

Jess Dang: Hi there. You're listening to episode number three 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. Today is a really special episode because I'm introducing you to an incredibly important person on the Cook Smarts team, Jess Smith, our meal plan developer.

Jess Dang: Now, this lady is the creative brain, the recipe executer, the spreadsheet ninja and photographer behind our meal plan service. She joined us in the spring of 2015 all the way from Thailand and has made our service and my life so much better. Before Jess joined, I was doing the bulk of the meal plan task and even though it was all doable, it did not leave me with a lot of time to focus on actually growing the business in any way.

Jess Dang: Plus, I was also becoming a first time mom in 2015 and I knew that if I wanted to invest in Cook Smarts and also be the mom, but I wanted to be, I needed to find somebody to take over the meal plans. But this was really scary for me, to hand this piece of work off to someone else because one, the meal plans is our product. It's what thousands of people pay money for, and two so much of it was based on my creative direction and it felt really scary to give that up.

Jess Dang: Plus, I was just worried that we were never going to be able to find someone because it was a job that required such a unique mix of skill. I don't think people understand how versatile you have to be. This person needed to be creative, love food, understand recipe creation, but also understand that they weren't creating recipes for foodies who wanted to spend hours cooking every night, but for busy parents who had a lot going on.

Jess Dang: And beyond having the food content skills, this person also had to be someone who likes spreadsheets, liked working in front of the computer, and could think, really like puzzle solve or think about puzzles because managing four different diet options for every meal, we've got original, gluten free, paleo, and vegetarian options for every single meal, churning out a new menu every single week, it takes a ton of organization and analytical skills.

Jess Dang: Plus, we were also looking for someone with food photography skills. I mean seriously, I was asking for a lot, but the second I saw Jess' meal plan sample and then video audition, I knew she was it. And even today, almost four years later, I'm still amazed that we were able to find someone with this perfect set of skills across the world. Thank you internet, who has been such a great fit for our company. I feel so lucky that we were able to find Jess, and I know that we are a better company because she's with us.

Jess Dang: So let's dive into our chat where we talk about how she made this huge career change to join our team and also give you a behind the scenes look into her job as our meal plan developer. Just a note that this interview was actually taped an entire year ago when Jess was about to go on maternity leave with her third baby. So clearly, it's taken me a full year to get this podcast off the ground because the life of a business owner and mom is nothing short of crazy, but even though this was taped a year ago, not a lot has

changed. The only thing is now I have three kids too. So enjoy meeting Jess and getting this behind the scenes look at our little company.

Jess Dang: Hi Jess, it's so good to have you on today. I know this is an especially busy week for you, so thank you for finding the time to sit down for this interview. Do you want to share with everyone what's happening this week?

Jess Smith: Sure. Yeah, we are expecting our third baby girl this week, any day.

Jess Dang: So excited.

Jess Smith: Yeah. We're really excited.

Jess Dang: Yeah. So I guess podcasts interview was high on your priority list with all the other things that are going on.

Jess Smith: Jess, I love podcasts, so this is like a dream come true to actually be interviewed for one.

Jess Dang: Oh, that's great. Well, speaking of changes, you've had quite a different job before you started at Cook Smarts. What were you doing before starting at Cook Smarts?

Jess Smith: I really was in a completely different field. I lived in Washington DC for a number of years and got a master's degree in public administration. So, I worked for the government, I did education policy work at the Department of Education and then after I got married, we moved overseas and worked for the State Department in Bangkok, Thailand. And the jobs were fairly similar. They were both sort of reporting on issues related to both those fields, but obviously totally different being in Thailand and doing that work there.

Jess Smith: So yeah, it was a big switch, and I didn't always think that I would work for the government, but I did think I would be in the public sector in some capacity. But then things just changed and I made this big leap and I just have been so happy to have done it.

Jess Dang: That's great. And how long were you in Thailand for?

Jess Smith: We were in Thailand ... My husband and I went over thinking we would go for about a year. He worked for the Peace Corps, so he ran the office there. So we thought, "Oh this'll be a fun adventure. After we get married, we'll go for a year." And then we ended up staying for almost five and we have twin daughters and we had our daughters in Thailand. So it was a big adventure and really fun. We ended up loving it there.

Jess Dang: I feel like I hear that happening all the time. People go abroad for a year and then it ends up always extending because you just adjust because I feel like it takes a long time just to kind of get settled in.

Jess Smith: Exactly. I mean life was really fun and we really liked the adventure of everyday, something kind of different happens and it just really suited us. But once we had our kids and things, it was nice to come back to the U.S. be closer to family and all that. So it was a great thing to do at the time that we did it.

Jess Dang: So you actually, you applied for this role while you guys were in Thailand. So how did you find out about the job? Were you looking to switch careers at the time?

Jess Smith: Yes. So it started becoming a dream of mine to make a change, a pretty drastic change and work in the food industry and have something to do with recipe development. And so I had a feeling that I was going to start looking for a new job. We knew we were probably coming back to the U.S. a couple of months after I started working for Cook Smarts. So when the job opened up, I just felt like, "Oh, this is an opportunity and I should pursue this and see where it goes." I could never have dreamed of the Cook Smarts job, I couldn't have envisioned what that job would be, but I definitely was interested in making a change and experiencing something different. So it just was complete, felt like total kismet that it came along when it did.

Jess Dang: Yeah. And you were a customer at the time, right?

Jess Smith: Mm-hmm (affirmative), exactly.

Jess Dang: Yeah. And I mean we could never have dreamed to have like such a perfect candidate. It's one of those things where ... And the job itself involves a lot of different skills and I was shocked that we were able to find you, who just had everything, the whole package.

Jess Smith: It really is great and it's such a ... I look back and feel like, "Oh, there was a path," and I feel really fortunate that I kind of followed it and took the opportunities that presented themselves when they did. And I was doing food photography and recipe development on the side just as a hobby, and it was a lot of work. And there were certainly times when I thought, "Is this really what I should be doing? Should I be spending so much of my time outside of my 9:00 to 5:00 doing this?" And then now here I say it and I would tell anybody to do that. I just think if there's something that you love, pursue it and put in the time and make it happen.

Jess Dang: Yes, you already had this food blog and you said you were photographing, developing recipes on the side for your food blog called Inquiring Chef, when did you start that and what inspired you to create it?

Jess Smith: So I have loved food blogs for so long. I mean, I had been reading food blogs since the early days of Smitten Kitchen and the big guys that started out.

Jess Dang: Yes.

Jess Smith: And so when we moved to Thailand, I really felt like, "Oh, here we are in this new place and I should start a food blog and write about it because this is a really interesting experience that not everyone gets to have." And I took some Thai food cooking classes and wrote about those and worked on my photography and really just had fun with it. I mean, 10 people visited the blog when I first started writing it. And it was really just for me, and then it became a really good way for our families back here in the U.S. to see what we were doing, to know that we were like okay and having fun and certainly to know that we were eating well.

Jess Smith: It just kind of grew from there and most of it was just self-taught. I learned how to use the camera myself, but because I loved it so much it didn't feel like work to research and learn and buy books and practice photography out in the world and then practice in the kitchen. So it just really ... A blog was just a great starting point because even today I still have the blog and it's still just a good place to play and I have total creative freedom and I can kind of just experiment with new things, new foods, new techniques, new photography equipment.

Jess Dang: And the blog is absolutely beautiful. So for folks that want to go to the blog, it's www.inquiringchef.com and I believe it's the same for your Instagram handle, is that correct?

Jess Smith: Yes, that's right there.

Jess Dang: All right. Folks will definitely follow you there. And there are lots of great photos of your cute twins and soon to be your new baby.

Jess Smith: Yes. Now I hear from people who have been following the blog since 2010 and really what a lot of them want is pictures of the kids and the twins and the baby coming this week. So yeah, there's a lot of that in there too.

Jess Dang: That's great. So you've clearly been passionate about food for a long time. How did you first learn to cook or when did you kind of realize this was something you were really interested in?

Jess Smith: I have always been really interested in food and I come from one of those families where food was really central to how we interacted. What happened at our house, we were sitting around the table and have dinner together, types of people. And my parents are just amazing cooks. They're both home cooks. They're both self-taught. But I lived in one of those houses where I would come home from school and my dad would have fresh pasta hanging from broomsticks around the kitchen.

Jess Dang: Oh wow.

Jess Smith: Yeah. My mom makes amazing bread and she's always done fantastic desserts, which I am not really a baker. So I've always admired her ability to just whip up amazing things.

And they took cooking classes and they bought cook books and it was just a house where we experimented a lot and we would sit around and watch my parents cook and experiment and be comfortable with trying new things and trying new flavors. So I really think just growing up in that kind of household just fueled this passion for cooking. And especially for home cooking. I mean for just the kind of cooking that you'd just sit around the kitchen and do it together and talk and learn.

Jess Smith: So that's really where it came from. And for me, everything I have learned to do is self-taught. I've definitely taken a number of cooking classes, knife skills classes and that sort of thing, especially to help me turn this into a career, but the world is just so easy to learn new things now. And when it comes to cooking, I mean, the internet is just exploding with resources and ways to learn and I love cook books. So it all just kind of came about over time.

Jess Dang: Yeah. Well, your parents, I believe both of them were working at the time. Right? So how do you think they did it in terms of making sure there was a home cooked meal on the dinner table every single night when they both worked and just kind of juggling all of that?

Jess Smith: Oh my gosh, I feel like now having kids, it wasn't until I had my kids that I appreciated how much work it was.

Jess Dang: Yeah.

Jess Smith: For my parents and everyone's parents to ... Sometimes it just feels like the cycle of making sure that kids have three meals a day and two healthy snacks, and I mean, you just feel like-

Jess Dang: It's a lot.

Jess Smith: ... that's all you do.

Jess Dang: Yeah.

Jess Smith: Right. Exactly.

Jess Dang: Yeah.

Jess Smith: And I look back and I feel like my parents made it seem totally effortless and seamless, but I know it wasn't that way. And I think definitely part of it was just the fact that both my parents really made an effort to engage us in the kitchen. When we got to a certain age, they were very much the type of parents that were like, "Why don't you cook one meal a week? Why don't you ...?" So they definitely got us involved at a very young age, which I'm sure help take the burden off.

Jess Smith: And then doing it as a partnership. I mean that's something that I love about Cook Smarts, is that with prep steps and with the recipes written up in consistent language, I think it's easy for two spouses to walk into the kitchen and trade off work and both get in there and feel involved, even if one is the primary cook. And I think my parents did that really well even without a formal method for doing it, which I have to think is how they'd get dinner on the table every night.

Jess Dang: Yeah, well we'll have to have them as our guest meal planners at some point in the future. That'd be so fun.

Jess Smith: They would love that.

Jess Dang: Yeah, entire family affair. So just kind of going back to when you applied for the Cook Smarts' position, I did not ... There was quite a bit of work in the application process because this is such a big role. Like this role was for our meal plan developer, which is basically our entire product.

Jess Dang: And so I made it so that we would only get people that were really serious about it. So you had to create a rough outline of a meal plan with all the diet versions and also create a video where you're teaching me something about cooking. Do you remember if it felt like a fun exercise coming up with a meal plan or was it kind of like, "Oh my gosh, that seems like so much work?"

Jess Smith: I mean, I was intimidated by it for sure. And I knew, of course I knew this was a big role and an important role in the company and so I was nervous about it, but I was really excited too. And in hindsight and even going through the process, I remember thinking, "Oh, it is good for me to work through this process because I had never done it before." I mean to have to think about different diet variations, how they fit together, to do the puzzle of meal planning, which now I do every week and we all do it together. So I understand it so much better, but at that time it was something very new to me. I think it was a really good process to go through and honestly, I loved it and it made me so much more excited for the job and feel so much more enthusiastic about being involved in the mission of Cook Smarts.

Jess Dang: Yeah, so much of it is really the puzzle piece. I think that's why this is such a unique role because we're just not looking for a recipe developer, we're also looking for someone that has kind of this like strategic view of things. That's like can think about putting together these meal plans like a puzzle because not only the entire week has to fit together, but we have all the diet variation. So there's like multiple moving parts and it's like playing this game of tetris, where like it's you put something in and all of a sudden like, "Oh, it doesn't work anymore." And so there's just like a lot of moving parts with it.

Jess Smith: Well, and I think I'm always amazed at how many iterations you and I can go through. I mean, we can go back and forth. The process starts so early, so long before the actual meal goes live and you and I can go back and forth seven, eight, nine times. I mean, I

think we had many iterations because you see something that you didn't see at the beginning that like, "Oh, this meal will fit so much better in this week," and then you're moving everything around.

Jess Dang: Exactly. I know. I think our process after working together now for three years has become so like just refined and we are just the well-oiled machine, but at the same time there's still some things we find in here now and it just happens.

Jess Smith: Exactly. And sometimes I'll go back and cook an archives, especially if we go on vacation or something, I'll go back into our archives, I'll make a week and print it out and we'll take it with us so that we can all kind of jump in and I'll be cooking through it and I'll think, "Oh, we should have used this efficiency or we should have had everybody prep this first. Or there should have been a slow cooker meal." I'll catch something that I just think like it's a constant learning process for us and we're constantly trying to improve it and make things smoother for our community, which I love.

Jess Dang: Yes. And I think that even though we still have improvements to make, I still think we are like some of the top meal planning experts in the world at this point.

Jess Smith: I believe.

Jess Dang: Especially with how much we talk about meal planning.

Jess Smith: Yes. And I really stand behind it because I think ... I mean I wake up in the night and think of things. I think we've done it for so long, we've done it together and I think your brain starts to work in a different way when you've done it as much as we have, which is great. But yeah, it's an endless process if you let it be.

Jess Dang: Yes. So your video really stood out. I remember when I was going through all the applications and your video was just really special. Can you tell us, do you remember what it was, could you tell us more about it?

Jess Smith: Yes. Well, I have to say I am a total introvert and being on video is very scary for me. So, that was the only part of the application process that I was so nervous about.

Jess Dang: You did great though.

Jess Smith: It ended up being really fun and I think it was a really good exercise. And again, it kind of played into the job very well. But I was still living in Bangkok, Thailand, and we had like a lot of apartment buildings there. We had this really gorgeous, lush, tropical, courtyard with all these tropical flowers and things. And so I figured I would just go all out, Thai with it and film the video, the cooking instruction video in the courtyard. My husband was there and he filmed it for me. And I remember on the second take, the one thing he said to me was to stop talking so much about fish sauce. So I went on and on about fish sauce.

Jess Dang: Oh.

Jess Smith: But I love fish sauce. I feel like one of my missions in life is to get people to try it as an ingredient because it is intimidating and it's stinky, but it's delicious. And I remember seeing a lot of our neighbors walk by and look over and I'm sure they were like, "What is this American filming herself making Thai papaya salad?" But it ended up being really fun in there. I was glad that was a part of the application but I was intimidated by it.

Jess Dang: Well, you did great, and the video was great and I didn't know you had to do two takes. And I think I am someone that gets ... I don't mind doing video, but I get extra nervous when like if my husband was behind the camera, I just feel like that extra level of scrutiny. I don't know if I would want my husband directing me. So, good for you.

Jess Smith: I felt so self-conscious, but yeah, it worked out. He's very supportive. He's a good cheerleader.

Jess Dang: Oh, the video was great. And I was like, "Wow, this is such an amazing backdrop." And I had eaten papaya salad but never seen it made before, so it was also just a unique video. And the reason that was part of the process was really to see someone's communication style and see like if they could teach something. I think that's just really important, whether it's actually even relevant to the role. I feel like you having teammates that are always eager to learn and also eager to teach is something that's really important in any company. And so it's like actually an interview question I ask everyone. This time we did it via video, but for the most part it's always part of my interview process.

Jess Smith: I thought it was great and I did feel like we were on opposite sides of the world when we met and interviewed. And so I do think anything you can do to kind of get to know the person, because we're such a small company and as you said, I mean, we work so closely together that I do think it was a good way, at least for me to kind of get some of even my nervous video personality across. So it was good. It was hard, but it was good.

Jess Dang: I barely sensed any of that. And so during the interview process, one of the things I told you that was really tough for me when I got started with Cook Smarts and all the meal plans was just getting feedback on everything. You know that so often, food bloggers, we put out recipes but you don't really get feedback on it because people often aren't really making the recipes, they're just kind of thing like, "Oh, this sounds so good." Or, "Can you substitute X?" Those are the types of comments most people get. But with our meal plan service, like people actually use it and you get feedback all the time. How was it getting used to that for you?

Jess Smith: Honestly, it was hard. That was one of the hardest parts about the job and you did a really good job of preparing me for that. And I felt really prepared for it and I wanted the feedback. But you're exactly right. It's so different. You know, the blog is a fun outlet. I play around, I cook something, maybe some of my recipes get a lot of feedback

and some just get a little, and I have creative control over there. So it just is a very different experience.

Jess Smith: And I think as time has passed, I've really felt like that has become one of my favorite parts of the job. And part of it is that we have a community within Cook Smarts of people who are excited about food, they're excited about flavors, they love trying new things and we have a lot of really excellent cooks.

Jess Smith: And so the feedback that I get from our community absolutely makes me a stronger cook. It makes our products so much stronger. And we really do make every effort to take that feedback and use it to make our meals and our meal plans better all the time. So it was hard, but honestly it's been one of the most rewarding parts of the job.

Jess Dang: Yeah, I agree. And I think just so many artists kind of create in a vacuum and in this case like we just can't, right? The product is out there being used every single day. And getting that feedback I think has made, I know my cooking better and I definitely know like over the years since you've joined, like our average ratings have gone up so much and I think that's because of you and all the feedback you've taken. But just like you know that now the process is so much better because we kind of know what the starting base needs to be in terms of what people need from flavors and also just the doability aspect of things. And that makes such a huge difference.

Jess Smith: Exactly. Absolutely. It's great because it is nice not to be doing this in a vacuum. And it is nice to know that every recipe that we put out there and we're going to have X amount of feedback and it's useful. I mean, it's things that we could actually do, that we can improve, and make life easier for home cooks that are a part of our community. So yeah, it's been great. It's been really one of the best parts of the job.

Jess Dang: What else was challenging about the job in the beginning?

Jess Smith: Oh my goodness. Definitely one of the most challenging things is time management. We had this cool thing where we all work remotely and we are very flexible about hours. But this is such a job where I could go into the kitchen and think I have a recipe exactly the way that it should be and think I'm just going to make it once and then tweak it and it'll be done and ready to go. And then I'll go in the kitchen and it will be, I'll have to make it again and again and again. And then I'm factoring in grocery shopping and dishes. Oh my gosh, the dishes just-

Jess Dang: Oh, yes.

Jess Smith: Completely overwhelm me, there's just no end.

Jess Dang: One day when we get to a certain point we'll hire you a personnel dishwasher just to like get through that part of it because I know that part, was my least favorite part of doing all the meal plan development was the dishes that awaited at the end of a long day of like cooking and photographing.

Jess Smith: Exactly. You feel so accomplished at the end of the day and you feel like, "Okay, I got all this done and I got all the photos done and all the testing done," and then you just have this mountain of dirty dishes. It's crazy. But yeah, I think the time management has been hard, and it's something that I still am constantly tweaking and I'm constantly trying to find the most efficient way to do my work and the most accurate way to do my work, because we have a long series of proofreading and checks in place to make sure our meal plans are as clean and consistent as they can be, but it's still like a constant process of writing, "How can I write this better? How long will it take to write this?" Yeah, the time management aspect is great to be so flexible, but that's just a challenge to do that for yourself and do it right.

Jess Dang: Yeah. And it's probably the nature of the job where there are so many moving parts. It's like meal plans before it gets out live to our members, there's like 50 different tasks and they're all really different from one another. Some of them you have to be in the kitchen and some of them require you to be photographing and some of them you're sitting down at a desk, and so it involves different types of work and therefore I think that makes it harder to manage as a result.

Jess Smith: Right, right. Some of it's cyclical. It's great because I can really set up my week and say, "Okay, on Monday I'm doing this. On Wednesday I'm doing this task," but then again, a lot of it is the testing and photography, it can take longer than you plan. It is a constant kind of process of tweaking and making it work.

Jess Dang: Well, you've been doing it for three years now and doing an amazing job. Have certain things gotten easier over time?

Jess Smith: Definitely my personal cooking skills. One of the most personally rewarding things about it is that I feel like I'm a much better cook. So, and my knife skills are better. And I just feel like when I walk into the kitchen and I feel confident and more comfortable moving around in that space than when I started.

Jess Smith: And it's great because I hear a lot of our community members say that too, that the routine of cooking becomes easier over time. So that's definitely been true. I feel a lot more confident and I definitely feel there's certain dishes or cuts of meat or things that I didn't feel that comfortable cooking without a recipe, and now I feel a little bit more comfortable just if I'm cooking for my family one night I feel a lot more comfortable just winging it, which has been really fun and sort of a place that I personally wanted to be with cooking. So that's been a really fun aspect of it.

Jess Dang: Yeah, I think that's the greatest part about cooking is even people that are really good at it still have like so much to learn. It's just kind of, it's like endless journey because there are so many things that no one in the world has like cooked everything and tried every different technique with it or done every flavor profile. And so there's just always something new to create, and new to learn. And that's what I love about being in this space.

Jess Smith: Yeah, absolutely. And I think we ask every year for input through our Facebook group. We ask people to give us ideas and people, they suggest recipes and dishes that I have never heard of. And it just goes to show like what an endless universe of food there is out there. And it's so fun to have someone say, "Oh, here's this Egyptian dish that I love." And then to be able to go research that and learn more about it and then try it for the first time.

Jess Dang: Yes, so your job has so many components to it and there's like so much to learn. Is there any particular piece of it that's your favorite or that you enjoy the most?

Jess Smith: One thing I like about the job is that it is really diverse because there is an administrative aspect of the job, which is sitting down at a desk and writing up the recipes in the most efficient way that we can. And then there's another part that's like very creative, and it's in the kitchen, and you're moving around, and you're taking photographs, and you're thinking about color and lighting and things. And so for me, I love that variation. I like both aspects of the job and I don't think I would want to do one or the other 40 hours a week.

Jess Dang: Right.

Jess Smith: So I love that. I love that variation and just it suits me.

Jess Dang: Yeah. I think we're similar in the way of we both have kind of like a creative brain as well as just kind of like some more cerebral, logical aspect. And so, you kind of exercise your brain in both ways for this particular role.

Jess Smith: It's nice. I feel like it takes a lot for me to feel burned out in one or the other because there's always, if I don't feel like cooking one day, then I have admin stuff to do and I can sit and do that. So it is a nice, nice balance.

Jess Dang: I know this is a question that a lot of our members are wondering. What do you do with all the food?

Jess Smith: Everyone asks this, when I explain my job to people, that's even if they get the two minute elevator spiel, they still ask what I do with the food. Actually it's kind of tricky to figure out what to do with the food sometimes because sometimes you're testing something over and over and over, and my whole family of four, soon to be five, we can't eat all of it.

Jess Dang: And you sometimes don't want to eat all. Like there's some meals that you make for the audience that makes sense for the product, but it's not making sense as something you might want to eat as a family. And I totally get that.

Jess Smith: Yeah. Sometimes I'm like, "Sorry guys, we're eating these pork chops again that we have had two or three times already because I just couldn't get it right." But my family is

really ... They're good sports about it. But I try to do some of the tests, especially the meals that really just fit within our lifestyle. I try to test them for dinner and we eat them for dinner, which is great because I have to cook dinner anyway.

Jess Smith: It takes longer because of course we're trying to be really precise and I'm possibly testing two different vinaigrettes or two different sauces or two different ... So it takes longer for me to put dinner on the table but I try to do that as much as possible. On our big test days or when we do a bunch of photographs, I often try to see if there's someone. If you live in the Kansas City area and you have had a baby or surgery or just moved, then I will put you on my list and see if I can drop off food.

Jess Dang: That's so nice. Yes.

Jess Smith: It's such a blessing and I feel so fortunate to have dinner on the table for our family. And then it's really nice when we can kind of spread some of that love around and it also introduces people to our product in a way that I think is really accessible. Like, "Here's some of these meals that are done. Try them and let us know what you think."

Jess Dang: Yes, exactly. Early recipe testers.

Jess Smith: Yes, exactly. Exactly.

Jess Dang: So switching gears a little bit, you've got two four-year-old girls, twins, and another one on the way and this high pressure job where thousands of people are counting on you for their dinners, how do you make all of that work?

Jess Smith: It definitely helps that I never have to wonder what we're going to have for dinner.

Jess Dang: Yeah.

Jess Smith: So that's a big bonus.

Jess Dang: Yeah, I think the mental load, the mental burden of meals, having that figured out is a huge, huge win.

Jess Smith: Yeah. And you know what, I mean, being a working parent as you know, even though we are cooking professionals, there are still nights when I get home and it's 6:15 and I've done no prep and I have no idea what we're going to eat and everybody needs a bath and everybody's hungry and ... I mean, that is the struggle of adulthood I think, kids or no kids.

Jess Dang: Exactly. And I think just because we're in the food world doesn't like exclude us from having kids that are picky. Like my older one is definitely going through like a picky phase and I'm doing all the things that I tell everybody else to do and I'm trying everything, but some of it works and some of it doesn't, and sometimes it works this month and it doesn't work next month, that type of thing.

Jess Smith: Totally. Absolutely. I mean, that's honestly been a surprise to me about parenting is that exactly, I've read all the books, I do all the things that we tell people to do and still there are things that my kids will not try. They will reject outright. It's definitely a reality, but I think it's doing this job because I love it and because I have found this thing that I love and because I believe in what we're doing, it does make it easier to kind juggle everything and I don't ever regret it.

Jess Smith: It feels like it's just such a natural part of this stage of life and Cook Smarts has just been such a great company to work for because we are flexible. If my kids are sick, I know I'll stay home with them, and we have a supportive team that jumps in and helps each other out and works together and that has made it possible and so much easier too.

Jess Dang: Do you think you could ever go back to like a regular job where you worked 9:00 to 5:00 in an office type of situation?

Jess Smith: I do not know how I could.

Jess Dang: Yeah, I don't think ... I couldn't either.

Jess Smith: But honestly, it's because I say this now, as soon as I feel it a little bit preachy about it because I really think that this is a great way especially in a job that is creative. I think having this flexibility for the team makes us just so much stronger. I think that the fact that like I don't have to go sit at a desk every day, that I can really say, "Okay, today I'm feeling creative. I'm going to go to the library and pull 20 cooking books off the shelf and sit in a corner and research," and I just think that flexibility makes this job work, and it makes our products stronger and it makes me work more efficiently. So yeah, it would be hard to go back. It really would. Who knows what the future holds, but gosh, this way of working I think just makes sense.

Jess Dang: Yeah, exactly. And I think it makes all of us so much more productive because we just fill in the time in the way that it needs to be filled in. I think sometimes like you go to work and you feel like you're forced to do something even though that's not what you want to be doing at the time or need to be doing. And in our case I feel like because there's so much flexibility, you always end up being productive with whatever time you have.

Jess Smith: Yeah, exactly. It's really nice to have control over that and to have the flexibility to do it when you feel like you're most in the zone for that activity.

Jess Dang: Yeah, and I think that we have gotten so efficient with it and I think that's what I've seen to be the biggest improvement. You're going to go on maternity leave for three months, but we have the entire, it's now, we're recording this is late July, but we have like the entire year of meal plans done because we have just gotten this routine down to such like easy process, very refined process. And so therefore, you were able to cram the whole year within seven months and you're going to go off on mat leave and we're just going to pick up where we left off in a couple of months.

Jess Smith: It's so great and it really is a testament to the whole team and all of us working together. And the fact that we ... One of the things that I don't know if all of our members or our community is aware of, but we get together for one week every year, towards the end of the year, and we plan on the entire coming year. You and I of course as we said, we end up tetrising and playing around with it throughout the process. But it just makes it feel like, okay, now we have a plan and we're all on the same page and we've gotten to pull ideas from our community and from our team, and it just makes the year go a lot smoother to have that all lined up ahead of time.

Jess Dang: Yeah, it is kind of crazy. I never thought we would do something like that, but having that full year of blueprint, that blueprint made, has made the rest of the year all the other things that need to get done so much easier just having that blueprint done.

Jess Smith: It does and it sounds kind of wild to look at the whole year together, but you actually do see patterns and rhythms and catch duplications that you don't want. I mean we actually catch stuff, that's just remarkable. Like, "Oh, we're eating that in January and now we have a similar meal in November. Is that what we want or do we want to throw something totally new?" I mean, it just makes us think about things in a different way.

Jess Dang: Right. And I think you know, that's what's made us meal planning experts. We get together every ... And we talk about meal planning year round. But like those very concentrated days are sitting in a room and just like looking at spreadsheets and all the old ratings, and just moving things here and there and just thinking about all these things that like you would never expect a regular home cook to do because it's not their job. This is something we've spent years thinking about and it makes a huge difference, I think when the actual meal plans do come out.

Jess Smith: Yeah, no, we're definitely meal plan geeks over here. I mean this is our ... We geek out over it for sure.

Jess Dang: So you've made a huge career change in these last three years joining Cook Smarts and kind of leaving the government world. Do you have any advice for others who are also trying to figure out if they want to take the plunge? Is there anything that you feel like you've given up or of what you've gained as a result?

Jess Smith: I would tell people just be brave. And I started the blog while I still had my government job and fortunately, I loved my job, but I just felt like there was something else out there that I wanted to pursue. And it took a lot of time. It meant I had a job and a half because I was ... And I wasn't getting paid for it. When I first started, I was working on the blog. It was just for fun and to learn. But I would tell anyone to do that because if you're not willing to put in the time when it's a hobby and you can just play around with it, then it may not be the right thing and you may just need to stay a hobby.

Jess Dang: Right.

Jess Smith: But yeah, no, honestly, it's been the most rewarding thing and it was scary and it meant putting myself out there and putting myself out through the blog and then putting myself out through the application process, but it's just been so rewarding, and one of the best things I ever could have done.

Jess Smith: And as you and I had discussed, the timing wasn't even quite perfect. I did some contract work for you while I still was working my other job because I had made a commitment to finish out a few more months with them. So it was hard but yeah, I would tell anyone if there's something out there that you love, chase it and do it and see what comes of it.

Jess Dang: That's great advice. And I think we've kind of come full circle because the reason I needed this position was because I was going on maternity leave. I know I was having my first baby and knowing that I was not going to be able to, even after I came back and do all the recipe development and photographing, and all of that. And so that's why I needed to bring somebody on, and here we are three years later and you are about to go on maternity leave for your third and yeah, it's gonna be a rough three months without you, but I know we're just going to be in such good shape when you get back.

Jess Smith: Yeah. I hope that's true. I hope that's true. It'll be weird to step away.

Jess Dang: But I think because we're professional meal planners, we're also just like professional planners. So all of it has already been planned well ahead. And we had plenty of time leading up to this and we're so excited for you.

Jess Smith: Yes. Well, thanks. Like I said, I'm very excited. Very ready.

Jess Dang: Yes. I'm sure.

Jess Smith: Very ready waiting for this baby to come.

Jess Dang: Yes. So just in a few days, Jess is going to have a new baby in her life. That's so crazy.

Jess Smith: Yes. And then I will be right where I know many of our community members are trying to figure out how I'm going to get dinner on the table because with a newborn.

Jess Dang: Yes. Yeah. We have so much empathy for our members because we've all been in their shoes.

Jess Smith: Exactly.

Jess Dang: Right. And we're all trying to do that same thing and have the same goals. And so I think that makes us a better company as a result because we have been in our customer's shoes.

Jess Smith: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Jess Dang: All right. Jess, thank you so much for talking with me and I'm so excited for this big change in your life that's coming up and Cook Smarts will never be the same without you. So I'm so glad to have you on the team.

Jess Smith: Well, thanks Jess. Thanks for everything and thanks for interviewing me today and making my podcast dreams come true.

Jess Dang: Awesome. All right. Well, good luck with everything and post lots of photos of the baby when she comes.

Jess Smith: You got it. I will.

Jess Dang: All right. I hope you enjoyed our chat and getting this little peek into our small company. If you're a meal plan service member, I hope it gave you an even greater appreciation of all that goes into planning your dinners. It's a job we hold dear because we know what a big responsibility feeding yourself and your family is. And if you're not a meal plan service member yet, come and get on board.

Jess Dang: As you can tell, our meal plan developer is incredible and our whole team puts so much love and thought into meal planning. Just head over to cooksmarts.com where you can get access to three weeks of free meal plans. And to see a photo of Jess' beautiful family, head to the show notes at cooksmarts.com/podcast/3 and that is the number three. And while you're there, please head over to iTunes too, leave a review and make sure you're subscribed too. We're a new podcast and Apple takes reviews and subscriptions seriously, so it's the best way to help others find us.

Jess Dang: And lastly, I know there are a couple of entrepreneurs listening right now and I just want to say don't give up. Growing a team was one of the scariest things I went through in the year I had my first kid. I went from zero to three employees and of course zero to one lifetime dependent. And I was really lucky to find the right people and it's made all the difference and also made this journey a lot less lonely for me.

Jess Dang: I know that hiring is scary, but take the time to find the right person and create an application and interview process with questions that really scream for the skills you need for success for that role. And for this role, this meal plan developer role, people had to create a sample meal plan with the four diet variations we offer and also submit a video of themselves teaching me something in the kitchen.

Jess Dang: This probably like, because there was a lot of work involved, it probably screened out a lot of people and it was so much more informative for me than asking them for a cover letter and a resume and it really helped me get a sense of the candidate. So I encourage you to follow that dream and find a great team to support it. It's not easy, but it's really

worth it. 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.