

Jess Dang:

Hi there, you're listening to episode number 34 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. All right, folks. So today I am back with a new episode after taking a little summer break, and I wish I could say that I went on a fabulous vacation and lounged by a pool. I went to museums and ate at some delicious restaurants, but yeah, that is not the summer we have been experiencing. I know that the summer you're having is probably not the summer you were planning or expecting back in spring. I mean, seriously, who would have thought that back in March that we would still be in quarantine and things maybe, maybe feel even worse now for some folks? I certainly didn't think it was going to last so long and be this bad, but now we know pandemics are real serious and will turn everyone's lives upside down.

Jess Dang:

For us, the pandemic impact on our summer has just been canceled vacation plans, which when I think about all the other worst things that could have happened to us due to a pandemic, it does not feel like a big deal. But over the last three years, our family has taken our annual family vacation over the 4th of July week because that's when daycare's closed for us. So we've just timed vacation for that week. So last year we went to Pasadena, the year before we went to Whitefish Montana and the year before that we went to San Diego. And this year, our plans were to return to San Diego and also celebrate our 10 year anniversary with our family and close friends. So it felt disappointing when I realized a few months ago that none of that was going to happen.

Jess Dang:

It sucks. But like I said earlier in the grand pandemic scheme of things, missing vacation and canceling an anniversary party feel, they feel like small things. And I also, I just think about the fact that we grew up pretty poor with not a whole lot. Our family had never had money for summer camps or vacations, but I still loved summer and I've been reminding myself of this and my kids are young. They don't know what a vacation is and all they care about really is having lots of time with us. So even though it isn't a typical summer, it's actually still been a really great one so far. We've had dinner outside most nights, the kids are always in the backyard being crazy rambunctious kids. They're in our front yard chatting it up with neighbors, probably not social distancing as much as they should because they're children and they're just so enthusiastic.

Jess Dang:

We have good friends that have given us an open invitation to their backyard pool, which has been such a nice treat with some of the hotter days. There's been a lot of ice cream trips, hikes, beach trips. We've had some friends over to our backyard for dinner and that makes the kids just so happy. Plus I've been able to get some work done again this summer, since as I mentioned before, all three of my kids are back in daycare or preschool, but Neko does turn five this month, actually tomorrow if you're listening to this episode the day it goes live. And she's supposed to start kindergarten on August 17, but as any parent with school aged children knows right now, everything is up in the air and this year honestly just feels like a wash.

Jess Dang:

Our district has already announced that school will be all remote, at least for the fall trimester. Does that suck and feel disappointing? Yes, but I also completely understand why it needs to be this way for

the safety of teachers, most importantly, and also remote kindergarten just basically sounds like a joke. Like getting a bunch of five-year-olds to sit in front of Zoom for I don't know how many hours a day, it kind of defeats the point of kindergarten to me. Yeah. So for a five-year-old, development needs to happen in person and with other kids and a nurturing teacher who they can see and touch, laugh and sing with. It'd be one thing if this happened in the middle of the year and Neko already had some friends and knew her teacher and had some sort of foundation with this group, but to start a new school that just lost their beloved principal to a different school district doesn't give me a whole lot of confidence right now.

Jess Dang:

So just like many of you, we are figuring it out. And I imagine we'll be refiguring things out all year long as the virus will remain that unwanted visitor in all of our lives. Oh yes. So I think I've accepted that this is going to be the year. If anything, I'm just like more anxious thinking about all the other families that don't have flexible schedules like I do, and can kind of make an alternative plan work. Neko is very young for kindergarten. So she could repeat preschool. There are lots of options for us, but yeah, I've just been thinking a lot about all the families that don't have these options. And if folks have any kind of ideas on how we can make it better for those families or do something, please let me know. I know I'm still trying to figure it out for our family, but I am thinking a lot about how we can be part of the solution for other families as well.

Jess Dang:

So I guess the conclusion is I'll be spending a lot more time with Neko, which I am actually looking forward to. She's been great and a lot of fun lately. We've had lots of moments of like, oh my gosh, this child is scaring me, but a lot of moments where I'm like, "Well, she's reached this point in her development where she's so curious and excited about things and just gets things." But because of that, I will need to shift a few things off of my plate for now. And I feel again so lucky that I have the flexibility to do that. What that means though is we're going to put a pause or I'm going to put a pause on our regular podcast episodes for now. We've been coming out with new podcast episodes every two weeks for the last, for this calendar year actually.

Jess Dang:

But with everything up in the air, I'm just going to take, just shift things around on my plate a little bit. There's a part of me that feels really disappointed in myself that this needs to be done because I've worked really hard to build up this podcast this last year and a half. But I also know that working parents are just going through unprecedented challenges and I just need to grant myself some slack and forgiveness and we just have to get through this time however we can. But I have every intention to be back because I have so many more ideas. So don't think that means you should unsubscribe from our feed. As you all know, there are so many other ways to hear from me. I send out an email every Tuesday. If you're not getting that, just head to any page on [cooksmarts.com](http://cooksmarts.com) and you can subscribe down by the footer.

Jess Dang:

I am also all over Instagram these days. I've actually taken over the Cook Smarts Instagram feed. It's been a long time coming. I've been avoiding it because I always just kind of avoided social media, but it has just made sense over these last couple months with everything that's going on for all that content to be coming from me. I've also been dabbling with IGTV. I know I'm so late to the game, but yeah, I kind of live like a technophobe hermit in some ways. Anyways, so you can not only hear from me there, but you

can, on IGTV, you can see this very, very tired mug of mine. And deciding to put a pause on the podcast wasn't easy, but again, every parent is making trade offs right now. It sucks, but it's the reality of our lives.

Jess Dang:

And I feel lucky that I get to make this decision and I hope to be back here very, very, very soon. So just consider this a little bit of a season ending. We're just on a seasonal break and we'll be back of the new season soon. But before our hiatus, I want to introduce you to one more Cook Smarts team member. The core Cook Smarts meal planning team is made up of four people, myself, Jess Smith, Sarah Byun, who you all met or re met through reruns the last two weeks. And then Jackie Sun. Jackie's been with Cook Smarts the longest and has helped me just in countless ways. She has the gentle heart of an artist, but the organizational skills of a project manager. And we are so lucky that she gives both those talents to us. So let's go and meet Jackie. Jackie, I'm so excited to catch up with you today and share your story with the Cook Smarts community.

Jackie Sun:

Hi Jess. Thank you so much for taking the time.

Jess Dang:

Such a pleasure. Okay. So you've been a part of the Cook Smarts story and team since 2013. Is that right?

Jackie Sun:

I don't even remember.

Jess Dang:

I think it was 2013, because that's when we launched the meal plan service and I'm pretty sure you joined like shortly after that. So was either like late 2013 or maybe even early 2014, but pretty much since the very beginning of the meal plan service.

Jackie Sun:

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I do remember it being pretty towards the beginning, just because the meal plans were just starting out. Well, because I remember the first meal plans. I wasn't there for them, but I remember how they looked like, and I was definitely one of the first employees you hired along with the graphic designer.

Jess Dang:

Yes. So what were you doing before joining Cook Smarts?

Jackie Sun:

I was actually working in restaurants as a pastry cook. Yeah. I would say that that would be like the main thing that I was working on. But right before I started Cook Smarts, I was actually doing customer service. It was like a seasonal job doing customer service at an online stationary company. And the reason why I went from pastry cook to customer service was because I've always wanted to start my own business. And whether that was going to be a restaurant or some other business, I just, I realized

that I needed to learn how to do the whole customer service thing, how to talk to people, how a business operates and everything like that.

Jackie Sun:

And customer service was just kind of the simultaneously easiest and hardest thing for me to get into just because I'm not really good with talking to people because I've been working in the kitchens all the time. And so I thought that was also an easy way to start and get out of my comfort zone and learn how to do that. So that's how I ended up at the stationary company. And that's actually where I found out about Cook Smarts.

Jess Dang:

Right. So I want to talk a little more about the pastry stuff because that's, I know it's going to be of great interest to lots of folks. So you went to pastry school, you went to culinary school for pastries.

Jackie Sun:

I went to culinary school specific, like it's just a little bit more general.

Jess Dang:

And what drew you to go to culinary school?

Jackie Sun:

Basically I became vegetarian and the food options were definitely a lot more difficult because I wasn't the one cooking at home. That would actually be my dad who cooked a lot. And even though Chinese cuisine has a lot of vegetables and stuff, it also comes with a lot of meat. And so I was having difficulty getting enough variety for my vegetarian diet. And so I was like, "Oh, I'm going to learn how to cook for myself." It was kind of a disaster. I wish that Cook Smarts existed back then to teach me how to cook. But I remember just trying to cook and figure things out and making a mess of things. But then slowly and surely just through practice and just kept going, going, going at it. I eventually got the hang of it and I really enjoyed cooking. And I wanted to get to the point that I understood more about cooking and learned the basics of cooking so that I could apply to vegetarian cooking.

Jess Dang:

Wait, so I don't think I knew this. So when you went into culinary school, you were really like trying to learn to cook for yourself? It wasn't like a larger, like I want to be a chef at a restaurant or it wasn't that sort of same goal?

Jackie Sun:

So I wanted to start my own business back then and I was actually doing fashion at that time. So I was kind of thinking in terms of like a retail store. But then when I got into cooking, I kind of realized, thought about I'm like, "Oh, it would be interesting to have like a restaurant or be in the food industry." So there was that aspect to it too. But why I started looking for schools in the first place was really to understand the more foundation, like basics of cooking so that I could do vegetarian cooking specifically.

Jess Dang:

Got it. So I mean, you grew up in the restaurant industry sort of because your dad owned restaurants growing up.

Jackie Sun:

Yes, yes. So my dad, my grandpa. And yeah.

Jess Dang:

So was he supportive of your decision to go to culinary school or kind of like, no, I don't want my daughter in the restaurant industry. Because it's such an immigrant mentality of like this is something I'm doing to help my kids so that they can have more opportunities. And I think I've seen a lot of kids who just said like, "No, actually I want to do food too." And parents, immigrant parents being not as pleased with that decision.

Jackie Sun:

Yeah. I think, well, first off my parents are very supportive in any path that we choose. So they were totally supportive when I went into culinary, when I was doing fashion, whatever, and they never said anything. But the funny thing was when I started working at Cook Smarts and I pretty much just stopped working in kitchens, my dad and my relatives were like, "Oh, that's good. You shouldn't be working in the kitchens." And it was just funny to hear it as like an aftermath versus like ... which is kind of nice because then it wasn't stopping me from doing what I wanted to do at that time.

Jess Dang:

No, that's great because I don't think my parents could hold their tongues about that. They would definitely let me know. They're like, "This is the wrong decision for you."

Jackie Sun:

But at the same time, it's kind of nice to know that in the start. I think there's a lot of stuff that I did not know going into the cooking industry and there's things they didn't tell you about that in school.

Jess Dang:

Yes. Well, you're still in the food industry with Cook Smarts, but you're clearly not working in restaurants anymore. Is there anything you miss from that work at all?

Jackie Sun:

Probably the biggest thing would be that when you're working at a kitchen or in a kitchen, you kind of just leave everything when you're done with it at the end of the day. You don't come back home and go like, "Oh, I need to respond to this email and finalize this project or whatever." And I think it's definitely a lot more apparent these days when a lot of us are working from home. When you're at home, it's hard to differentiate your time, like what is your own personal time? What is home time? What is work time and everything. And whenever I was working in a kitchen, it would just be like at the end of the day, everything's just left behind in the kitchen. I can go home and just completely get out of it.

Jess Dang:

Yeah. No, that's so true. It is one of those industries that can never like ... you cannot do remote work. You have to be in the kitchen making the food. There's not like a inbox of to do's left for you. It's just, you do it there and then you leave it there.

Jackie Sun:

Exactly. I mean, of course there's like the trade offs where when you're there, it can be pretty stressful just trying to get the food out and everything and the physical exertions, emotional, mental, everything. There's definitely trade offs, but that was a nice aspect of it that at the end of the day, you're done.

Jess Dang:

Yes. Okay. So you've been with Cook Smarts like we said early, practically from the beginning and you've had to wear so many different hats. And you've been helping me so long, I don't even remember all the hats you've worn throughout this time.

Jackie Sun:

Oh, me neither.

Jess Dang:

And yes, it's evolved as our needs have changed and your development has changed. So can you just walk us through like just some of the things that you've done and maybe highlight your favorite or even least favorite.

Jackie Sun:

Oh man. From the beginning of when you hired me, it was definitely for customer service thing, which is what I was trying to get into. But I had told you that I wanted to learn how a small business operates pretty much. So I was doing customer service. You got me into Facebook and Instagram. And then we also have the Facebook group, the Kitchen Hero Community Facebook group. So I was on there talking with community members and I think I was setting up blog posts on WordPress.

Jess Dang:

Yes. But all of this was new to you. So before we continue, I just want to tell the funny story of when you came on, the meal plan service was ... you know just a couple of months old and I was just so overwhelmed. I had hired someone to help me with development, like the coding stuff, but otherwise, I was doing basically, mainly everything else. So the recipe development, writing, entering it into the database, the photographing, customer service, social media, all of it. I was just so desperate for help when I met you, I was like, "This girl seems nice. She seems like she'll work hard and is excited to learn." And I think my hope was you were going to help me with, like you mentioned, customer service and social media. So at that time, Instagram wasn't that big. So mainly it was Facebook. And I didn't even think to ask if you were on social media and I just assumed you had a smartphone and both of those things were not true.

Jess Dang:

That was just my inexperience of hiring at that time. You were the first person I hired. And I was like, and then when you came on and you were like, "Yeah, I don't have a smartphone." I was like, "What?" But you learned fast. And I think what really impressed me was like you learn fast, also you just have like

you're very creative and also very detail oriented and you don't find those traits together often. Maybe I'm just generalizing, but I find that like, you have both like the soul of an artist, but also someone who likes to do task management and make sure everyone gets their things done and are very much deadline oriented.

Jackie Sun:

Well, yeah. I've always felt like this is weird, is this a conflict? But yeah. I mean, that was definitely something that was new to me. I mean, to be honest, I wasn't a complete noob when it came to social media. I was actually, I'm going to be dating myself right now, but I was actually on Friendster and I don't know if you remember Friendster.

Jess Dang:

Oh, I do remember Friendster. I mean, I was on Friendster for like a hot second and it was like, everybody was on it and then all of a sudden it was like people have moved on. I was like, "Okay."

Jackie Sun:

Oh, I feel like I used it for a while and then people moved on and there was like Myspace and Facebook and stuff. So I was using that social media platform for quite a while. But then I think there were some rumors about it that you would have to pay or something. And then by that time I just got bored with it. And then Facebook came around and you could only be, I forget who they targeted first, but like university students or something like that. And because I went to community college, I wasn't able to use Facebook. So it was kind of like this ... Yeah. I mean, that's why I never got into it. And I think by the time they opened it up to everyone, because I wasn't in the loop in the first place, I didn't even know that you could access probably until the interview. I'm like, "Oh, so you could actually get on Facebook?"

Jess Dang:

It's such a pleasant surprise working with you because like I said, I knew you were going to be someone who wanted to learn, who'd work hard, but because you had all these other, like this experience of culinary school and pastries, you had this artistic background. And so I immediately, very soon after you started with us doing customer service and social media, I was like, "You know what, Jackie can also help me with food styling." And that would ... because that process was, it was crazy. Cooking the food and then trying to style it and photograph it. And then having you just take on that piece with such relief. And then pretty soon I was like, "You know, Jackie can also probably photograph too." And so I just kept handing you stuff and you were just happy to do it. And it was such like you already had that sort of talent and eye, so it was super easy just to hand that off to you.

Jackie Sun:

I really enjoyed it because it was something different. Like I said, customer service stuff is really out of comfort zone, but I really, really, really love challenges and learning things just for the fun of it really. And so like the whole Facebook thing, that was very interesting to me, even though I don't really care for it, or in my personal life like to constantly be on social media. And then when you suggested that I take on like the food photography, I was definitely a lot more interested in because that's definitely more in my comfort zone with the whole creative aspect of it.

Jess Dang:

Yeah. And so over the years, yeah, things have shifted on and off your plate since you now live in Oregon and I actually no longer do the meal plans that we shifted food photography and the styling off of your plate, but you were still doing a lot of the editing for some time. But I think the big thing we had you start doing that I do wonder if this is like now your favorite thing is you are basically now like Cook Smarts project manager. You kind of are like, you have the 360 view of everything that's going on because you're the one that plugs it all into Asana, which is what we use for project management. So just tell me about that and getting into it and getting excited about it.

Jackie Sun:

Oh yeah. I do agree. That's my favorite. I love nerding out about organizational stuff and I'm always trying to figure out ways to work more productively and efficiently. So even though this is totally opposite from being creative, I just love it. It's just really, like if ever I'm tired and just sleepy or something, I can just go in Asana and organize things and I'll feel a lot better. And-

Jess Dang:

That is amazing. I love that. Because it's like I do have moments where I do enjoy it, but I also, like I am someone that would prefer to leave things open-ended and not really ... in my personal life I guess, like not really care that much about deadlines. And so I'm so glad like you'll crack the whip on us and make sure everything is being done and you just are so good at being our task master.

Jackie Sun:

Thank you. Yeah. I just really love the whole, it's like putting together a puzzle and it's a lot more complicated than if I'm doing it for myself. So again, that's kind of the challenge part of it, that's why I love it. I think sometimes it's just hard because we are a small business still. A lot of times we wear multiple hats. So in addition to managing the project tasks, I also do like editing and stuff, and it's really just a matter of trying to work out the schedule and to work on different tasks that require different focus, different energy and that's kind of part of what I do. I try to figure out how I can work a lot more efficiently to get more done in a certain amount of time.

Jess Dang:

Yeah. And I think that you've done a great job of it, of like ... and also making sure that the rest of the team we're all on task because we are a content company and I don't think people ... like nowadays, content is everywhere and people just consume content so easily. And I don't think they realize all the steps that content creators need to take in order to get that content out to you. It is such a juggle of making sure everybody is on task, but also not doing too much of any one thing and are able to actually get the piece of content we put together out.

Jackie Sun:

There's actually so many steps and sometimes it's like, I mean, goodness, you can work months on something and then you post it on Instagram and it's like, it has its 15 seconds of fame and then it's done. But there's a lot of content that we do produce that's really, really great and that they can be used at any time and that's what's awesome.

Jess Dang:

Yeah. So I think one thing that over the years that with your help, that's really helped Cook Smarts be more efficient or actually feel like we're more productive as a team is just like breaking down everything

that we do into these really like micro steps. And so it allows for anyone to know where a piece of content is at any given time, but also just makes you feel much more accomplished where you can check off these little teeny tasks that you're like, we're making progress towards that end goal.

Jackie Sun:

Oh yeah. That checking off thing really helps to feel good about what you're doing.

Jess Dang:

It is so satisfying to say like check that box. So our entire team, we meet up once a year, and everyone is pretty much now remote. You and I used to live in the Bay ... you used to live in the Bay area and so we used to meet up, but now everybody is remote, which is great. But we come together once a year as a team. And during that time, we're brainstorming our meal plans for the following year. And each year, we are just so ... even though we've added an additional a hundred meals every year and now our archives is well over a thousand meals, you have this encyclopedic knowledge of all of our Cook Smarts meals and everyone is always so impressed. So how do you do that?

Jackie Sun:

Well, to be honest, I think it's just the fact that I'm on the meal plans a lot. So for example, you and Jess our other meal planner. You guys are working with the current meal plan or like the upcoming one. But then for me, I'm constantly going back to them for our content. So I think that's why I just know it a lot better because they'll be like, "Oh, well, we need it for this blog post." So I'm constantly combing through our meal plans to look at recipes and stuff. And also having a hand in editing the photos, writing prep steps. I was always going back into the meal plans and looking at them and I think that's just why they click in my head.

Jess Dang:

Yeah. And I've also realized I'm working with you over the years that you definitely have a very much a visual memory. And I think that also just speaks to the fact that you have great visual aesthetics. It's like you have this memory of all of our meals and be like, oh, it's like that one. Remember that one? And it looked like, the photo looked like this and I'm like, "What? That was a meal we did?" I think the last five years, my memory has been wiped out because of children, like just birth and pregnancy and postpartum stuff. But yeah. I'm like, "How does Jackie remember all of this? It's amazing."

Jackie Sun:

That's actually a good point. I didn't think of it like that. But yeah, I do see it in my head, like the visual thing. And again, I think that has to do with editing photos. I don't edit the photos anymore, so I don't know. We'll see this year if I remember anything. But yeah, there is definitely that visual aspect of it where if I'm trying to think of a meal, I can see the image in my head. And I think it also helps that I used a meal plan service. So when I'm cooking and I make the dish, then I get to actually experience the dish for myself. It helps me remember the recipe even more.

Jess Dang:

Yeah. Well, I really love that you are also a customer. You didn't start off as one, but you became one. So how was that? Did you do any meal planning before that? Did you have to do it? Were you living at home? I can't remember what you were doing for your meals.

Jackie Sun:

I think I was living with my sister and my niece at that time when I started, but I did cook a lot at home before that for my family. So I cook for other people as well. And even though I didn't use Cook Smarts right when I started. But then close to the beginning, I started using it. And the whole meal planning thing is that it's actually a little different for me because I'm already accustomed to meal planning on my own. So I was able to just kind of figure that out, but I was really using a lot of the Cook Smarts recipes.

Jess Dang:

So now you're in a mixed diet household. Your partner is an omnivore, a carnivore and you're still vegetarian. So how do you meal plan for that and how do you guys make sure that like everybody has a meal that they enjoy?

Jackie Sun:

Oh my goodness. Sometimes I feel like it gets even more complicated every day, but I think just sometimes our diet changes and so it's a really like this big adapting thing. But for the most part, it is just like I'm vegetarian and he is like you said, a carnivore and he likes his meat. So I do make sure that he gets his meat. And with Cook Smarts, it's pretty easy to use it just because I can pick either the original version of the recipe or the vegetarian one. And if I do the original one, I just cook the meat on the side. And then if I do the vegetarian version, I will just choose a meat and just cook it very simply on the side and add like a vegetarian protein.

Jackie Sun:

So things like that it's pretty easy. But then the meal planning would be a little different because the portions would be different because I'll either be eating more of that like vegetarian aspect of it. The customer's meal plan are designed so that it's four servings of this amount of food. But then because I'm cooking the meat separately and then there's the vegetarian part, I have to increase the vegetarian part or something so that there's enough for both of us and leftovers, but I might eat be eating more of the vegetarian stuff because he hasn't-

Jess Dang:

Got it. I see. I see what you're saying. It's like each serving for him is like a half serving because he has another animal protein and for you it's like one and a half.

Jackie Sun:

Exactly. Yeah. So it's trying to like figure that out that can be complicated. And there are sometimes that we kind of discover, me more so than him that the body doesn't process gluten very well recently. So now it's like introducing a more gluten free aspect to it. So the meal planning can be quite difficult. And especially also now with being in lockdown and everything, I've actually just taken the route of one of the Cook Smarts' writers, Leila. She wrote a blog post on how to grocery shop when you don't want to meal plan. I've pretty much just been following that. And I would just buy like two weeks worth of groceries and then I'll go on to Cook Smarts the archives and just look up and ingredients to see what to make versus actually using a meal plan.

Jess Dang:

No, and I think, well, you clearly have the foundation where you can easily do that. And clearly between the archives and the fact that you are a very adept cook, that's not a problem.

Jackie Sun:

And beyond the meal plan service, there's definitely like all those Cook Smarts resources that they're like the basics of cooking. Again, that's like, that's what I went to culinary school for. And I wish that Cook Smarts was there when I started just because we cover so many basics that's so helpful. I actually, I may be Chinese, but I learned to stir fry from Cook Smarts.

Jess Dang:

Oh really? That's great. That makes me so happy to hear. You should tell your dad that and make him feel bad. Be like, "Why didn't you teach me how to stir fry?"

Jackie Sun:

Well, because that's the thing with like my dad, and when he cooked at home and I would just watch him. I was like, "Well, how do you do this and how do you do that? Or what are you using? How much do you use?" And he's like, "Oh, you just put some of this and some of that and a little bit of this." And I was like, "This isn't helping me."

Jess Dang:

Yeah, no, I think, I don't know with like my parents, they were some of it it's like, they're not natural teachers. And I think that's a bit of an issue. My dad was also in the restaurant industry. He wasn't a cook, but he more did like front of the house stuff, but I think he's just had no interest. At the end of the day, he didn't cook growing up. He was like, "I spend all day in a restaurant. I'm not going to be cooking." And he was not even around during the dinner time to be cooking. And so, yeah, I think maybe I definitely didn't learn to stir fry until I was on my own.

Jackie Sun:

I thought your dad cooked at home though.

Jess Dang:

He does now. He's only started cooking at home since he left the restaurant industry. Now that they're retired and it's just my mom and him, he does all the cooking.

Jackie Sun:

Oh, so he never cooked when he was working at a restaurant.

Jess Dang:

If anything, I think he really has learned to cook in the last like 15 years, like 10 to 15 years. And he and I are very, like I am exactly like my dad. We're both tinkers and it's the same. I think if all my kids asked me for a recipe, I'd just be like, "We'll just do a little bit of this and a little of that." I'm like, "Why can't you figure it out?"

Jackie Sun:

Me too. Me too. I think I would do that too.

Jess Dang:

Yeah, I can so see that. So I think he and I are very similar in that way. And he loves watching all the cooking shows on YouTube and just like playing around with stuff. So he's very adventurous and a very eager learner. And so I think his cooking skills has really improved in his last like decade since he's taken over cooking at home.

Jackie Sun:

Oh, that is so awesome because my dad's doing that too, where he's been watching, I guess it's maybe like all these available videos nowadays, but yeah. He's making naan at home.

Jess Dang:

Wow. Yeah. I think there's something also like yeah, Asian men and their iPads and screens. Like my dad, you just cannot get him off a screen. He just wants to be like ... he's got like his YouTube cooking channel that he's watching and then TV in the background. And then he's scrolling through his phone on WeChat with all of his brothers and sisters. And so yeah.

Jackie Sun:

Yes. Exactly.

Jess Dang:

Yeah. Okay. So you were a bit at a crossroads before starting Cook Smarts where you wanted to maybe learn these business skills. So did you expect to still be working with us seven years later? But do you feel like you've gotten skills to be able to start your business? Which you have, so let's talk about that too.

Jackie Sun:

Yeah. Oh, has it really been seven years?

Jess Dang:

Yeah. Yeah. It has. I know. Time flies when you're having many hats to wear.

Jackie Sun:

Yeah. So wow. Seven years. I definitely didn't-

Jess Dang:

That means you cannot leave me. You cannot leave. Once you're in for seven years, you're in for life.

Jackie Sun:

I'm stuck here. No, but then I honestly didn't think that I would be here this long because whenever I was working in a restaurant, I always just kind of ... like they never lasted for more than a year sometimes just because I would get bored. If it's the same menu over and over again, and you're cooking the same thing every day, it gets very boring or like my physical or emotional health was on the line. And so then I would have to leave, but with Cook Smarts, I've been given a lot of different

challenges that I think has kept me very motivated to keep going. So that's really great. I really appreciate that. And for starting my own business. So-

Jess Dang:

Tell us about that. Tell us what you're doing now. Right now you're part time with Cook Smarts which is great. It was like, I remember when you made that shift, it's been like a year when you went part time and we were a little bit scared, but also not. I just felt like you were ready and our company was at a point where we could handle losing half of your time. It was just, I think a seamless transition.

Jackie Sun:

Yeah. It seemed to work. I mean, there was ... I was very like, it's like I've been with you guys so long that I was like, "It's okay. We'll just figure things out as it goes," and it's worked out fine and it's still working out fine, which is great. But when I mentioned earlier that I was thinking about starting opening a restaurant or whatever. But overall it was just, I just wanted to start up my own business. I love being able to create something from scratch. And I think it's just always kind of like been in me to be an entrepreneur. So I decided to focus on actually my first love, which is drawing. And so I wanted to kind of create a business that's based on art. I wasn't really sure what I was doing. So even though my shop launched about nine months ago, I feel like it's been a work in progress for a long time as I was just trying to figure out what to do.

Jackie Sun:

And I think about three years ago, I really started focusing on it and trying to figure out how I could make it a business. And I was able to take a lot of what I learned at Cook Smarts to start what I was doing. Now it has really been streamlined a lot being able to open my shop and create products that I could sell. And I sell, well, my goal is to really focus on illustrations. So in the shop, you'll just find products that have my illustrations such as stickers, magnets, postcards, prints and more to be added soon, hopefully.

Jackie Sun:

So it's definitely more illustration based. I'm not trying to be like a sticker company or anything, but really just try to hone my skills as an artist. And I actually never really thought I'd get to this point because when I was trying to figure out the business part of it, I was like, "No one's going to want to buy my art because I'm terrible." And I was like, "I can't do this." And it was really just through practice and not giving up that I'm able to get to where I am today. And you can even see it in my art like how much I've grown in that aspect.

Jess Dang:

Well, it's been so fun following along on Instagram and then watching you open the shop and all of that. And it's yeah. So where do you get your illustration ideas from?

Jackie Sun:

One way that I really love to get illustration ideas is from creative challenges. There's always prompts. I feel like I've been saying this a lot, but yeah, I really do like challenges. So of course I'm gravitated towards that. And so whenever there's prompts, it really helps to condense your ideas because you know there's that saying, something like creativity likes constraint or something like that? Yeah. So I really like to be able to have that little confinement so that you can just focus on an idea and then think

about more about how it is. So what I usually do is that the first idea I get, when I want to draw something, I never draw all that. I actually let it sit and ruminate in my head for sometimes like days or months until I come up with the second idea or third or fourth. And that's the one I usually draw because I like to try to push myself and create something that is aligned with my goals, which is to tell a story visually,

Jess Dang:

What do you need to do for yourself like to could get yourself in the mental state to create?

Jackie Sun:

Oh, it's actually, what I've noticed is when I was first starting to get back into drawing, it was really hard for me to get started. Like I just tried to figure out all these methods and all these productivity hacks to get myself into drawing. And I think right now it's just, I've gotten to a point where I feel off whenever I don't draw for the day. So I don't even need to really get myself into a certain head space to draw. I just do it because I feel the need to, and I think it just came from days and days of just making myself practice and draw and get into that.

Jess Dang:

Oh, that's so great. Was there a time where it felt more like a chore and then it just stopped at some point? And do you know when that happened or how that happened?

Jackie Sun:

Oh, that's a good question. I think it's really understanding why it would feel like a chore. And a lot of times to me it was like because there was some kind of pressure like, okay, I have pressure to get this perfect because I'm trying to post it somewhere or it was for somebody. So I wanted it to look right. So by stripping away any kind of pressures or obligations, it actually made it a lot easier to draw. So one of the things that does still have that kind of pressure is whenever I'm designing for products. So because that has to look a certain way, it's not just like a sketch. So whenever that happens, what I do is I let myself sketch first and just to get into the zone of like, oh yeah, I can get messy. I can get ... this can be really ugly and no one has to see it at all. And just knowing that is easy to move on to the next step of, okay, well now I'm a little warmed up. I can go and create something that needs to be more perfect.

Jess Dang:

Yeah. I think that's the most important hurdle, like the mental hurdle for creators is just to be like, you just have to start even though it's not going to be perfect at the beginning. And I think Ira Glass, there's a video I've seen of him. It's just like a minute and a half of him talking about the creation process for him. He does This American Life the podcast, and he's been doing it for, I don't know, a long time, but it's just like, you just have to start creating. And even though you know it's going to be bad, but when you look back on your early work and you're like, "Oh my God, that's so bad." But you just, everyone has to start somewhere.

Jackie Sun:

That's true. Yeah. I mean, I know that what I draw today maybe in a month I'm going to look back at it and be like, "That was really bad." So you really do have to start somewhere. And I think taking the pressure off of yourself in whatever way you can, like you don't have to post everything on Instagram

that, everything that you make. Just have something for yourself and that really lets you create freely and easily.

Jess Dang:

On the business side of things, what has been helpful from your time at Cook Smarts in translating that into building a business for yourself now?

Jackie Sun:

Well, first off I think the whole, we talked about this, the content creation is like knowing the process, how we do it for Cook Smarts has allowed me to create this stuff, like content for my business Wondershins a lot easier and understand the steps. Right. So instead of like, I feel like if I didn't work at Cook Smarts, I would've been like, "Oh, well I need to create this piece. I'm going to try and do it." And then I'm just going to get so overwhelmed. But then when you have the process, when you can break down all the tasks, it starts to seem a lot more doable. I'm like, "Okay, well now I know that I need to share this on this social media platform and you need to share it here and really be a lot smarter about how things are being promoted or shared." And I think that's been really helpful. And even though I don't work on the marketing stuff for Cook Smarts, just being able to see how you do it has been really helpful as well.

Jess Dang:

Oh, that's so nice because I still don't know how I'm doing it. I'm still figuring that out.

Jackie Sun:

Oh, that's great. That's great. I think that's another thing. Things are always going to be changing, right? Like the platforms that use, the technology and just how customers behave. So you always have to adapt and learn.

Jess Dang:

Yes. It's true. Well, Jackie, it was so fun to chat with you and kind of take a walk down memory lane and just, I'm so proud of everything that you've done for Cook Smarts and now for yourself through Wondershins. So just remind people where they can find your Etsy shop and your Instagram.

Jackie Sun:

So Instagram, well, pretty much everywhere. It's Wondershins, W-O-N-D-E-R S-H-I-N-S. And on Etsy it'll be wondershins.etsy.com where you can find cute stickers, magnets, postcards, prints, lots of good things. And yeah. Thank you for having me Jess and for employing me.

Jess Dang:

Yes. Well, it's been my pleasure and you've been such a help, such a great help. I don't know what I would have done in the last seven years without you. Before I let you go, I'm going to make you go through our rapid fire round if that's okay.

Jackie Sun:

Okay. Yeah, that sounds great.

Jess Dang:

Alright. Your most important kitchen tool.

Jackie Sun:

Most important kitchen tool is a frying pan.

Jess Dang:

Your go to breakfast.

Jackie Sun:

Apple with peanut butter.

Jess Dang:

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

Jackie Sun:

Ramen.

Jess Dang:

What's one meal you never get sick of?

Jackie Sun:

Ramen.

Jess Dang:

Yes. For those ramen lovers, there's a lot of ramen illustrations on Jackie's shop. So go get that.

Jackie Sun:

Yeah. Any kind of noodle soup basically. I think that's always a winner for me.

Jess Dang:

One ingredient that you always have in your pantry.

Jackie Sun:

Oh, that's a good one. Soy sauce.

Jess Dang:

A guilty pleasure food or not.

Jackie Sun:

Cool. Flaming hot Cheetos.

Jess Dang:

Have you been eating a lot of those in quarantine?

Jackie Sun:

I might've gotten a bag or two and I'm trying to be better about it now.

Jess Dang:

I think I've heard that the sales of flaming hot Cheetos has been just like through the roof.

Jackie Sun:

Oh really? I know I've seen a lot of different flaming hot products lately that I want to try, but I'm also trying to be good about not getting one every couple of weeks.

Jess Dang:

Yeah. Your favorite life optimization or organization app. I think I know the answer to this.

Jackie Sun:

Oh, would that be like Asana or?

Jess Dang:

That could be Asana. Yeah, whatever you use that you think has really optimized or organized your life.

Jackie Sun:

Oh yes. I like Asana and I recently started using Tangerine, which is great. It's a habit and mood tracker.

Jess Dang:

Oh, Tangerine. Is it a mobile app?

Jackie Sun:

Yes.

Jess Dang:

Okay. We'll have to check that out. Hardest thing you've done

Jackie Sun:

Probably starting the business. That was definitely hard.

Jess Dang:

Proudest thing you've done.

Jackie Sun:

Also starting a business, but I guess also, I don't know if this counts, but also becoming an aunt and I love my niece, so I'm very, very proud to be her aunt.

Jess Dang:

Well, she is so lucky to have you. I've seen over the years many pictures of her.

Jackie Sun:

Oh yes. I share a lot.

Jess Dang:

Last book that you loved.

Jackie Sun:

Oh man, this is really good. I'm going to have to go with The Mistborn series by Brandon Sanderson. I think I'm cheating there because that's like three books.

Jess Dang:

The Mistborn series by Brandon Sanderson. Is it like, is it a fantasy, trilogy type of-

Jackie Sun:

Yes. Fantasy. I love fantasy books, but yeah. So it's three books. The first, I don't even know if it's called The Mistborn Trilogy, but the first book's called Mistborn and Brandon Sanderson has just been my favorite writer since I discovered him the last year. I think last year was a year of Brandon Sanders for me. I've just read nothing but Brandon Sanderson.

Jess Dang:

All right. I've never gotten to a fantasy book so I'm going to try. Maybe that is the one for me. I've tried many and I'm like, I can't get into it, but I will try.

Jackie Sun:

Yeah. Or if you just wanted one single one, you can read Elantris which is also really good.

Jess Dang:

Elantris. Okay. The only fantasy I've been into is really Harry Potter and I can't wait for the kids to be ready for that.

Jackie Sun:

Oh my God. I love Harry Potter.

Jess Dang:

I know you do. Last TV show that you loved.

Jackie Sun:

Oh man. I just finished watching Avatar: The Last Airbender and I really love it.

Jess Dang:

I haven't even heard of that. There are just so many shows these days.

Jackie Sun:

Yeah. I mean, this one was like an old animated show in Nickelodeon. I think it was like in 2009 or something, but I never watched it when it came out, but Netflix just started having Avatar: The Last Airbender. So I was able to binge watch it all. And it's just, it's amazing.

Jess Dang:

And this one is just for you. The last thing you drew.

Jackie Sun:

I drew an onigiri.

Jess Dang:

What is that? Onigiri?

Jackie Sun:

Oh, onigiri. Is that how you say it? Onigiri.

Jess Dang:

I don't know actually. I need to ask someone, like a Japanese friend. How do you-

Jackie Sun:

Honestly, I think I'm going to. Now I'm wondering how to say that properly. But yeah, I think I just doodled it literally right at first just while we were setting up.

Jess Dang:

So for those people who don't know it, I say onigiri. Anyone that knows that that's wrong or right or actually the right pronunciation, please let us know. But it's just a sushi rice that's wrapped in seaweed, but then there's often fillings inside like pickled plum or salmon or yeah, but I love getting them. They're really.

Jackie Sun:

Me too. I've been craving them so-

Jess Dang:

Well, Jackie, it was so fun to chat with you. I hope you guys are doing okay in quarantine and yeah. I'm just so proud of everything that you've done for Cook Smarts and for your new business.

Jackie Sun:

Thank you so much. Well, thank you. I'm so happy to be part of the Cook Smarts team still. So thank you so much.

Jess Dang:

Getting to share Jackie's story totally makes me feel like a proud big sister. I have been so lucky to get to work with her and bug her all the time with all of my random thoughts and impulsive ideas. And she totally helped me reign it in with her project management skills or like actually puts it into a productive way by making it into tasks and making sure that we actually execute on all the crazy things I think about. I've seen her grow a lot, working for Cook Smarts and now launch her own business. So please make sure to follow her on Instagram and visit her totally adorable Etsy shop Wondershins. If you love to cats, Boba tea and ramen noodles, you will find many and novelty items to purchase and don't we all need some cute novelties right now? I know that I do.

Jess Dang:

And as for hiring, I'm not going to lie. I totally lucked out with Jackie considering as I mentioned in the podcast, how untargeted and unspecific my interview process was at that time. It's gotten so much better. And if you listen to my chats with Jess and Sarah, you'll know that my application and then interview process was much more refined at that point. But a lot of like running and growing a business just also comes from gut feelings. Most of the time when my gut feeling was not a good one and I went against it, it didn't turn out great. I'm not going to lie, when I interviewed Jackie, there was definitely a sense of desperation like I cannot keep working by myself like this, but there was also like a feeling of just comfort when I met her. She had been recommended to me by someone I knew. So that helped a lot.

Jess Dang:

But overall, I could tell that she was someone who was dependable, hungry to learn and also just a kind person. And those are always traits you want in people you hire regardless of the position. So right now Cook Smarts has a core meal planning team of four employees, including myself, and then about a dozen freelancers. And kindness is a trait I've looked for in every single person we brought in because that is one of the core values of our company and the product, the community and the team we want to create. So many of the hard skills can be taught, but you want the people you surround yourself with and trust your business with to be kind. For those who have any questions about growing a business or a dream, you can always reach out to me @CookSmarts or my personal Instagram, which is @JessDangCS or Cook Smarts' Instagram, which I'm paying a lot more attention to these days.

Jess Dang:

And you can find me a lot more frequently is I'm of course just at Cook Smarts. I know I'm still figuring it all out. Things are changing all the time and believe me, this pandemic has thrown so many curve balls at businesses, but just like with all this stuff with schools, we are all just figuring it out and just taking it day by day. Okay. So speaking of our business, when you support us, our small business, you are supporting a great team of real people who really care a lot about the work they do and the people they serve. So if you're in need of meal planning help and still haven't signed up for a trial at Cook Smarts, head to [cooksmarts.com](https://www.cooksmarts.com) for a free trial. We really do make canceling easy to do. And if you cancel before your trial ends, you will not be charged a cent and please spread the word whether you are a member or not.

Jess Dang:

But before we go, I wanted to share a recent review from [hithere726469392](#). "The Cook Smarts podcast is an incredible resource. Cooking, delicious food at home is a priority for our family and Cook Smarts has completely revolutionized our meal planning, shopping, and cooking process. I'm a Cook Smarts

subscriber, and the podcast is full of incredible tips and information to make the process even better and easier. I don't even know how I did it before Cook Smarts." So hithere726469392, you can also get a Cook Smarts tote bag for your wonderful review. So please reach out to us at [hello@cooksmarts.com](mailto:hello@cooksmarts.com). So if you want to support our podcast, help us grow, maybe be the winner of fabulous tote bag or a face mask actually. You have a choice of a face mask or a tote bag at this time because we are selling face masks through Red Bubble and Society6.

Jess Dang:

So you can win either one of those if we read your review in a future episode. So please head to Apple podcast, throw us some stars, let others know why they should be listening to this podcast. You're stuck at home anyway. So helping us out would be a very productive way to spend five minutes. And even though we might not have a new episode for some time, there are over 30 episodes for someone new to catch up with. So pass us along to a friend who needs some kitchen help during this quarantine, which probably is every friend you have. So you have no excuses that you don't know anybody that could use some of our Cook Smarts knowledge. You can tell them I learned so much about flavoring from Cook Smarts. Make sure to check out their flavoring episode or recommend any of your past favorites. We'll be back with a new episode as soon as we can, but until then, thank you for letting us join you in your kitchen and wherever you're listening to this podcast. And until next time, happy cooking from your kitchen cheerleader.