

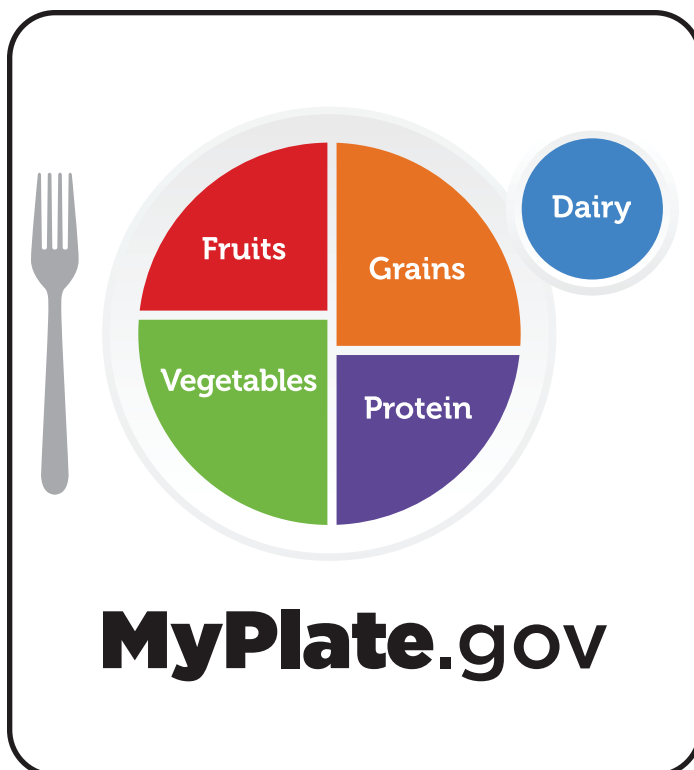
How to Get Out of a Mealtime Rut

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When you or a family member find out what is on the menu for dinner, is the typical response “Again?” If you dread the thought of cleaning another dish or you just can’t think of the last time you were excited by your own cooking, you may be in a cooking rut. Even the most avid cooks have cooking ruts from time to time. Fear not, because these ideas will spark your cooking creativity and make meal-times more appealing!

Benefits of Home-cooked Meals

Sometimes a reminder of the benefits of cooking at home is all we need. In many studies, meals made and eaten at home were linked to higher-quality diets and better health. Home-cooked meals often have more variety, are more balanced, and include foods from all five of the food groups featured in MyPlate, a visual nutrition guide based on the USDA’s Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Studies have shown families that prepare and eat meals at home five or more times each week consume more fruits and vegetables than those who eat meals at home less than three times per week.



Aside from the health benefits of home-cooked meals, enjoying meals cooked at home benefits the family in many other ways. Home-cooked meals often result in shared family meals, which are linked to stronger family connections. When cooking at home, children are more likely to engage in the cooking process. As a result, children may be more likely to eat foods that are more nutritious when they help make the meal, and they learn cooking skills they will use as they move into adulthood. Additionally, when children see adults eating a variety of nutritious foods, they are more likely to make the same healthy choices. These are all great reasons to cook at home.

Start Simple

The easiest way to get out of a cooking rut is to build MyPlate meals. MyPlate serves as a visual guide to include all the food groups at meals. When planning your meals, refer to MyPlate to include fruits, vegetables, grains, proteins, and dairy. Including a variety of foods from all groups ensures you receive the energy, fiber, and nutrients each food group provides.

Start with a favorite family meal. This might be your regular “go-to” dish because it is easy and filling or simply a meal that your family loves. Think about that meal in terms of MyPlate. What can you add or change about the meal to make it a MyPlate meal? MyPlate can help us build satisfying meals that include a variety of nutrients and the fiber we need, helping us feel full longer. These MyPlate meals do not have to be complicated. Simple meals that are filling and nutritious are the goal.

If your go-to meal is chicken and rice, consider making a stir-fry by adding frozen mixed vegetables and a stir-fry sauce to serve over brown rice. Pair with canned mandarin oranges and a glass of milk. This meal now includes all the food groups and has more flavor and nutrition than the original.

Add Creativity and Fun to Your Meal Creations

Rely on a variety of useful tools to inspire kitchen creativity. These ideas will provide you with a new outlook when preparing your next meal that will help you break free of the mealtime rut. Approaches that encourage family involvement in mealtime decisions and preparation are a win-win.

Plan Themed Dinner Nights

Reduce decision-making by creating a standing themed dinner night each week. Taco Tuesday and Pizza Friday are nothing new. Put a new spin on these by letting a family member pick a recipe or by making something from scratch that you normally would not, such as pizza crust. Ask your family what creative ideas they have for a themed dinner. Ideas may include Slow Cooker Saturday, or Throwback Thursday with classic childhood favorites. If one night is family movie night, make a meal that relates to the movie. It helps to know each week has at least one pre-scheduled meal.

Whole-grain banana pancakes with a berry and yogurt parfait are sure to please. Use vegetables by making breakfast burritos or an egg casserole, both of which can serve as lunch the next day.

Try Breakfast for Dinner

One of the most familiar ways to vary your dinner routine is to make breakfast for dinner. Breakfast foods are often affordable and easy to make. Cooking them at dinner allows more time to make breakfast foods that are too time-consuming for morning routines. Aim to include whole grain, fruit, and protein options.

Explore the Store

It is common to purchase the same items at the grocery store from week to week. When you have time, explore the store to look at items you have never tried or new products that are available. Try buying something you enjoy but simply have never made at home, such as eggplant or parsnips. Go beyond your own store and see what other grocery stores are in your area. Explore an international market to find interesting new items and to see their versions of items you buy at your regular grocery store. You may pick up a new grocery store routine.

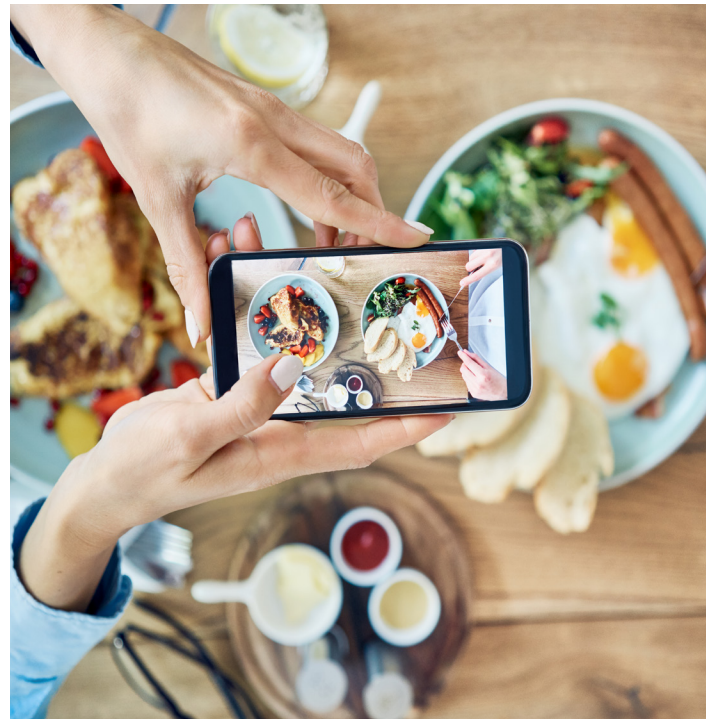
Celebrate a Food Holiday

Another easy way to decide what to make for dinner is to celebrate a national food holiday. With a simple search on the internet, you can find multiple days in the month that are food holidays. For example, March 9 is National Meatball

Day. Make a favorite meatball recipe or search for a new one you would not usually try. Each month, your family can plan which food holidays to celebrate.

Cook through a Cookbook

Grab a cookbook you have not used in a while or browse a bargain bookstore or library. Consider swapping cookbooks with a friend. Try choosing recipes you would not usually make, or discover new flavors by browsing through international cookbooks. You might be pleasantly surprised and learn a few new cooking skills in the process. Make note of what you and your family liked or disliked about a recipe and what changes you would make.



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Take Photos along the Way

Be your own source of inspiration. Take photos of your kitchen creations and make an album on your smartphone. Refer to your digital photo album when you need inspiration. This is especially helpful for meals that you threw together with items you had on hand. It is a way to recall dishes without recipes, and it reminds you of your kitchen creativity. Encourage family members to do the same and create a shared album so that everyone can get involved.

Shop Your Kitchen

Do you have boxes of pasta that have been in your cupboard for a while? Is there broccoli in your freezer that should be used soon? Go through your kitchen to find items that need to be used. Start with one or two items you want to use, and then browse your pantry for flavors that would pair

well. Consider how much time making the meal will take. If you only have 20 minutes until the meal must be served, waiting for the oven to preheat may not allow enough time to cook. Explore online resources or smartphone apps that provide you with recipes based on the food items you have on hand.

Sauce It Up

Explore using sauces in different ways. A jar of pasta sauce can be used for so much more than spaghetti. Consider adding it to vegetable soup or as an ingredient for eggplant parmesan. Use salad dressing as a meat marinade. Try using salsa in a chili recipe or on a burger for a Mexican-inspired sandwich. Mix up homemade pizza by using something other than tomato sauce as your base. For example, green salsa or very thinly sliced fresh veggies can make a great base that is “outside of the box.” Most types of cuisine have their own sauces to liven up dishes; either make your own or find a store-bought sauce to add a flavor from around the globe. You can also enhance your standard sauces simply by adding roasted vegetables to pasta sauce or crushed pineapple to barbecue sauce.

Phone a Friend

Ask family members or friends what has been on their dinner schedules lately. Co-workers might provide some clever ideas, too. If you work similar schedules, they may have recipes that fit your time constraints. Even the grocery store may be more of a resource than you realize. The butcher may provide you with valuable advice on how to prepare certain items, and you might find recipe cards if you ask.

Watch the Pros

Cooking shows are another way to get inspired to try something different or to learn a new spin on preparing a classic recipe. Simply going to a popular chef’s or cooking show’s website makes it even easier to get inspired. Online videos can be another source of inspiration, as many talented home chefs put content on social media.

Eat with the Seasons

If you find yourself eating the same fruits and vegetables year-round, consider eating with the seasons. A seasonal produce guide is available at your county Extension office that lets you know what is in season where you live and how to find it. Even if you use the same recipes, changing out what produce you include can make the dish feel entirely new. For example, in the cooler months, broccoli and carrots may be a great addition to a pasta dish, and in the warmer months, you could try summer squashes and eggplant. With various items being harvested locally, you will constantly have new, fresh ingredients for your recipes that will help keep you out of a mealtime rut.

Be Inspired

Cooking ruts will happen, so use these ideas for inspiration in the kitchen to create something you enjoy eating. The many benefits of making meals at home will be multiplied when you involve your family members. Together you can create and share satisfying and nutritious meals—and maybe get some help with kitchen cleanup in the process!



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