



Meal Planning for Busy Moms

Using the *Secrets of a Busy Cook*

by MARY ANN KELLEY

PRESENTED BY



MENUS4MOMS.COM

How Menu Planning Saves Time & Money

If you could ask for more of any one resource in your daily life, what would it be? Odds are good that you would say either more time or more money. While we realize that food costs are skyrocketing and it is wreaking havoc with our budgets, we may not realize that something as simple as menu planning could save us hundreds of dollars each month and cut out hours of prep time each week.

Did you know that according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average American family spends more than \$2000 a year eating out? Not only does this hurt our bank accounts, it often hurts our bodies, too. From larger portions and more fat to calorie-dense foods and less vegetables,

eating out falls far below home cooking in terms of health. We save time by eating out or buying processed food that takes little preparation but can be heavy on cost and light on nutrition.

On the other hand, we try to save money by eating at home and cooking from scratch and we end up spending too much precious time in the kitchen every night. This leaves us frustrated when it takes 15-20 minutes to eat what it has taken so long to prepare. There is an alternative! Menu planning can give you more time and money. Try taking this short quiz to find out if menu planning can help you.

Quiz Time! Could Menu Planning Save You Time and Money?

- How many days per week do you eat out for dinner?
- How many days per week do you start planning dinner after 4pm?
- How many days per week have you done no physical preparation work on dinner before 4pm?

How to Score: Give yourself one point for each day and total your score. If you scored:

- **Over 15** — You sound like a mom in chaos and menu planning could dramatically help you
- **Between 10-15** — You are making progress but could use some tips
- **Between 5-10** — You are almost there, you just need a few “emergency meal ideas”
- **Under 5** — You are a domestic queen!

Depending on your answers to the quiz, you could gain 12-20 hours or over \$150 (or both) every month with menu planning!

Let me take a moment to say that despite my emphasis on eating out, I am not suggesting that you never eat out. On the contrary, I love to take a break from cooking and eat out. What I am suggesting is that if we could just cut out the times that we run through the drive-thru or eat out because we failed to plan dinner, we could save a significant amount of money. Let your eating out be enjoyable because it is intentional. Don't let yourself get caught in the guilt of eating out because once again it's 5pm and everyone is hungry and nothing is thawed or the pantry is empty.

If you cut out one fast food meal per week for the whole family, you can save about \$100/month depending on the size of your family. If you cut out two sit-down restaurant meals a month, you

can save \$80/month. That is a total of \$180/month and it doesn't even include the amount you will save by planning easy meals around sale items instead of picking up prepared foods at the grocery store.

On the flip side, moms on a tight budget have no choice but to save money, so their strategy of cooking meals at home can leave them spending hours in the kitchen. Someone who is preparing 6 home cooked dinners per week (not from packaged prepared foods) is probably spending at least 9 hours a week just preparing dinner. I am going to show you how smart menu planning can cut that preparation time in half, giving back 4-1/2 hours each week to use for something more important than meal preparation.

How to Make a Great Meal Plan by Customizing

Great menu plans aren't made by just listing a few meals and putting the ingredients on a shopping list. The best plans are made by taking other factors into account, and the most important factor to consider is your schedule.

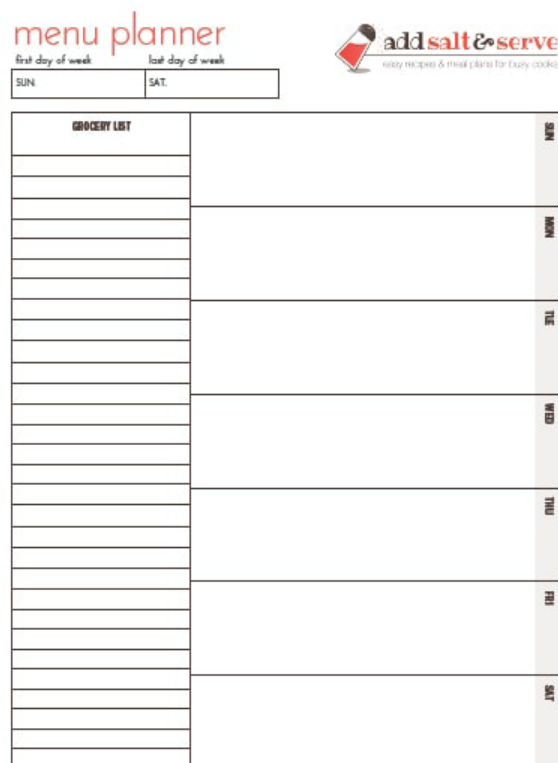
I use a menu planning form like the one to the right to help me keep track of what I have planned for dinner compared to what I have on my schedule. You can download our free menu planner form here:

<http://menus4moms.com/planner-pages/>

Sit down with your calendar and look at which nights you have some extra prep time and which nights you will be gone right up until dinnertime. Plan crockpot meals for nights when everyone will be walking in the door starving. Plan bulk cooking some ground beef for the freezer if you have extra time on taco night. I will discuss more about cooking for the freezer later, but for now, realize that whether your menu plan helps you depends on whether you can implement it. If you plan a big meal with lots of last minute preparations on a night that you will be gone until 5pm, odds are good that your menu plan isn't going to succeed that week.

Using Sales Flyers with Menu Planning

Another important factor for customizing your menu is your grocery sales flyers. You may prefer to stock your freezer with meat when it is on sale



The menu planner form is titled "menu planner" and includes the "add salt & serve" logo. It features a header for "first day of week" (SUN) and "last day of week" (SAT.). Below this is a "GROCERY LIST" section with a grid of 14 rows and 2 columns. The right column is labeled with days of the week: MON, TUE, WED, THU, FRI, and SAT. The form is designed for users to plan meals and track grocery needs for each day of the week.

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so that you don't have to plan your meals around sales, or you might have a small freezer and prefer to plan to eat what is on sale and not store it. If you have room (and keep in mind that cooked meat takes up a lot less space than raw meat), take advantage of those sales by buying in bulk (5-10 lbs. in the case of meat) whatever is at a deep discount and preparing it the day you bring it home. Plan tacos the night you shop and when you brown the beef for the tacos, brown the rest of the ground beef (or boil it in a crockpot) and freeze the cooked beef in 1-pound increments.

Considering Produce Seasons

If you want to take advantage of fresh produce instead of frozen, consider what is in season. It may seem obvious, but don't plan to use blueberries in August and fresh corn in March. It saves money to focus your side dishes on what's in season. The food will be cheaper and more nutritious because it is fresh. In the off-season or if you can't get local produce, it is better to use frozen fruits and vegetables because they are typically flash frozen shortly after harvest, locking in the nutrients, while fresh produce is shipped for days or weeks at a time, losing nutrients rapidly.



Grilled Cilantro Lime Corn

Cooking for the Freezer

The concepts in the Busy Cook's Pyramid are ideas that I had embraced for years without actually putting them into an organized format. One day I was browsing online and found these same ideas well-framed in this concise pyramid from Lynn Nelson, and I am grateful to her for graciously allowing me to use it.

The Busy Cook's Pyramid contains five pyramid building blocks that, when combined, create great meals with little stress and time. The base of the pyramid is formed with the strong foundation of Cooking for the Freezer, which will have the most impact on saving time and money. If you have tried bulk cooking and are shuddering in horror, fear not.

Cooking for the freezer can be as simple as doubling recipes and freezing the extra or cooking ground beef and chicken in bulk so that it is ready when you need it.

One of the most important features of the Add Salt & Serve weekly meal plans is bulk cooking ingredients for the freezer, and it is how you will save most of your time and money. When you buy



meat in bulk, you can stock up when it is on sale. Watch the fliers in the paper or online and have specific price points that you want to hit. When you find a sale that meets those price points, buy in bulk and prep the food for the freezer first — browning, boiling, grilling, sautéing, whatever you prefer. Why brown one pound of ground beef five times if you can brown five pounds one time?

Old Way

10 lbs ground beef per month at \$3.29 per lb

15 minutes cooking per lb

\$32.90 per month

2 ½ hours cooking time

VS

Cooking for the Freezer

10 lbs ground beef per month at \$1.69 per lb

30 minutes cooking once

\$16.90 per month

½ hour cooking time

To give you an idea of how **Cooking for the Freezer** saves you time and money, think about buying 10 pounds of ground beef at \$1.69/pound when it is on sale instead of spending \$3.29/pound. You save \$16 by purchasing it on sale, and by cooking it all at once in 25 minutes or less, you save two hours compared to cooking 10 pounds separately for 15 minutes each time.

You can see that a regular practice of this kind of freezer cooking will quickly add up in time and money savings. This doesn't include the savings not going to Taco Bell because pulling cooked meat out of the freezer and serving tacos at home costs a fraction of the money (and probably about the same amount of time) it would have taken to feed the whole family at the Taco Bell drive thru!

I often buy a 10-pound bag of frozen chicken breasts from Costco and marinate and grill the entire bag at once. When it is cooked, we have grilled

chicken for dinner and chop the other 9 pounds for the freezer. Onions and green peppers can be chopped and sautéed before freezing, saving time and tears later. We do this in late summer almost weekly when our green bell peppers are ready for harvest and then we have enough in the freezer for the whole year, but even if you don't have a garden you can buy them for less when they are in season.

If you have a rice cooker, try cooking a large batch of brown rice and freezing it in 2 cup portions. It makes a great addition to soups and casseroles without having to wait for an hour for it to cook.

Beans are another time-consuming but easy ingredient to cook for the freezer.

Cooking beans once and freezing them in 2-cup portions saves hours of time later when you need them for recipes, and dry beans are a fraction off the cost of canned beans.



Cooking beans for the freezer

Dried beans are easy to cook and can be done in a slow cooker.

Overnight soak: Leave beans in water overnight.

Quick soak: Heat to boiling and boil for 2 minutes. Turn heat off and cover, let sit for 1 hour.

Ingredients

- 1 bag dried beans (black, pinto, kidney, etc.)
- water

Directions

Rinse beans in a colander and check to be sure there are no stones or other debris. Place beans in a Dutch oven and cover with water so that the water is twice as deep as the beans. Soak beans using either the overnight or quick soak method.

Drain beans in colander and rinse pot. Place beans in slow cooker and cover with water, making sure the water is twice as deep as the beans. Cook on High for 5 hours or Low for 8- 10 hours. Drain beans, reserving liquid (place colander on a large pan or bowl then pour beans in).

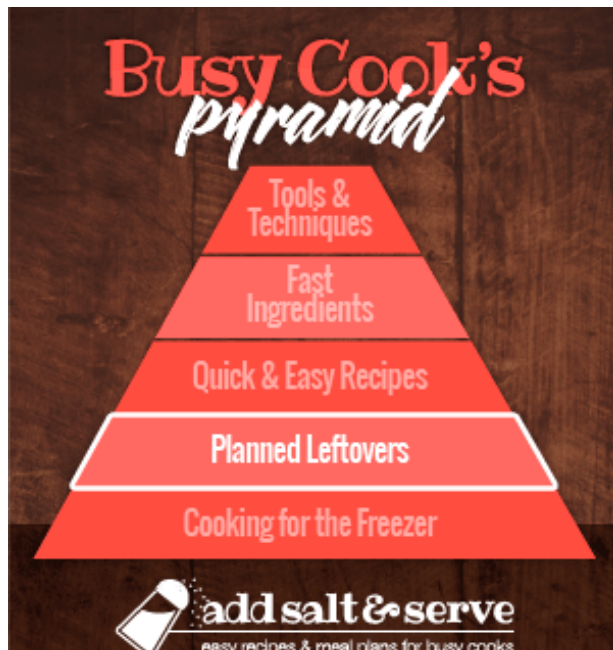
Separate beans into 2 cup servings in freezer bags. Cover beans in each bag with some of reserved liquid.

When you are planning meals, take into account dishes that freeze well and double them as you make dinner, freezing the extra. Many pasta dishes freeze well (it is best to slightly undercook pasta and rice when it will be frozen in a dish), but it

is best to avoid freezing anything with real cream since it tends to separate after thawing. The more you prepare in bulk for the freezer, the less time it takes to prepare a meal another night.

Planned Leftovers

Planned Leftovers are essential for saving money because not knowing what you are going to do with leftovers from a roast or a ham usually leads to waste. The Busy Mom Menu incorporates planned leftovers almost every week and is one of the most popular features of the menus. A baked ham will later get used in Hawaiian pizza or ham and pineapple shish kabobs.



A roasted chicken is used later in the week by making broth from the bones and skin and making chicken and dumplings or chicken noodle soup. Not only is it less waste, but when you plan your leftovers, there are less meals to plan for the week.

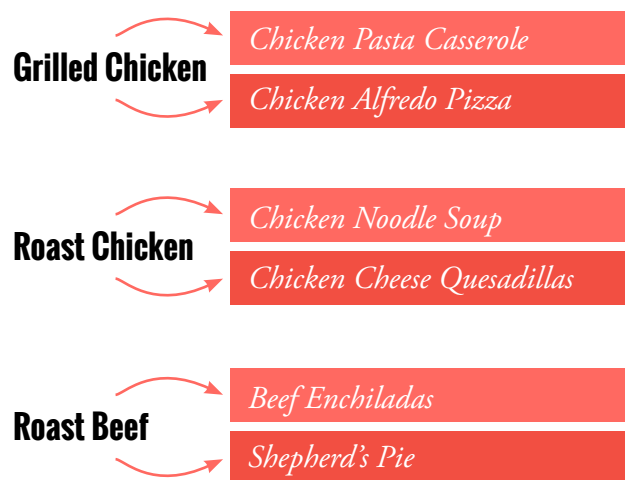
Planned leftovers are great for scheduling conflicts, too. Usually the initial meal involves a roast



or other meat, so if you use a crockpot recipe you can account for those days when sporting events or piano lessons keep you out until dinnertime.

Also, you can do some of the prep work for the second meal before you put the leftovers away, saving time later in the week.

Great Ideas for planned leftovers

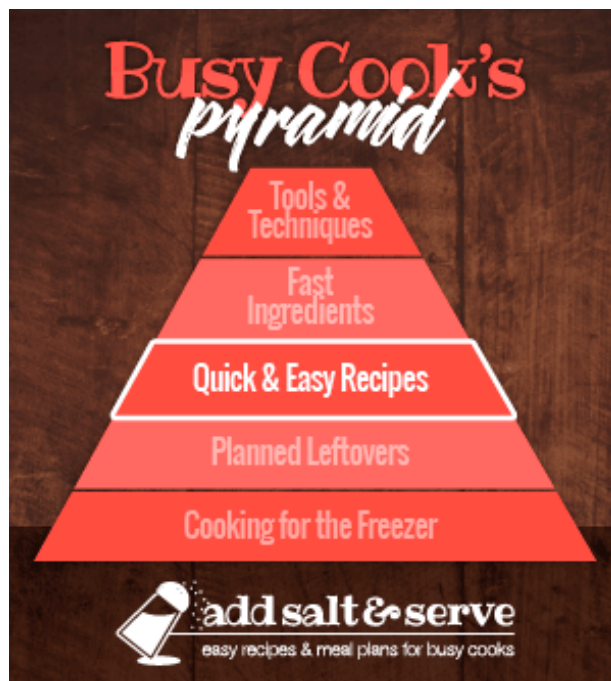


Quick and Easy Recipes and Fast Ingredients

The third building block in our pyramid is Quick and Easy Recipes. Although I do occasionally make elaborate meals, most of the recipes that I use have as few ingredients as possible and simple preparation. The bulk of every busy cook's collection of recipes should be dishes that are quick and easy and can be prepared without much effort. These recipes should do more than just provide food quickly; they take advantage of fast ingredients and tools and techniques that help you keep your time in the kitchen to a minimum. Keeping a list of the easiest dishes that are family favorites and always having the ingredients on hand for these dishes is an effective way to prevent eating out when you are running late or have an especially busy afternoon.

Having a collection of quick and easy recipes isn't enough, however. Keeping your recipes organized is vital to menu planning because a messy overstuffed recipe box will discourage you when you are browsing for quick and easy recipes.

Because I have recipes from a variety of sources including magazines, recipe cards, and online printouts, I have a hard time making a recipe box work. Instead, I use a 3-ring binder, and have pocket dividers with tabs. I keep a section for each recipe category (Casseroles, Soups, Chicken, Beef, Vegetables, Pasta, etc.) and keep page protectors in each section. I really like this method because



dishes that I haven't tried can go in the pocket for that section, and tried and true recipes go in the page protectors. When you have time, go through your recipe book and separate out your recipes into tried and true vs. those that you want to try. It makes it much easier to plan when every recipe that looks good isn't vying for space in your recipe box, and you know which recipes are reliable.

When planning your menus, be on the lookout for recipes with few ingredients and short simple instructions. When the kids are gone and you have five hours to make dinner, feel free to get out that Julia Child cookbook, but for busy moms, the best plan of action is to keep the recipes simple.

Cooking for the freezer and planned leftovers give you a head start on the fourth building block

of the pyramid, **Fast Ingredients**. Fast ingredients allow you to quickly put together a main dish using frozen meat that you can thaw in the microwave. There are pantry (and freezer) staples that are perfect for busy cooks and should always be stocked for quick and easy meals. Make sure that your pantry, refrigerator, and freezer are stocked with these items at all times. For me, they include broth, rice, pasta, frozen cooked meat, frozen vegetables, cheese, and cream of chicken or mushroom soup (or a substitute mix). With items like these on hand I can put together a pot of soup or a casserole that will go from preparation to table in 20-30 minutes.

I am a big fan of frozen vegetables. Because they are flash frozen shortly after harvest, they retain most of their nutrients and are easy to steam. Steaming frozen vegetables keeps their beautiful color, and then they can be sautéed with a small amount of butter or oil and some seasonings. The whole process takes less than 10 minutes. By starting with cooked meat from the freezer and making a side dish from frozen vegetables along with a bag salad, I can put together a nice meal in about 30 minutes.

You can see that **Quick and Easy Recipes** and **Fast Ingredients** can make the difference be-



tween chaos and peace at dinnertime. Next is the last aspect of the Busy Cook's Pyramid, **Tools and Techniques**.

Tools & Techniques and a Sample Menu

The last block in the Busy Cook's Pyramid is Tools and Techniques.

Tools

My mantra for cooks is to get the best tools you can afford. If you are only going to buy a crockpot once, if you can afford it, get the nicer programmable model rather than the cheapest stripped down model. In the long run you notice the difference in convenience every time you use it, and the savings in convenience is worth way more than the price difference. Good tools save you time and frustration every time you use them.

Your tools should be easily accessible. For me, that means on the counter for the big tools like



my crockpot and my knives. It looks a little more cluttered than if everything was put away, but the



reality is that I won't use them if I have to get them out each time I want to use them. Some of the tools that are essential for me are my grill, crockpot, microwave, good pans, good knives, and large stainless steel bowls. There are many other tools that are nice to have but not essential. Some larger ones are a bread maker, a rice cooker, and the powerful all-in-one mixers. Smaller tools that make life easier are items like a marinade container, a food chopper, a garlic press, and other specialty tools. Whatever the tools are that you prefer, invest in them if you will use them.

Some of my household “servants”

Microwave — my favorite tool for defrosting all those prepared ingredients and meals from the freezer

■ **Crockpot** — used weekly and almost always on days when activities keep us on the go until dinnertime

■ **Bread Machine** — this comes in handy for making one loaf at a time, and it is great for getting pizza dough ready just in time for lunch

■ **Rice Maker** — we use a lot of rice, and my rice maker lets me set it and forget about it

■ **Shopping List App** — I love these because once I have prices at my local stores programmed into it I can drag and drop my list from a selection of items and it organizes my list by category and gives me a total price for the trip right on the list

■ **Grill** — good tool for quick meals but also for preparing ingredients for the freezer like grilled chicken or vegetables; it keeps the kitchen cool in the summertime

■ **Electric Pressure Cooker** — recipes for electric pressure cookers abound online and can help you cut your cooking time dramatically and reduce cleanup time as well

Don't fill your kitchen with a bunch of unused accessories, but for the tools you will use regularly, invest the money to purchase quality products.

Kitchen appliances and cooking techniques have come a long way since our mothers' days. All these hi-tech gadgets and cooking methods can save you lots time in the kitchen. Without planning the use of these tools and techniques into your day, they will sit unused on the counter.

Most of us do not have household servants in the traditional sense, but have you ever thought of your crockpot or electric pressure cooker as a servant? Your bread machine? Take advantage of these appliances and let them serve you throughout the day so that you can focus on other things.

Techniques

The last item in the pyramid is Techniques. Learn quick and easy ways to accomplish routine tasks. Know how to cut an onion, seed a pepper, mince garlic, or anything else most recipes call for. If you don't have a good basics cookbook, get one. My favorite, and the one I give as a gift, is the *Better Homes and Gardens Cookbook*. It is a classic illustrated cookbook that covers all of the basics plus things you might not be as familiar with.

You can go online for just about any technique you want to see illustrated. These are two of my has favorite sites for videos showing cooking techniques, ingredient guides, kitchen tips, and more:

Wegmans: wegmans.com/cookingtechniques

Serious Eats: seriouseats.com/how-tos

Have a Backup Plan

The last key to making a great menu plan is having a back-up plan. One mom was just starting to use the menu plans, and the very first week, one of her kids unknowingly let the roast for the next day fall out of the refrigerator and it sat on the kitchen floor all night. Those kinds of things happen despite the best planning, and that is when your back-up plan comes into play. We were able to help her save the day by rearranging her meal plan to include some back-up meals.

Crisis Meals

I have several meals that I can put together in 10-15 minutes with items I keep on hand all the

time and I use those as my crisis meals. These crisis meals use either frozen or canned ingredients along with pasta or rice so I don't have to worry about perishables that I don't have on hand. (I don't consider frozen vegetables perishable unless we have a power outage.) A good example of a crisis meal that everyone in my house loves is Hash Brown Soup. With just a bag of frozen hash browns, a pound of Velveeta cheese, some chicken broth and a couple of cans of cream soup, I can put together a hearty, filling meal that can be served with bread and a salad. Even men who think that soup doesn't make a meal love this one.

Hash Brown Soup

Ingredients

- 1 sautéed onion (from freezer stock)
- 3 cans chicken broth
- 1 large bag frozen hash browns
- 1 can cream of celery soup
- 1 can cream of chicken Soup
- 12 oz can of evaporated Milk (or 1-1/2 cups regular milk)
- 1 pound velveeta cheese



Directions

Combine onion and broth, bring to boil. Add hash browns, bring to boil. Add soups (don't dilute) and evaporated milk, bring to boil. Add Cheese. Heat until cheese melts.

Rachel Ray suggests keeping a few index cards in your glove-box with the ingredients listed for easy dishes. In a pinch you can stop at the store and grab the items you need to make a quick meal. If you don't work outside the home, you could create index cards with the menu on one side and the ingredients on the other, you can laminate them and let your husband keep them in his car. When you call him in a panic to pick something up at the store, he can be the hero when he brings home all the makings for a nice easy meal. Examples of quick fix meals include rotisserie chicken with a

salad, fruit, and bread; ready-made pesto with pasta, salad, and bread; pizza on a ready-made crust with your favorite toppings; tacos with corn and rice; subs with veggies and dip; and cheeseburger pie with frozen vegetables.

*"If there's one thing I learned . . . it's to save time by doing as much work as possible before you actually **NEED** the food!" — ROCHELLE*

The menu plan on the following page was created with the Busy Cook's Pyramid in mind.

Sample Menu with Busy Cook's Pyramid

MON	Lasanga Steamed Broccoli Italian Bread	Lasagna uses an easy recipe and makes an extra pan for the freezer . Broccoli will make leftovers for Thursday's potato bar.
TUE	Grilled Chicken Zucchini Herb Casserole Crusty Bread Pineapple Chunks	Grilled chicken is cooking in bulk for the freezer and makes leftovers for Friday's Chicken Salad Pitas.
WED	Tex Mex Pasta Skillet Salad Mango Slices	Tex Mex Pasta is an easy stovetop recipe with fast ingredients.
THU	Loaded Potato Bar Salad Vanilla Yogurt with Apples & Grapes	The Potato Bar takes advantage of leftover broccoli and you can use your tools by using the microwave or crockpot.
FRI	Chicken Salad Pitas Chips Frozen Grapes	The Pitas are a quick and easy recipe using leftover chicken . The sides are also quick and easy.

To review, there are several things to keep in mind when putting together a meal plan. You don't have to do it all yourself; the Busy Mom Menu is a wonderful tool using the Busy Cook's Pyramid that can save you time and money.

If you decide to create your own menu plan every week, do more than just write a meal plan for the week — consider your schedule and take sales into account. Use the Busy Cooks' Pyramid to save time and money, and have a backup plan for those days when everything falls apart.

Do you love the idea of menu planning but don't want to plan your own menus? Use Add Salt & Serve meal plans and save both money and time. Using our meal plans can save you over \$100/month in grocery costs as well as hours in the kitchen! Here is what one mom says about our menus:

"I have thoroughly enjoyed your site since I found it! I don't like trying new things, or doing hard recipes that leave me stuck in the kitchen all night. I have 5 children and I work and go to college part time, so my time is very limited. Your site has really helped me know what is for dinner, stick to my budget, and try out new recipes. That Chicken Pepper Pasta was so delicious last night! And more importantly, my children loved it too! Thank you for everything!"

YOLANDA C. IN ILLINOIS

I hope you have enjoyed our Meal Planning for Busy Moms e-Course.

If you love the Busy Cook's Pyramid but just don't have the time to plan it all out, our free meal plans can take the stress out of your dinner hour.

We even have a feature that allows you to create and customize your own meal plans and recipe



collections! Sign up for free at the link at the bottom of this page. You'll get:

- Weekly email linking to the meal plan
- Time-saving tips
- Instructions for stocking your freezer
- Ability to customize & create meal plans (requires free registration)

"Having your menu and shopping list has saved me so much time and money, has my family eating things we'd never tried before, and keeps us talking at the table rather than rushing through a restaurant. You've taken all the stress out of the kitchen for me, and put the fun back in!"

MICHELLE W.



Click Here to Get Free Meal Plans

www.menus4moms.com/free-weekly-dinner-menus-take-two/