riding with them and eating lunch together every day so ...

Lauren Davis:

So sweet.

Jess Dang:

Yeah, so we shall see how and when we get out of this. When we do what is the that you most look forward to? I know for you it might be a little bit later but I'm so ... I'm sure it'll be even more exciting when it all comes together.

Lauren Davis:

Probably sending my son back to school, just to do the opposite.

Jess Dang:

Yeah, he'll be second grade by that point. I don't know. Let's hope that's not the case.

Lauren Davis:

Oh my God, I hope not. But it's not only because that my husband or my parents need a break, but he gets so much out of being with kids his age and his teachers are amazing. I just I hope that we'll be able to do it safely sometime soon.

Jess Dang:

Yes. Well, Lauren, before we let you go, I have a little rapid fire round I'd love for you to go through if that's okay.

Lauren Davis:

I'm ready.

Jess Dang:

All right. Okay, your most important kitchen tool.

Lauren Davis:

I don't have a word for it. I have a spoon with a flat edge. It's probably older than I am with a broken handle and I literally use it for every meal and I can't find a replacement anywhere.

Jess Dang:

To eat with? It's a spoon you eat with?

Lauren Davis:

No, it's like to cook with. It's like half spatula, half spoon and shout out to the Cook Smarts community, if you know what I'm talking about, send the link or a carrier pigeon because I'm not kidding, I will Venmo

you my money. I am looking for a new replacement that's BPA free and healthy and I love it. I use it every meal. Okay, I'm sorry.

Jess Dang:

We'll need you to snap-

Lauren Davis:

Okay, we can start again.

Jess Dang:

We'll need you to snap a photo of it so we can put it in the show notes, so people can identify exactly what it is. Okay, your go to breakfast.

Lauren Davis:

Homemade sourdough toast, goat cheese with avocado and Trader Joe's Everything Bagel Seasoning.

Jess Dang:

Oh, that sounds good. I have some sourdough rising right now. It sounds really good. You have 15 minutes to make a meal, what is it?

Lauren Davis:

That's hard. Okay, so if I did the five minute prep over the weekend in advance, definitely the maple-dijon panko salmon. I feel like we've mentioned salmon like 16 times in this ... I don't have it that often.

Jess Dang:

It is such a great ... It makes me sad when ... Obviously all the chicken has gone, not gone but it's like the chicken empties out first and I'm like really sad when I see like all the salmon that's like leftover and I'm like, "Salmon is a great protein people."

Lauren Davis:

I think it's on my mind because I've had it for like seven days straight after I defrosted it all.

Jess Dang:

Oh, gosh. What's one meal you never get sick of besides salmon or maybe you will get sick of salmon?

Lauren Davis:

No, no, I am sick of it. The sheet pan chicken fajitas.

Jess Dang:

One ingredient you always have in your pantry.

Lauren Davis:

Raisins.

Jess Dang:

Guilty pleasure food or not.

Lauren Davis:

Wine.

Jess Dang:

Your favorite life optimization or organization app.

Lauren Davis:

Trello.

Jess Dang:

Hardest thing you've done.

Lauren Davis:

Overcome my anxiety.

Jess Dang:

Proudest thing you've done.

Lauren Davis:

Raised a kind kid.

Jess Dang:

Last book you loved.

Lauren Davis:

Tomorrow There Will Be Sun by Dana Reinhardt.

Jess Dang:

Oh, I don't know that one. I want to put on my list. The last TV show you loved.

Lauren Davis:

Outlander. We just had the season finale last night.

Jess Dang:

I have to check that one out. I feel like several of my guests have mentioned that one so-

Lauren Davis:

It's good.

Jess Dang:

... it's time.

Lauren Davis:

Read the books first though.

Jess Dang:

Okay. I have been not in a reading mode.

Lauren Davis:

In your free time, in your free time.

Jess Dang:

Yes, I need to read at some point in my life, it'll come back. Lauren, it was such a pleasure to talk to you. As a small business owner, it's the best gift to me, is get to talk to our community members. I just want to thank you so much for taking the time to share your story and all these great tips with us.

Lauren Davis:

You got it. It was a pleasure.

Jess Dang:

Okay, I hope your whole family stays safe and everybody stays sane, but it sounds like you all are just doing just great together.

Lauren Davis:

Thank you. You too.

Jess Dang:

Wasn't Lauren just lovely? I did not say this to Lauren, but I know you're listening Lauren, whenever it is safe for your family to be out in the world again, we should definitely get together over a delicious Cook Smarts meal. We would love to have you over to our house. This pandemic has hurt so many people and I wish I had something more comforting to say to Lauren at the end, but I truly hope that her family stays healthy, and that it won't be long until her son can enjoy a play date again, and she and her husband can go on a fun date night out to their favorite restaurant. I know that these are the simple things that we're all hoping for right now.

Jess Dang:

I'm really grateful to be in the position of still having a job and sheltering in my lovely home and having all my family healthy. But what I wouldn't give just to go to the movies right now. I really miss hiding at the movies, as that was something I would do once a month just play hooky for an afternoon and head to a matinee, and just lose myself for two hours in someone else's world over a huge bucket of buttered popcorn. I wouldn't trade this time with my kids for anything, but I wish it didn't come with all the little trappings of a pandemic. Okay, so back to a few things Lauren mentioned. I want everyone to make sure they head to the show notes for this episode.

Jess Dang:

You can just go to cooksmarts.com/podcast/31. That's the number 31, three, one. We have photos of Lauren's whole color coded meal planning process. It is very impressive. I wanted to make sure you see it. If you've been in a bit of a motivation rut, first I want to say that is totally okay. Just allow yourself that space, but if there's any part of you that wants to be done with the pandemic paralysis, check out the photos and just start with one post it or just cook your favorite meal that you can eat over and over again, and take pleasure and comfort in that meal and then plan the next one. You can do this and we're here for you regardless of what stage of pandemic grief or emotions that you're in.

Jess Dang:

You also need to head to the show notes to figure out what the spoon situation is. Lauren did send us a photo of the spoon that she was talking about. In the podcast she mentioned that her favorite, her most important kitchen tool and when we did the rapid fire round is this like spoon with a flat edge. It was not what I thought it was going to be. It is like just like a metal spoon that's about a foot long she says and it's got a flat edge at the tip of it instead of a rounded tip. Never come across a kitchen tool like this, so we need the entire podcast community's help in finding her a replacement in case this one breaks, or she needs a backup.

Jess Dang:

Okay, so before we go if you haven't yet, please head over to Apple podcast 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 anyway, so helping us out would be a very productive way to spend a few minutes of your time. We'll be back with a new episode in two weeks. This time, I really mean two weeks. But until then, thank you for letting us join you in your kitchen or wherever you listen to this podcast and until next time, happy cooking from your kitchen cheerleader.