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EVERYDAY PRACTICAL

A Week of Food, Planned in 5 Days

In five short sessions, build a weekly food routine that fits your real calendar, one shopping trip and one cooking session — and that survives the week going wrong.

5-day guide · 5 chapters · Self-Directed Learning Framework

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide was built with the Self-Directed Learning Framework (SDLF): every chapter gives you a short starting action, the one idea you actually need, a fully worked example, a checklist, and exercises done with your own calendar and kitchen — no filler, no re-reading required.

Important: this is a guide to planning, shopping and batch cooking — not nutritional advice, and not a diet. It does not tell you what to eat, and it is not a substitute for a dietitian or a doctor, particularly if you have a medical condition or a food allergy. Where food safety is mentioned, follow your own country's food-safety authority, whose guidance overrides anything here. Work through the chapters in order; each takes 20–35 minutes.

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CHAPTER 1 OF 5 · DAY 1 · 25 MIN

Planning Around the Week You Actually Have

> **Outcome:** "I have a plan with a meal for each slot that needs one — and no meal for the slots that don't."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Open your calendar for next week and mark every evening you will not be eating at home. That is the fastest planning win available.

The minimum you need to know

Meal planning fails when it plans for a generic week instead of your week. Start from the **calendar, not the recipes**: how many meals do you genuinely need to produce, on which days, and how much time does each of those days actually leave? A Tuesday that ends at seven and a Saturday that ends at two need different meals. Then apply the rule that prevents the week-two collapse: plan **variety through components, not through recipes**. Cooking five different dishes is exhausting and cooking one dish five times is unbearable, but cooking three or four **components** — a grain, a protein, a roasted vegetable, a sauce — and recombining them gives genuine variety from one session. Plan fewer meals than you think you need, because leftovers, invitations and takeaway happen. Two deliberately empty slots is a plan that survives; seven full ones is a plan that produces waste.

Worked example: one real week, planned

The calendar shows: Monday home late, Tuesday normal, Wednesday out for dinner, Thursday normal, Friday home late, Saturday free, Sunday family lunch elsewhere. So the week needs five dinners, not seven — and two of them, Monday and Friday, must be reheat-only because there is no cooking time. The plan is built from components rather than dishes: a pot of rice, a tray of roasted vegetables, a batch of chicken thighs, a pot of lentils and a jar of yoghurt-herb dressing. Monday is rice, chicken and vegetables. Tuesday, the same components become a wrap, assembled fresh. Thursday, the lentils become a soup with the last of the vegetables. Friday is a repeat of Monday, which is fine on a Friday. Saturday is cooked fresh from scratch, because that is the day with time and it stops the week feeling industrial. Five meals, four components, one session.

Checklist

- ☐ Next week's calendar checked before any recipe is chosen
- ☐ Number of meals actually needed counted — not assumed to be seven
- ☐ Each slot marked as cook-fresh, assemble, or reheat-only
- ☐ Plan built from three or four components rather than five different recipes
- ☐ At least one slot deliberately left open for a change of plan
- ☐ At least one meal planned to be cooked fresh, so the week isn't all reheated

Exercises

1. Write out next week's evenings and mark which ones need a meal from you.
2. Choose four components that combine into at least three different meals.
3. Assign each needed slot a component combination, and leave one slot empty on purpose.

CHAPTER 2 OF 5 · DAY 2 · 25 MIN

A Shopping List That Matches the Plan

> **Outcome:** "I have one list, built from the plan and checked against what I already own."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Open your fridge and write down the three things in it that will go off first. Those three should appear in next week's plan.

The minimum you need to know

The shopping trip is where most of the week's food waste is created. Two habits fix most of it. First, **shop the plan, not the shop**: a list built from the component plan, written as quantities rather than vague items — "1 kg chicken thighs", not "chicken" — because vague items get guessed at generously and the excess rots. Second, **shop your kitchen first**. Go through the fridge, freezer and cupboards before writing the list and build the plan partly around what is already there and closest to expiry. Half a bag of spinach and an opened jar of paste are ingredients, not obstacles. Organise the list by where things sit in the shop so you are not crossing the floor four times — that is what keeps one trip to one trip. And be realistic about fresh produce: it does not all survive seven days, so heavy leaf and soft fruit belong in the first half of the week, with sturdier vegetables later.

Worked example: from plan to list

The four components need: rice, chicken thighs, carrots, courgettes, red onions, peppers, lentils, yoghurt, lemon, garlic, herbs, tortillas, stock. The cupboard check cuts it down fast — rice, lentils, stock, garlic and half a bag of onions are already there, and the freezer has chicken from a previous offer. The fridge has a courgette on its last day, which is why the Thursday soup exists in the plan at all. The list that gets written is: carrots 1 kg, peppers ×3, red onion ×2, yoghurt 500 g, lemon ×2, flat-leaf parsley ×1, tortillas ×8. Seven items, grouped by aisle, one trip, about twelve minutes in the shop. The version of this list written without checking the cupboard would have been thirteen items and would have produced a second bag of rice and a duplicate head of garlic.

Checklist

- ☐ Fridge, freezer and cupboards checked before the list was written
- ☐ Items closest to expiry deliberately built into the plan
- ☐ Every list item written with a quantity, not just a name
- ☐ List grouped by aisle or shop section
- ☐ Soft produce planned for the early part of the week, sturdy vegetables for later
- ☐ One shopping trip, list taken, nothing added that isn't on the plan

Exercises

1. Do a full cupboard and fridge inventory and cross off everything your plan already covers.
2. Rewrite your list with a quantity beside every single item.
3. Reorder the list by shop section and time your next trip against your usual one.

CHAPTER 3 OF 5 · DAY 3 · 35 MIN

One Cooking Session, Run in Parallel

> **Outcome:** "I can cook a week of components in one session by overlapping them instead of queuing them."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Think about the last time you cooked and count the minutes you spent standing and waiting. That waiting time is where a whole second component fits.

The minimum you need to know

A batch session is a scheduling problem, not a cooking problem. Cooked in sequence, four components take four times as long; cooked in parallel, they take barely longer than the slowest one, because most cooking is waiting. The method is the one professional kitchens use: **start the longest unattended thing first**, then fill its waiting time with everything else. Oven items go in first because the oven cooks without you and can usually hold two trays. Grains and pulses go on next because a pot simmers unattended. Anything needing your hands — chopping, sauces, assembly — happens during those gaps. Two practical rules make this work: **prep everything before you start any of it**, so you are never chopping while something burns, and **cook components slightly under** where they will be reheated, because reheating cooks them further and the difference between good and mushy is one reheat. Clean as the gaps allow; a session that ends with an hour of washing up is a session that does not happen again.

Worked example: four components in seventy minutes

0:00 — oven on. All vegetables chopped, chicken seasoned, everything laid out. 0:12 — vegetable tray and chicken tray both into the oven. 0:14 — rice on, lid on, timer set. 0:16 — lentils on in a second pot with stock. 0:20 — while all four cook, the dressing is made and the chopping board and knife are washed. 0:30 — rice done, off the heat, lid on to steam. 0:35 — vegetables out, slightly firmer than you would serve them tonight, because Thursday's soup will cook them again. 0:45 — chicken out, rested. 0:50 — lentils done. 0:55 — everything spread on trays to cool. 1:10 — cooled, packed, labelled, kitchen already mostly clean because it was cleaned in the gaps. Total hands-on time is well under half of the seventy minutes.

Checklist

- ☐ All chopping and prep completed before any heat is turned on
- ☐ Longest unattended item started first — usually the oven
- ☐ Waiting time used for the next component, not for standing
- ☐ Components that will be reheated cooked slightly under
- ☐ Washing up done in the gaps rather than left to the end
- ☐ A written order of operations followed, not improvised

Exercises

1. Write a minute-by-minute order of operations for your four components before you cook.
2. Cook the full session once and note where you were waiting with nothing to do.
3. Rewrite the order of operations afterwards based on what actually happened.

CHAPTER 4 OF 5 · DAY 4 · 25 MIN

Cooling, Storing and Reheating Properly

> **Outcome:** "My food is cooled fast, stored in the right place and labelled, and I know what to freeze."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Look in your fridge and find one container with no date on it. You are about to discover why labels matter.

The minimum you need to know

This is the chapter where the rules come from your national food-safety authority rather than from a blog, and following them is what makes batch cooking safe rather than risky. The core ideas are consistent across authorities. **Cool quickly**: hot food left standing sits for hours in the range where bacteria multiply fastest, so spread it into shallow containers rather than leaving it deep in the pot, and get it into the fridge within about two hours. **Store cold**: fridges should run at or below about 5 °C, and most are warmer than their owners assume — a cheap thermometer settles it. **Label everything** with contents and cook date, because the alternative is guessing, and people guess optimistically. **Freeze what the week will not reach**, on the day it was cooked rather than after it has sat. And reheat until **steaming hot through the middle**, not warm at the edges, taking out only the portion you will eat.

Worked example: packing down the session

The four components come off the heat and are spread into wide shallow containers rather than left in their pots, which drops them from steaming to room temperature in about forty minutes instead of three hours. Each lid gets a strip of masking tape: "chicken thighs — 16/09", "roast veg — 16/09", and so on. The portions for the first three days go into the fridge, which a thermometer confirms is running at 4 °C. The two portions intended for Friday are frozen immediately rather than optimistically left in the fridge for five days. When Monday's meal is reheated, one portion comes out, is heated until it is genuinely steaming through the middle rather than warm at the edges, and the rest of the container goes straight back in the fridge without ever having been warmed.

Checklist

- ☐ Food spread into shallow containers to cool, not left deep in the pot
- ☐ Everything into the fridge or freezer within about two hours of cooking
- ☐ Fridge temperature actually measured, not assumed
- ☐ Every container labelled with contents and cook date
- ☐ Anything not going to be eaten within a few days frozen on the day it was cooked
- ☐ Reheated until steaming hot through the middle, and each portion reheated only once
- ☐ Your own national food-safety guidance checked and followed where it differs

Exercises

1. Buy or find a fridge thermometer and check what your fridge is really running at.
2. Label every container currently in your fridge with a date.
3. Look up your national food-safety authority's page on cooling and reheating leftovers, and note where it differs from your habits.

CHAPTER 5 OF 5 · DAY 5 · 25 MIN

Keeping It Going When the Week Goes Wrong

> **Outcome:** "I have a minimum version of this routine that still works on a week with no time."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Decide, right now, which single component you would cook if you only had twenty minutes next Sunday. That is your minimum version.

The minimum you need to know

Every routine that depends on a good week eventually meets a bad one, and what happens then decides whether the routine survives. The fix is to decide the **minimum version** in advance, while you are calm: the one thing you will still do when the session is impossible. Usually that is a single component — a pot of grain, or one tray of roast vegetables — plus a shortlist of three meals you can assemble from the cupboard with no cooking at all. A partial prep is enormously better than none, and it keeps the habit alive, which matters more than any individual week. Two other things keep it going. **Review honestly**: at the end of each week, note what got eaten, what got thrown away and what you could not face by Wednesday, and change the next plan accordingly — waste is data, not failure. And **build a short repeat list** of combinations that worked, so planning week six takes ten minutes rather than thirty. The goal was never twelve identical containers. It was never standing in front of the fridge at seven o'clock with no plan.

Worked example: week four goes wrong

Sunday disappears entirely — a family thing runs all day. The full session is not happening. The minimum version does: twenty minutes on Sunday night for one pot of rice and one tray of roast vegetables, both cooled and labelled. Monday and Tuesday are covered by those plus a tin of chickpeas and the dressing that keeps for a week. Wednesday is the cupboard fallback, pasta with tinned tomatoes and whatever is left. Thursday, an hour appears unexpectedly and half a normal session gets done. Nothing is thrown away, no evening ends in a panic, and week five starts from the repeat list rather than from scratch. The review note for that week is one line: "two components is enough for three days — do that as the default when Sunday is busy."

Checklist

- ☐ A minimum version defined: one component plus a no-cook fallback
- ☐ Three cupboard-only meals identified that need no prep at all
- ☐ End-of-week review done: what was eaten, what was wasted, what you got sick of
- ☐ Next week's plan adjusted based on what was actually thrown away
- ☐ A repeat list started of component combinations that worked
- ☐ A missed week treated as one missed week, not as the end of the routine

Exercises

1. Write down your minimum version and put it somewhere you will see it on a bad Sunday.
2. List three meals you can make from your cupboard right now with no fresh ingredients.
3. Do one honest end-of-week review and write the single change you will make next week.

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