

Dinner Sorted: Build Your Family Meal Plan Around 15 Flexible Base Recipes

A modular system for tired parents who want variety, less waste, and zero dinner panic — without following a rigid plan

For: Burnt-out parents of children under 12 who spend too much mental energy on weeknight dinners, feel guilty about wasted groceries, and have tried meal planning before but abandoned it because locked-in weekly schedules felt like another chore rather than relief

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01

Why Meal Planning Keeps Failing You

Names the real problem — rigid systems — and introduces the modular Base 15 framework as the alternative.

It's 5:02 pm. You've just walked in the door, or closed your last browser tab, or peeled a small person off your leg. Someone is already asking what's for dinner. Your brain, which has been making decisions since roughly 6am, produces nothing useful. So you order pizza again, or throw together something from the freezer, and then feel vaguely guilty about it for the rest of the night.

That cycle isn't a discipline problem. It's a system problem — and the system most meal-planning advice prescribes makes it worse.

The Trouble with Rigid Plans

The classic meal plan goes like this: you sit down on Sunday, assign a recipe to every weeknight, write the shopping list, feel organized, feel proud. By Wednesday, it's collapsed. Tuesday's pasta bake didn't happen because there was a school event. Thursday's fish needs an ingredient you forgot. Friday you're too tired to attempt anything with more than three steps, but the plan says stir-fry.

When life drifts from the plan — and it always does — the plan becomes useless. Worse, the groceries you bought for those specific meals start going off in the fridge. Now you feel guilty about waste *and* still don't know what to cook. Most people quietly abandon the whole thing and conclude that meal planning just isn't for them.

It's not you. It's the format.

What You Actually Need

You don't need 50 new recipes or a color-coded binder. You need a small, reliable set of recipes that already work for your family — ones that can flex around a busy Tuesday, a picky eater phase, or a half-empty fridge without falling apart.

That's the Base 15 idea. **The Base 15 is a personal roster of 15 recipes that your family will reliably eat, that you can cook without consulting a recipe, and that are built to adapt.** Not 15 rigid meals — 15 frameworks. A tray bake that works with whatever protein and vegetables you have. A noodle dish that can go Asian-inspired one week and creamy the next. A grain bowl that rotates through whatever's on sale.

The magic isn't in the number 15 — it's in the modular thinking behind it. Once a recipe is designed (or chosen) to bend, variety stops requiring effort.

What This Guide Does

Each section builds one piece of the system:

- **Section 2** helps you choose your own 15 using a simple set of filters.
- **Section 3** shows you how to multiply those 15 into dozens of distinct meals through deliberate swaps.
- **Section 4** gives you a weekly rhythm that takes 15 minutes, not an afternoon.
- **Section 5** connects your Base 15 to a smart pantry that stops food waste before it starts.
- **Section 6** is a hands-on toolkit — worksheets, templates, lists — to build your actual system this week.

You won't be handed someone else's meal plan. You'll build your own, and it'll fit your real life because you made it.

02

How to Choose Your Personal Core 15

Guides the reader through selecting their own 15 base recipes using a clear, repeatable criteria framework.

What Makes a Recipe 'Base-Worthy'

Not every recipe you love belongs on this list. Your Core 15 has one job: to be the reliable backbone of your weeknight cooking. That means each recipe has to pass four tests before it earns a spot.

- **Fast enough for a Tuesday.** If it takes more than 45 minutes hands-on, it's a weekend recipe, not a base recipe. Be honest here.
- **Accepted by most of the family.** It doesn't need to be everyone's favourite — it just can't cause a standoff at the table. "Most people eat it without complaint" is the bar.
- **Built on affordable staples.** Ingredients you can buy any week without wincing at the receipt. Seasonal produce is fine; expensive specialty items are not.
- **Flexible across seasons.** A recipe that only works with fresh summer corn is a warm-weather guest, not a year-round resident.

The 5-Category Rule

Spread your 15 recipes across five categories — roughly three recipes each — so you get natural variety without thinking too hard. Your five categories don't have to match anyone

else's. A common starting point:

1. Chicken (baked, stir-fried, slow-cooked)
2. Beef or pork
3. Pasta or noodles
4. Plant-based (beans, lentils, eggs, tofu)
5. Sheet-pan or one-pot meals

If your family doesn't eat red meat, swap that category for fish. If you're vegetarian, replace two animal categories with legume-based and grain-based. The point is **deliberate spread**, not a prescribed list.

Start With What You Already Cook

Before you open a cookbook or scroll a recipe site, do this first: grab a piece of paper and write down every dinner you've made in the last month that actually got eaten. These are your candidates. You probably already have eight to ten base-worthy recipes sitting in your head — you just haven't named them as a system yet.

For each candidate, ask one quick question: *Can this recipe flex?* Specifically — can it swap a protein, work with a different sauce, and show up as both a wrap and a bowl on different nights? A simple chicken stir-fry that can swap in tofu, take a peanut sauce or a soy-ginger one, and serve over rice *or* in a flatbread — that's a true base recipe. A dish that only works one way is a single-use slot.

The Trap to Avoid

The biggest mistake people make when building their list is choosing recipes they *want* to be the kind of family that eats, rather than recipes their family will reliably eat. That gorgeous grain bowl stays aspirational if your kids push it away every time. Save it for weekends or adults-only nights. Your Core 15 is not a vision board — it's a working tool.

Your List Will Change — and That's Fine

Think of your Core 15 as a living document, not a permanent contract. You'll swap something out when a new recipe clicks with your family, when a season shifts, or when you finally hit your limit with that one pasta dish you've made forty times. You can update the list whenever you want. The only rule is that at any given moment, all 15 slots are filled with recipes you'd genuinely cook this week.

03

The Flexibility Engine: Variations and Swaps

Teaches the modular logic that turns 15 recipes into dozens of distinct meals through deliberate swapping.

The secret isn't having 15 perfect recipes. It's understanding that each recipe is a template, not a fixed instruction. Once you see it that way, your Base 15 stops being a short list and starts being a kitchen of dozens of meals.

The Three Swap Levers

Every base recipe has three places you can twist it without breaking it:

- **Protein swap** — the cooking method stays the same, the protein changes. A sheet-pan situation with chicken thighs works equally well with salmon fillets, chickpeas, or pork tenderloin.
- **Format swap** — the same filling or flavored protein becomes a bowl, a wrap, a pasta topping, or a baked potato filling. The food doesn't change; the vehicle does.
- **Sauce or seasoning swap** — a neutral base gets a different finishing sauce and it tastes like an entirely different meal. Lime-cumin versus soy-ginger versus a simple garlic-herb butter.

You don't need to pull all three levers at once. Pulling just one is enough to make Tuesday feel nothing like Sunday.

One Base Recipe, Five Dinners

Let's take a basic seasoned chicken — cooked in a pan or oven with salt, pepper, garlic, and olive oil. Deliberately unfussy.

1. **Sunday:** Sliced over rice with roasted broccoli and a garlic-herb drizzle
2. **Monday (leftover lunch):** Chopped into a wrap with whatever salad greens are in the fridge
3. **Tuesday:** Same chicken method but swap to chickpeas — serve in bowls with feta and cucumber over couscous
4. **Wednesday (leftover logic):** Sunday's extra rice becomes a quick fried rice with egg and frozen peas
5. **Thursday:** Back to chicken, but this time finished with a soy-ginger glaze and served over noodles

Same fundamental skill set. Completely different plates.

How Swaps Handle Picky Eaters

Instead of cooking two dinners, put the swap on the table. Keep the base the same — taco-seasoned beef, say — and set out two sauces or toppings. One child gets mild cheese and plain sour cream; the other loads up with salsa and jalapeños. The base did the work; the toppings finished the negotiation.

Rotating Seasonal Produce

You don't swap recipes with the seasons — you swap the vegetables **inside** them. Your sheet-pan base stays. In autumn it's squash and red onion; in spring it's asparagus and cherry tomatoes. The recipe stays on your list all year, and you stay flexible without thinking hard.

Three Bases Can Cover a Full Week

Pick any three from your Base 15 — say, a grain bowl base, a braised protein base, and a stir-fry base. With one protein swap and one format swap each, you have nine distinct meal slots covered before you've even touched the others. That's Monday through Sunday with variety built in, not bolted on.

04

Build Your Modular Meal Planning Rhythm

Shows how to use the Base 15 system to plan a real week in under 15 minutes, without a rigid schedule.

The goal isn't a colour-coded weekly schedule pinned to the fridge. It's a **loose plan you can actually follow**, made in less time than it takes to scroll for ideas.

Your Weekly Check-In (It Takes 10 Minutes, Really)

Pick one moment — Sunday morning, Friday after school, whenever — and do a single short check-in. You're not planning every meal. You're reading the shape of your week.

Ask yourself:

- Which nights are genuinely chaotic? (sport, late meetings, after-school activities)
- Which nights are easy, where you have time to actually cook?
- Are there one or two nights you'll probably eat out or order in?

Once you can see the week's shape, you're ready to plan — and it only takes the next five minutes.

The Anchor and Flex Method

Here's the only structure you need. Look at your two or three hardest nights and assign each one an **anchor meal** — a Base 15 recipe you know is fast, kid-approved, and low-effort. These are locked in. Everything else stays flexible.

For the remaining nights, don't pre-assign meals. Instead, write a short list of three or four Base 15 recipes you're happy to make *at some point this week*. On the day, you pick whichever one fits your mood and what needs using up.

A real example might look like this:

- **Tuesday (football practice):** Noodle stir-fry (20 min)
- **Thursday (late finish):** Sheet-pan sausages and veg (25 min)
- **Flex pool for Mon/Wed/Fri:** Pasta bake, rice bowls, or loaded wraps

That's your whole plan.

Fridge First, Shop Second

Before you write a single item on your shopping list, open the fridge and freezer. You're looking for anything that needs using in the next three days. Then match a Base 15 recipe around what's already there — not the other way around.

This single habit will cut your food waste dramatically. The Base 15 is specifically designed so its recipes share ingredients, meaning half a cabbage or some leftover roast chicken slots naturally into at least two or three options.

The Fast-Night Shortlist

Tag four or five of your Base 15 recipes as **20-minutes-or-less**. These are your activity-night anchors. When Tuesday has two school pickups and a swimming lesson in it, you're not improvising — you're pulling from a list you already trust.

Sharing the Load

Tell your partner or an older child the flex pool at the start of the week. A simple text works:
"This week I'm thinking pasta bake, rice bowls, or wraps — can you handle one night?"

When the plan is a short list rather than a rigid schedule, other people can actually step in without needing a full briefing. That's the difference between a system that sits on your shoulders and one the whole household can carry.

05

The Waste-Busting Ingredient Strategy

Shows how stocking a smart staple pantry around the Base 15 eliminates the food waste that kills motivation.

The Real Villain: The One-Off Recipe

Here's how food waste actually happens. You find a recipe online, buy a bunch of ingredients you don't normally stock — a jar of miso paste, a bunch of fresh tarragon, one small tin of chipotle peppers — use a quarter of each, and then watch the rest quietly die in your fridge over the next two weeks. Multiply that by a few meals a week and you're throwing away real money, plus the motivation that goes with it.

The Base 15 system fixes this at the root. When you cook the same 15 recipes on rotation — with swaps and variations — you stop buying for one-off occasions. Every ingredient you buy has multiple jobs to do.

Build Your Staple Stack

Your **Staple Stack** is the set of pantry, fridge, and freezer items that appear across at least three of your Base 15 recipes. These are the things you keep stocked at all times, so you're never starting from zero.

To build yours, grab your Base 15 list and run through these steps:

1. Write down the key ingredients for each recipe.
2. Circle anything that appears in three or more recipes.
3. Those circled items are your Staple Stack — buy them regularly, in larger quantities.
4. Everything else is a **fresh top-up**: buy it only when that specific recipe is on your week's rotation.

For example, if your Base 15 includes a stir-fry, a fried rice, and a grain bowl, then soy sauce, sesame oil, and garlic are almost certainly Staple Stack items. You'll use them every single week.

One Ingredient, Many Dinners

Batch-prepping a single ingredient can quietly power several nights. A pot of cooked rice on Sunday feeds into fried rice on Monday, a burrito bowl on Wednesday, and a quick soup bulked out on Thursday. Roasted vegetables made in one tray go into pasta one night, a wrap the next, and scrambled eggs the morning after.

Choose **one ingredient per week** to prep in bulk — usually whichever appears most often in that week's planned meals. That's it. You're not doing full batch cooking. Just one thing.

The 'Use It Up' Decision Tree

When you have leftovers or something that needs eating, ask in order:

- **Can it go into tomorrow's Base 15 meal as-is?** (Leftover chicken → tonight's pasta or tomorrow's rice bowl.)
- **Can it be the protein or veg swap in another base recipe?** (Roasted sweet potato → swap into your usual grain bowl.)
- **Can it bulk out a soup or a wrap?** Almost everything can.
- **If none of the above** — use it for lunch, not dinner. Remove it from the dinner equation entirely.

This keeps your Base 15 logic intact without forcing ingredients where they don't fit.

The Compound Payoff

Fewer recipe types means a shorter, more predictable shopping list every single week. You stop over-buying because you know exactly what you'll need. Staple Stack items get used before they expire. Fresh top-ups are small and targeted. Over a month, most families find they spend noticeably less on groceries — not because they're eating worse, but because almost nothing goes in the bin anymore.

06

Your Starter Kit: Worksheets, Templates, and Checklists

A hands-on toolkit the reader completes to launch their own Base 15 system this week.

Everything you've read so far only becomes real when you put pen to paper — or fingers to keyboard. These tools are designed to be filled in, not admired. Work through them in order and you'll have a functioning system by the end of the week.

Base 15 Recipe Roster

Copy this table and fill it in as you confirm each base recipe. The "Swap Notes" column is just a prompt — jot the first substitution that comes to mind.

| # | Recipe Name | Category | Avg. Cook Time | Swap Notes |

|---|-----|-----|-----|-----|

| 1 | | | | |

| 2 | | | | |

(Continue to 15. Categories to choose from: protein-led, pasta/grain, soup/stew, sheet-pan, quick assembly.)

Flexibility Matrix

For each base recipe, fill in at least one option per column. You don't need ten ideas — two or three unlocks real variety.

| Base Recipe | Protein Swap | Format Swap | Sauce/Seasoning Swap |

|-----|-----|-----|-----|

| e.g. Stir-fry | Tofu / prawns | Rice / noodles / lettuce cups | Soy-ginger / peanut / sweet chilli |

Fill in all 15. Even half-complete rows are useful.

Weekly Meal Planning Template: Anchor and Flex

Each week, place two **anchor meals** (known wins, minimal thought) and leave the rest as flex slots.

...

MONDAY [] Anchor / [] Flex — Recipe: _____ Busy night? Y/N

TUESDAY [] Anchor / [] Flex — Recipe: _____ Busy night? Y/N

WEDNESDAY [] Anchor / [] Flex — Recipe: _____ Busy night? Y/N

THURSDAY [] Anchor / [] Flex — Recipe: _____ Busy night? Y/N

FRIDAY [] Anchor / [] Flex — Recipe: _____ Busy night? Y/N

Leftovers in the fridge this week: _____

Ingredient that needs using first: _____

...

Staple Stack Checklist

Tick what you already have. Circle what needs restocking. Add anything specific to your Base 15 at the bottom.

Pantry: tinned tomatoes — dried pasta — rice — lentils — stock cubes — olive oil — soy sauce — canned beans — coconut milk — dried herbs

Fridge: eggs — butter — garlic — onions — hard cheese — plain yoghurt

Freezer: frozen peas — chopped onions — minced meat portion — flatbreads

My additions: _____

Quick-Start Action List: Next 48 Hours

1. Write your Base 15 Roster — even rough names count.
2. Complete the Flexibility Matrix for your top five recipes.
3. Do one anchor-and-flex plan for next week using the template.
4. Check your Staple Stack and restock two gaps.
5. Cook one base recipe tonight and note one swap you could make.

Troubleshooting Q&A

"I can't think of 15 recipes." Start with 8. The system works at any size — it grows as you cook.

"My kids rejected a new swap." Keep the protein familiar, change only the format. Noodles instead of rice is a smaller jump than a new protein.

"I forgot to plan and it's Monday." Open your Roster, pick whatever has the shortest cook time. The list exists exactly for this moment.

"We got bored after week two." Rotate two recipes out and add two new ones. The system is meant to refresh, not stay frozen.

"It still feels like too much to maintain." Drop to a three-day plan. Half a week planned is infinitely better than none.

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