

A New Year, a New You: Strategies to Simplify Your Life in the Kitchen



*Have you made the goal to simplify your life in the new year?
Try these strategies to simplify your life in the kitchen.*

Organize

Keep shelf-stable items and utensils that you frequently use visible in the kitchen. Move spices you use often to the front of the cabinet and invest in a tiered tower or spice rack so everything is visible at once. Store dry goods such as flour, sugar, grains, and beans in airtight glass jars or plastic containers on the counter or on a visible row of the pantry. Store cooking utensils in a holder on the counter or in a drawer next to the stove (Bittman, 2014).

Stock Up

Having basic pantry, refrigerator, and freezer staples on hand can make it much easier to throw together a quick dinner. If the thought of purchasing all of the items at once seems overwhelming, add a few items to your list each week and in a couple of months, you will be set. Here is a basic list to get you started (Bittman, 2014):

- Extra virgin olive oil, canola oil, and/or vegetable oil
- Vinegars – balsamic, red wine or sherry, and/or white wine
- Dried herbs and spices – salt, black pepper, chili powder, curry powder, cayenne pepper, smoked paprika, cumin, garlic powder, onion powder, red pepper flakes, oregano, sage, rosemary, tarragon, dill, basil, and thyme
- Dried grains – brown rice, quinoa, whole-wheat couscous, dried whole-wheat pasta
- Dried and/or canned beans – garbanzo, black, kidney, navy, and/or cannellini
- Canned tomato products – tomato paste, canned tomatoes (diced, crushed, whole)
- Nut butters*
- Brown sugar, honey, maple syrup
- Flours – whole-wheat white flour, white flour, cornmeal

- Baking soda, baking powder
- Nuts and seeds* (walnuts, almonds, etc.)
- Chicken and/or vegetable stock or bullion

**refrigerate to preserve quality*

In addition, stock up on frozen vegetables – corn, mixed vegetables, peas, spinach, edamame – and fruit when items are on sale.

Plan Ahead

Planning several days or a week of meals at once may seem like an overwhelming task, but once you get into the routine, you will likely find it saves a great deal of time. There will be less trips to the grocery store and less time spent thinking about what's for dinner.

Tips to get started:

- Ask your family for favorite meal ideas.
- Start small. Select one or two recipes you know how to make and add one or two new recipes per week.
- Need help choosing recipes? Think about your weekly schedule. Are there going to be late nights at work or sports games to attend? If so, you may want to plan a slow cooker meal or a meal you can remake from leftovers for this busy night. Look at what is on sale at your local grocery store and consider what produce is in season, which means it will likely be less expensive.
- Gather your recipes for the week and create a grocery list. First, check to see which items you already have at home. Include the other ingredients on a list. Organize your list according to the sections of the grocery store: produce, dairy, meat/seafood, dry goods/spices, and the freezer section.
- Make notes about which recipes your family likes and

dislikes. After a month or so, you'll have a substantial list you can use to create a rotating meal schedule and you can add in new recipes if you choose to.

- Visit ChooseMyPlate.gov for more grocery shopping and meal planning tips.

Cook Once, Eat Twice

- Grains: Double a batch of grains, such as rice. Immediately separate, cool, and refrigerate the extra portion. Use the leftovers the next night in a stir-fry or casserole.
- Meat/Protein: Roast extra chicken, pork, or beef. Use it the next night in a soup, tacos, or green salad.
- Beans: Cook extra beans and use the leftovers for bean burritos or taco bowls.
- Roasted vegetables: Roast extra vegetables and use the leftovers for a pureed soup or hearty vegetable stew. Or try roasted vegetable tacos or a roasted vegetable grain bowl topped with nuts, seeds, or crumbled cheese.

Remember to follow food safety rules for leftovers.

- Cool and refrigerate food in shallow containers promptly (within 2 hours of cooking).
- Cold food should be stored at 40 F or lower.
- Discard refrigerated leftovers after 3-4 days.
- Remember to label and date frozen items. Store frozen items in containers such as gallon freezer bags or freezer grade plastic or glass containers and ensure that your freezer remains at 0 F or less.
- Thaw frozen items in the refrigerator or microwave. Never thaw food on the kitchen counter or at room temperature.
- Remember to reheat all leftovers to 165 F throughout.
- Visit Foodsafety.gov for recommended freezer and refrigerator storage times or the National Center for

Home Preservation's Guide to *Freezing Prepared Foods* for more information on freezing leftovers. Additional information from the USDA on food safety and leftovers can be found here.

This article was written by Brittany Bingeman, Extension Assistant Professor FCS, Washington County

References:

1. *Bittman, M. (2014). How to cook everything fast. New York: Double B Publishing, Inc.*
2. *Kitchen Timesavers. (2017). In Choosemyplate.gov. Retrieved from <https://www.choosemyplate.gov/budget-time-savers>.*
3. *Leftovers and Food Safety. (2013). In United States Department of Agriculture*

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