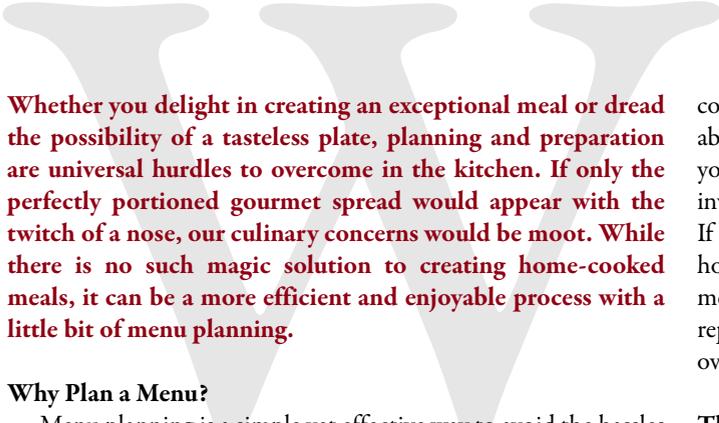




Making a Menu

Set Yourself Up for Success in the Kitchen by Preparing a Menu Plan



Whether you delight in creating an exceptional meal or dread the possibility of a tasteless plate, planning and preparation are universal hurdles to overcome in the kitchen. If only the perfectly portioned gourmet spread would appear with the twitch of a nose, our culinary concerns would be moot. While there is no such magic solution to creating home-cooked meals, it can be a more efficient and enjoyable process with a little bit of menu planning.

Why Plan a Menu?

Menu planning is a simple yet effective way to avoid the hassles and disappointments in the kitchen that result in nights of ordering takeout or microwaving frozen dinners. Train yourself to think of restaurant dining as a special occasion and you will be more inclined to prepare meals at home. Thinking a few simple steps ahead will encourage healthier meals, maximize your free time, save money, and minimize food waste.

Where to Start?

Assess your situation: Your approach should vary depending on what is on your figurative life plate, so start by assessing your food habits, needs, interests, and schedule. If you are an overscheduled parent or homemaker, you might need to account for a month-long schedule or pay special attention to stretching your dollar. If cooking for one person, you might focus on a single elaborate meal per week and shop more frequently. As a basic rule, take one substantial shopping trip per week. This lends well to weekly plans and will ensure that your produce stays fresh, that you have time for new ideas, and that you can take advantage of what's on sale that week.

Research: Before you embark on your weekly supermarket sweep, take some time to research. Start by sorting through your recipe box, flipping through the pages of any cookbooks or magazines you have around the house, and filing all interesting recipes for your future menus. Make a special section for practical goulash-type recipes for those days when you feel like deviating from your plan or when it's time to use up stray ingredients in the refrigerator.

Find inspiration: Another option is to derive menu inspiration from individual ingredients rather than structured recipes. Take a casual trip to the market and browse for items that you naturally gravitate toward or that excite you. Then, research some simple recipes that utilize those specific ingredients. This technique helps curb impulse buys, which often end up ultimately in the trash can.

When creating a menu plan, it's important to keep your

cooking style in mind. If you just need some guidance, it's reasonable to experiment; however, if making food is always a chore for you, be realistic about the amount of effort you are willing to invest and choose recipes with few ingredients or little prep time. If planning seems like too much effort for daily meals, start by hosting a plated dinner party for friends and family. Create a menu plan for this special evening and think ahead about how to repurpose some of the same ingredients for your personal meals over the next few nights.

Think Seasonally

The reemergence of the farm-to-table tradition forces us to think about where our food is coming from. Contribute to the local economy while encouraging a varied and nutritious menu in your household by planning your menu around local seasonal produce. Farmers' markets peddle the best of the local and are an excellent place to pick up wholesome ingredients for the week's menus.

Alternatively, plan for what you are given. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a convenient and supportive way to obtain local ingredients. In essence, although plans vary, you purchase a share with a farmer and in exchange receive one basket of produce a week throughout the season. This instant access to unknown and unexpected produce forces more creativity with menu planning. For a guide to your local farm-fresh organizations and some tips on cooking with produce, check out www.LocalHarvest.org. Have a list of reliable recipes on hand so you don't waste time when your CSA share arrives.

Unfortunately, fresh fruits and vegetables turn quickly. When cooking for one person, produce is often wasted, and eating too much of it at once can spoil your taste for the item. Consider an organic produce delivery service that can provide smaller portions than CSAs, or make meals with fresh veggies for a couple of days and then cook them into a dish to last and create a new flavor.

Extra Encouragement

For those who remain a little lost in the kitchen, look for helpful resources such as free downloadable menu planning calendars, templates, and recipe cards to get on the right track. For those of us who stumble over complex recipes, it is simple with handy guides such as *The I Love Trader Joe's Cookbook*, which identifies specific item combinations at the popular store to make everything from Fat Tire Flammade to Grilled Flatbread Salad.

If nothing else, make your menu something to be excited about. Have at least one delicious meal to look forward to every day so even if cooking doesn't thrill you, eating your favorite foods will. *Written by Maresa Giovannini. YHL*