



HOW TO

GET

DINNER

ON

THE

TABLE

WITH

YOUR

SANITY

INTACT

...and maybe, hopefully, possibly, miraculously, actually enjoy it
just a little teeny itty bitty bit...

main Umbrella Areas

...for a Manageable Dinner Hour...



Slow Cooker/Pressure Cooker Meals



Make-Ahead/Freezer Meals



20- or 30-Minute Meals



No Recipe Meals

yes, there really is such a thing

15 Easy Ways

...to reduce stress in the kitchen and make cooking more enjoyable...

Try a New Recipe

We all have those recipes that are in the regular rotation (Taco Tuesday, anyone?) but trying a new recipe now and then can help dinner time not feel like the doldrums. It's like buying a new pair of jeans to spice up your wardrobe. Er, kind of. Choose carefully and trust your instincts (go to a trusted source so you don't end up with fried alligator tail soup that no one wants to eat). Be adventurous *within your comfort zone* (i.e. no alligator tails for us, thankyouverymuch).

Keep it Simple – Part 1

Abandon the idea RIGHT NOW that your average Thursday night dinner needs four courses (or even a side dish) and focus on simple, healthful, flavorful ingredients and foods. A hearty main dish can often stand alone or be served with a no-prep side dish (like sliced apples, fresh-cut vegetables, bread + butter, etc). Save the seven course meals for your birthday (and make someone else cook it for you); there's no faster way to get burned out in the kitchen than biting off more than you can chew (pun totally intended) when it comes to your lifestyle and what is manageable on any given day. *Don't abandon those gourmet meals completely*; just go for them when you have time, resources and a live-in housekeeper.

Keep it Simple – Part 2

If you're dedicated to this idea of keeping it simple (and I'm so proud of you), commit to finding more one-pot wonders, 20- or 30-minute meals, and other recipes that work with that idea of simple, simple, simple. You can't execute this plan if you're faced with 32-ingredient, two-day prep meals.

Use Fresh Herbs Especially Basil

Sprinkle fresh basil on pasta and pizza and any recipe that calls for dried basil; or just top slices of fresh mozzarella with it + a drizzle of balsamic vinegar + a tomato slice and pretend you are in heaven; also, using fresh basil in a jar of prepared spaghetti sauce may be the best decision you'll ever make.

Something New for You

Had your eye on that mini spatula forever? Go ahead, splurge! It will be the best \$3.95 you've ever spent. Having a fun, new kitchen tool can push those doldrums away. I'm not advocating buying out Amazon's kitchen and cooking section but every now and then, a new spoon or spatula or whisk can really spice things up.

Cook with a Friend

If you are someone who likes company and would be waaaaay more happy cooking while talking about your latest Netflix discovery, explore the idea of getting together with friends to knock out a week (or month's) worth of freezer/make-ahead meals. Or if that's too ambitious, just get together to make that evening's meal during the day together. This helps the time go fast and gets more hands on the dirty work (chopping vegetables, assembling dishes, etc.). Sidenote: This may make some of you cringe, but cooking with your kids is also a great way to make cooking fun (mostly for them, but for you, too!). It seems counterintuitive – and sure, it may be slightly messier, but kids can be the greatest helpers if given a specific task (chopping olives, tossing a salad, grating cheese, stirring ingredients) + they tell great stories and you can get caught up on all the knock-knock jokes you've missed over the years.

Clean as You Go

It can be rather depressing to cook your life away only to be left with a heap of dirty dishes. There's no getting around that completely, but cleaning during the process can make a huge difference. Sure, there's those nights it doesn't happen (child needs help going potty, middle schooler needs help on math too advanced for ye old mom brain, and so it goes; you know the drill). But on nights when the stars align, washing dishes right after using them, or at the very least putting everything in the sink and wiping countertops along the way, makes a huge difference in sanity levels.

Toss Something Else on the Salad

Making a simple no-recipe green salad for dinner? Perfect! Now toss something delicious and unique and no-prep on to take it up a notch: sunflower seeds, raisins, feta cheese, chopped apples or strawberries or blueberries, shaved Parmesan or Asiago cheese, etc. It's amazing what a yummy salad add-on can do to your overall happiness.

Jazz Up Prepared Foods

In an ideal world, we'd all make from-scratch meals every night but if that isn't going to happen in your current reality, take prepared foods up a couple levels by adding fresh and/or unique ingredients. Fresh basil + prepared spaghetti sauce, fresh vegetables + boxed seasoned rice, avocado sour cream dipping sauce + frozen burritos, splash of fresh lime juice + canned fruit, chopped fresh or frozen mangoes + prepared salsa, chopped fresh tomatoes and avocados + canned chili, cooked crumbled bacon to prepared salad kit (and on and on)

Multi-Tasking Tools

Go through your kitchen and ditch the tools/equipment taking up space but not doing much, and focus instead on saving up or getting tools that do double- (or triple-) duty. For instance, mixing bowls that are also microwave-safe; a blender that can tackle smoothies but also chop nuts, crush cookies, and whip cream; a food processor that can chop but also mix batters (even pizza dough and other breads), an electric cooker (like an InstantPot) that can replace a slow cooker, rice cooker and pressure cooker. Also, keep in mind that it is far better to have one or two really sharp, good knives, than a whole drawer of old, dull knives. Plus, using a santoku knife (you know those ones that look like a bird's beak) will put you on the fast track to feeling like a rock star in the kitchen.

Claim a Signature Dish

Find a recipe you love and make it yours. You know, the kind of thing where people say "{insert your name} makes the best homemade pizza" or "have you tried {insert your name} chocolate chip cookies, they're amazeballs" or "beg {insert your name} to make her famous rice pudding" or "dude, {insert your name} broccoli cheese soup is killer" or "get your hands on {insert your name} grilled cheese sandwich" <--keeping it real here. Seriously, it doesn't matter what it is, but it's ridiculously rewarding to have *that dish* that people know is your thing.

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Embrace the Freezer

Frozen fruits and vegetables are an absolute lifesaver in cooking and can help reduce a serious amount of stress. Fresh is awesome when you've managed to get to the store in the last couple days and/or the broccoli hasn't gone bad in the back of the fridge yet. But frozen vegetables and fruits (and meats, too) last a long time in the freezer if stored well and have a lot of nutrition and flavor when cooked right. Many frozen vegetables can be roasted just like fresh vegetables for a quick side dish, also – just add a few minutes onto roasting time (425 degrees F, veggies tossed lightly with olive oil, salt and pepper).

Cook Once, Eat Twice

This is not a new concept but if cooking is a daunting prospect (and even if it's not), when you finally dive in, double that recipe and freeze the other half! It's a rare meal that doesn't freeze well (the anti-freezer meals are usually ones heavy on milk/cream or soups with pasta but even then, feel free to experiment). You'll be singing hallelujahs when dinner can be pulled straight from the freezer and popped in the oven to heat up, and it's really not that much more work on cooking night to double everything.

Rotisserie Chickens for the Win

Do you even know how many easy, delicious recipes already call for cooked, shredded chicken? Thousands. If rotisserie chickens are your jam, buy a couple every time you're at the store (Costco, I'm lookin' at you). At home, immediately take the meat off the bones and store it in the freezer (I usually put it in freezer-ziploc bags or cleaned leftover sour cream/cottage cheese containers). In the same vein, cooking your own chicken (from a whole chicken or boneless, skinless chicken breasts and/or thighs) in bulk and stashing the meat in the freezer is a fantastic solution, too. The point is, keeping cooked chicken on hand is a lifesaver.

Get Crazy

If you're really trying to embrace the joy of cooking, combine it with something you already love. Turn up the music! Listen to an audiobook! Finally watch Poldark or Downtown Abbey! With modern day technology (tablets and smart phones), cooking has never been more fun (just keep that screen away from the tomato sauce and boiling pasta).

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SLOW COOKER MEALS

Slow Cooker Lasagna

Yield: Serves 6

Note: The recipe as written is for a meatless lasagna but to add meat, simply brown whatever meat (ground turkey, beef, sausage, pork, etc) with a bit of salt and pepper and maybe some diced onion and minced garlic, drain any excess grease and stir the meat into the red sauce mixture before assembling.

28-ounce can crushed tomatoes
6-ounce can tomato paste
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon pepper
1-2 teaspoons brown sugar
1/2 teaspoon dried oregano
1/2 teaspoon dried basil
1/4 teaspoon dried thyme
1/2 teaspoon garlic powder,
1 teaspoon balsamic vinegar
2 cups (16 ounces) cottage cheese (drain off excess liquid if there's a lot)
1/2 cup (2 ounces) freshly grated Parmesan cheese
1 teaspoon dried parsley (or a couple tablespoons fresh)
Pinch of salt and pepper
9-12 no-boil or regular lasagna noodles (about 10 or so ounces)
10 ounces mozzarella cheese shredded (2-3 cups)

Lightly coat the inside of a round 4- or 5-quart slow cooker with nonstick cooking spray (the recipe can be doubled for a larger slow cooker).

In a medium bowl, whisk together the crushed tomatoes, tomato paste, salt, pepper, sugar, oregano, basil, thyme, garlic powder, and balsamic vinegar.

In another bowl, stir together the cottage cheese, Parmesan cheese, parsley and pinches of salt and pepper.

In the slow cooker, spread about 1/2 cup of sauce across the bottom. Add a double layer of noodles (only do a single layer if using regular lasagna noodles and not no-boil), breaking to fit. Spread 1/3 of the cottage cheese mixture (it's ok if the layer is spotty and not overly thick), followed by 1/3 of the remaining sauce and 1/3 of the mozzarella cheese.

Repeat the layers (noodles, cottage cheese mixture, sauce and mozzarella) twice more.

Drizzle 1/3 cup (more or less) of water around the edges (see note above). Cover and cook on low for 4-5 hours. Turn off, remove the insert (if it's removable) to a heatproof spot or trivet and let sit for 20 minutes before serving (you can dig in before that but it might be just a tad soupy and lava hot).

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Slow Cooker Red Beans and Rice with Chicken Sausage

Yield: Serves 8

1 cup diced yellow or white onion
1 medium green bell pepper, diced
4 (15-ounces each) cans kidney beans, undrained
1 teaspoon coarse kosher salt
1 teaspoon coarse or freshly cracked black pepper
2 bay leaves
1/2 teaspoon dried thyme
2-3 cloves garlic, finely minced
1 1/2 pounds kielbasa or chicken sausage, sliced (precooked sausage like Aidell's brand)
Hot, cooked brown rice, white rice or quinoa for serving

Combine all the ingredients except the kielbasa/sausage in a medium slow cooker and give it a good stir. Cook on high for 4-5 hours or on low for 7-8 hours. Add the sausage and cook until warmed through (anywhere from 20 minutes to another hour). Add additional salt and pepper to taste before serving. Serve over hot, cooked rice (white or brown) or quinoa.

Pressure Cooker Chicken and Black Bean Chili

Yield: Serves 6 to 8

1 cup dried pinto beans (about 8 ounces)
1 cup dried black beans (about 8 ounces)
1 1/2 pounds boneless, skinless chicken breasts
1/2 cup chopped yellow or white onion
2 garlic cloves, finely minced
1 tablespoon ground cumin
1 teaspoon dried oregano
2 teaspoons salt
1/2 teaspoon black pepper
1 1/2 tablespoons chili powder
28 ounce can crushed tomatoes
5 cups low-sodium chicken broth
Toppings: sour cream, grated cheese, diced avocados, tortilla chips

Combine the dried beans in a bowl and cover with cool water by 2- to 3-inches. Soak overnight (8-12 hours). Drain and rinse. In a 6-quart or larger pressure cooker, combine the beans with all the other ingredients (except the toppings). Stir to combine. Close and lock the lid of the pressure cooker. For electric pressure cookers, cook on high pressure for 20 minutes. For stovetop pressure cookers, cook on high pressure for 15-17 minutes. Let the pressure cooker naturally release pressure for 10-15 minutes before releasing the rest under quick pressure.

Shred the chicken breasts and serve the chili with desired toppings.

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make-ahead/freezer meals

Italian Lasagna Roll-Ups

Yield: Serves 6-8

Meat Sauce:

1/2 cup chopped yellow or white onion
2 cloves garlic, finely minced
1 pound lean ground turkey or beef
1 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon black pepper
28-ounce can crushed tomatoes
15-ounce can tomato sauce
1 teaspoon dried basil
1/2 teaspoon dried oregano
1/4 teaspoon dried thyme

Ricotta Filling:

2 cups ricotta cheese (or a 15 ounce container)
1 large egg
1 teaspoon dried basil
2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley
8 ounces mozzarella cheese shredded, about 2 cups
(reserving 1/2 cup for topping)
4 ounces Parmesan cheese finely grated, about 1 1/2 - 2
cups (reserving 1/4 cup for topping)
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon black pepper

Noodles:

12 traditional lasagna noodles

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F. Lightly grease a 9X13-inch baking pan and set aside. In a large 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium heat, cook the onion, garlic, ground turkey or beef, salt and pepper, breaking the meat into small pieces. Cook until the meat is no longer pink and is cooked through, 5-7 minutes. Drain any excess grease.

Add the crushed tomatoes, tomato sauce, basil, oregano, and thyme and simmer over medium heat for 10-15 minutes. Add additional salt and pepper to taste. While the sauce is simmering, boil the lasagna noodles in a large pot of salted water according to package directions until al dente. Drain the noodles, rinse quickly under cold water and then lay the noodles flat in a single layer on waxed or parchment paper.

In a medium bowl, stir together the ricotta cheese, egg, basil, parsley, mozzarella cheese (remember to set aside 1/2 cup of the mozzarella for topping later), Parmesan cheese (remember to set aside 1/4 cup of the Parmesan for later also), salt and pepper. Gently spread a heaping spoonful of the ricotta filling down the center of each noodle. It doesn't have to cover the entire noodle, just press it into a somewhat even layer. The filling will be divided up evenly over all 12 noodle (I don't start rolling up the noodles until I've used up all the filling so I can add more to each noodle if need be). Spread a tablespoon or two of the red sauce down the center of each noodle on top of the creamy filling. Again, it doesn't need to be perfectly even, just drizzle/spread it across the top.

Spread about one cup or so of the sauce in the bottom of the prepared baking dish. Roll each noodle and place seam-side down in the baking dish in four rows of three. Spread the remaining sauce over the noodles, sprinkle with the reserved cheeses and cover with aluminum foil that has been lightly coated with cooking spray (so it doesn't stick to the cheese as it bakes). Bake, covered for 35 minutes. Uncover and bake for an additional 10 minutes. Let the lasagna rolls rest for 10 minutes before serving.

To freeze this meal: prepare and assemble the dish in the prepared pan and cover with the lightly greased foil. Freeze. When ready to bake, pop the pan in the oven as it preheats to 350 degrees. Bake covered for about 80-90 minutes. Uncover and bake for another 20-30 minutes until the lasagna rolls are heated through and the edges of the casserole are hot and bubbly.

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Crunchy-Topped Swiss Chicken Bake

Yield: Serves 6

Sauce:

3/4 cup low-sodium chicken broth
1/8 teaspoon poultry seasoning
1/4 teaspoon onion powder
1/8 teaspoon garlic powder
Pinch of black pepper
1/4 teaspoon salt, more to taste if needed
Pinch of dried parsley
Pinch of paprika
3/4 cup milk
1/4 cup all-purpose flour

Chicken and Cheese:

5-6 boneless, skinless chicken breasts
5-6 large slices Swiss cheese

Topping:

1 1/4 cups panko bread crumbs
1/4 teaspoon poultry seasoning
1/8 teaspoon garlic powder
1/8 teaspoon onion powder
1/4 teaspoon dried parsley
2 tablespoons butter, melted
Hot, cooked rice or quinoa for serving

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F. Lightly grease a 9X13-inch baking pan.

For the sauce, in a medium saucepan, bring the broth and all the seasonings to a simmer. In a liquid measuring cup or small bowl, vigorously whisk the milk and flour together until smooth. While whisking the broth, slowly pour in the flour/milk mixture, whisking constantly. Continue to stir and cook until the mixture bubbles and thickens, 3-4 minutes. Remove from the heat and add additional salt and pepper to taste as needed.

Pat the chicken dry and lightly season with salt and pepper on each side. Place the chicken in a single layer in the baking pan - it's ok if the chicken is crammed in side-by-side as long as it isn't overlapping much. Place a slice of Swiss cheese on every chicken breast. Pour the sauce evenly over the top. Cover the pan with aluminum foil and bake for 30 minutes.

While baking, make the topping: in a ziploc bag or in a bowl, toss together the panko, poultry seasoning, garlic powder, onion powder and dried parsley. Drizzle in the melted butter and mix to combine. After the first 30 minutes of baking, remove the pan from the oven, uncover and sprinkle with the topping mixture. Return to the oven, uncovered, and bake for 20 minutes, until the crumbs are golden and the chicken is cooked through.

Let the casserole rest 5-10 minutes before serving. Serve over hot, cooked rice or quinoa, if desired.

To freeze this meal: let the sauce cool before assembling. Follow the directions in the recipe but instead of topping the casserole with the panko mixture, put the panko mixture in a freezer ziploc, then cover the casserole dish with a double layer of foil. Freeze both the topping mixture and the casserole. For baking, put the frozen casserole, covered, in the preheated oven and bake for about an hour and 20 minutes. Uncover, top with the panko mixture and continue to bake for another 30-45 minutes until the chicken is cooked through and the crumbs are golden.

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Freezer Beef and Bean Burritos

Yield: Makes 6-8 burritos

Rice:

- 1 1/2 cups low-sodium chicken broth
- 3/4 cup long grain white rice
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 cup minced fresh cilantro

Filling:

- 1/2 cup low-sodium chicken broth
- 1 (15-ounce) can pinto beans, rinsed and drained
- 1/2 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 1/2 cup finely chopped onion
- 3 tablespoons tomato paste
- 3 garlic cloves, finely minced
- 1/2 tablespoon ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1 teaspoon chili powder
- 12 ounces extra lean ground beef or lean ground turkey
- 1 tablespoon fresh lime juice
- 3/4 teaspoon salt
- 6-8 (10-inch) flour tortillas, white or wheat
- 5 ounces shredded sharp cheddar cheese (about 1 cup)
- 5 ounces shredded Monterey Jack cheese (about 1 cup)
- 6 tablespoons sour cream, light or regular

For the rice, bring the broth, rice, garlic, and salt to a boil in a medium saucepan over medium-high heat. Reduce the heat to low, cover and cook until the rice is tender and most of the liquid is absorbed, about 16-18 minutes. Remove the rice from the heat, keeping it covered, and let it sit while you prepare the rest of the ingredients. When ready to use, add the cilantro and fluff with a fork.

For the filling, combine the broth and half of the beans in a small bowl and mash with a fork until the beans are coarsely mashed with the broth (reserve the whole beans for later). In a large, 12-inch nonstick skillet, heat the vegetable oil until hot and rippling. Add the onion and cook for 3-4 minutes, stirring often. Stir in the tomato paste, garlic, cumin, oregano and chili powder and cook for 1-2 minutes. Add the ground meat and cook until no longer pink, about 8-10 minutes, breaking the meat into small pieces while cooking. Drain any excess grease if needed.

Stir the mashed bean mixture into the meat mixture and cook for 3-4 minutes until the mixture is thick and most of the liquid has evaporated. Stir in the rest of the whole beans, lime juice and salt. Remove from heat. Let the beef and bean mixture and the rice cool to warm room temperature before proceeding. Wrap the tortillas in between damp paper towels and microwave until the tortillas are soft, about 1 minute. Arrange the tortillas on the counter and divide the rice, beef and bean filling and cheese evenly among the tortillas. Dollop each tortilla with a tablespoon (more or less) of sour cream. Fold the sides of the tortilla toward each other over the filling while lifting the bottom edge over, rolling into a burrito shape. Wrap each burrito in plastic wrap. Place burritos in a gallon-sized freezer ziploc bag.

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20- or 30-minute meals

Quinoa Enchilada Skillet Meal

Yield: Serves 6

1 tablespoon olive oil
2 cloves garlic, finely minced
1 poblano chile, seeded and finely diced (about 1/3 - 1/2 cup) (see note above for substitutions)
2 cups quinoa, well-rinsed and drained
2 1/2 cups low-sodium chicken broth
16 ounces tomato sauce
1 (15-ounce) can black beans, rinsed and drained
1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon chili powder
1/2 teaspoon dried oregano
1 teaspoon ground cumin
2 cups frozen corn kernels
1-2 tablespoons fresh lime juice (from about 1 medium lime)
1/2 cup chopped cilantro
2 cups cooked, diced chicken or turkey
1/2-1 cup shredded Monterey Jack or sharp cheddar cheese (or a combination)
Optional toppings: avocados, sour cream, chopped tomatoes, olives, etc.

In a 12-inch nonstick skillet with a lid, heat the olive oil over medium heat and add the garlic and poblano chile. Cook for a minute or two, stirring constantly. Add the drained quinoa, broth, tomato sauce, beans, salt, chili powder, oregano and cumin and stir to combine.

Bring the mixture to a simmer over medium-high heat, reduce the temperature, cover the skillet, and continue simmering for 20 minutes until most of the liquid has been absorbed and the quinoa has popped open and is tender. Regulate the heat during cooking if the mixture is sticking to the bottom of the skillet.

Uncover and stir in the corn, lime juice, cilantro, and chicken. Cook for about 5 minutes or until heated through. Add additional salt and pepper to taste if needed.

Sprinkle the top with cheese and cover the skillet to let the cheese melt (or broil - if the skillet is oven-safe - for a more bubbly topping).

Serve with optional garnishes if you'd like: avocados, sour cream, chopped tomatoes, olives, etc.

Chipotle Chicken Tacos

Yield: Serves 6

3 tablespoons butter
4 garlic cloves, minced
2 teaspoons minced canned chipotle chiles in adobo sauce (or sub 1-2 teaspoons chili powder)
1/2 cup orange juice
1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
3/4 cup chopped fresh cilantro
4 boneless, skinless chicken breasts (about 2 pounds)
1 teaspoon yellow mustard
Salt and pepper
12 (6-inch) flour tortillas

Melt the butter in a large nonstick skillet over medium heat. Add the garlic and chipotle and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Stir in the orange juice, Worcestershire sauce and 1/2 cup chopped cilantro and bring the mixture to a boil. Add the chicken and simmer, covered, over medium-low heat for 12-13 minutes, flipping the chicken halfway through cooking. When the chicken is done cooking, transfer to a plate and tent with foil.

Increase the heat to medium-high and cook the mixture left in the skillet until the liquid is reduced to about 1/4 cup, about 5 minutes. Off the heat, whisk in the yellow mustard. Using 2 forks, shred the chicken into bite-sized pieces and return to the skillet. Add the remaining cilantro to the skillet and toss until well combined. Season with salt and pepper. Serve warm with tortillas topped with lettuce, cheese, tomato, sour cream and avocado.

Chicken Curry in a Hurry

Yield: Serves 4

Note: Fresh ginger is really fantastic in this recipe - if you've never used it or don't know this great tip: buy a knob of ginger, cut it into 1-inch pieces (no need to peel), and freeze it. When you need it in a recipe, take a chunk out of the freezer and grate it on a rasp grater or the small holes of a box grater. Super easy!

1 teaspoon oil
1 tablespoon grated ginger (see note above)
2 cloves garlic, finely minced or pressed
2 teaspoons curry powder (my favorite is Sweet Curry from Penzey's)
1/2 teaspoon ground coriander
1/4 teaspoon ground cumin
1 pound boneless, skinless chicken breasts or thighs, cut into bite-sized pieces
1 can (13.6 ounce) lite coconut milk
1/2 tablespoon light brown sugar
1/2 tablespoon fish sauce
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon black pepper
1 tablespoon cornstarch (optional)
1/4 - 1/2 cup chopped cilantro
Hot, cooked rice or quinoa for serving

In a large, 12-inch nonstick skillet, heat the oil over medium heat until hot. Add the ginger and garlic and cook, stirring constantly, for about 30 seconds, until it starts to smell fragrant.

Sprinkle in the curry powder, coriander and cumin. Cook for another 30 seconds, stirring to prevent burning. Add the chicken and cook until lightly browned, 2-3 minutes (it doesn't need to be cooked all the way through quite yet).

Stir in the coconut milk, brown sugar, fish sauce, salt and pepper. Bring the mixture to a simmer. Cook for 4-5 minutes until the chicken is cooked through.

If you would like the sauce a bit thicker, whisk together the cornstarch with 2 tablespoons cold water in a small bowl. Once combined, stir the mixture into the simmering curry. Simmer, stirring constantly, for a minute or so until the sauce thickens a bit.

Stir in the cilantro. Season with additional salt and pepper to taste, if needed. Serve the curry over hot, cooked rice, quinoa or whatever else you might like (or it can be served on its own).

Cashew Chicken Lettuce Wraps

Yield: Serves 6

1 tablespoon olive oil
1/2 cup finely diced yellow or white onion
1 cup finely diced (or shredded) carrots
3-4 cloves garlic, finely minced or pressed through a garlic press
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon black pepper
1 pound boneless, skinless chicken breasts or chicken thighs, cut into small pieces
3 tablespoons low-sodium soy sauce
2 tablespoons pure maple syrup
1/2 cup chopped raw cashews (lightly toasted, if desired)
Bibb or green leaf lettuce leaves for wrapping
Chopped cucumbers and tomatoes for serving

In a large 12-inch nonstick skillet, heat the oil over medium heat and add the onion and carrots. Add the garlic, salt and pepper and cook for 2-3 minutes, until the vegetables start to soften.

Season the chicken pieces lightly with salt and pepper and add to the skillet with the onions and carrots. Cook, stirring often, until the chicken pieces are cooked through, 4-5 minutes.

Stir in the soy sauce and maple syrup and cook over medium heat for 2-3 minutes, letting the soy sauce and maple syrup bubble and simmer.

Stir in the cashews, cooking until they are just heated through. Season to taste with additional salt and pepper, if needed.

Serve in lettuce leaves topped with tomatoes and cucumbers (the freshness adds a delicious element to the flavors!).

No-Recipe Meals

Scrambled eggs or an omelet with ham and vegetables (zucchini, mushrooms, broccoli, etc.). Go crazy and add a side of whole grain toast.

Chicken Sausage, sliced, sautéed with baby potatoes and chopped cabbage (don't forget a healthy dose of salt and pepper!). I add a bit of broth and a lid to steam so everything is tender and delicious.

Grilled or skillet-cooked chicken breast with steamed broccoli or other veggies. The options are really endless with a meal like this – grill or skillet-cook any type of meat and serve it with whatever vegetables, sides or leftovers you have.

Panini. Here's a favorite: bread, deli turkey, sliced green apple (trust me), a little Dijon or regular mustard, and cheddar or swiss cheese. The sky's the limit with paninis – you can even have everyone build-their-own with all the fixings that are out.

Loaded quesadillas: take two tortillas and top one with any leftover chicken or steak (deli meat works great, too), cheese and any vegetables you like (you'd be surprised – almost anything is good on a quesadilla!). Toast in a skillet until golden and heated through.

Baked potatoes (regular or sweet potatoes). Top the baked potatoes with chopped ham, sour cream, cheese, chili, leftover gravy – get creative!

Easy chicken parmesan. Sauté chicken (seasoned well with salt and pepper) in a skillet. When cooked through, pour in a cup or two of jarred spaghetti sauce, sprinkle shredded mozzarella over the top and serve over cooked pasta (or by itself!). Don't forget to sprinkle with that fresh basil if you have it!

Chef's salad. Toss together whatever greens you have and add sliced deli or turkey ham, shredded cheese, diced tomatoes and cucumbers, and hard-boiled eggs (halved). Serve with whatever dressing you have in the fridge.

Ravioli with Lemon Garlic Spinach. Cook your favorite ravioli according to package instructions. In a skillet, saute a package of fresh baby spinach until wilted with a little olive oil, chopped garlic, a pinch of salt, and a squeeze or two of fresh lemon juice. Top the spinach with the cooked ravioli and drizzle a little olive oil and salt over the top.

4-ingredient chocolate chip cookie balls: mash together 2 bananas with 1/3 cup peanut butter or so, a pinch of salt (doesn't count on the ingredient list!), 2 ½ cups quick oats and ½ cup mini chocolate chips. Roll into balls. Chill, and try not to eat the whole batch.

Mason jar salads: pour dressing (1 to 4 tablespoons) in the bottom of a wide-mouth canning jar (pint or quart, depending on how hungry you are), layer in veggies, meat, nuts (options are endless) and stuff greens on top to reach the top of the jar. Put on a lid and refrigerate for up to five days (dreamy!).

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10 Holiday Food Tips That Just might Save Your Life

- 1) **Write out your menu plan.** Include all the details, like what meals you'll be serving and include each and every dish. Might I even suggest that writing it out the old-fashioned way (yep, pen and paper) is a very useful 1st draft before going for the electronic spreadsheet.

- 2) **Keep dinner simple and end with a stunning dessert.** Bonus: most desserts can be made several days in advance and things like cheesecake (yum) can be frozen months ahead of time. With a dessert so good everyone will cry, no one will remember that dinner was simple (and honestly, sometimes simple is the most tasty). For instance, a slow cooker turkey breast is just as delicious as a 24-hour brined and roasted turkey (in my humble opinion).

- 3) **Forget experimenting.** Or in other words, Christmas dinner may not be the time to pull out that cooking torch for the 1st time, mkay? Go with the best of the best, tried-and-true recipes – ones you've made before or at least know they have a 99.7% chance of succeeding. Save the experimenting for a Friday night when you have nowhere to go and no one else to serve.

- 4) **Prep in advance or rather, choose dishes that can be made in advance.** Like, actively look for dishes with make-aheadability (dude, that's a word). The following things (just to name a few) can be made ahead with great results:
 - PIES (make 'em, bake 'em, cool 'em, and refrigerate for up to two days; reheat on low in the oven while everyone is scarfing down the ham or turkey) – word has it they also freeze well (and if you don't want to make the pies completely, pie dough freezes excellently for months ahead of time)
 - ROLLS (make the dough and shape on a baking sheet the night before; refrigerate and then take them out 2-3 hours before you want to bake them – baked and cooled rolls also freeze amazing well and reheated for just a few seconds in the microwave and they are light and fluffy as ever)
 - MASHED POTATOES (make the day before and refrigerate and then reheat on low in a slow cooker the day of for a couple hours – dreamy!)
 - CRANBERRY SAUCE (make and freeze several months in advance; take it out the night before and let it thaw in the refrigerator...seriously a no-brainer)
 - MOST CASSEROLES AND BAKES (like potatoes or even stuffing – they can be made 1-2 days ahead of time and refrigerated to reheat the day of; at the very least, the prep for each of the casseroles – chopping, toasting, etc – can be done days in advance)

- 5) **Grocery shop earlier than you think.** Avoid the lines of frantic last-minute shopping and do your own shopping the week before. Very few ingredients won't survive the week long wait.
- 6) **Slow cooker, slow cooker, slow cooker.** This appliance is often forgotten at the holidays but it just might save your sanity and help you keep your cool. It can keep most recipes warm (mashed potatoes, green bean casserole, cheesy potatoes, appetizers and dips) and can even be the option for cooking the turkey or ham.
- 7) **If you've overcooked the turkey, pour warm chicken broth over the pieces right before serving.**
Seriously, brilliant, and yes, I've had to do this before (sob).
- 8) **Go for a breakfast that can be made and frozen weeks ahead of time.** Many of us like to include a fun, different holiday breakfast in the lineup of holiday eats, but it's the last thing we want to think about. Cinnamon rolls, monkey bread, muffins, and many egg bakes can be made and frozen ahead of time.
- 9) **Print recipes and tape them to your cupboards.** This is my most oft-used tip when hosting for the holidays. No more dropping my phone in the gravy while trying to pull up the next recipe to make.
Print.The.Recipes.
- 10) **If you are limited on oven space, write out a schedule.** Include what dish needs to be baked and when and for how long...and since not all of us are blessed with double ovens (my one dream in life), consider the following:

-your neighbor may be going to their grandma's/aunt's/2nd cousin thrice removed house; so don't hesitate to ask if you can use their oven to bake some of your dishes in

-baked dishes (like sweet potatoes, green beans, cheesy potatoes, etc) can be baked, wrapped in towels and placed in a large cooler; they'll stay warm for at least an hour, if not longer

-remember the slow cooker (or electric roaster) like I mentioned above.

-do not underestimate what an outside grill can do for you; if heated on low, it can keep dishes warm, too and even aid in some of the cooking