



20 Meal-Prep Tips From People Who've Been Doing It For Years

By Megan Edwards
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Meal prepping can save you tons of time on cooking throughout the week—that is, if you know how to do it properly. From planning out your meals, to chopping produce, to ensuring leftovers don't go to waste, there are lots of simple tricks that can make your time in the kitchen easy and efficient. From the Forks Over Knives perspective, there are four stages of [meal prepping](#):

- **Planning** out your meals for the week ahead.
- **Shopping** for your ingredients.
- **Preparing** complete recipes or some of their components: chopping produce, batch-cooking grains/legumes/soups, and getting any other elements ready to use later in the week.
- **Putting it all together** as you assemble the full meals.

We asked several plant-based meal-prep veterans—including a chef, a noted author/influencer, and experienced meal preppers in the FOK community—for their best advice on making each of these four stages simpler. Try out a few of their clever hacks to streamline your meal-prep process and turn the chore of cooking into an enjoyable activity!

Menu-Planning Tips

Our meal-prep pros offered their best advice on how to create a weekly menu that minimizes extra work and maximizes flavor.

1. Start with familiar recipes, and build

your repertoire from there.

Prepping four or five brand-new recipes right off the bat can be overwhelming, especially if you aren't sure whether they'll turn out delicious or a disaster. The No. 1 rule to follow as you begin your meal-prep journey: Build your culinary expertise gradually.

“Begin with recipes you know really well,” says Chef Dan Marek, director of plant-based culinary and content development at Rouxbe Online Culinary School. “If you have a repertoire of four or five recipes that you know how to execute, you'll always be able to make a reliable, tasty meal. Each week I would suggest that you try to learn a new one—that way the longer you do this, the more recipes you have at your fingertips. With more recipes under your belt, you can really start to mix and match them each week.”

2. Plan recipes with similar ingredients.

A surefire way to get intimidated by meal prepping is to cram your fridge full of more ingredients than you can realistically manage. Simplify your workload (and your grocery list) by grouping your weekly recipes around similar ingredients.

“I might plan to make Buffalo cauliflower tacos and an eggplant dish with Israeli couscous one week,” Marek explains. “The couscous dish might have diced red pepper in it and the tacos might have red pepper slices in it. By planning multiple recipes for the week that have the same ingredients, you won't have to chop up a bunch of different things at the same time. It makes the prep and cleanup process easier.”

3. Pick a culinary theme for the week.

Not sure how to find recipes with similar ingredients? Choosing a culinary theme for the week is a great way to group meals that have complementary flavor profiles and use a lot of the same components.

“I personally love to do a Mexican-inspired week that will use lots of fresh cilantro and lime juice or an Italian-inspired week that will use fresh basil, parsley, and

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lemon juice,” says Kristen Hong, author of *Fridge Love* and creator of the [Hello Nutritarian](#) wellness blog.



4. Using online recipes? Always read the comments.

While it's usually a wise decision to stay away from the comment section of most online platforms, it can be helpful to look at the comments from other home cooks when you're using online recipes. You'll often find lots of interesting ideas for ingredient substitutions, cooking methods, or serving suggestions from people who've already done it. You might even find a variation of the recipe that will speak to your taste buds more than the original version!

“I always read the comments for insight and tips on tweaking a dish to my liking,” says Julie Stubbins, who uses [Forks Meal Planner](#) to plan and prep her meals.

5. Use technology to your advantage.

If multiple people in your household do the shopping or offer input on the week's menu, there are several smartphone apps that will ensure communication around meal prepping goes smoothly.

“My wife and I will make a list on our phones of what we want to eat, typically in the [iPhone] Notes app because they're shareable between the two of us,” says Marek. “We can brainstorm recipe ideas even if we aren't together and get a better sense of what our food for the whole week will look like.”

There are also grocery list-sharing apps (such as [Out of Milk](#)) that are updated in real time so multiple people can shop at the same time while ensuring that you don't purchase duplicate ingredients.

Shopping Tips

No matter if you love perusing the aisles of [Trader Joe's](#) or dread going to the store, these tips will help you make the most of your shopping sessions.

1. Order groceries for pickup or delivery instead of going to the store.

Do you find yourself aimlessly wandering supermarket aisles even when you have an organized grocery list? Staying out of the store altogether can save you time, energy, and money.

“When possible, I order my groceries for pickup,” says Tiffany Mitchell, a Forks Meal Planner subscriber since 2019. “Many of the stores that offer this service will waive the pickup fee if you order over a certain amount, and a week's worth of groceries almost always puts you above the minimum. The time it saves me to not have to go grocery shopping is time I get back to do other things (like cook!). Also, the fact that I'm not physically in the store prevents me from impulse buys that would otherwise throw me off track with what I have planned for the week.”

2. Stock up on pantry staples, and buy in bulk when it makes sense.

“Keep some basic ingredients on hand at all times,” suggests Stubbins. “My favorites are maple syrup, tahini, smoked paprika, and a variety of nuts.”

Even though your meals will rotate each week, it's a smart idea to have a generous supply of frequently used condiments, spices, legumes, and grains so you can easily throw together a quick meal if your prep plans go out the window. Bulk-buying canned beans, tomatoes, tomato sauce, and other essentials that have a long shelf life can save you money and time in the long run.

3. Get creative about hard-to-find ingredients.

If you find a recipe that looks delicious but you aren't sure where to find some of the ingredients, turn to the interwebs for a little help.

“Be flexible and don't let hard-to-find ingredients deter

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you,” advises Mitchell. “Some ingredients (especially in smaller cities) may be harder to find, but when that’s the case, I simply Google a substitute. You can do the same thing if there’s a certain ingredient you don’t like and you want to swap it out. The important thing is that the recipe tastes good and you’ll eat it!”

Hands-On Prepping Tips

This stage of meal prepping is where the magic happens. Learn how to transform your raw ingredients into ready-to-use building blocks that will help you create satisfying meals in less time.

1. Create a *mise en place* in your fridge.

If there’s just one meal prep tip you implement from this list, it should be this one. Creating a mini *mise en place*—a French culinary phrase that means “putting in place”—will set you up for a productive week of cooking that requires very little work when it comes time to assemble the full meals.

“The first thing you should do after getting home from the store is get out your vegetables, do a quick wash, and then cut them all up into usable-sized pieces for the week,” Marek suggests. “A restaurant is able to create a dish in just 10 minutes because they have all the individual ingredients chopped up and ready to go in a line. You can do the same thing in your kitchen. So if you spend an hour and half chopping veggies, marinating tofu, and blending sauces then you only need 15 minutes on Tuesday night to pull them out and create your meal.”



2. Batch-cook in your Instant Pot or crockpot.

If two or more recipes for the week include the same

grain or bean, make a big batch so you only have to prep that ingredient once for the entire week. If you don’t have a pressure cooker or slow cooker, you can always batch cook in a regular pot on the stove!

“The [Instant Pot](#) is a huge time saver for lentils, beans, and rice,” says Carrie McBride, who’s been using Forks Meal Planner to help chart out her meals each week since 2020. “I also try to make a soup, chili, or stew every Sunday. Sometimes that’s our Sunday evening meal, but it will often be eaten alongside a salad at lunch or as a backup meal in case [other] leftovers don’t go as far as expected.”

3. Use extra fruit and veggies for easy weekday snacking.

Meal prep doesn’t only include sit-down dinners: The technique can be useful for creating grab-and-go snacks that you can enjoy between your main meals.

“I like to clean and prep fruits and veggies in Mason jars for the coming week,” says McBride. “My teenagers are much more likely to eat fruit if it is ready to go. Things like peppers, carrots, broccoli, and cauliflower make great snacks, and anything not eaten for a snack during the week can go into a stir-fry or the end-of-the-week soup.”

“Mini bell peppers, baby carrots, celery with peanut butter, and fruit are fantastic plant-based snacks and great sources of long-lasting energy that you can ‘graze’ on throughout the day,” adds Mitchell. “One of my absolute favorites is frozen chunks of mango. Frozen fruit is more economical if you’re trying to save money, and easy to buy in bags from most grocery stores.”

4. Position time-sensitive ingredients at the front of the fridge.

Tired of having your leafy greens wilt in the veggie drawer before you can use them? If you place the most perishable ingredients in a dedicated section of your fridge or pantry, then you’re less likely to forget about them before it’s too late.

“I live by the motto ‘front of fridge, front of mind,’” says Hong. “The main idea is to showcase your food by pulling your fresh produce out of the crisper drawers and placing it eye-level in your fridge. Use clear glass jars or

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containers so you can easily see what you have available. This prevents food waste because your produce isn't getting pushed back and forgotten in your drawers. You can also stand up your hearty veggies (like carrots, celery, radishes) and leafy herbs in jars and tent them with produce bags or reusable silicone bags to prevent wilting."

5. Overnight oats are a breakfast lifesaver.

Not a morning person? Learning how to make [overnight oats](#) will be a game-changer for your a.m. routine. The best thing about this easy meal is that it only requires a few ingredients and five minutes to make!

"While you can meal prep and cook breakfasts like everything else, for me it's just easiest to reduce it to two words most days: overnight oats," says Mitchell. "I often add either fresh or frozen fruit to mine and a couple tablespoons of chia seeds. Super quick, easy, and totally whole-food, plant-based!"

6. Make sauces and dressings first.

Here's a sneaky meal prep tip that will make the cooking process easy: Assemble any liquid components of a dish before you touch the heftier ingredients. This method ensures that you have all your separate elements ready to go so you aren't left scrambling to make a sauce when all the other elements of your meal are ready to come together.

"Many recipes call for you to make the dressing or sauce while the recipe itself is cooking, but I find that I can get easily distracted and lose track of where I am," say Mitchell. "If I make the dressing first, then it's ready to go."

7. Portion out salads into individual jars.

Salads can be one of the trickiest meals to prep in advance. If you make it in one big bowl, the greens are likely to get soggy and veggies might dry out and lose flavor. The answer to your salad woes: Layer individual portions into glass jars to stash in the fridge so you have ready-made meals at your fingertips.

"On Sundays I use extra large Mason jars to create salads, and they generally keep through Friday," recommends McBride. "I take a bit of a shortcut on the

prep by using a premade garden salad from a bag and add baby kale, baby arugula, and a power greens mix which has chard and spinach. I'll start by placing broccoli slaw (pre-shredded, from a bag), shredded carrots, and roasted cauliflower pieces at the bottom of the jar. Then add the greens mix, and then any other toppings I like, such as nuts and seeds. Things like cucumber and tomatoes can get slimy, so I chop them up separately and place them in a Mason jar with a bit of balsamic vinegar to top the salad once it's plated. For my dressing I just mix up enough in another jar to last me for several days. A favorite of mine is [a mix of] balsamic vinegar, maple syrup, stone ground mustard, and sriracha."



8. Invest in good reusable containers.

You might meal prep like a boss, but do you have enough Tupperware to properly store your delicious creations? The right kitchen gear can vastly improve the efficiency of your prep days and make reheating leftovers a breeze.

"I love my reusable containers because they stack really well and make your fridge easy to maneuver," says Marek. "And if they're clear, you can see what you have going on inside them. I typically put the prepped ingredients in the front and the completed dishes behind those so I don't lose track of what I still need to use during the week."

Tips for Putting It All Together and Staying on Track

Make the most of your newfound meal-prep skills by learning how to make the process of whipping together a tasty meal like a pro.

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1. Freeze leftovers for a rainy day.

One common complaint about meal prepping is a disinterest in eating the same thing several days in a row. If that's the case for you, try freezing half of every dish that you make so you can reheat the meals at a later date. Not only do you keep things interesting for your taste buds, but you have emergency meals stashed away for a night when you don't feel like cooking. This technique is especially effective for single people who are cooking for one and want to ensure their hard work doesn't go to waste.

"If I have a particularly busy week it's nice to have something in the freezer so I can lessen the amount of cooking I need to do," says Marek. "You can make a full-size recipe and freeze half of it for later or even make a whole other batch to save for a rainy day."

2. Cook in smaller spurts if you don't love lots of leftovers.

There's no hard and fast meal prep rule that says you have to make a giant pot of soup every Sunday to last you the whole week. If you enjoy making meals throughout the week for more of that "made to order" feeling, then only make one or two meals at a time. This strategy ensures you have a hot meal for dinner the same night and leftovers for lunch or dinner the next day.

3. Find a community to keep you accountable and inspired.

If you find yourself getting in a meal-prep rut, it can be helpful to draw on the creativity of other home chefs to light your fire again. From recipe blogs to Facebook groups, there are tons of digital communities that offer support.

"Joining a group of WFPB meal preppers through your favorite social media site is a great way to stay motivated and engaged in the process," recommends Mitchell. "Take pictures of your meals and share them, and seek out advice with others. I belong to several groups on Facebook, including a [community exclusive to the Forks Over Knives Meal Planner](#) that has been invaluable in letting me know I'm not alone, seeing the success of others, and keeping me on the road with encouragement and advice from others."

4. Minimize food waste by using all your produce scraps.

It's inevitable that some ingredients will go to waste during busy weeks, but you can work on [reducing food waste](#) both during the prep process and throughout the week as you assemble your meals. Being mindful of food waste will stretch your grocery dollars and has the added benefit of being environmentally friendly!

"Keep all of your veggie scraps (especially onion skins and ends, carrot skins, celery hearts, and garlic skins) to make a simple [homemade veggie broth](#)," advises Hong. "Or when you see berries about to go bad, freeze them for smoothies or make a homemade jam."

To learn more about a whole-food, plant-based diet, visit our [Plant-Based Primer](#). For meal-planning support, check out [Forks Meal Planner](#), FOK's easy weekly meal-planning tool to keep you on a healthy plant-based path.