Think you’ll never win at weeknight meals? Think again. This plan requires a little sacrifice—two hours on a weekend—but the payoff is huge: a mix-and-match stash of building blocks to create easier, faster dinners all week long.
RESTAURANTS HAVE A TRICK for getting food from the kitchen to your table in a few minutes: They prep and cook things days or hours ahead of time and store them in the refrigerator. (Rocket science!) Then they finish everything off and assemble when it’s time to serve. You can do the same thing in your kitchen. Set aside a couple of hours on Sunday to follow the steps on these pages: Wash and chop vegetables; cook some versatile ingredients, plus a few fully ready-to-go dishes; and make some cold items that you can use multiple ways—on a salad, in a sandwich, or as a game-changing topping. The colored boxes on these pages offer suggestions on how to combine prepped foods to pull together different dinners. Ready to fill the refrigerator? Grab reusable containers, washi tape, and a marker (trust us—label everything) and start cooking up a saner week.

SUNDAY-PREP DOS AND DON’TS

**DO**

Start with a clean kitchen, lots of counter space, and several stacks of clean, empty containers.

Invest in clear containers that nest when not in use and can stack neatly in the refrigerator or freezer to maximize space.

Clearly label and organize the prepped ingredients so that helpers (spouses, teens, babysitters) can easily find what they need to pull together dinner. Ideally, reserve a shelf or two in the refrigerator for everything.

Change things up. Take note of what gets eaten completely week after week, and tailor your next prep session accordingly.

**DON’T**

Overbuy. Be realistic about what you can prep in the time you’ve set aside, and shop accordingly.

Invite the family. This is a job best tackled without loved ones underfoot. Exception: Older kids can help, but give them a small to-do list that’s the same each week so that they master it and don’t slow you down.

Be an overachiever. Squeezing in muffins or school bake-sale sweets can derail the essential tasks. Save baking for monthly make-and-freeze affairs.

Rush things. Wrapping and shoving warm food into the refrigerator before it has had time to cool can bring down the core temperature of the entire machine, compromising meat, fish, and dairy stored nearby.
STEP NO. 1
COOK/STEAM/BOIL
Tackle this list on the stovetop.

- Hard-boil eggs
- Steam potatoes (any kind)
- Cook a grain (like brown rice)
- Simmer a soup (recipe below)
- Boil noodles (for mac and cheese)
- Make cheese sauce (for mac and cheese)

Serve the soup warm, topped with herb yogurt or sour cream.

Not a carrot fan? Try the recipe with 4 pounds of peeled squash, cooked with 8 cups of chicken broth, instead.

RECIPE
CARROT SOUP WITH HERB YOGURT
NEXT PAGE
Carrot soup with herb yogurt

HEAT the oil in a large pot over medium-high heat. Add the onions, carrots, thyme, 1 teaspoon salt, and ½ teaspoon pepper. Cook, stirring often, until the onions are tender, 10 to 12 minutes. Add the water and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer, stirring occasionally, until the carrots are completely soft, 12 to 15 minutes.

PUREE in a blender, in batches, until smooth. Stir in the carrot juice and vinegar. Store in an airtight container for up to 1 week. Reheat over a low flame.

HANDS-ON TIME 30 MINUTES  TOTAL TIME 50 MINUTES  SERVES 6 (OR 4 WITH LEFTOVERS)

⅓ cup olive oil, plus more for serving
2 onions, chopped
4 pounds carrots, peeled and sliced
1 tablespoon fresh thyme leaves
Kosher salt and black pepper
6 cups water
2 cups carrot juice (found in the produce aisle)
1 tablespoon apple cider vinegar
Herb yogurt (Get the recipe on page 10)
STEP NO. 2

ROAST AND TOAST

You can do both of these at the same time in the oven.

- ROAST a versatile vegetable (like squash; get the recipe on page 12)
- TOAST 2 cups nuts (walnuts or almonds)

TO COOK

Bring to room temperature. Bake at 400°F until golden and warmed through, 25 to 35 minutes.

Reheat the leftovers in the microwave; or serve cold, with salad, for a school or workday lunch.
COOK the pasta according to the package directions. Wipe out the pot and melt the butter over medium heat. Add the flour and cook, stirring constantly, for 2 minutes. Slowly add the milk while stirring. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the sauce slightly thickens, 6 to 8 minutes. Add the Cheddar-Jack, mustard, and pepper and stir to melt. Stir in the pasta. Transfer to a 9-by-13-inch (3-quart) baking dish and cover with the Muenster. Cool completely. Cover tightly with plastic wrap and refrigerate until ready to bake, up to 4 days.

3/4 pound short pasta (such as cavatappi or cavatelli)
2 tablespoons butter
1/4 cup flour
4 cups whole milk
8 ounces shredded Cheddar-Jack cheese (about 2 cups)
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
1/2 teaspoon black pepper
5 slices Muenster cheese (about 4 ounces)
STEP NO. 3

WASH AND TRIM

Throw these items into quick stir-fries, salads, and smoothies. (You can switch it up from week to week.)

- Trim and cube 1 pineapple (or 2 mangoes)
- Wash and cut 1 bunch celery (or broccoli)
- Wash and trim ½ pound snow peas (or 2 peppers)
- Clean, trim, and tear 1 bunch kale
- Wash and dry 1 head lettuce
- Wash and chop 1 bunch fresh herbs

CUT CELERY

Pack with bean dip or herb yogurt as a snack, chop and add to tuna salad, or blend into smoothies.

TORN KALE

Blend into green juice, add to grain bowls, or toss into Goes-With-Anything Kale Salad.

HANDS-OFF TASK: DEFROSTING SHRIMP

Then you’ll have them on hand to stir-fry with celery, snow peas, and rice. Or steam them for a quick protein to go in salads, tacos, or soup.

RECIPE

WHITE BEAN DIP

NEXT PAGE

CHOPPED HERBS

Stir them into herb yogurt or salads, use them to season soups, or sprinkle them over meatballs.
White bean dip

SERVES 4 TO 6

Combine one 15-ounce can white beans (such as cannellini), ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil, ¼ cup warm water, and 1 teaspoon kosher salt in a food processor; blend until smooth. Stir in additional oil to thin the dip, as desired. Refrigerate in an airtight container for up to 5 days.

Turn this dip into a vegetarian main dish with roasted vegetables and rice. Or layer it into a sandwich with thinly sliced cucumbers, lettuce, tomato, and cheese.
BOILED POTATOES
Toss with vegetables, greens, and herb yogurt. Or warm and mash with butter, milk, and salt to serve with seared steak.

TOASTED NUTS
Sprinkle over oatmeal, salads, grain bowls, or soup for added protein and flavor.

CHOPPED PINEAPPLE
Toss into smoothies, pack in school lunches, or serve over vanilla ice cream for an easy weeknight dessert.

HARD-BOILED EGGS
Peel and chop to make egg salad, slice to top toast, or halve and add to warm grain bowls.

CUT SNOW PEAS
Serve with herb yogurt or stir-fry with bacon, peeled shrimp, and brown rice.
Tuna Salad

SERVES 4 TO 6

Mix together three 5-ounce cans white albacore tuna, ¼ cup mayonnaise, ¼ cup full-fat plain yogurt, 1 tablespoon water, 2 teaspoons Dijon mustard, and 2 stalks chopped celery with a fork. Refrigerate in an airtight container for up to 3 days.

Serve over Bibb lettuce, stack into a sandwich, or top with Swiss, Muenster, or Cheddar cheese and broil for a tuna melt.

Creamy Yogurt Dip

SERVES 4 TO 6

Stir together 2 cups full-fat plain yogurt, ½ teaspoon finely grated garlic, 2 tablespoons chopped fresh herbs (such as mint, parsley, and/or dill), and 1 teaspoon each Dijon mustard, lime zest, lime juice, and kosher salt. Refrigerate in an airtight container for up to 5 days.
Reheat the squash in the microwave for 3 minutes, or on a sheet pan in a 350° F oven until warmed through, 8 to 10 minutes.

COOKED GRAINS
Use them as the base of a hearty grain bowl, with roasted vegetables, greens, toasted nuts, eggs, and hot sauce or sriracha.

RECIPE
GOES-WITH-ANYTHING KALE SALAD

While the squash roasts in the oven, your hands are free to wash and prep other things. Try roasting a different vegetable every week—carrots, beets, cauliflower, etc.
Goes-with-anything kale salad

Serves 4 to 6

Whisk together 3 tablespoons each lemon juice and olive oil, 2 tablespoons Dijon mustard, and ¼ teaspoon each salt and pepper. Add 2 bunches Tuscan kale or 1 bunch curly kale (thick stems removed and leaves torn into bite-size pieces). Rub together to coat the leaves. Store in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 3 days.

Roasted Squash

Serves 4 to 6

Toss 1 acorn or butternut squash (washed and cut into wedges) in 3 tablespoons olive oil and salt and pepper. Cover with foil and cook at 350° F until almost soft, 30 minutes. Uncover and cook until soft and golden brown, 15 minutes more; cool. Refrigerate in an airtight container for up to 5 days.

Combine the squash with a grain and Goes With Anything Kale Salad, use it to top tacos, or reheat it and serve warm with pork or fish.
STEP NO. 4
MAKE AND STORE

In addition to your three flavorful meal toppers, prepare some meatballs that can go hot or cold.

- Tuna salad
- Bean dip
- Herb yogurt dip
- Meatballs

SERVE THE MEATBALLS warm with red sauce over cheesy polenta or pasta, or cold with green salad and a dollop of herb yogurt.

TO COOK
Cook the meatballs (in batches) in 2 tablespoons oil in a nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until browned on all sides and cooked through, about 6 minutes.
MIX together the beef, pork, ricotta, panko, onion, parsley, Parmesan, milk, egg, 1 teaspoon salt, and ½ teaspoon pepper in a large bowl until just combined.

GENTLY form into 30 meatballs (about 2 tablespoons each). Transfer to an airtight container (separating the layers with parchment paper) and refrigerate for at least 24 hours and up to 3 days (or freeze for up to 1 month). (Note: Store cooked and cooled meatballs in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 4 days.)

¾ pound ground beef  
¾ pound ground pork or turkey  
½ cup ricotta  
⅓ cup panko bread crumbs  
½ cup finely chopped onion  
¼ cup chopped parsley  
¼ cup grated Parmesan  
2 tablespoons milk  
1 large egg, beaten  
Kosher salt and black pepper