

Hi there! You're listening to episode #8 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.

In today's episode, I'm sharing how I'm trying to create a greener kitchen and reduce the amount of waste, especially plastic waste, that my family produces.

I've always been really inspired by people who are committed to producing zero waste. We are definitely nowhere near that or even necessarily have that as a goal, but I have been trying to do a bit better.

Ever since having kids 4 years ago, I've become so much more aware of all the waste, we as a modern family of 5 produces. There are of course the diapers in those early years, but as we've had to accumulate more stuff for our kids, there is just so much packaging waste that comes with it all. I've tried to buy used or get hand me downs when possible just to avoid dealing with the styrofoam and plastic that so many things are packaged in but we still get plenty of way-too-convenient Amazon packages. And now that there are 5 of us, we've upgraded to a minivan. I know that someday these gas guzzlers will all be electric, and this is actually the industry my husband works in so my guilt is slightly assuaged but for now my Toyota Sienna only gets 18m a gallon, and even though I love it, I am very aware of my increased carbon footprint every time I fill up a tank.

Aside from the accumulation of stuff that results with kids, I think having them has just made me think more about the long term impact of my actions, like am I ruining the planet for my kids and their kids?

Anyways, I digress a bit. Today's episode is not about the overwhelming guilt I sometimes feel as a human being who consumes resources and produces waste. Even though I'm committed to making improvements in all areas of my life, today's episode is going to focus solely on the food or kitchen side of things. It's the area I spend the most time in and feel like we've made some great progress with small, doable changes that anyone listening to this podcast can also make. But before we dive in, a little plug for our waste-reducing meal plan service.

A survey from a few years ago reported that the average family produces about \$2K in food waste every year. Now that is a lot of money down the drain as well as a lot of wasted resources. Our meal plan service is committed to reducing your food waste by providing you with a weekly menu that's been optimized for ingredient efficiency. So if you use half a head of cabbage in Monday's meal, we'll try to make sure you use the rest of it in Thursday's meal.

You'll save time by not having to spend your Sundays searching the web and making grocery lists. Based on your meal selections, we generate a magical grocery list for you, so you can swing by the store just once a week and buy only the items you need, lowering both your gas and food expenses. With our meal plan service, you can experience what a satisfying feeling it

is to empty out your fridge every week because all your perishables got used up in a delicious meal.

Can't wait to try it out and see your food waste and food budget go down? Head to [cooksmarts.com](https://www.cooksmarts.com) and get 3 weeks of meal plans for free with no payment info required.

And now back to today's episode.

So before we dive into the greener changes I've made in the kitchen, let's just quickly chat about why reducing plastic usage even matters. I'm by no means an environmental or materials expert, so we'll keep this brief and at a level that everyone can understand. If you want to read more, I will let the world wide web guide your curiosity, and let me know what you learn as this is an area I'd love to educate myself in even more.

Basically the biggest problem with plastic is that it does not biodegrade meaning it won't decompose into a natural substance. It will however eventually degrade meaning it will break down into smaller pieces but that process can take anywhere from 500 to 1000 years and during that time, it just ends up sitting in our oceans and landfill. In our oceans, it often ends up in the stomachs of marine life, leading to a lot of unnecessary deaths. In landfills, it just sits there and chemicals from the plastic can leach into soil and groundwater, which can adversely affect the animals and people living near those areas.

And we live in a world that is very plastic dependent so there is just a lot of it floating and sitting around waiting to degrade.

You might think that you're not contributing to this problem because you recycle your plastic, and I definitely was in this camp, but the truth is so much of the plastic we recycle never actually gets recycled. People recycle plastic that actually isn't recyclable or some of the plastic has just been too contaminated to be taken by a recycling facility. I've seen data stating that the number might be as little as 10%, so the other 90% ends up in landfill or getting burned.

Even more worrisome is the percentage of plastic goods that actually gets recycled will likely go down since China made changes to stop taking a lot of foreign garbage, especially plastics, last year. If you're in the States, this really affected a lot of waste management companies who could no longer send their recyclables to China for processing -- some of what would have gone to China was diverted to landfills here or just burned.

For me, there are lots of things to worry about and lots of ways I can be a better citizen but the amount of waste I produce, especially 1-time use plastic, is something I can easily change with some small tweaks, and I do believe that it can make a difference. But before we dive into the changes I've made, I want to just say this episode isn't meant to make anyone feel guilty but hopefully just raise some awareness. Every little bit helps and if there are ways you can also reduce your usage and waste of 1-time use plastic, our collective efforts there can actually

make a huge difference since we throw away a lot of single-use plastic bags and straws. According to EarthDay.org, we use 2M of these bags a minute and more than half a billion plastic straws are used every day worldwide. I feel like simply trying to reduce your usage of these items can have a huge impact.

I'll be mentioning quite a few product links today so make sure to head to our show notes if you're interested in checking any of the products out. You can get there by going to cooksmarts.com/podcast/8, and that's the number 8.

So with that background, let's talk about what I've been doing to be more environmentally responsible in my food habits. One of the biggest changes we've made is we rarely use Saran wrap. Right now we have 2 huge rolls of Costco plastic wrap in our pantry, and I should really just give them away for free because I don't think we'd get through them in our lifetime.

When we were using Saran wrap, most of the time it was to cover a container that didn't have an accompanying lid or to wrap up some piece of cut produce, like half an onion or a lemon. We still definitely need to do all of those things in the kitchen but there are other reusable products that I now turn to instead.

One of these products are our Food Huggers. I first purchased these maybe 5 or 6 years ago when it was a Kickstarter project. Something you might not know about me is that I'm a total sucker for Kickstarter projects -- the entrepreneur in me always wants to support other creators and if it's a product that will make my life better, I cannot help hitting buy. Food Huggers were definitely one of those products that I thought was genius. They're made of silicone and come in a variety of sizes and basically they're these circles that have a lip on the perimeter which hugs onto whatever you put them on. I'll use them to cover up small bowls or an open can of coconut milk. You usually buy a stack of them in different sizes, so there's one that's small enough to hug a cut lemon or cut banana and large enough to hug a cut onion or grapefruit.

Aside from the circles, they also have an avocado shaped one. Now I don't own this one, but probably should just because we so often find ourselves in the situation where we only need half an avocado. Right now we just store the other half in Tupperware but maybe the avocado shaped Food Hugger might reduce browning before we were to use it again. You can purchase Food Huggers on their site and also through Amazon. They come in a variety of combinations but most commonly the circular ones come in a stacking set of 5, meaning there are 5 different sizes, and the avocado ones come in a set of 2 -- one larger one and one smaller one since avocado sizes can vary quite a bit. Like I said before, I don't have the avocado ones, but I actually have 2 sets of the circular ones, and they get a ton of use in our kitchen.

I've also seen some copycat products pop up over the years including one that's square or rectangular to hug butter and cheese so definitely do some Google searching and find the shape and set that works for you.

Now Food Huggers work great for small items but what if you're trying to cover something larger, like a mixing bowl full of matzoh ball mix (I mention that because I've got a bowl of that sitting in my fridge right now) or half a cut watermelon or cantaloupe, but don't want to use disposable plastic wrap?

The product I've bought for those instances are these beeswax-based sheets, and these are the newest addition to my greener kitchen efforts. Probably about a year ago, I started to get all these advertisements for them in my Instagram feed, and I was definitely intrigued. I looked them up and the price point was about \$18 for 3 different sizes, a small sheet that could wrap around a cut lemon, a medium-sized one that could wrap around a regular-sized sandwich, and a larger-sized one that could wrap around a large mixing bowl or maybe a cut watermelon.

\$18 seemed like a lot to me to spend on what I thought was just 3 different sized pieces of wax paper so I never made the purchase. However, recently a few of our Cook Smarts members recommended them, and I thought they might help me completely eliminate my use for plastic wrap, so I went on Amazon and bought a pack.

And you know what? I absolutely LOVE them. So the first surprise was it's not like wax paper. That was my original worry -- I thought they were pretty flimsy pieces of paper and didn't understand how they could hold up through a lot of uses. However, it's actually more like fabric that's coated in beeswax and had I read the description I would have known that earlier. Most of these wraps are actually made with cotton and then a coat of resin and beeswax, which is what makes it so pliable to whatever shape you need it to take.

They did have a slight honey scent when I first unwrapped them but that has definitely worn away over time. To clean them, I use my regular dish soap with some cool water and then just hang them to dry in my dishrack usually over a plate or my cutting board. You want to avoid warm or hot water because that will melt the wax, which you need to keep the sheets pliable. And after it's dried, I just fold it back up and store it in a drawer.

They say if you take care of it well, it should last you a year or beyond and there are easily Google-able directions on line on how to extend their lifetime even more by basically revitalizing the wax on them. I haven't had to do this yet, but it looks like you just want to set them onto a baking sheet that's lined with parchment or Silpat and bake for 2 to 3 minutes at around 125 to 150 degrees F. This will warm and remelt the wax so it melts back into some of the creases you've created. And when they're no longer revivable and stop being pliable, you can just compost them.

Beyond just covering mixing bowls without lids, I've also been using these sheets to wrap up partially used produce as well. Right now the largest sized one is wrapped around half a head of cabbage. I also have been using them to wrap sandwiches because sometimes I make humongous sandwiches that don't fit neatly into my lunch containers and because these sheets are so pliable, they keep the filling of my sandwich nice and snug.

Anyways, I'm a huge fan, and probably will purchase a few more of the larger sheets as I'm finding that's the size I find myself needing the most since I have my Food Huggers for the smaller things. The other product I was debating purchasing instead of the beeswax sheets were these silicone lids. It's pretty much the same idea as the Food Huggers but just in a larger size so you could cover a large mixing bowl or a cut head of cabbage. However, I thought the beeswax sheets were a bit more versatile -- they can take any shape, so they can be used to wrap a sandwich, cover up a quiche, or wrap a cut onion, and I've definitely used them for all of that! And I think they'll become my go-to host / hostess gift too.

Another area where I really wanted to reduce my plastic usage was of course plastic bags. We basically have eliminated the use of the plastic grocery bags you get at checkout many, many years ago. Living in California, it's actually hard to even find a plastic bag at any grocery store and I always keep a stack of reusable bags in my car and one of those bags that you can bundle up and throw in your purse at all times. However, as someone who does a lot of cooking, every grocery shopping trip whether we did it ourselves or through delivery resulted in a lot of those often single-use plastic bags usage to hold all the produce and bulk good we bought.

I tried to reuse those bags as much as possible or recycle them at stores that took them back but as I mentioned in the beginning, it's very unlikely those bags really actually get recycled. I knew that I could be doing better in this department and made a 2019 resolution to try to eliminate having to use plastic bags when grocery shopping. So one of my first Amazon orders of this year was purchasing a set of cotton bags to replace the plastic ones offered at most stores.

This was a bit of investment for me because I ended up buying 3 sets of bags that totaled \$63.00. 2 sets were these mesh bags that look almost like netting. It's a pretty tight knit so when I check out the cashier still has to look inside the bag to figure out what's inside and I have to do the same once they're inside my produce drawer. It's not a huge deal at all but just something to expect. The last set are just cloth cotton bags that can be used for items found in the bulk bin aisle like flours, grains, or dried beans that would clearly just fall through the netting of the other bags. In total, I bought 21 bags. 15 of the mesh ones and 6 of the bulk bin ones. For the mesh ones, I found a set that had 3 bags of 3 different sizes and then another set that was just 6 medium sized bags, and I thought that would pretty much cover all of my shopping trip needs and it totally has. I haven't had to use any plastic bags this year while grocery shopping myself, and I don't know, it's just made me so much happier. Again, it was a bit of an investment at \$63, but I'm really glad I made the switch. Whenever I'm out shopping with them, people always comment on them (in a good way) and ask me where I got them. If they've gotten dirty at all, I just flip them inside out and toss them into the wash with my other dirty linens.

These bags also come with a tare weight tag on them, which is the weight of the bag. You can ask the cashier to take that weight off so you're not charged for the additional weight of the bag. I've actually never done this because I'm perfectly ok with paying like 20 more cents a trip and

saving the time that the cashier would have to take to enter the tare weight for each weighed item.

The only downside about the bags is there's no way I can use them for grocery delivery. I don't do delivery all that often anymore as a result, but I'm ok with that. Life is always about tradeoffs,

If you're interested in replacing the plastic bags you use at the grocery store, just start counting how many bags you typically come home with to determine how many you'll need. You might want to buy a few extra because there will always be times when some of the bags are still being used while you need to make a new shopping trip.

I've enjoyed using these so much that these might end up being my go-to holiday gift for my family this year

The next area of my kitchen that I wanted to talk about was all the containers I have. Clearly, I cook a lot and there are always leftovers in our fridge, so I own a wide variety of containers. Some are those cheap plastic takeout containers and some are really nice glass Snapware containers.

Now like I said earlier, this whole project of reducing the waste that comes out of my kitchen is definitely a work in progress, and one area that I am still struggling with is all those plastic takeout containers. I love takeout but I am trying to limit it because you end up with so many more of those plastic containers, and I already feel like my drawers are drowning in that stuff.

Clearly, I try to reuse them for packing leftovers and freezer meals, and even if they say they're microwave safe, I never microwave them just so they do last longer. We haven't done takeout in a long, long time so our supply has been relatively stable lately but I know at some point, especially with a new baby on the way, we're gonna get takeout or delivery from our favorite Indian or Thai restaurant, which of course always results in a lot of new leftover plastic containers.

Now with delivery there isn't much you can do -- you could do some research and patronize places that only do compostable containers but in my case, most of the places I patronize for delivery are very divey so not likely they'd be super excited to accommodate my request. One thing you could do is ask them to not pack up any plastic cutlery because if you're eating at home, you already have access to eating utensils and probably already have a graveyard of plastic forks and spoons.

Now if you're doing takeout, some Cook Smarts members offered up their tips for avoiding getting more plastic containers. When you're putting in your order, you can see if they'll put them onto plates and then show up with containers to pack up your order or just show up early and give them your containers and see if they'll pack it straight up inside of them.

This got me thinking that just like I carry a reusable bag around in my purse, I should also carry around some food containers, especially when I'm planning on going out to eat. Instead of asking the restaurant for a takeout container, you can just pack it up in containers you've brought from home and same thing when you're ordering food to go from a place. So many times, I've gone out to pick up some lunch and then feel like I got more packaging than I did food, so I know I could do better there.

And of course most of the time, I pack up lunch for leftovers in glass containers and then I just pop the whole thing into the microwave to reheat. There are times when my lunch is packed in plastic. Again I always try to avoid microwaving plastic even if it says it's microwave safe. I'm sure it's fine, and I see tons of people doing full meal prep in those black plastic containers with the clear top, but I'm just a little bit paranoid and I just have it in my head that it extends the life of your plastic containers to not microwave them or put them through big heat changes. So if I happened to have packed up lunch in a plastic container, I'll transfer the food from the plastic container to a plate or bowl that I always keep at my desk, and I also have cutlery that stays there. After I'm done, I just wash everything up in our office sink and feel so good that I haven't spent any money on lunch by bringing leftovers and don't have anything to throw anything away from the meal.

Last year, I started having to pack lunch everyday for my daughter for preschool, and I wanted to invest in a container that she and our family could use for years. There are so many options these days, so I ordered like a dozen different lunch containers from Amazon and did a whole video review on Instagram. I've saved it to my highlights so you can check it out when you're in the market for a lunch container, and I'll be sure to link to it in the show notes.

There were so many cute, colorful plastic options but the downside was 1) they were made of plastic and 2) in all the reviews, it seemed like mold was always a problem even for those who were super diligent about taking all the components apart for washing. Plus, I felt like the cute, colorful ones did have an expiration date -- like maybe she wouldn't want to be carrying that around when she got older.

So I ended up keeping a few of the stainless steel containers from Lunchbots and Planetbox. Planetbox has 3 configurations and we bought the Shuttle and the Rover -- the smallest and the medium-sized one. I'm not gonna lie -- they were pricey. The Shuttle was \$40 and the Rover was \$55. I did get them during their back-to-school sale, so they were 20% off, and maybe even had free shipping. Even with the discount though, I never thought I would spend that much on lunch containers, but they had come highly recommended by Cook Smarts members and other moms I knew. When they arrived, I understood why they were the price they were. They're hefty, and I could just tell that they would endure many years of kids dropping them and hundreds, if not thousands of rounds of dishwashing. Plus, I don't worry about dealing with mold with stainless steel.

We've been using them for about half a year now and they look like new and I know they will last our family a lifetime.

We sometimes use these containers for snacks too, and this is another area where we try to avoid using disposable plastic bags. We don't buy individually packed snacks and instead pack up nuts, crackers, veggies and other snacks in these stainless steel containers or other little snack containers or reusable Silicone bags, so even though we have a drawerful of Ziploc bags, we now rarely use them for anything.

Another area where we're reducing waste is drink containers. We've also noticed that whenever we take the kids out to restaurants, they tend to give us a plastic cup and straw for the kids water or milk, so we always make sure they know as soon as we sit down that we brought our own water bottles for the kids and that they don't need to give us plastic cups. You can do the same for any place you frequent that would give you a disposable drink container, like your favorite coffee shop or tea place. Bring an insulated container and your drink will stay warm or cold for even longer. And of course just always carry a water bottle with you. You'll hydrate more and avoid having to buy bottled water. I have 1 that lives at my desk in the office, 1 in my gym bag, and 1 in my handbag, so I'm never without a water bottle.

So those are the big areas that we've made some really purposeful changes, and I feel like they've really made a difference in decreasing the amount of waste we produce. But like I said before, it's still very much a work in progress and the next area I want to tackle is reducing the amount of stuff we buy that's packaged in plastic. It's gonna be hard because we always get the huge clamshell of spinach, organic eggs and organic milk at Costco. They're packaged in plastic but also such good deals.

And then of course, we go through a lot of condiments like peanut and almond butter, hummus and our favorite Casa de Sanchez salsa that are also packaged in plastic. We also purchase most of our spices through Thrive Market online and they're packaged in these plastic baggies.

Right now I'm in the process of thinking through what we can start buying from the bulk bin aisle instead. Like our local Whole Foods lets you grind your own peanut and almond butters, so we could start bringing our own glass jars to the store and filling them with fresh made peanut and almond butters instead. We could also start doing the same for spices too. We could bring our empty spice jars and just fill them direct from bulk. If you do plan on doing this, just make sure your store allows you to bring your own containers. If they do, you'll need to weigh the empty containers beforehand and mark the tare weight on them so the cashier knows how much weight to deduct at checkout.

Something else that's packaged in plastic that we buy repeatedly is Greek yogurt and I've been really curious about making my own yogurt in our Instant Pot, so that's another pantry staple where we might be able to use less plastic.

But like I said at the top of the episode -- my goal isn't to get to zero plastic waste, but I think our family is moving in the right direction with the changes that we've made so far and recognizing that there are still other changes that we can make. To me, it's about doing better where we can but also not driving ourselves crazy and not being ridden with terrible guilt in places where we can't or it just doesn't make sense for us both time and money wise.

If using less plastic and creating a greener kitchen is an area you care about and want to do better, I invite you to do a quick assessment of your current habits. The best place to start is really reducing your single-use plastic, so again the plastic produce bags and plastic straws. Make some small tweaks there and you can always do more with time. Small habit changes add up, and I feel like you're much more likely to stick with things if you focus on one change at a time versus trying to do everything at once.

I'd love to hear from you -- if you want to share your progress, other ways you're keeping it green, or just have comments on anything I've shared today, head to our show notes at cooksmarts.com/podcast/8. 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).

I have had so much fun putting these first 8 episodes together but I'm not gonna lie, it is a lot of work, so I'd love for you to help us reach more people by spreading the word. If you have a friend or a family member who's looking to make some greener habit changes, please share this episode with them.

And if you can you can do me a huge favor and leave a review on iTunes, that will help more people discover this show, which means we will create lots more smart, organized, and confident cooks in the world!

Lastly, if you're not a member of our award winning meal plan service yet, sign up at cooksmarts.com. It'll be a game changer in reducing your food waste!

Thank you for letting us join you in your kitchen or wherever you're listening to this podcast, and until next time, happy cooking from your kitchen cheerleader!