

Surviving the 7-day mania of meal planning

by LISA A. KAMINSKI

To make life easier, some people follow the once-a-month meal planning and cooking approach, where you buy, prepare and cook a month's worth of meals in one day and then freeze them until you need them.

I am not one of those people.

I like the *idea* of stockpiling 30 days of ready-to-heat dinners in my freezer like an end-of-the-world underground bunker. But that would require *way* more planning than I'm capable of. And a Costco-size freezer. Besides, even my best-laid plans usually fall apart with my family's hectic schedule. Top that off with the typical craziness of the meal-prep witching hour and you can understand why I shy away from once-a-month cooking.

But I figured I could handle *seven days* of meal planning. Weeknights would run smoother if I planned what to make for dinner and stocked my kitchen with all the necessary ingredients. It sounded simple enough.

But the reality of meal planning took a turn for the worse. My carefully crafted meal plan morphed into a meal *ban*, one dreadful dinner at a time.

Meatless Monday

I make a no-fail Vegetable Soup for Veggie-Haters, falsely believing my take-no-prisoners recipe will convert my meat-loving-men to healthier eating at least once a week. My carnivore clan (less than thrilled with the lack of a dead animal in their entrée) immediately start dissecting their soup. My husband stealthily pushes all the carrots to one side hoping no one notices. In between looks of disgust, the boys pick out the onions while asking, "Ew! What's that green stuff floating next to the potato?" I fudge and say the chopped kale is parsley. After a few spoonfuls, my finicky teens push their half-empty bowls away and claim they're both "full" as they grab a couple more slices of bread and bolt upstairs. *Day One: Fail.*



Planning out a week of meals can save you a lot of time...if your family cooperates.

Tasty Tuesday

Tonight, I tempt taste buds with gourmet cuisine, taking my cue straight from The Barefoot Contessa herself. I channel my inner Ina Garten as I whip together an elegant meal of chicken with Asiago cheese and basil, oven-roasted dill carrots, and penne pasta with roasted red peppers, garlic and sun-dried tomatoes. It's piping hot and ready to serve---until family plans go awry. My husband Kevin needs to work late, my older son Trevor has to help with a group project at school and my younger son Parker has his soccer practice rescheduled. After an extra two hours of keeping dinner warm, my epicurean entrée and sumptuous side dishes meld into charred chow. *I'm 0-2.*

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Win-them-back Wednesday

I attempt to appease everyone's picky palate with a family favorite: a crockpot full of simmering chili. I toss a couple pounds of beef in the slow-cooker, add some chopped onions, herbs and diced tomatoes and we're good to go. Eight harried hours later, we walk through the door, anticipating the spicy

aroma of chili to welcome us home. Strangely, we smell nothing. I head to the kitchen and see the cord dangling next to the crockpot like a lifeless snake. *Rats!* I forgot to plug it in before we all left today. The opposite of last night's overcooked dinner, tonight's meal sits raw and bloody in my cold crockpot, practically mooing when I crack open the lid. I grab a bag of tortilla chips, dump salsa in a bowl and dub it a Tex-Mex appetizer. *I'm rotten at meal planning.*

Thankless Thursday

After three failed attempts, I'm cursing the meal plan and popping open cans of condensed soup, wondering if anyone will even notice it's not homemade. In an attempt to make me feel better, Parker and Trevor both remark how delicious the soup is and encourage me to "make this more often." Yeah, I'll hold on tight to that Campbell family recipe. Good grief, why do I even try?

Free-for-all Friday

With everyone on a different schedule tonight, I ditch the idea of a home-cooked meal together. Trevor eats at the mall food court with his friend before they see a movie. Parker eats a PB&J in the car on the way to his soccer game. Kevin (if he remembers to bring cash) will eat a concession-stand hot dog at halftime. I chug some water, grab a cheese stick and pop a few pretzels in my mouth. *My meal plan is dying a slow and painful death.*

Shameful Saturday

By the weekend, the boys are fighting, Kevin's cursing his way through a plumbing project and I'm crying into my cookbook as I throw frozen fish sticks at the kids because I'm

ready to give up cooking. I run for the front door, pretending not to hear their pleas for "just one more chance."

Sanity-saving Sunday

Tonight I'm dining alone with a cup of hot tea and my head buried in a copy of Erma Bombeck's "Aunt Erma's Cope Book," reminding myself I cannot divorce my family or just opt-out of dinner for the rest of my life. I eye the stack of menus on the counter and realize it's time we start supporting the small businesses in our community. I pick up the phone, dial and hear the words that bring joy to my ban-the-meal-plan heart: "China Wok, may I help you?" **liv**

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