MEAL PLAN BASICS

Professional organizers and foodies share tips to help you ease the rush of weeknight dinners and reduce food waste at the same time.

WRITER **RENEE FREEMON MULVIHILL** ILLUSTRATOR **TRINA DALZIEL**

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF MEAL PLANNING? IS IT WORTH THE EFFORT?

GEORGE You can save sanity and money and minimize food waste. You generally eat healthier too since you aren't relying on drive-throughs.

REICH When the meals are planned in advance, they tend to be healthier and the cooking is less stressful. You have a plan when you come home from work.

ALKHAS There are many benefits of meal planning, but my favorite is the peace of mind I feel when I know I have everything I need to prepare dinner after a long day of work.

DELAP Our goals are often to lose weight and get healthier. Meal planning helps you implement your goals with better food choices and an intentional eating plan.

KLEIN You are only shopping once a week for your meals and you know where your food comes from. Plus, there's nothing like homemade food.

ALKHAS Studies have shown that regular family meals can help a child enhance their communication skills, develop good eating habits, feel a sense of belonging, and improve their self-esteem.

ARE THERE TIPS TO MAKE GROCERY SHOPPING EASIER?

KLEIN Doing online shopping saves you a ton of time and can be efficient. You can place your order and avoid having to waste hours at the grocery store.

GEORGE I use a grocery list template in Evernote. I have a list of all the things that are staples in my pantry, fridge, and freezer. Before I go to the grocery store, I go quickly through the list and delete anything we already have. The list is organized by aisle, so I can share the list with my husband and he can look at it on his phone.

REICH It's wasteful to buy things in huge quantities. Just buy what you need. The more things you have, the more work it is maintaining them.

WHAT ARE SOME SIMPLE WAYS TO GET STARTED WITH MEAL PLANNING?

GEORGE If you are completely new to meal planning, just start by planning 1 meal for the week ahead before you go on your usual grocery trip. It doesn't need to be elaborate or time-consuming. Build on that new skill once you feel comfortable by planning 1–2 meals and so on, until you have the whole week planned.

DELAP Create a family dinner grid. Ask your family for 5–10 breakfasts and dinners they love, and rotate these options every week or two.

ALKHAS Write down everything your family likes to eat. This list of favorite dishes is the basis for meal planning. I suggest you collect at least 20–30 dishes to create a menu that doesn't repeat itself too much.

REICH I recommend coming up with four weeks of meals. Create plans for week 1, 2, 3, and 4. If you had the week 1 menu last week, then you can do week 2 next, and so on.

KLEIN Meal planning is about trying to get out of your rut and avoid having the same things over and over again. It can be as simple as making a batch of rice and chicken and broccoli that could be for tacos one night and egg rolls the next night. If your kids love meatballs, try different textures. Serve them in buns and in bowls.

GEORGE Start by planning a meal for a day of the week that doesn't feel stressful for you. If your kids have soccer on a certain night, that might not be the best day.

ALKHAS Open your calendar and mark the days you'll be home and have time to cook. This is an important part of meal planning. What's the point of planning a lasagna night if everyone will be at a baseball game?

REICH Every Sunday night look at your schedules. If mom and dad are going to be out on Wednesday night, maybe order in pizza that night.

OUR EXPERTS

HELENA ALKHAS, professional organizer, A Personal Organizer; Glenview, Illinois

ELLEN DELAP, professional organizer, Professional-Organizer.com; Houston

DAWN GEORGE, professional organizer, Dawn George Organizing; Chester County, Pennsylvania

DINI KLEIN, author and food host, Prep + Rally; Los Angeles

BARBARA REICH, professional organizer, Life Organized; New York City

Please see "Meet the Pros," *page 90,* for contact information.

HOW DO I ORGANIZE MY PANTRY TO BETTER KEEP TRACK OF SUPPLIES?

REICH When you organize the pantry, put like foods together. Snack foods should go together, canned goods together, etc. Within snacks you might have all the chips together; in canned goods you can have all the vegetables together and all the soups together.

GEORGE Create a zone for all the ingredients you will need for the next week's dishes and recipes. You can have a bin or area labeled "this week."

DELAP Organize your pantry so you can see all the items. Decanting items [removing them from their original packaging and storing them in other containers] can help you save space, keep items fresh, and make it easy to access your food. Staples such as flour, cornmeal, and sugar should always be decanted to keep them fresh. Containers should have a strong seal with a pop-up top so they are airtight.

REICH I like to decant all the dry goods (flour, sugar, cereal, and other things you open and don't use right away) into other containers so they stay fresher and look neater. I tend to use containers with lids for items you use less frequently because you can stack those containers. Then I use bins for grab-and-go items.

KLEIN I like to always use glass storage containers so I can see what's in there and know where everything is.

ALKHAS I prefer square or rectangular containers as they make better use of the space. Stackable bins are also ideal for making the best use of vertical space in your pantry, but I don't like stacking more than two items because it becomes hard to access. You can also use shelf risers and place one item under the shelf riser and one on top.

GEORGE If you've got a 16-inch-deep shelf, be sure to use a 16-inch bin so you aren't wasting any space. Use labels so everyone knows what goes where.

ALKHAS Always put less-frequently-used items on the bottom of the pantry or way in the back.

HOW CAN I SET UP THE REFRIGERATOR SO ITEMS DON'T GET LOST IN THE BACK—AND SO WE EAT MORE HEALTHY PRODUCE?

GEORGE I am a fan of glass containers. You can see through them, and they can go from refrigerator to microwave or you can eat from them.

KLEIN If you wash produce and store it in individual containers, it will look so appealing and appetizing that it will get eaten.

REICH Buying healthy food is only part of it. You have to plan ahead and have the carrots and celery cut up and put at eye level so they're the first thing you see when you open the refrigerator.

ALKHAS The best way to always eat fresh produce is to know what you'll cook and buy only what you need. Also, ask your grocery store when restocking day is. Then you can always buy the freshest ingredients.

KLEIN Keep track of what's in your vegetable bin so you don't overbuy.

DELAP Designate a specific shelf at eye level for leftovers in your refrigerator so you can see what is available to use.

ALKHAS You could also designate a specific color of container for leftovers to help your family identify them and go for them first.

REICH Part of eating healthy and being organized is going through your refrigerator regularly. Once a week, go through the refrigerator and get rid of everything you don't need.

KLEIN Once a week, I go through my whole fridge and wipe down the shelves, take inventory, and look at expiration dates.

HOW CAN I MAKE BETTER USE OF LEFTOVERS?

GEORGE We often have one night later in the week (like maybe Thursday) when we eat leftovers from earlier in the week. That's meal planning too! Having a defined leftover night has been a game changer for my family.

DELAP Host a "cafeteria night" at your home with all your leftovers to make it fun to eat them up. Or fill glass containers with leftovers so you'll have lunch ready to take with you the next morning.

KLEIN Get creative with leftovers. Instead of having the same chicken and rice tonight, make a chicken fried rice so it feels like a new dish. Or have a *Chopped* competition with your family. Tell your kids they need to make dinner using three ingredients and let them get excited about planning dinner.

REICH If you want people to eat leftovers, there has to be a plan for the leftovers. Plan that on Monday you are going to make grilled steak and tofu with salad or a sweet potato, and on Wednesday you are going to have the leftover beef and tofu in tacos.

KLEIN You always want to finish the leftovers with something fresh to make them feel like they were just made today. I love using lemon and lime—they really wake up all the flavors. Fresh salsa and herbs can help liven things up too.

ALKHAS If you notice you have too many leftovers, it's time to assess the amount of food you're preparing. You can reduce the quantity per recipe or skip one meal per week.

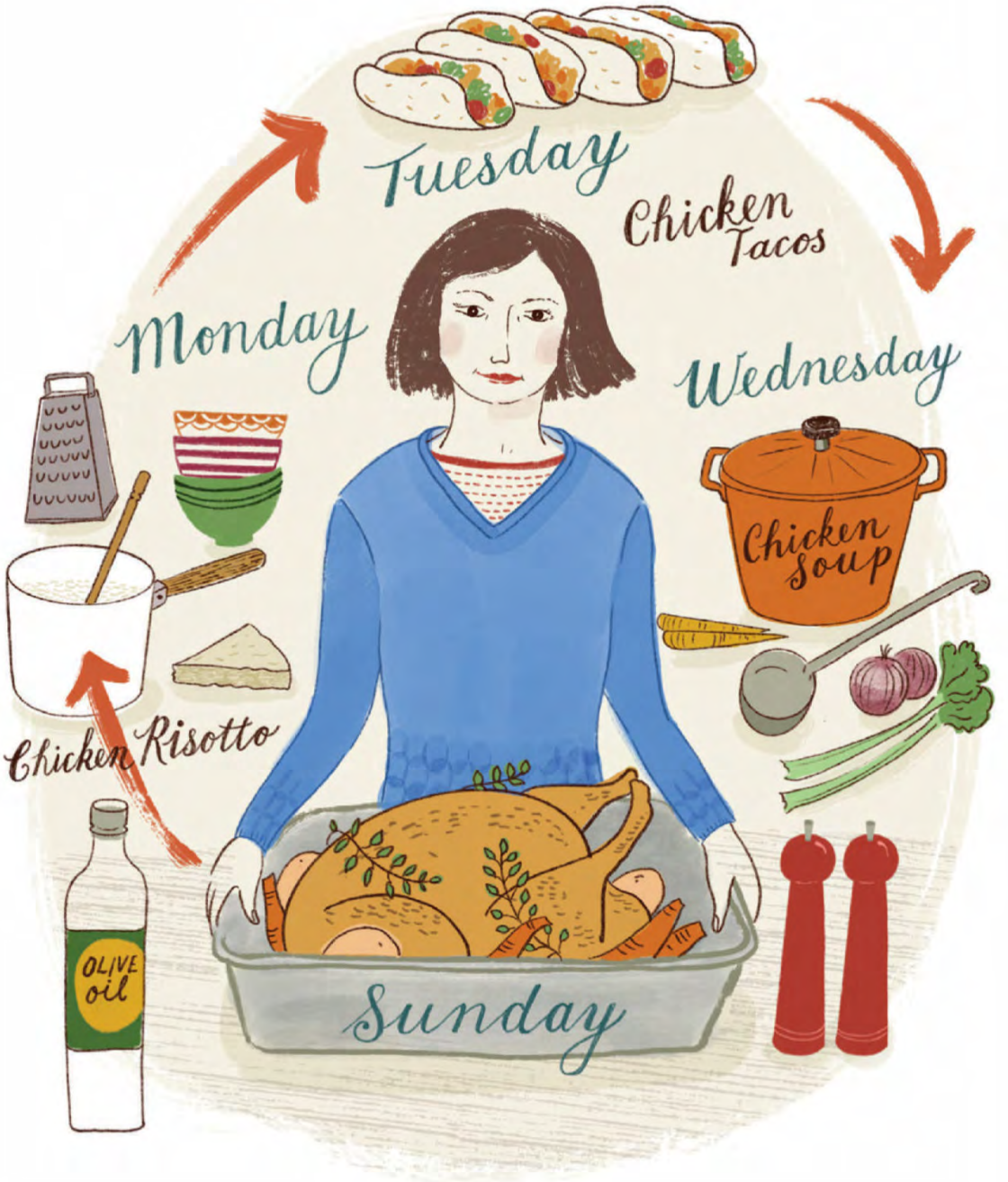
SHOULD I LABEL LEFTOVERS OR MAKE AN INVENTORY LIST?

GEORGE You can keep a roll of painters tape and a marker in a nearby drawer to label leftovers.

ALKHAS It depends a lot on your family situation. If you have teenagers coming home and serving themselves, you can simplify their fridge use by labeling the container. I also like to write the cooking date on the container's lid.

REICH You can just put a little sticker on it with a date that you need to throw it away.

DELAP Use a magnetic dry-erase board on the side of your freezer to keep a list of what you have. Your list will be a visual reminder for you.



APPS TO HELP WITH MEAL PLANNING

REAL PLANS This meal planning app contains more than 1,600 recipes and automatically creates a grocery list based on the recipes you choose.

PAPRIKA RECIPE MANAGER 3 Use this app to organize your recipes and create grocery lists. You can download recipes from your favorite websites and sync that information to multiple devices.

EMEALS This app makes grocery shopping easier. It will automatically create a grocery list based on your selected recipes and connects directly with online grocery partners such as Walmart, Amazon Fresh, and Instacart.

"Two to three slim bookcases can work as open lockers—one per family member would be ideal. Add a lift-top ottoman as a place to put on and take off your shoes."

—JAMIE NOVAK, PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZER

GOAL

CORRAL FAMILY GEAR

Minimize disarray in your home entryway with storage that offers dedicated space for everyone's essentials.

WRITER **RENEE FREEMON MULVIHILL**

☑ **CUSTOMIZE STORAGE** to suit your family's needs. Here, a mix of matching elements from a storage line offers both open and closed cubbies, as well as drawer units that double as benches, *opposite.* Storage was personalized for each family member to produce a custom look for less.

☐ **ASSIGN A HOOK** to each family member so everyone knows where their stuff goes—and when it's time to move overcrowded items elsewhere. (No, you don't need to hang every coat you own in the mudroom.) If you'll be hanging heavy backpacks, make sure the hook can hold a good amount of weight.

☐ **SET UP A COMMAND CENTER** where you can charge phones and tablets and display messages. A corkboard, *below left,* offers a place to pin invitations or photos to inspire you. Include a notepad or whiteboard for jotting reminders about after-school activities or shopping lists.

ANOTHER
GREAT *IDEA*

Is your phone always running out of charge during the day? Set up a spot in your mudroom for chargers and extra cords so you can grab one on the way out the door. "I suggest having a drawer of chargers in your mudroom so, if your charger is upstairs, you can just grab an extra one," says professional organizer Barbara Reich. To avoid any arguments, consider labeling cords or using color to distinguish who gets which one. "Buy different colors of cords and designate one color for each family member," says professional organizer Dawn George. "You can also have cords in different areas of the home and label them by area. If you label a cord 'mudroom,' you'll know it lives there." Another time-saver: Store chargers or cords in labeled travel pouches to make grabbing the right one even easier.

RESOURCES BEGIN ON *PAGE 92.*

WHAT TO BUY

BREAKFAST ZONE

Get your day started on the right foot by grouping all your morning essentials in one area of the kitchen.

WRITER **MEGAN BOETTCHER**

1

2

3

4

1 ON DISPLAY

Encourage everyone to eat more fruit with a grab-and-go fruit station. Place ripe fruit on the bamboo tray and let other produce ripen in the vented glass bowl. Just Ripe Fruit Bowl, $68; *uncommongoods.com*

2 TEA TIME

This two-sided organizer holds up to 120 bags of tea. The clear bins are removable, making it easy to reload your favorite flavors. TeaStand Tea Bag Organizer and Caddy, $35; *youcopia.com*

3 KEEP IT FRESH

Store cereal, oatmeal, or pancake mix in a clear container with a food-grade safe seal. Better Homes & Gardens 3-Pack Flip Tite Food Storage Container Set of 3, $23; *walmart.com*

4 GRAB AND GO

You'll get out the door with ease each morning when you fill this three-tier bin with protein bars, instant oatmeal, and hydration packets. Shelfbin 3-Tier Small Packet Organizer, $20; *youcopia.com*

"Put your mugs above your coffeemaker. Or if you're a tea drinker, put to-go cups, honey, and tea bags by the mugs."

—BARBARA REICH, PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZER

5 COFFEE BREAK

If you start the morning with a cup or two of joe, keep mugs handy with this stylish rack. Its compact design takes up minimal counter space. Heart & Hand with Magnolia Wood Mug Tree, $20; *target.com*

6 CLOSE AT HAND

Store all your favorite coffee pod flavors in a drawer near the coffee pot. This organizer fits drawers 19–22 inches wide. Rev-a-Shelf Adjustable Coffee Pod Storage Drawer, $109; *wayfair.com*

7 AT YOUR SERVICE

Leave this charming tray on the counter to hold a sugar bowl, tea tin, or set of mugs. Ria Safford Collection by iDesign Acacia Wood and Wire Serving Tray, $39; *idesignlivesimply.com*

8 SERVING STATION

Reimagine a baker's rack as a breakfast bar. Utilize hooks to hang mugs and a drawer to hold coffee or tea supplies. Use shelves for cereal boxes and bowls. 65-Inch Bakers Rack, $124; *honeycando.com*