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Plan ahead for a week's worth of meals



One dinner can be turned into two or three, saving time and money

Food Front

By Jane Mundy

Some of my fondest childhood memories are of my grandmother's kitchen. I loved stuffing bits of Sunday's roast through the meat grinder for shepherd's pie, shelling peas or rubbing together flour and butter to make scones. She always cooked from scratch, and she knew that one meal could easily be turned into two or three with a bit of planning and preparation. That's why I suggest that people who want to eat well should set aside about four hours on the weekend and get cooking for the week ahead.

I can almost hear people saying: "Who has time for that?" But anyone who has worked in a commercial kitchen knows that prepping saves time. If you prep on the weekend, during the week you won't have to dash to the grocery store or takeout joint to buy ready-made or processed food. I know some people equate cooking with work. But you can make it more enjoyable by involving the kids, as my grandmother did with me, or by inviting a friend over to cook and share the results — open a bottle of wine, play your favourite tunes with the volume cranked up and enjoy yourselves.

In addition to saving time during the week, you'll end up eating better because food left closer to its natural state is more nutritious than refined food. That means when you're planning ahead, you should think about

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choosing brown rice over white, and dried legumes over canned. And as an added benefit, you'll discover that cooking from scratch is more economical than buying processed foods. Organic chicken does cost about 15 per cent more than conventional chicken, but imaginative menus call for less meat and more grains and vegetables. And having cooked grains, beans and vegetables in your fridge makes it easier to eat less meat.

Here is a basic grocery list to get you started on a week's worth of plan-ahead dinners.

- 1 or 2 free-range, organic chickens
- Dried garbanzo beans, black beans, navy beans
- Brown rice and arborio rice (for risotto)
- Seasonal vegetables and fruits
- Onions, carrots, celery, beets, squash, garlic

Chicken

A whole organic chicken is greater than the sum of its parts when you use the bones, neck and gizzards for stock. I usually serve a one-pot, roasted chicken dinner surrounded by roasted vegetables on the first night. I'll have enough meat left over for a few more meals.

Stock

Homemade chicken stock will impart a richer, deeper flavour to just about anything you would normally make with water.

At any decent restaurant, there's always a huge stock pot bubbling on the back burner and veggie scraps, from onion skins to carrot peelings, are constantly added to it. Think about that next time you're gathering up scraps to put in the compost bin.

I always have a few litres of chicken stock in the freezer and I freeze some of it in ice-cube trays for use when a recipe calls for a small amount of stock. In addition to using it as a base for soups and stews, add it to pasta sauce, curry and veggie stir-fries.

Beans and rice

Almost all canned beans include sodium and some also contain animal fat, sugar and various chemicals. So use dried beans whenever you can. To get a head start, soak dried beans overnight — they will cook faster the next day.

Cook a large batch of brown rice, store it in a sealed container in the fridge, then reheat it in the microwave with a few tablespoons of liquid and serve with a piece of fish or other protein. You can also toss beans or rice in a salad or soup, or mix them together to make an easy side dish for roasted vegetables.

And then there's risotto. Yes, it is time-

consuming to make, but just about any restaurant that serves it prepares it ahead of time until it's almost cooked, then finishes it off right before serving.

You can do the same thing. Be sure to coat the arborio rice in butter or oil before you start to cook it so that it doesn't get soggy. Then cook it until it's almost done, spread it out on a baking sheet to cool and refrigerate it.

When you're ready to serve it, place the risotto in a heavy pot, add a little hot stock and stir for about five minutes or until perfectly al dente. Add cream and Parmesan cheese or lemon zest and fresh herbs along with the stock if you like.

Vegetables

While your beans and rice simmer on the stove, roast some root vegetables in the oven. Try roasting beets and butternut squash, turnips and rutabagas, and garlic.

QUICK CHICKEN STOCK

- 1 or 2 chicken carcasses and giblets
- 2 yellow onions, quartered
- 2 carrots, chopped
- 2 stalks celery, ribs and tops, chopped
- 1 bunch parsley
- 2 sprigs fresh thyme (optional)
- 2 bay leaves
- 8 peppercorns
- Salt to taste

Put everything into a large pot and cover with water. Bring to a boil and skim the fat off the top for a clear stock. Simmer for about three or four hours, skimming as necessary.

Pass the stock through a fine sieve and discard the solids (my dog loves the cooked carrots and chicken skin). Cool to room temperature, then refrigerate and/or freeze.



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Try parboiling and pickling cauliflower, parsnips and carrots — pickled veggies are great snacks and will keep in the fridge for at least five days. With roasted beets, I slice a few and fill a mason jar topped with apple cider vinegar to use near the end of the week. The rest go into salad or soup and even dessert (red velvet cake, anyone?).

What's next?

You can now throw together a chicken and squash curry in about 20 minutes. You've also got the ingredients for chicken pot pie, chicken tacos with black beans, or chicken and chickpea stew. Or how about butternut squash and black bean chili, or a quick ratatouille?

Get creative and search recipes online. Experimenting with a repertoire of recipes and not falling back on the tried and true will make you a more adventurous and confident cook.



Feature

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