



ARTICLE / COOKING STORY

An Easy 5-Day Starter Menu for Meal-Planning Newbies

Say goodbye to the midweek dinner dilemma with this jump-start for the Yummly Meal Planner.



Debbie Koenig

Posted Jan 14, 2020



I used to be the kind of home cook who loved winging it. At the end of the day I'd wander into the kitchen—which I made sure to keep well-stocked—and decide what to make for dinner. If I fancied something specific, I'd run to the store and pick up what I needed. Dinner might be a little late, but my husband and I didn't care. I loved the freedom, the flexibility, the challenge.

And then I had a kid.

All my fondness for spontaneity went out the window. Where once I saw a blank canvas awaiting my artistry, now I just saw a ticking clock and a hungry, picky child. I found myself ordering in too often, and thereby spending too much money to buy food that was much less healthy than what I'd cook myself. When I did load up on fresh foods, they'd go bad before I could use them.

I'm embarrassed to admit how long it took me to come around to meal planning. I avoided it, thinking that knowing on Sunday what we'd be eating on Thursday would take all the fun out of cooking. Boy, was I wrong. Once I started planning ahead, I never looked back.

After years of meal planning, today I only see the positives. I walk into the kitchen knowing what I need to do, instead of wondering what I might do. When my son asks me what's for dinner I have an answer, which leaves much less room for him to kick up a fuss. (Yes, he's 13. Yes, he still kicks up a fuss from time to time.) We spend less on food than we used to, because there's less ordering in and less waste—I cook intentional leftovers, which I reinvent into new meals later in the week. And because I'm in control of what goes into our meals, we can count on reliably healthy eating.

Tricks for successful weekly meal plans

I've gotten so good at meal planning that now I've been writing about it professionally for several years. In that time I've picked up a few tricks.

- **Start with protein.** It's easier to build a five-night menu around chicken or tofu, say, than cauliflower or sweet potatoes. Add the cauliflower to the chicken, not vice versa. (With Yummly's powerful search engine, it's a snap to find thousands of dinner recipe options based on your favorite ingredients; just type in an ingredient in the search bar.)
- **Freeze strategically.** If you're shopping on the weekend but not cooking your fish until Friday, you'd do better to buy it frozen. And if you're buying bakery bread at the same time to serve more than two days later, pop it in the freezer wrapped in foil, minus any plastic. When you're ready to use the bread, put the whole thing straight into a 350° oven for about 20 minutes (30 for a big loaf).
- **Make leftovers.** Whenever you can, cook once to serve twice. If you're serving rice one night early in the week, plan to cook a double batch so you can spend less time a few days later.
- **Stay organized.** For years, I've kept a spreadsheet of the recipes I've used—it helps me avoid repeating myself, and provides inspiration when I'm not looking to reinvent the wheel. But Yummly recently introduced a [Meal Planner](#) tool for subscribers, which can make life even easier. You can use the Meal Planner to save recipes to build your week and create a shopping list. For extras like crusty bread or salad fixings, you can add individual items to the list. If you have the Yummly app on your smartphone, you can easily take that list to the grocery store. No time for grocery shopping? The Meal Planner gives you the option to send your grocery list directly to an online store for pickup or delivery.

Try our sample 5-day weeknight meal plan

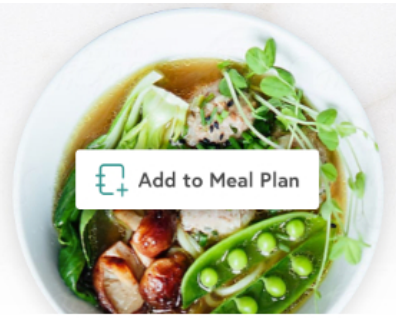
Below is a sample meal plan I created using the Meal Planner. You can follow it exactly (just click on "Let's Get Started!" below, then follow the prompts to add it to your plan); or swap in your own recipe ideas. Either way, once you get going with meal planning you'll never again gape into the fridge at 6 PM, wondering what's for dinner.

Create Your First Meal Plan

with Yummly!

Our personalized Meal Planning tool helps simplify your weekly shopping and cooking routine.

Let's Get Started!



Note: The [Yummly Meal Planner](#) is available to paid subscribers.

Monday: 5-Ingredient Pesto Salmon with rice and Easy Roasted Asparagus



5-Ingredient Pesto Salmon by Yummly

If cooking fish makes you nervous, fear not. This [5-Ingredient Pesto Salmon](#) recipe is so simple (about 5 minutes of prep time), you won't believe you hesitated. And the results are pretty spectacular for a Monday night, with classic basil, parmesan, garlic, and olive oil pesto permeating the luscious fish. Serve this with rice: In fact, make a double batch of white rice tonight (or quinoa, if you prefer; brown rice takes too long for this quick meal), serve half tonight with the salmon and refrigerate the rest for Wednesday. Don't forget to add rice to your Yummly shopping list if you don't have it in your pantry already.





Easy Roasted Asparagus by Yummly

Since you already have the oven going, consider adding [Easy Roasted Asparagus](#), which cooks at the same temperature as the fish. The whole meal is gluten-free, by the way.

Tuesday: Braised Chickpeas with Tomato, Spinach, and Feta with crusty bread



Braised Chickpeas with Tomato, Spinach, and Feta by Yummly

This simple vegetarian recipe for [Braised Chickpeas with Tomato, Spinach, and Feta](#) transforms a jar of marinara sauce into a filling, flavor-packed easy meal. A generous amount of garlic, plus red pepper flakes, lemon, and tangy, salty feta cheese keep things exciting. Make sure you've got plenty of bread—you'll want to sop up every bit of sauce.

Wednesday: Sweet Peach Baked BBQ Chicken with steamed broccoli and rice



Sweet Peach Baked BBQ Chicken by Yummly

With just six ingredients—including salt and cooking spray—tonight's recipe for [Sweet Peach Baked BBQ Chicken](#) is sure to become a family favorite. You'll be dreaming about that sweet-hot BBQ sauce, with its smoky undertone brightened by the unexpected addition of peach jam. And Yummly users report success swapping in boneless chicken breasts for the chicken thighs (you may need a little more sauce). Plan to steam some broccoli while the chicken bakes (and don't forget to add broccoli to your shopping list).

Thursday: 5 Ingredient Sun-Dried Tomato and Spinach Frittata with a big salad and a baguette





5 Ingredient Sun-Dried Tomato and Spinach Frittata by Yummly

Think of a frittata as a big, cheesy, baked omelet, the ultimate breakfast-for-dinner. This recipe for [5 Ingredient Sun-Dried Tomato and Spinach Frittata](#) gives you the basic technique, which you'll riff on again and again with whatever veggies you have on hand (I make a killer frittata with leftover roasted vegetables)—but tonight, sun-dried tomatoes, baby spinach, and basil make an enticing combination. If you're happy to keep eating your greens, add a romaine or kale salad on the side. Consider any leftover frittata for easy lunches.



Friday: Quick & Easy Sheet Pan Pork Chops with Roasted Potatoes and Veggies





Quick & Easy Sheet Pan Pork Chops with Roasted Potatoes and Veggies by Yummly

Potatoes that are crunchy outside and fluffy inside; your favorite additional vegetables (broccoli, cauliflower, bell peppers, carrots, and/or zucchini); and tender pork chops all cook together with simple spice-rack seasonings for a healthy meal. Who doesn't love an entire dinner cooked on a single sheet pan? [Quick & Easy Sheet Pan Pork Chops with Roasted Potatoes and Veggies](#) is bound to please. But ending the work week with easy cleanup? That's what I call a plan.