Meal Planning

I love this time of the year. The farmers market is in full swing, the fruit trees are producing their lovely flavors, and the vegetable gardens (if you have one), are growing like weeds! Eating whole foods seems to be much easier this time of the year since we are surrounded by fresh crops. Are you taking advantage of the fresh vegetables and fruits that are in season? How can you transform existing meals to be just a little bit better?

Instead of simply taking out “bad foods”, consider how to transform them. One way to do this is to think about a continuum of food quality rather than “bad” or “good” foods. You can progress step-by-step towards improving food quality by building on what you already enjoy and know.

Here are some photo examples of progressive steps to improving food quality:

**Breakfast**

**Stage 1:** So let’s say you start your day with a whipped-cream coffee drink and a chocolate croissant. Maybe you eat this in your car on the way to work or school. Where could you go from here over the course of a year or so?

**Stage 2:** You could replace the croissant with a whole grain muffin and the super-duper epic “dessert in a cup” with a regular coffee, with milk and sugar. Another option would be to add a cup of yogurt for a bit of protein. Perhaps you are still rushed and busy so you eat it with some distractions at your desk or with the laptop on.

**Stage 3:** Perhaps you decide to switch the muffin to granola with cottage cheese. You decide to try black coffee (with a little sugar) and a couple servings of colorful fruit. Maybe you feel like you need to be productive while you eat so you check out the news headlines over breakfast.
Stage 4: Finally, after several months of practicing just a little bit better, you are setting aside time to enjoy a leisurely breakfast of an egg frittata, which you prepped in advance on your food prep day. The coffee is black or it has become green tea, the protein plus colorful fruit and veg have become the stars of the meal. And you have discovered you really like lemon water. You now eat mindfully, feeling relaxed, while watching the sun rise.

Stage 3: “Hey! I can make my own burger and it’s pretty good! I whipped up the patties on my food prep day so I have them handy. “And I got some nice cheese and fresh whole grain buns from the market. Pretty darn tasty.”

Stage 2: “Fine, fine. I’ll get a side salad with that burger, and maybe just a few potato chips, while I work on that report. Oh yeah, and throw in a diet soda instead of regular.”

Stage 1: “Eat slowly? Who has time for that? Grab a burger and go!”

Lunch

Stage 4: “Let’s do the burger without the bun. And I’m going to sit, take my time, and enjoy this. I need a quiet break from the day. “What to drink? Oh, water’s good.”
Dinner
Stage 1: It’s 8 pm. You have just gotten home after an insane day at work. All you want to do is put food into your face and zone out in front of the TV. You can’t even imagine making anything more complicated than boxed macaroni ‘n’ cheese right now. Ketchup and hot dogs will fancy this up.

Stage 2: Your protein’s evolved to a rotisserie chicken leg that you have grabbed at the grocery store on the way home. You have added a side salad. You are getting pretty good at cooking your own pasta. Work is still on their mind, and a few drinks will take the edge off.

Stage 3: Protein and veggies are starting to find their way on to the scene. You have cut the booze to 1 drink. And you have banished the smartphone from the dinner table. (Hey! You are actually sitting at the dinner table!)

Stage 4: With your meal planning and prep strategies, even a late-night dinner looks good. You can whip up a delicious salad in 3 minutes flat and have some pre-cooked quinoa on hand. That rotisserie chicken is still a fast, convenient option, but now it’s got some healthy buddies. The wine is there for flavor now, rather than taking the edge off because after practicing relaxation skills for the past several months, you are better able to handle any stress that comes your way.

Be Just A Little Bit Better
Notice that the final image in each series is an ideal. Most of us may never have all our meals look like that, but we can all move in that direction, slowly. What if you try making just one meal a week like that ideal? What if you make your regular everyday meals just a little bit better, one step at a time (for instance, by sitting down at a table to eat)? I think
that qualifies as a success! These evolutions and food transformations may take weeks, months, and/or years so be patient. It is important to change the quality of our food but equally important are the changes that improve the fundamental experience of the food. Changing how you eat, will often change what you eat. Conversely, changing what you eat may not change the underlying patterns of how you eat.

- Binge eaters can (and will) still binge on “healthy” foods.
- Meal skippers can skip a healthy meal just as easily as junk food.
- Mindless eaters can plow unconsciously through a salad or a burger.

Changing how you eat will help move you towards implementing a meal plan that looks like the ideal meal in the final images shown above. In fact, it could literally change your life.

As far as I am concerned, these are the two most important nutrition tips that can change your eating experience and your life.

1. Eat slowly first, before making any specific meal changes.
2. Eat slowly and mindfully, without distractions.

**Slow Eating (simple, but not easy)**

- Slow eating asks you to check in.
- Slow eating tunes you into your physical hunger/satiety cues.
- Slow eating creates awareness of food smells, tastes and textures.
- Slow eating enhances digestion.
- Slow eating counteracts feelings of deprivation and restriction.

People who struggle with eating slowly can use a simple timer to track their meal time, or an app such as [SlowMow](https://www.slowmow.com). You can also place visual reminders around your environment to remind you to eat slowly. Another way to slowly eat is to use chopsticks or your less dominate hand. Try putting utensils down after each bite. After a few bites, take 3 or 4 deep breaths. In my opinion, eating in this manner brings about such a profound sense of relaxation. You can also separate your meal into four segments and give yourself five minutes to eat each quarter for a total of 20 minutes.

**Eat Slowly and Mindfully, Without Distractions**

Start with slow eating first so you give yourself time to get the hang of it. Then add the step of mindful eating without distractions. You do not need to clear the deck and sit alone with a bowl of rice. Meals shared with family and friends, enjoying good conversation and company, are an important part of life.

All you have to do is make some basic changes such as:

- Putting mobile devices away while eating.
- Sitting at a table to eat (rather than while driving, walking down the street, standing over the sink, etc.).
- Eating without other electronic distractions (such as in front of the TV, or while working at the computer).

Focus on improving food quality, bit by bit, rather than overhauling your entire menu. Move along a continuum towards steady improvement, working with the theme of “a little bit better”.

I have included a seasonality vegetable and fruit chart. I challenge you to purchase a vegetable that you have never eaten before, research how to prepare it and do it! Enjoy the challenge of “good local hunting”! You might dig up something wonderful, and support a local farmer too.
To find out what is in season in our area, check out this awesome link: [Seasonal Food Guide](#)

There is no need to have a recipe this month because it is now up to you to find a recipe(s) that will work for you and the new vegetable(s) you are going to try 😊 Have fun!

*(Article inspired by Precision Nutrition Coaching Certification)*