

Hi there! You're listening to episode #12 of the Cook Smarts podcast. I'm Jess Dang the Founder of Cook Smarts and I'm here to help you become a more confident and organized cook in the kitchen.

So we had a short summer hiatus and came back last week with our first episode of Season 2. We kicked it off with a chat with Laura Fuentes, mom of 3 and founder of MOMables a company devoted to helping families eat healthier, and our conversation covered everything from school lunch ideas to mindset shifts that make parenting less overwhelming. It's a great back-to-school episode for parents because some of your lives are about to get pretty crazy.

I know that schools are starting earlier and earlier and many of your kids have already headed back. Back in my day, school always started after Labor Day so if your school is still old school like that, next week might be when your lives get a bit more hectic with after-school activities, homework help, and PTA meetings..

However, even if you're not a parent this episode is still for you because today we're covering how to save some time in the kitchen. In all the years I've taught cooking and run Cook Smarts, not one person has said, I wish it took me longer to cook a meal. Nope, not a one, so this episode is really for everyone.

Because this is such a big topic that applies to everybody and because I have so many tips for you, I'm actually going to break this down into a 2 part episode, because the last thing I want to do is overwhelm ya'll. I know there is lots on your plate, so your homework is to take just 1 tip from each of these episodes and just practice integrating it into your life. Some of these tips may take some initial effort from you, but I promise you there will be great payoff not that far down the road. So enjoy that extra time you've earned and then tackle the next tip and just integrate, practice, repeat.

But before we dive into the 3 time saving tips I'm gonna share with you today, a little plug for our meal plan service, which saves thousands of home cooks tons of time every single week, and let me tell you how we do that. We're like your personal cooking assistant. Yes, there are lots of free recipes out there and you could search the vast internet for them but that takes time and you might end up with 3 different recipes that require too many new ingredients or too much time or just don't taste that good. Instead let us, the professional meal planners who literally spend all day thinking about this, plan an organized weekly menu for you.

We create all of our recipes ourselves so they're consistent and quality-controlled. They're interesting and varied but also not complicated. And each recipe comes with a gluten-free, paleo, and vegetarian version so you can eat how you want to eat every single night. You get to select the meals that most appeal to you every single week and then we generate a grocery list that's already organized into store sections to save you even more time. You walk into the store with a plan and just breeze in and out.

And then when it's time to cook, we have all these short videos that you can watch to help you finally, for instance, learn how to properly chop an onion and it takes you 3 minutes instead of 30. So if you're ready to have us be your personal kitchen assistant and save you loads of precious time, just visit cooksmarts.com, and get a free 30 day trial to our meal plan service. And plans start at just \$6 / month -- it'll be the most affordable and valuable help you'll ever get. Again visit cooksmarts.com for a free 30 day trial and enjoy more free time today.

And now returning to the first of our 3 time-saving tips. This first one is one that I talk about a lot, so I'm sorry if you've heard it before, but it is a really important one. If you want to eat a healthy diet, which means one that's full of vegetables, you have to finally learn to use a knife, for reals.

I want you to be able to pick up a knife, hold it the right way, not worry about chopping off any fingertips, know the best way to chop any common ingredient I put in front of you, and maybe even chop without having to look down at your chopping board, but I don't want us getting ahead of ourselves. Again, we're gonna start small and build from there.

However, it's not enough to just have great knife skills. I want your knife to be sharp too because a blunt knife is not going to save you time. It will drag you down in the kitchen, make your prepping experience so much more frustrating, and it's actually really unsafe because you'll be using more force than you need to or positioning yourself in a weird way, and that's when accidents happen.

In order to truly save time in the kitchen you need both a good tool and the skills to use that tool most effectively and efficiently. Now this doesn't mean that you need an expensive knife. One of my favorite knives is a Chefmate's knife from Target. I don't think that brand even exists anymore but I've owned it for almost 15 years and still use it almost daily. I do find that it needs professional sharpening more often than my much more expensive Global knives but when it's sharp, you would never know it's a \$20 knife. Knives to me are like cars. It doesn't matter if you have a Hyundai or a BMW, they all need maintenance but if you take care of them, they will all get you from point A to point B and can last you a lifetime.

When I was giving in-home cooking lessons, I met so many people who had registered for nice knives when they got married, but over the years, they weren't stored properly, they were placed in the dishwasher and never sharpened, and this resulted in dull blades. I would always bring my knife roll of sharpened knives, and they were just shocked at the difference.

So if you have a dull knife, don't give up on it or think you need to upgrade to a new knife. Google or search on Yelp for a local, professional knife sharpener and take your knives in for a major tune up. If you've never gotten your knives sharpened, you too will be shocked by what a difference a new sharp blade can make. Where I live, every farmer's market usually has someone doing knife sharpening out of their truck so every few months, I'll just bring them along, and they'll sharpen them while I shop. They typically charge by the inch, and it is totally

worth it. I love supporting a local craftsman in their trade, and in exchange, I get a sharpened knife and lots of time saved.

If you're someone who really likes to work with their hands, then it might be worth getting some stones and learning how to do it yourself -- there are lots of videos on YouTube showing you how. I have a friend Scott who's an engineer and so incredibly handy, and he brought his set of knife sharpening stones over to my house once and did it for me, and that was such a treat. I'm happy to let a professional do it for me, just like I'm happy letting a professional cut my hair -- just not something that I feel like I need to learn to do myself.

If you're going to start with any tip from today's episode, please start with this one. It'll be easy to do and set you up to spend a lot less time in the kitchen. And then you'll be ready to use that tool like a master -- so to do that, there are 2 ways. One is to find a local in-person knife skills class. Again head to Google or Yelp, and do it with a friend, do it with your partner, do it with a sibling or even a parent and make an activity out of it. One of my best friends gifted me a knife skills class at a local kitchen appliance shop right out of college, and it was the best gift ever because even though I cooked a lot in college and thought I was using a knife correctly, there were still all these tips and tricks that I didn't know about, and I was able to implement them immediately. Over time, it made such a huge difference in the time it took me to prep my ingredients before cooking.

So option #1, find an in-person knife-skills class. Option #2 is to clearly find one online. YouTube of course will have a million how-to videos but since you're listening to the Cook Smarts podcast, you might be interested to know that we also have a great starter knife skills video, and I will of course make sure to link to it in our show notes. It's less than 10 minutes long and if you make the modifications I suggest, you'll probably start saving at least 10 minutes each time you prep and that kind of time adds up, my friends. And anyone who's ever learned anything (which of course is everybody) knows that acquiring the knowledge is just part of the equation. You of course need to practice what you've learned too, but that part is something you can do every time you prep. So, let's stop wasting your very precious time by doing things inefficiently and learn the most efficient way to use your knife and chop everything in your kitchen whether you find an in-person knife skills class or one online.

And because I'm such a firm believer in the importance of knife skills for making your life so much better in the kitchen, we're kicking off a completely free "Improve Your Knife Skills" community challenge in mid October for members of our Facebook Group. If you're not a member yet, it's super easy to join. Just search for Cook Smarts on Facebook and you'll find us! There will be lots of resources and each week you'll be given a small piece of homework that ties into one of our meal plan recipes so you'll be building skills while cooking dinner, and therefore totally winning at life.

Now I know I just spent a lot of time talking about knife skills, but for my next time saving tip, we're actually trying to move away from using a knife and taking advantage of zero or no prep

vegetables in our weeknight cooking routine. When folks are picking quick recipes, they'll look at the number of steps or the number of ingredients but one thing they often overlook is how low maintenance the ingredients are. Now what do I mean by maintenance? In this case, I'm talking about the level of effort required to turn that ingredient into something edible. When you're in a hurry, I do not recommend trying to wrestle a butternut squash. Even if you have great knife skills, peeling, deseeding, and then chopping a butternut squash will still take a lot longer than say, chopping a zucchini, for example.

But it's not just about how easy something is to chop -- something like Swiss chard is incredibly easy to chop but is often accompanied by a lot of dirt so it requires a bit more effort to wash up properly. However, a bell pepper, now that's a low maintenance vegetable that's not only easy to clean but also quite easy to chop up.

So while you may feel like you don't have the time to make veggie-filled meals during the week, I'm here to tell you: you can have your veggies and save time in the kitchen, too when you pick low maintenance veggies that require zero to minimal prep. I know your ears just perked up when I said zero prep -- like sign me up for that!

In my zero prep category, I've got things bucketed into fresh and frozen. In the fresh category, we have items like your salad mixes. I usually pick up several of these a week because it means I can have fresh greens easily with any meal and even though it's called a salad mix, you don't have to enjoy it only as a salad base. You could add some greens to a smoothie, you could make it into a slaw that's included in a wrap or on tacos, you could fold it into some eggs for a dinner omelet, you could add them to a soup or pasta or just simply saute them up for a side dish.

And you can use them as substitutes for the actual head or bunch of greens. Like if a recipe calls for kale, you don't have to buy a bunch of kale and deal with the cleaning and prepping -- just keep a bag of kale mix and use it in the soup or quiche or frittata or meatballs or simply saute it up for a quick side of cooked greens. Trader Joes (and I'm sure many other grocery stores) sells this salad mix that's made up of sliced up cabbage, brussels sprouts, and kale, and we often use that as a slaw for tacos or just simply saute up with some oil, salt, pepper and lemon juice for a quick side. So instead of slicing the cabbage, brussels sprouts, and kale, you can just open the bag and there you go.

Other zero prep items in the fresh category are grape and cherry tomatoes, baby carrots, and portobello mushrooms. My kitchen pretty much always has cherry tomatoes in stock because they're great for throwing into a salad or for even creating a quick fresh tomato sauce without any chopping needed. Baby carrots of course can always be eaten as is, but I like to actually throw them on a sheet pan or my air-fryer and roast them. And of course, a portobello mushroom is a great vegetable sub for a meat-based burger. Just brush it with some oil, salt and pepper throw it into your oven or onto your grill and you're done.

You could of course also get fresh vegetables that are pre-chopped too, which means zero prep on your part. Clearly, it's a bit more expensive to buy 1 lb of chopped broccoli vs. 1 lb of unchopped broccoli but if it means you're going to be more likely to cook the broccoli if it's already chopped, then to me that trade off is worth it. I know so many of us buy produce whole with of course the intention to prep and then cook it, but then life gets in the way and a lot of things go to waste because they spoil before we get to it. It happens to everyone so I think the first step when you're at the market deciding whether you should buy the chopped broccoli or the whole broccoli is to be honest with yourself on the level of effort you can reliably put in on a weeknight because our intentions don't always match our execution. And this may change over time too. As your knife skills get better -- remember tip #1 -- you might be more likely to go for the whole broccoli.

For me, my primary goal is to make a home cooked meal as many nights as I can and when I look at my calendar on any given week, if it's really crazy, then I just allow myself more shortcuts. Even though I am very competent with a knife, slicing a cabbage is still going to take me longer than just dumping that bagged mix out. I know that this might mean I'm spending a bit more and maybe having to throw away a plastic bag but if you're likely to order takeout instead, that also produces its share of packaging waste as well. So other items you can often find pre-chopped for you aside from broccoli and cabbage are shaved brussels sprouts, cubed butternut squash, grated or diced carrots, chopped and riced cauliflower, diced celery, unhusked corn, diced onions and peeled or minced garlic.

Now that we've covered the fresh zero-prep veggies, I'm going to quickly cover frozen. I think folks think that if they're buying frozen veggies, they're not getting the freshest product but that's totally not true. Frozen veggies are usually frozen at their freshest and the best part is, they're frozen after they've been cooked so all you need to do is defrost and warm up, so great time savers for any kitchen!

If you haven't been taking advantage of frozen veggies in your ingredient repertoire, take a walk down the frozen aisle at your grocery store and make a list of what they carry so you know when you can make a shortcut swap. Some of the common ones I see are broccoli, butternut squash, carrots, cauliflower florets and rice, corn, green beans, mushrooms, okra, peas, and also lots of medleys.

Outside of these zero-prep options, there are also a lot of easy prep vegetables that should be a standard part of your weeknight meal repertoire. Easy prep vegetables are low maintenance -- they don't require peeling or have soft skins so you can easily chop them. They are also perfect starter veggies for kids to help chop. Some that I turn to often are asparagus, bell peppers, bok choy, celery, cucumbers, tomatoes, zucchini, eggplant, mushrooms, green beans, okra, snow peas, and sugar snap peas. Asparagus, you literally just snap the ends off and even if you need to chop them, it's pretty easy chopping, right? Cucumbers appear on our dinner spread probably 3 nights a week because they are so easy to chop and my kids just love them. Green beans too because my kids know how to use scissors and can help trim them so if I get them to do that

over the weekend, they are then a zero prep veggie during the week. And even though I'm someone who doesn't love zucchini, we often include it in our weekly meal plan just because it's super easy to chop up.

Ok, so now onto our last time saving tip for this episode -- similar to tip #2 of incorporating more low maintenance veggies into your weeknight rotation, tip #3 is to incorporate more fast cooking methods and ingredients into your weeknight rotation, and this goes for veggies, proteins, and grains. Cook Smarts has an excellent blog post that walks you through a variety of cooking methods and has a super comprehensive list of quick cooking veggies, proteins, and grains that are perfect when you need to quickly churn out a meal.

For the veggies, we even list the quickest cooking methods for each one, so for example, if you're in a real hurry and want to make a side of broccoli with dinner, you probably don't want to roast them. As delicious as roasted broccoli is, you need to wait for the oven to heat up and the process of roasting just takes a while. Instead, we recommend that you blanch or microwave broccoli. If you don't know what blanching is, it's just boiling an ingredient for a short amount of time and then giving it an ice bath after it's drained to preserve its texture and color. Basically the ice bath part just stops further cooking from continuing so you don't get a mushy vegetable. If you're feeling lazy, like I often am, I just boil it for less time and skip the ice bath too. Just don't tell anybody.

And while microwaving a frozen dinner isn't the healthiest option (though sometimes totally necessary on an especially crazy week), microwaving veggies is such a quick way to cook them while also retaining most of its nutrients. It was definitely my working mom's go-to method to get vegetables on our dinner table, and one I turn to regularly. What I'll do is just put my chopped broccoli in a glass Pyrex dish, fill it with like 2 tablespoons of water, sprinkle on some salt, cover with a wet paper towel and microwave it for 2 and a half minutes, and I have perfectly cooked broccoli to do whatever I want with. I can toss it with a dressing, with some butter & lemon juice, sprinkle on some fresh parmesan cheese or I can add it to a stirfry and since it's already cooked, it really just needs to be added and covered in some sauce.

So head to our show notes at cooksmarts.com/podcast/12 or just find the link in the episode description to get the link to this article, which covers all the ways you can cook your veggies quickly.

This article also covers quick cooking proteins and grains too because nobody has time for bone-in chicken thighs on a weeknight. Ok, not completely true. Bone-in chicken thighs is probably my favorite cut of chicken and something we feature from time to time on Cook Smarts meal plans but when we do that, we make sure to also include some quick cooking proteins that week too to balance it all out. See that type of organized thinking is what our members pay us the big bucks for but also something you can easily do too. A lot of seafood cooks quickly, so on nights you're busy, swap in shrimp, cod, sole, tuna steaks, or salmon. If you'd prefer meat roaming proteins, go for thin cut steaks and pork chops, pre-cooked sausage, chicken tenders

or turn thicker pork chops or chicken breasts into cutlets by pounding them super thin. And the last group of super quick cooking proteins that people forget about, unless you're vegetarian, of course are the vegetarian ones. Because my husband is pescetarian, we eat a lot of veggie proteins every week, which is also why our weeknight dinners usually come together quickly. Tofu, tempeh, seitan, canned beans, and eggs really just need some heating to provide texture and temperature.

So when you're doing your weekly meal planning, make sure that you've got a good amount of low maintenance and quick cooking ingredients in the meals that you've chosen, and feel free to make edits and substitutes within a recipe. I know this is something that takes a bit of experience, but I assure you that if you just start doing it, it'll become more natural. I find that when we get too attached to a recipe is when we're not optimizing our time. For example, you might find a recipe for like Middle Eastern spiced chicken breasts you're really excited about but consider swapping the chicken breasts for a thin cut steak or salmon or even tofu. You can use the same spices, but just use them on a quick cooking protein. Or perhaps that recipe came with a side of roasted butternut squash. If I was really excited about the flavors but not about chopping a butternut squash, a high maintenance veggie, I would just sub in baby carrots and cook it the same way.

But before we wrap, I want to just quickly share one of my favorite go-to quick dinners. I start with a quick cooking grain like quinoa, and I start that first because it usually takes the longest. The protein portion is salmon, which I broil for 6 to 8 minutes, depending on the thickness. I love broiling because you don't even have to wait for the oven to preheat. For the veggies, we just do sliced cucumbers -- which remember are on our low maintenance veggie list -- with a quick pickle of rice vinegar, sugar, and I sprinkle in lots of Trader Joe's Everything Bagel seasoning. And then I usually do 1 other veg whether it's a quick salad or airfrying or sauteing up some baby carrots. For the salmon, you can jazz it up in so many ways with very little effort. Just last week, I slathered it with pesto & parmesan when it came out of the oven. I also use the Trader Joe's Everything Bagel seasoning on that too, as well as za'atar, or really any spice blend. You could also throw some cherry tomatoes or sliced peppers on the sheet pan and they'll blister up nicely and add some more veggies to your meal. This dinner can be literally done in about 20 minutes, including prep!

So to sum it all up, the best skill you can learn if you really want to save time in the kitchen is to improve your knife skills. If you are going to do 1 thing from this episode, I hope it's to get your knives sharpened and take a knife skills class, whether one in real life or one on the internet. Again, Cook Smarts has lots of knife skills resources which I'll include links to in the show notes.

The other things you're gonna do that are extra credit that I want you to build up to is making a list of quick prep and quick cooking ingredients that you and your family like and want to regularly rotate into your menus. If you weren't taking copious notes during this episode, you can find those lists linked to from our show notes. Your weekly meals should probably be made up of like 80% of these ingredients, especially if you're still feeling so-so about your knife skills.

If your goal, like mine, is a home cooked meal and you're willing to be flexible about how you get to that destination, you will be much more successful in hitting that goal if you incorporate more of these low maintenance ingredients into your weekly grocery list.

If you ever need ideas on how to make these swaps or want to just share some of the ways you've saved time in the kitchen, head to our show notes at cooksmarts.com/podcast/11 and leave us a comment. You can also connect with us on Instagram at [@cooksmarts](https://www.instagram.com/cooksmarts) and also my personal Instagram, which is [@jessdangcs](https://www.instagram.com/jessdangcs).

And remember, next week we're gonna be back with another episode of time saving tips and this one will focus less on day-of cooking and more on how getting ahead saves you so much time in the future.

Before we wrap today, I want to share Megan_2014's review that she left us on iTunes, "In my ongoing quest to be the household chef for my family and have less dependence on step-by-step recipes, Cook Smarts comes to the rescue. The podcast is informative, engaging, and packaged in a digestible, actionable package." We are all about helping you take action in the kitchen, so thank you Megan for that awesome review. You've won yourself an awesome looking and functional Cook Smarts tote bag that can hold all those low maintenance ingredients we know you'll be stocking your grocery list with. Just reach out to us at hello@cooksmarts.com.

If you want to be a super support of Cook Smarts and home cooking, give us some stars on iTunes and leave a review too. If we share it on a future episode, you too will be like Megan and be the owner of an awesome tote bag and get lots of people asking you, where'd you get that tote bag?

Lastly, if you're not a member of our meal plan service voted #1 by Lifehacker readers, sign up at cooksmarts.com for a free 30 day trial. It will save you an unbelievable amount of time and headache in the kitchen.

