

Hi there! You're listening to episode #9 of the In the Kitchen with 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, we're doing things a bit differently. I wanted to share a personal story with you all -- one that's been really formative in the cook and probably even the person I am today. Some of you may already know this but I know many of you don't, but 14 years ago, I was on season 2 of the Next Food Network Star. If you haven't heard of the show, it's basically a reality TV competition show where contestants show off both their cooking and TV hosting skills -- the prize? Your very own show on the Food Network. My season was the season that launched the celebrity of Guy Fieri. It was also only 2005, and reality TV was just beginning to be a thing and if you watch the finale, you can totally see just how low budget the production was. I was a naive, inexperienced 24 year old, nothing like the wise 37 year old that I am now, and it was an absolutely terrorizing experience. I was so uncomfortable in front of the camera, I was so anxious that I barely slept and in just a few weeks, I lost 10 lbs (a tenth of my body weight). Despite all of that, I'm still so grateful for the experience because I came out of it with 3 really important lessons that I want to pass onto you today.

But before I do a little plug for our meal plan service.

Most nights getting dinner on the table can feel like you're on some reality TV cooking competition show. You have 30 minutes to throw something together before your kids or you melt down from hanger. Some of the ingredients you planned on using are spoiled. You didn't read through the recipe beforehand and as you start cooking, you realized you needed to make the sauce ahead of time. Because we understand how stressful making a home cooked meal can be, we've designed our meal plan service to bring a sense of calm to dinner time.

Our weekly menus are optimized for food waste. They also include short educational videos and clearly written prep steps, making it easy for you to get dinner on the table night after night. And we wouldn't be surprised if after a few months, you felt confident enough to audition for that reality TV cooking competition show. If you're not already a member, head over to cooksmarts.com and start enjoying our simple, healthy, flexible meal plans today for free with absolutely no payment info required.

And now onto today's episode.

So yeah, just how did I as a 24 year old strategy consultant decide that it would be a GREAT idea to audition to host a cooking show when I myself had only sorta been cooking for like 3 years?

Absolutely naivete and hubris!

To set the scene, I was about 2 years out of college. I had spent my first year out of school teaching English in China and then came back to California where I had gone to school and found a job as a strategy consultant. I was probably a little bit less than a year into the job, living with my then boyfriend now husband at the time.

I spent most of my days in front of a laptop making lots of PowerPoint slides and creating Excel spreadsheets. I was learning a ton but it was also pretty stressful, and after a long day at work, I really looked forward to making dinner in our teeny tiny apartment kitchen. It was just a nice break to be working with my hands and creating something tangible versus staring at a screen. I started cooking here and there during my college days and really loved that now as an adult with my own kitchen, I got to cook dinner every evening and just really enjoyed it.

Often times, I would have the Food Network on while I was cooking, and one night I saw a commercial with an audition call for the show. A normal person probably would have just let it pass but instead, my reaction was, "I could totally be the host of a TV cooking show. I'm gonna make an audition tape." Somehow the fact that I still started most cooking sessions hoping that I wouldn't burn the meal didn't register as a potential red flag ... like maybe I didn't quite have the experience necessary to guide millions of people in the kitchen.

Yes, I was not concerned with such silly details, and instead had to figure out how I was going to get my hands on a video camera. Remember that this was 2005, before the first iPhone came out and everyone basically had a video camera in their pocket at all times. At the time my husband was getting his PhD at Stanford, which is also where we met as undergrads, and we were living in graduate student campus housing. I found out that you could rent video cameras from one of the libraries, so that's what I did. I walked over one night, rented a camera and bought a cassette tape and made my 3 minute audition video on how to make wonton noodle soup.

I used the microwave as a timer and made I don't know how many takes I had to do. I think the forcing function was that I was running out of wonton wrappers, and if I didn't get it right, I'd have to make another trip to the store. Again the fact that I stumbled so many times should have been another red flag that maybe I wasn't meant to be in front of a camera, but apparently I chose to ignore this fact. I eventually got something that I was satisfied with and sent off my audition package.

And probably as soon as I sent off the package, I forgot about it. This wasn't like college applications where you knew you'd get an answer either way. It wasn't something I had been working for and towards for the last 13 years of my life. Instead it was something I did on a whim, and I knew that the chances I'd get picked were incredibly slim, and I probably wasn't even going to hear back from them, so when I did a few weeks later I was beyond shocked.

Apparently out of 8K audition tapes, I was one of the 8 chosen. My first reaction seriously was, "You must be confusing me with another short Asian girl." But apparently they hadn't.

Arrangements were made to send a producer out to me to start filming my backstory. I would have to take a month off of work to be in New York to start filming. I was also sent a packet of all the things that needed to be done to get me ready for the show, like have this many outfits that weren't white or black, and then the scariest thing of all, all the recipes I would need to submit. And they were very specific, like I needed to send in x amount of appetizers, x amount of family recipes, x amount of desserts.

My initial reaction was, but wait, I'm not a recipe creator. I thought I was auditioning to be a TV show host? Somehow it didn't occur to me that the 2 roles were inextricably linked -- that part of the job of course would be to share your recipes, to speak with authority about your own creations in the kitchen.

So every night after work, I'd rush home and start piecing together my own recipes. As I sat down and forced myself to go through the exercise, I realized I was a recipe creator. I started with meals our family had cooked, which had just been passed down to me by mouth over the years and finally wrote down an ingredients list and directions. I had paid enough attention when I was cooking from other people's recipes that I had gotten a sense of the fundamentals and a wide variety of cooking formulas. I would start really simple like I really liked this chicken dish -- how can I tweak it to make it my own?

So that brings me to the first lesson I want to share with you: anyone can be a recipe creator. Yes, anyone, including you. Now clearly not everyone wants to be one -- most people are happy to follow a recipe but the ability to create in the kitchen is in all of us.

And I want you to start adopting that mentality -- you have the ability to create. I love cookbooks, I love browsing through recipes, but I think most home cooks get too hampered by recipes. We sort of follow them on auto pilot and really forget that the kitchen can be a place where you get to be creative. I think that's why I fell in love with cooking so much. While I'm someone who loves spreadsheets and numbers, I also have a really creative side, and I didn't necessarily get to exercise that at work.

If you start paying attention to the recipes you're cooking, you'll start to see patterns. Read through a bunch of chunky soup recipes, pizza recipes, or casserole recipes, and you'll notice within each type of meal, they all follow fairly similar patterns.

It's like being a quilt maker. Most quilt makers start with a pattern but then pick the prints that go into the pattern. And really expert quilt makers eventually start to make up their own patterns. A recipe creator starts off pretty much the same way. In the beginning you use the patterns you know and then pick the ingredients that go into the pattern, and maybe eventually they get comfortable enough even making up their own patterns.

Now I realize with anything in life, starting is the hardest part, and if you've been following Cook Smarts and me for awhile, you know I'm all about starting with small steps to build long lasting

habits. So don't throw out all of your cookbooks just yet. Instead every week choose a recipe and try to make 1 tweak to it. And then the next tweak, make 2 tweaks, and just keep on building from there. Perhaps you get to the point where you can interpret a recipe as a pattern and basically make up all of the ingredients or perhaps you just get more comfortable substituting a few things here and there on the fly. Either way you're still a recipe creator in my book!

Ok so let's head back to November of 2005. We've now left California for New York City, and I've just arrived at an apartment in Chelsea that I'm going to be living in for the next few weeks while we're filming the show. I'm introduced to producers and film crew members and soon I'll be meeting the other 7 finalists selected. I was definitely nervous because at the age of 24, I knew I was going to be one of the youngest contestants. And as soon as I met the other 7 finalists – all seasoned cooks, chefs, and restaurateurs who were about 10 years older than I was – I understood that I was selected to be the guinea pig.

My role: the young corporate kid who would likely go up in flames and maybe produce some laughs. I was definitely the wild card.

Luckily I had great producers working with me, and they definitely didn't try to paint me as a fool. I have no idea what the show is like today -- like if people are painted as the villain or the egoist -- but back in season 2, it really was such a friendly show. The 8 of us became fast friends and were always incredibly supportive of each other and the producers never tried to pit us against each other in interviews.

The truth is filming is a SLOW process. There is so much waiting around, and I have no idea if it's to create extra anxiety or if TV is just highly disorganized. We would often have to be ready at 6AM to be picked up and taken to the Food Network studios in Chelsea Market but filming wouldn't start for hours later. We would just sit and stew in our green room for hours before anyone told us what was going on. So we had a lot of time to get to know each other as well as anxiously worry about what was ahead of us. It was definitely a huge bonding experience, and because I was the baby of the group, I really felt like the others took me under their wing as like a younger sibling.

Despite all of that, it still was a grueling process for me. As someone who's been on the other side of a reality TV cooking show, I can tell you it is way harder than it looks. You are put to the test in these artificially made stressful situations, and I just wasn't ready for it. I wasn't just a novice cook but I was still definitely a work-in-progress as a person. At 24, I hadn't really come into myself yet, let alone the persona I could be on TV. And as they kept telling us, you need to be twice as dynamic on TV b/c the black hole of the cameras suck half that energy away.

So before a challenge would start, I would try to give myself a pep talk. I'd remind myself to smile, amp it up, try to be charming but under the heat of bright studio lights and staring into a

lineup of inanimate cameras, I honestly had a hard time remembering my name. Forget charming! I was lucky if I could get through the challenge without literally fainting.

In one of our first challenges, we were asked to dice an onion and fillet a fish under Iron Chef Morimoto's discriminating eyes and the judgment of producers and TV execs. It's just another day in the kitchen (so I told myself).

Hands sweaty and shaking, I filleted my fish and diced my onion. I looked to Morimoto for approval. Grimacing, he responded: "I would never serve that onion in my restaurant. Look at the bits of peel in it." I wanted to pull my chef's coat over my head and hide from all the cameras and the kitchen for the rest of my life.

Clearly, I didn't do that because even though the show seriously kicked my butt, I walked out of the experience excited to get back into a normal kitchen – one without cameras and Morimoto (unless he was cooking). I learned how much I didn't know and that the best thing I could do to improve my cooking skills was just to continue messing up but always learning from my mistakes.

Kitchen mishaps happen to everyone, and hopefully yours will not be seen on national TV. So the second lesson I wanted to share is to never let any cooking mistakes set you back from discovering what a fun and rewarding place the kitchen can become with a bit of practice. There is a lesson in every mistake.

None of us were born knowing how to cook, and because cooking is not part of the school curriculum (though I think it should be), we end up piecing this craft together very much on our own. We don't have a teacher or an instructor telling us what we've done wrong, but luckily these days, we have the internet and YouTube. If you need to troubleshoot a mistake you've made in the kitchen or not sure if you're doing something the right way, a quick Google search will often get you the answer you need.

Again this is about going beyond the recipe and digging a little deeper. I've said this a million times, but recipes are not perfect -- they don't tell you everything and they don't necessarily teach us techniques so we have to go the extra step if we want to expand our cooking skills. Based on this lesson, I wanted to do more with the recipes featured in our meal plan service, which is why we incorporate short chopping technique videos right into the experience so that you're building skills while cooking dinner.

So get in the kitchen, don't be afraid to make mistakes, and learn, learn, learn from them.

Now that we've covered lesson #2, let's head back to the competition. Luckily the producers and the TV execs were kind and decided that no one would be eliminated in the first episode, so I lived to cook through another episode's worth of challenges.

However, not surprisingly, I was eliminated in the next episode joining a group that no one wants to join -- being the first person to be kicked off a reality TV competition show. You know it has to happen to someone and despite how out of place I felt, I was of course still hoping it wouldn't be me. Honestly, there should be some sort of therapy support group for all of us. So how did it all go down?

My final challenge required us to cook a recipe selected by the producers from a collection that we had submitted during the audition process. We had 30 minutes of prep, which the culinary team had outlined for us, and then 5 minutes to demo it in front of the cameras, judges, and producers.

They chose my mom's Asian Bolognese – one of my childhood favorites – but for some reason, my prep list did not include pre-cooking a “swap-out” of my ground meat. (“Swap-out” in food TV speak is the finished lasagna that's already cooked in the oven that replaces the uncooked lasagna that has just gone in.)

However, I thought the directions were the directions. I didn't question them and just followed what they had outlined.

As the countdown started for my five minute demo, I already felt defeated. There was absolutely no way I could finish cooking ground meat in under five minutes. In that moment, I wish I had followed my gut instead of the instructions on my prep sheet.

So for almost five minutes, I demoed how to not cook meat in front of three cameras and a crew of food and TV professionals. Even though I did it with a lot of enthusiasm, talking about my family, my history with this dish, how long they – the viewer – should cook the meat for (more than five minutes, for sure!), I knew I was doomed at the end.

And then in the last minute of my demo, I had to plate my uncooked dish, and ask the judges not to taste it because, well, I didn't want to be known as that contestant who gave Rachel Ray and Bobby Flay salmonella.

After the challenge, we were all lined up under the hot studio lights, and I wasn't surprised when Marc Summers announced the first people to leave the show followed by name. Unable to deliver a finished dish, I unsurprisingly got the boot. I remember walking off the stage feeling incredibly embarrassed walking away from my fellow contestants, the TV execs, and the producers and also knowing that in a few months my friends and family, along with millions of people would see me being the first person kicked off the show.

However, my mistake also taught me that recipes and in this case, prep sheets are only guides. I needed to also remember to use and trust my own judgment when cooking. Like I said earlier, recipes aren't perfect and you just can't follow directions on autopilot. The third and last lesson

from My Next Food Network Star experience that I wanted to share is that using your intuition and senses are also incredibly important to be successful in the kitchen.

Even though I was an incredibly young cook at that point, I had cooked that dish and ground meat enough times to know that a few minutes wasn't going to be enough. My intuition was telling me to course correct but I chose not to believe in myself. If you ever find yourself in the same position where something just seems off about a recipe, listen to your inner voice and ignore the recipe.

You are the one who knows your stove and your oven. You are the one who's physically in front of your dish and can see if it's burning or not cooking fast enough. You are the one who can actually taste the dish and decide if it needs more salt, more spices, more acid. You are not cooking for Morimoto, and the only opinion that matters is yours, so use it. No one is born with a chef's intuition. It comes with paying attention to your experiences in the kitchen, and the more you observe, taste, and tinker, the more you will develop this intuition.

If you do want a resource, a few years ago, I created a cooking lesson called 5 Cooking Secrets Every Cook Needs to Know, and its goal is to help you build your intuition. None of it is rocket science, but they're basic steps that are just left out of recipes and can elevate your cooking, and I'll make sure to link to it in our show notes.

And now to wrap up my reality TV story. Because I was the first one kicked off, I basically had 3 weeks to hang out in New York City, and I took full advantage of it. I wasn't allowed to tell anyone that I was the first one eliminated so I had to be careful when hanging out with friends in Manhattan that I not make myself too available. Otherwise it would be pretty obvious that I had been kicked off the show. With my small per diem, I spent my days walking around various Manhattan neighborhoods, eating, enjoying all the great museums, and occasionally seeing friends from high school and college who were living in the city.

I was kept in the dark about what was happening on the show so that was a bit tough to not know what was happening with my fellow contestants. Fortunately we did have a few reunions at the end, and it was so fun to be back with everyone without the stress of the competition. We enjoyed some delicious meals on the Food Network's dime, and just got to hang out together before all going our separate ways. At this point, there were 2 finalists -- it was Reggie and Guy -- but the winner hadn't been chosen yet. We were all going to come back together when the season aired to tape the live finale where the winner was going to be chosen based on America's vote.

So a few months later, we ended up back in New York together. There were advertisements of the show everywhere on billboards and taxis. I remember seeing a lit up billboard for the show in Time Square, and it felt totally surreal to see my face several feet tall. It was fun to be back with everyone, and spoiler alert, Guy won, and it was great to celebrate his victory with him. Honestly that man was meant to be on TV. He's got a huge personality and is also a wonderful,

gregarious person. As the show aired, I actually watched most of the episodes with him and his friends and family up in Santa Rosa where he lives.

I've been so impressed watching him build his food and media empire over the last decade and a half, and a few years ago he actually invited all of us to be on his reality TV competition show Guy's Grocery Games to celebrate the 10th anniversary of all of us meeting. At first I said no. I had just had a baby and didn't feel any need to be on TV, but the producers wore me down, and I ended up back on a set with Carissa, Andy, Reggie, Nathan, and of course Guy, and we had such a good time being back together.

After 10 years of creating recipes, learning from the many mistakes I've made in the kitchen, developing my intuition and just growing into myself, I was a totally different cook and person. I felt so much more confident competing, and I treated it like I was just cooking in my own kitchen despite the artificiality of the challenges. If you're a Hulu subscriber you can actually watch that episode there and also of course you can buy the episode on Google, YouTube and Apple iTunes.

Now at 37, my experience competing on the Next Food Network Star seems like it was another life and world ago. Getting kicked off so early definitely fueled my passion for cooking, so I'm so happy it happened. I thought I was going to be really embarrassed when the show aired, but I wasn't. Instead I felt really proud that I had taken such a big chance on myself and did something that was incredibly challenging and way outside of my comfort zone.

I know that some of you feel this way about cooking but just give yourself the time and patience to learn and to improve. Getting dinner on the table may feel like a reality TV competition show every night but I promise that no one is watching or judging you. It's very likely that you are your own harshest critic in the kitchen, so be forgiving of yourself too! That was something I definitely had to learn after the show too.

So thank you for indulging me over the last [x] minutes and letting me take a walk down memory lane. Despite feeling quite traumatized during the experience, I know that it's also really shaped the cook I've become, and I feel so lucky that I've gotten to share the lessons I took away from the show with you. I hope they make a difference in your cooking journey, and if they do, please let me know in today's show notes which you can find by going to cooksmarts.com/podcast/9, messaging me on Instagram at [@jessdangcs](https://www.instagram.com/jessdangcs) or [@cooksmarts](https://www.instagram.com/cooksmarts), or of course leaving us a glowing review on iTunes. I'll also be sharing some photos on the show notes and social media too, so head over there to take a look.

We're still getting this podcast off the ground so your review really makes a huge difference, so if you can take 5 minutes to leave one, I'd be so appreciative.

I've had such a fun time producing our first 9 episodes and we've got 1 more left next week before we got on a short summer break. Don't worry though because we'll be back in a few

weeks, and I've got so much more to share with you, including a lot of time saving cooking tips, just in time for back-to-school!

Lastly, if you're not a member of our award winning meal plan service yet, sign up at [cooksmarts.com](https://www.cooksmarts.com). We have so many delicious meals for you to apply these 3 lessons to, so let's get cooking and learning more together

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!