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karblak

FREE GUIDE

The 30-Minute Dinner Playbook

How to put a real dinner on the table on a Tuesday, with a plan that is still standing on Thursday.

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Why weeknight cooking falls apart

Almost nobody stops cooking because the recipes were too hard. They stop because of everything that happens before the pan gets hot.

The problem is the decision, not the cooking

Ask anyone who has given up on cooking during the week what went wrong, and you will rarely hear that a dish defeated them. What defeated them was standing in the kitchen at ten past six with no idea what dinner is, a fridge holding four unrelated ingredients, and about nine minutes of patience left.

That moment is a decision problem wearing a cooking costume. By the time you are hungry and tired, your capacity to choose is gone. Anything that requires you to decide at that moment will lose to the takeaway app, and it should — the app is asking you for one tap and no thinking.

So the useful question is not how to cook better. It is how to arrive at six o'clock with the decision already made, the ingredients already in the house, and the next physical action obvious.

The three failure points

- You did not decide in advance, so the decision lands at the worst possible time of day.
- You decided, but you did not shop for the decision, so half the ingredients are missing.
- You decided and shopped, but the recipe was written for a calm Sunday, and it is Tuesday.

Every one of these has the same shape: the plan was made by a rested version of you and executed by a tired one. A weeknight system has to be built for the tired version, because that is the one who has to cook.

What a working system looks like

It fixes the decision once a week, not seven times. It produces exactly one shopping trip. It assumes that on at least two nights you will have almost nothing left in the tank, and it plans those nights accordingly instead of pretending they will not happen.

That is the whole design. Everything in the rest of this guide is a detail of it.

The five-recipe week

Five, not seven. The two missing nights are the ones that make the other five survivable.

Why five

A seven-night plan has no slack in it. The first evening that goes sideways — late meeting, sick child, a train that does not turn up — breaks a night, and a broken night in a seven-night plan means ingredients you bought for Thursday are now going off on Saturday. One bad evening quietly ruins the week and, worse, teaches you that planning does not work.

Five leaves two nights unplanned on purpose. One is for leftovers, which we will design deliberately in chapter five. One is genuinely free: eat out, eat toast, eat whatever the day allows. Because those nights are in the plan, using them is not failure.

Choosing the five so they help each other

Do not pick five recipes you like. Pick five recipes that share a shopping list. This is the single highest-leverage habit in weeknight cooking and almost nobody does it.

- At least three should share a base ingredient you buy in one quantity — a bag of onions, a large pack of chicken thighs, one bunch of coriander.
- No more than one should need an ingredient you would not otherwise buy. Two exotic purchases in a week is how cupboards fill with jars.
- At least two must be genuinely fast — under twenty minutes, one pan — and they go on the nights you already know are hard.
- Vary the shape, not the cuisine. Five stir-fries is monotonous; a traybake, a soup, a pasta, a rice dish and a salad is not, even if they use the same six vegetables.

Ordering the week

Put the recipe with the most perishable ingredient first. Fish, soft herbs and salad leaves go on Monday or Tuesday; roots, brassicas and anything from the freezer can wait until Thursday. Ordering by perishability rather than by preference is what stops the plan producing waste.

Then put your two fast recipes on the two evenings you already know will be hard. You know which they are. Everyone has them, and they are the same nights most weeks.

One shop, sorted by aisle

The list is not a memory aid. It is a route through the shop, and writing it as a route is what turns forty minutes into fifteen.

Write the list in the shop's order, not the recipes' order

A list grouped by recipe makes you walk the shop once per dish. A list grouped by aisle makes you walk it once, full stop. Group into produce, meat and fish, dairy, dry goods, tins and jars, frozen, and household — in the order your particular shop lays them out.

The second benefit is bigger than the time saved: an aisle-sorted list consolidates duplicates automatically. Three recipes each wanting half an onion becomes one line that says two onions, and you stop buying a third bag you do not need.

Quantities that match what is actually sold

Recipes ask for 150g of something that is sold in 400g packs. If your list says 150g you will buy the pack and waste 250g, or you will buy it and improvise, badly, on Thursday.

Write the list in units the shop sells: one pack, one bunch, one tin. Then let the plan use the whole pack across the week. This is the mechanism by which planned cooking is cheaper than unplanned cooking — not clipping coupons, just not buying things you will throw away.

The substitution column

Shops run out. Write, next to any ingredient that matters, the one thing you would accept instead. Leeks for onions. Any firm white fish for the one named. Cream for creme fraiche.

Deciding this at home, calmly, takes ten seconds. Deciding it in the shop, in a hurry, is where people abandon the whole plan and buy a pizza on the way out.

The thirty-minute method

Thirty minutes is not a claim about how fast you chop. It is a claim about the order you do things in.

The first four minutes decide the other twenty-six

Before touching an ingredient: read the whole recipe, turn on whatever needs to get hot, and put every ingredient on the counter. That is it. It takes four minutes and it is the difference between thirty minutes and fifty.

Reading first tells you the one step that takes longest, so you can start it first. Preheating first means the oven is not the thing you are waiting on at the end. Laying everything out tells you immediately if something is missing, while there is still time to change plan rather than discovering it half-committed.

Start the slowest thing first

Almost every weeknight recipe has one element that takes noticeably longer than the rest: the rice, the oven, the pan of water. Start it before you do anything else, then prepare everything else inside its window.

Most home cooks work top to bottom through the method as written. Recipes are written in a readable order, not an efficient one. Reordering around the slow element is usually worth ten minutes on its own, with no change in skill.

Clean as the gaps appear

There are always two or three dead minutes — something simmering, something roasting. Use them on the washing up rather than on your phone. A kitchen that is nearly clean when you sit down is the single biggest factor in whether you cook again tomorrow.

This is not about tidiness. It is about what the kitchen looks like the next evening when you are deciding whether cooking is worth it.

Leftovers, on purpose

Most leftovers are an accident, which is why most of them are thrown away. Planned leftovers are a different thing entirely.

Cook too much, deliberately, once

Pick one recipe in the week and scale it to one and a half times. Not double, which is more than most households will eat before they resent it — one and a half, which is one extra meal.

Choose the right dish for it. Braises, stews, roast vegetables, grains and anything sauced improve or hold overnight. Fried food, delicate fish and dressed salads do not. Building the surplus into a dish that gets better is why planned leftovers feel like a second meal rather than a repeat.

Transform, do not reheat

The reason people dislike leftovers is that they eat exactly the same plate twice. Change the form and you change the meal.

- Yesterday's roast vegetables become today's soup, or a filling with cheese.
- Yesterday's braise becomes a pasta sauce, or the inside of a baked potato.
- Yesterday's rice becomes fried rice, which is better with day-old rice anyway.
- Yesterday's roast chicken becomes a sandwich worth looking forward to, then stock.

Label, and put it at eye level

Anything going into the fridge gets a note of what it is and the day it was made. Anything going into the freezer gets the same, plus a portion count. Ten seconds now, versus an unidentifiable tub in three weeks.

Then put it at the front, at eye level. Food is not thrown away because it went off; it is thrown away because it went out of sight and then went off. The shelf you look at first should hold the thing that needs eating first.

NEXT STEP

Take this week's five for free

Tell us how many you cook for and what you avoid, and karblak will send this week's five recipes with the shopping list. Yours to keep whether or not you subscribe.

Weeknight \$29.99/mo • Home Cook \$299/mo • Kitchen Pro \$499/mo

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<https://karblak.store>

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