

how to be a kitchen rock star

...and still manage a social life/school life/or any life at all...



tips, strategies, recipes

go ahead, rock it

♥ get even more rock star recipes and tips at: www.melskitchencafe.com ♥

simple ingredients to keep on hand for fast dinners

- Eggs
- Boneless, skinless chicken breasts (can keep in the freezer)
 - Ground turkey or beef (can keep in the freezer)
 - Bread + deli meat + condiments
 - Tortillas
 - Cheese (slices or a block of cheese)
 - Pasta
 - Rice (brown or white)
- Jarred spaghetti sauce (or a can of crushed tomatoes you can easily season with dried basil, oregano, garlic and onion powder)
 - Baby carrots and other vegetables you like to eat (broccoli, cauliflower, celery) + lettuce if you like salads or use it on sandwiches
- Potatoes (regular or sweet; they keep for a long time in a cool, dry spot)
 - Frozen peas and corn (and other vegetables you like)
- A few simple spices (garlic powder, basil, oregano, curry powder, etc.)
 - Canned beans/refried beans
 - Crushed tomatoes, diced tomatoes and tomato paste
 - Chicken broth or bouillon
 - Cream cheese
 - Olive oil

no recipe meals:

-Scrambled eggs or an omelet with ham and vegetables (zucchini, mushrooms, broccoli, etc.)

Go crazy and add a side of whole grain toast.

-Grilled or skillet-cooked chicken breast with steamed broccoli.

Season both the chicken and broccoli well!

-Panini (fancy name for a grilled sandwich). Here's a favorite: bread, deli turkey, sliced green apple (trust me), a little Dijon or regular mustard, and cheddar or swiss cheese.

-Loaded quesadillas: take two tortillas and top one with any leftover chicken or steak (deli meat works great, too), cheese and any vegetables you like (you'd be surprised – almost anything is good on a quesadilla!). Toast in a skillet until golden and heated through.

-Baked potatoes (regular or sweet potatoes). Top with chopped ham, sour cream, cheese, chili + guacamole – get creative!

-Easy chicken parmesan. Sauté chicken (seasoned well with salt and pepper) in a skillet. When cooked through, pour in a cup or two of jarred spaghetti sauce, sprinkle shredded mozzarella over the top and serve over cooked pasta (or by itself!).

-4-ingredient chocolate chip cookie balls: mash together 2 bananas with 1/3 cup peanut butter or so, a pinch of salt (doesn't count on the ingredient list!), 2 1/2 cups quick oats and 1/2 cup mini chocolate chips. Roll into balls. Chill, and try not to eat the whole batch.

-Mason jar salads: pour dressing (1 to 4 tablespoons) in the bottom of a wide-mouth canning jar (pint or quart, depending on how hungry you are), layer in veggies, meat, nuts (options are endless) and stuff greens on top to reach the top of the jar. Put on a lid and refrigerate for up to five days (dreamy!).

♡ get even more rock star recipes and tips at: www.melskitchencafe.com ♡

strategies for grocery shopping

plan a budget before anything else

Set a grocery budget before you go to the store and most importantly, before you plan your menu. If you can't afford steak and shrimp, don't plan it on the menu!

shop with a list

This may be the single most important strategy to save money and keep you on track. If you

plan your meals

You'll spend way less money if you only go to the grocery store once a week (or better yet, once every two weeks!)

plan your meals based on sales

A couple warnings though: don't buy the specials you didn't plan to in the first place (buy 4 get 1 half off may not be the best choice ALL the time!) AND even if something is on sale (like, say, frozen burritos) doesn't mean you need to buy a whole case.

don't go to the grocery store hungry

It's a really bad idea. Trust me. You'll come out having spent your monthly budget on what sounded good at the moment. And tomorrow when you are slightly less ravenous, all that canned chili isn't going to seem so appealing.

avoid fun-size or individually packaged foods

Especially fruits and vegetables and pre-seasoned meats. The grocery store is charging you more for those items but they are simple things you can easily do at home (cutting your own carrots and slapping a marinade on that chicken isn't hard; promise, plus it will save you a bundle).

the only kitchen equipment you really need

Essentials:

10-inch nonstick skillet
One good knife (a mini Santoku or sharp paring knife)
4-quart saucepan/pot
Cutting board
9X13-inch metal pan
Wooden or silicone spoon
Whisk
Flat spatula
Rubber spatula
Medium glass or metal mixing bowl (that is microwave safe)
Measuring cups
Measuring spoons
2-cup liquid measuring cup
Can opener
Cheese grater
Hot pads

Optional (but kind of fun):

Muffin tin
Miniature muffin tin
11X17-inch rimmed baking sheets (because, cookies)
Blender
Tongs (for salad, flipping meat while cooking)
Slow cooker (4- or 5-quart)
Toaster
Electric hand mixer
Serrated knife
Garlic press
Potato masher
Kitchen scale

And about a million other things! ☺

♥ get even more rock star recipes and tips at: www.melskitchencafe.com ♥

a few handy dandy equivalents & measurements

SMALL VOLUME (LIQUID:)

TABLESPOONS	CUPS	FLUID OUNCES
1 tablespoon	3 teaspoons	1/2 fluid ounce
2 tablespoons	1/8 cup	1 fluid ounce
4 tablespoons	1/4 cup	2 fluid ounces
5 tablespoons + 1 teaspoon	1/3 cup	
16 tablespoons	1 cup	8 fluid ounces

LARGE VOLUME (LIQUID):

CUPS	FLUID OUNCES	PINTS/QUARTS/GALLONS
1 cup	8 fluid ounces	1/2 pint
2 cups	16 fluid ounces	1 pint=1/2 quart
3 cups	24 fluid ounces	1 1/2 pints
4 cups	32 fluid ounces	2 pints=1 quart
8 cups	64 fluid ounces	2 quarts=1/2 gallon
16 cups	128 fluid ounces	4 quarts=1 gallon

DRY MEASUREMENTS:

1 cup = 16 tablespoons

1 pound dry = 16 ounces

easy peasy
healthy
fast
delicious
recipes

(plus a few treats at the end for good luck!)

instant pot "baked" ziti

Serves 6-8

Ingredients

2 cups broth, I use low-sodium chicken broth
2 cups cream (see note)
½ teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper
2 cloves garlic, finely minced (or 1/2 teaspoon garlic powder)
16 ounces uncooked ziti pasta or other tube-shaped pasta
15- ounce can crushed tomatoes
1 ½ teaspoons dried oregano
1 ½ teaspoons dried basil
½ to 1 cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese
Fresh basil, for serving (optional)

Directions

1. Lightly spray the bottom and sides of a 6-quart Instant Pot with nonstick cooking spray. Pour in the broth and cream and add the salt, pepper and garlic.
2. Add the pasta; don't stir, but if it's mounded in the center, arrange into an even layer. Pour the crushed tomatoes evenly over the pasta and sprinkle the oregano and basil over the top. Don't stir.
3. Secure the lid of the Instant Pot, set the valve to seal, and select "manual" or "pressure cook" and dial up or down to the minutes needed --> take the cooking time on the pasta package directions, cut it in half and subtract two more minutes. So for pasta that cooks to al dente in 12 minutes, the IP cooking time would be 4 minutes (add an extra minute if you like your pasta super soft).
4. Let the pressure release naturally for 10 minutes and then quick release the remaining pressure.
5. Add the Parmesan cheese and stir thoroughly (it's ok if there are some darker, cooked spots on the bottom of the pot/bottom layer of pasta). Serve the ziti immediately with chopped, fresh basil, and additional Parmesan, if desired.

easy korean beef and rice

Serves 6

Ingredients

1 1/2 pounds ground turkey or ground beef or ground chicken
3 cloves garlic, finely minced or 1 teaspoon garlic powder
Salt and pepper
1/4 cup brown sugar
1/2 cup low-sodium soy sauce
1/4 cup low-sodium chicken or beef broth
1 tablespoon sesame oil
1/2 teaspoon red pepper flakes plus more to taste or 1 teaspoon hot sauce
1/4 teaspoon ground ginger
3 green onions, chopped
Hot, cooked rice or quinoa for serving

Directions

1. Start the rice or quinoa, cooking according to package directions (usually about 15-17 minutes cooking time).
2. While the rice/quinoa cooks, in a large, 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium heat, add the meat, garlic and 1/4 teaspoon salt and pepper. Cook, stirring to break the meat into small pieces, until the meat is cooked through and crumbly, about 7-10 minutes. Drain any excess grease.
3. In a liquid measuring cup or bowl, whisk together the brown sugar, soy sauce, broth, sesame oil, red pepper flakes (or chili-garlic sauce), and ginger.
4. Stir the sauce into the meat and simmer over medium heat for 5 minutes or so.
5. Serve over hot, cooked rice or quinoa, topped with the chopped green onions.

super simple spicy thai noodles

Serves 4-6

Ingredients

1 pound linguine or spaghetti

1-2 tablespoons crushed red pepper flakes

1/2 cup toasted or regular sesame oil

1 tablespoon fresh lime juice or rice vinegar

6 tablespoons honey

6 tablespoons low-sodium soy sauce

Chopped green onions, shredded carrots, chopped peanuts, chopped cilantro for topping

Directions

1. In a small saucepan, heat the sesame oil and red pepper flakes on low heat for 10-15 minutes. Pour the oil through a fine strainer into a liquid measuring cup and discard the pepper flakes. To the warm oil, whisk in the lime juice (or vinegar), honey and soy sauce. Set aside.
2. In a large pot of boiling, salted water, cook the linguine according to package directions. Drain the noodles and return them to the pot or to a large bowl. Toss the noodles with the oil mixture.
3. Serve the noodles warm, room temperature or cold with the desired toppings sprinkled on top.

chicken caesar salad wraps

Makes 4 wraps

Ingredients

- 1/4 cup light or regular mayonnaise
- 1/4 cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice (from about 1 large lemon)
- 1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
- 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
- 1 garlic clove, finely minced or pinch of garlic powder
- 1/4 cup olive oil
- 3 cups cooked, shredded chicken (a rotisserie chicken works great here)
- 1 romaine lettuce heart (about 6 ounces), torn into bite-sized pieces
- 4 (10-inch) whole-grain tortillas or wraps

Directions

1. In a small bowl, whisk together the mayo, Parmesan cheese, lemon juice, Worcestershire sauce, mustard and garlic. Whisk in the olive oil slowly until thoroughly incorporated.
2. In a large bowl, toss the chicken and lettuce with the dressing. Divide the chicken/lettuce mixture evenly among the tortillas or wraps. Roll and secure with a toothpick, if desired. Serve.

smoked turkey cobb wraps

Makes 1 wrap

Ingredients

- 1 tablespoon cream cheese, light or regular
- 1 12-inch tortilla or wrap
- 2 leaves green or romaine lettuce
- 4-5 slices thinly sliced smoked turkey
- 4 thin slices tomato
- 1 large egg, hard-boiled and sliced
- 4 thin slices red onion
- 1/2 avocado, seeded and thinly sliced
- 3 strips cooked bacon, regular or turkey bacon

Directions

Spread the cream cheese evenly over the tortilla. Place the lettuce down the center of the tortilla. Arrange the turkey over the lettuce. Layer the tomato, egg, onion and avocado over the turkey and top with the bacon. Roll up tightly and slice in half diagonally. Serve immediately.

creamy garlic alfredo sauce

Makes about 2 cups of sauce

Ingredients

2 tablespoons butter

3 cloves garlic, finely minced or pressed through a garlic press or 1 teaspoon garlic powder

4 ounces cream cheese, softened and cut into 6 pieces

1 cup milk (1% or higher works best)

3 ounces Parmesan cheese, grated (about 1 cup) – not the stuff in a can

1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper

1/2 teaspoon salt, more to taste, if needed

Directions

In a medium pot or skillet, melt the butter over medium heat. Add the garlic and cook for about 2 minutes, stirring constantly, taking care not to let the garlic burn. Add the cream cheese, stirring with a whisk until the mixture is smooth. It will look curdled at first, but with constant whisking for 2-3 minutes, it should come together to form a smooth, creamy paste. Add the milk gradually, about 1/4 cup at a time, whisking quickly and constantly until each addition is incorporated fully into the sauce. Stir in the Parmesan cheese, pepper and salt. Stir until the cheese is melted and the sauce is the desired consistency. Cook for 2-3 minutes for a thicker sauce or remove right after the cheese is melted for a thinner sauce. Serve immediately over hot, cooked noodles.

crispy southwest chicken wraps

Makes 6 wraps

These wraps freeze great! Let them cool, wrap in plastic wrap or foil and freeze. Then unwrap and microwave when ready to eat.

Ingredients

1 cup cooked rice, warm or at room temperature
1 cup cooked, shredded chicken (or other leftover meat, like shredded pork or beef)
1 can black beans, rinsed and drained
1 green onion, finely sliced (white and green parts)
1/2 red or green pepper, diced
1/4 cup fresh cilantro, chopped
juice of 1 lime
1/2 tablespoon chili powder
1 teaspoon ground cumin
1/2 teaspoon garlic salt
2 cups shredded cheese (I use a combination of Monterey jack and sharp cheddar)
Sour cream (optional)
6 burrito-sized flour tortillas

Directions

1. Mix rice together with chili powder, cumin and garlic salt. Add remaining ingredients except for cheese and sour cream. Sprinkle cheese over tortillas, leaving 1/2-inch border around edges, then arrange chicken and rice mixture down the center of each tortilla. (Optional: I like to dollop a little sour cream over the cheese before arranging chicken and rice mixture down the center. Roll stuffed tortillas, leaving edges open and slightly flatten the wraps with the palm of your hand. Spray seam-side of the wrap lightly with cooking spray.
2. Heat a large non-stick skillet (or griddle) over medium heat for 1 minute. Arrange wraps, seam-side down, in pan or griddle and cook until golden brown and crisp, about 2-3 minutes per side. Cooking them seam-side down first helps seal the long edge so they don't fall apart. Transfer to a plate and repeat with remaining wraps. Serve warm.

skillet taco pasta shells

Serves 6

Ingredients

1 pound ground turkey or beef
1 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon pepper
1 teaspoon onion powder or 1/2 cup finely chopped yellow onion
1 teaspoon garlic powder or 2 cloves garlic, finely minced
14.5-ounce can diced tomatoes
8-ounce can tomato sauce
1/2 cup salsa verde (green salsa or green enchilada sauce)
15-ounce can pinto beans, rinsed and drained
1 teaspoon chili powder
1/2 teaspoon dried oregano
2 1/2 cups medium pasta shells (like [these](#))
1 1/3 cup low-sodium chicken broth
1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
1 teaspoon brown sugar
1 cup shredded sharp cheddar cheese
Fresh cilantro for sprinkling
Sour cream, olives and salsa for serving (optional)

Directions

1. In a large, 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium heat, cook the ground turkey or beef, salt, pepper, onion (or onion powder), and garlic (or garlic powder), stirring every once in a while to break the meat into small pieces. Once the meat is cooked through, drain any excess grease and scrape the meat mixture to a paper towel-lined plate.
2. To the skillet add the diced tomatoes, tomato sauce, salsa verde, pinto beans, chili powder, oregano, pasta shells, chicken broth, Worcestershire sauce and brown sugar.
3. Bring the mixture to a gentle simmer and cook, stirring often to make sure the pasta isn't sticking, until the pasta is tender and most of the liquid has been absorbed, 15-20 minutes.
4. Stir in the cooked ground meat and top with the shredded cheese. Cover the skillet for 1-2 minutes to let the cheese melt. Sprinkle with fresh cilantro. The sauce will thicken as it rests.
5. Serve with sour cream, olives, and salsa, if desired.

quick spaghetti sauce

Serves 4-6

Ingredients

1 pound ground beef, ground turkey, or ground pork (or a combination)
1/2 cup chopped onion
2 cloves garlic, finely minced
2 tablespoons tomato paste
1 teaspoon dried basil
1 teaspoon dried oregano
1/4 teaspoon dried thyme
1/2 teaspoon coarse, kosher salt
1/4 teaspoon black pepper
28-ounce can crushed tomatoes
8-ounce can tomato sauce
1-2 teaspoons brown sugar
1 tablespoon low-sodium soy sauce
Hot, cooked noodles, for serving
Freshly grated Parmesan cheese, for serving (optional)

Directions

1. In a large 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat, cook the ground meat, onion, garlic, and a pinch of salt and pepper, breaking the meat into small pieces as it cooks, until the meat is no longer pink.
2. Drain any excess grease.
3. Stir in the tomato paste, basil, oregano, thyme, salt and pepper. Cook over medium-high heat, stirring constantly, for about a minute, until the mixture smells fragrant.
4. Add the crushed tomatoes, tomato sauce, brown sugar and soy sauce. Stir to combine.
5. Bring the sauce to a simmer and cook for 5-10 minutes (or as long as you like/need).
6. Serve over hot, cooked noodles.

one pot creamy tuna and shells

Serves 6

Ingredients

1 teaspoon oil
2 garlic cloves, finely minced or 1/2 teaspoon garlic powder
1 cup milk
2 cups water
2 1/4 cups low-sodium chicken broth
16 ounces pasta shells
1 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon pepper
2 tablespoons milk or heavy cream
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
2 5-ounce cans white albacore tuna, drained
Salt and pepper to taste
Fresh parsley, chopped
Lemon wedges, for serving

Directions

1. In a 4- or 5-quart pot, heat the oil over medium heat and sauté the shallot (or onion) and garlic for 2-3 minutes.
2. Stir in the milk, water, broth, shells, salt and pepper. Bring to a simmer, and cook, uncovered, stirring often (at a simmer, not a rigorous boil) until the pasta is al dente, according to package directions (the pasta will continue to cook a bit over the next few minutes so don't overcook it in this step). Each brand of pasta will differ slightly; depending on the brand, you may need to add a bit more liquid toward the end of cooking time but do so gradually so it isn't too soupy. There should be a bit of liquid left even after the shells are just tender. They'll continue to soften up and the liquid will be absorbed as other ingredients are stirred in and as it rests.
3. Stir in the milk or heavy cream, mustard, and lemon juice. Add the tuna and mix gently until combined. Stir in additional salt and pepper to taste, if needed. Let the pasta rest for 5-10 minutes - it will thicken up and get nice and creamy.
4. Sprinkle with parsley and serve with extra lemon wedges - it is delicious with lemon juice drizzled over the top of individual servings.

chicken curry in a hurry

Serves 4

Ingredients

1 teaspoon oil
1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger or 1/2 teaspoon ground ginger
2 cloves garlic, finely minced or pressed or 1/2 teaspoon garlic powder
2 teaspoons curry powder
1/2 teaspoon ground coriander (leave out if you don't have it)
1/4 teaspoon ground cumin
1 pound boneless, skinless chicken breasts or thighs, cut into bite-sized pieces
1 can (13.6 ounce) light coconut milk
1/2 tablespoon light brown sugar
1/2 tablespoon fish sauce (leave out if you don't have it)
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon black pepper
1 tablespoon cornstarch (optional)
1/4 - 1/2 cup chopped cilantro
Hot, cooked rice or quinoa for serving

Directions

1. In a large, 12-inch nonstick skillet, heat the oil over medium heat until hot. Add the ginger and garlic and cook, stirring constantly, for about 30 seconds, until it starts to smell fragrant.
2. Sprinkle in the curry powder, coriander and cumin. Cook for another 30 seconds, stirring to prevent burning.
3. Add the chicken and cook until lightly browned, 2-3 minutes (it doesn't need to be cooked all the way through quite yet).
4. Stir in the coconut milk, brown sugar, fish sauce, salt and pepper. Bring the mixture to a simmer. Cook for 4-5 minutes until the chicken is cooked through.
5. If you would like the sauce a bit thicker, whisk together the cornstarch with 2 tablespoons cold water in a small bowl. Once combined, stir the mixture into the simmering curry. Simmer, stirring constantly, for a minute or so until the sauce thickens a bit.
6. Stir in the cilantro. Season with additional salt and pepper to taste, if needed. Serve the curry over hot, cooked rice, quinoa or whatever else you might like (or it can be served on its own).

mexican haystacks

Serves 6

This recipe can easily be cut in half!

Ingredients

1 pound ground beef or ground turkey
1 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon black pepper
1/2 teaspoon paprika or smoked paprika
1 tablespoon chili powder
1 1/2 teaspoons cumin
1/2 teaspoon onion powder
1/2 teaspoon dried oregano
1/4 teaspoon garlic powder
1/4 cup all-purpose flour
2 cups low-sodium beef broth (if using regular broth, cut down the salt in the recipe)
8-ounce can tomato sauce
15-ounce can black beans, rinsed and drained
1 cup frozen corn kernels (no need to thaw)
Lime wedges, for serving (optional)
Hot, cooked rice or quinoa for serving
Taco toppings: lettuce, sour cream, cheese, olives, etc

Directions

1. In a large 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium heat, add the ground beef or turkey, salt and pepper, and cook, breaking the meat into small pieces, until cooked through. Drain excess grease, if needed.
2. Stir in the paprika, chili powder, cumin, onion powder, oregano, garlic powder and flour. The mixture will be crumbly. Cook for 1-2 minutes, stirring constantly, until the meat and spices are fragrant and sizzling.
3. Whisking quickly and constantly, slowly add the beef broth and tomato sauce about 1/2 cup at a time, letting the mixture thicken and bubble between additions before adding more.
4. Stir in the back beans and corn. Bring the mixture to a simmer and cook 5-7 minutes until thickened.
5. Serve the sauce over rice (or quinoa) with lime wedges and taco toppings of your choice.

♥ *get even more rock star recipes and tips at: www.melskitchencafe.com* ♥

french bread pizza

Serves 4-6

Ingredients

1 loaf (about 12-inches) french bread

1 tablespoon olive oil

Garlic powder, for sprinkling

1/2 cup grated Parmesan cheese, more or less

1-2 cups pizza sauce

Pizza toppings of choice: mozzarella cheese, pepperoni, etc.

Directions

1. Preheat the oven to 425 degrees F.
2. Slice the french bread in half the long way, forming two long halves (like a hot dog bun but don't keep them attached). Lightly press on the bread with the palms of your hands or with the bottom of a flat baking sheet until the bread is compressed to about half of what it was (generally about 1/2-inch or so thick, but like I mentioned in my post, homemade french bread doesn't flatten quite as well in my experience).
3. Drizzle the olive oil on both halves, about 1/2 tablespoon for each half, and brush lightly into the dough. Sprinkle with just a touch of garlic powder.
4. Sprinkle half of the Parmesan cheese across each loaf. Place the loaves of bread on an aluminum-foil lined baking sheet and bake for 3-5 minutes, until the Parmesan cheese is just barely starting to turn golden and has hardened a bit to the touch. Take care not to burn the Parmesan!
5. Spread pizza sauce on top of the Parmesan-crusting loaves and top with pizza toppings of your choice. I usually go with about 1 cup of mozzarella cheese for each half and throw on some pepperoni and olives but the sky is definitely the limit here!
6. Bake the pizzas for 8-10 minutes until the cheese is bubbly and the edges of the bread are starting to crisp up and turn golden.
7. Using a serrated knife, cut into pieces and serve immediately.

delicious ground beef or turkey stroganoff

Serves 4-6

Ingredients

- 1 1/2 pounds lean ground beef or turkey
- 1 small onion, chopped (about 1/2 cup)
- 1 clove garlic, finely minced or 1/4 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon pepper
- 8 ounces sliced white button mushrooms
- 4 ounces light cream cheese, cubed
- 2 cups low-sodium beef broth
- 1/2 cup lowfat milk
- 3 tablespoons flour
- 1/2 cup light sour cream
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Cooked egg noodles or rice for serving

Directions

1. In a large nonstick skillet, cook the meat, onion, garlic, salt and pepper, on medium-high heat, stirring occasionally to break up the meat into small pieces, until the meat is almost cooked through but still slightly pink, about 5 minutes. Drain excess grease. Add sliced mushrooms and cook until the mushrooms are soft and browned and the meat is cooked through, another 5 minutes or so.
2. Add the cubed cream cheese and let the cream cheese melt over medium heat, about 2-3 minutes, before stirring in. Mix gently until the cream cheese is incorporated throughout the meat mixture. In a large liquid measuring cup, combine the beef broth and milk. Whisk in the flour until the mixture is smooth and there are no lumps of flour remaining.
3. Stir the beef broth/milk mixture into the meat and cook over medium or medium-high heat, stirring occasionally. Let the mixture bubble and simmer until slightly thickened, 3-4 minutes. Stir in the sour cream and add additional salt and pepper to taste. Serve over cooked egg noodles or hot, cooked rice. Sprinkle each serving with fresh parsley, if desired.

pasta al forno: simple baked pasta with tomatoes and cheese mozzarella}

Serves 6

Ingredients

- 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 garlic cloves, finely minced or 1/2 teaspoon garlic powder
- 2 (14-ounces each) cans diced tomatoes
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1 teaspoon dried basil
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 teaspoon black pepper
- 1 pound penne pasta or other tube-shaped pasta
- 8 ounces mozzarella cheese, cut into small cubes
- 2/3 cup shredded Parmesan cheese

Directions

1. In a large pot of lightly salted water, cook the pasta until al dente according to package directions. While the pasta is cooking, in a 10- or 12-inch nonstick skillet, heat the olive oil over medium heat. Add the garlic and cook, stirring constantly, for one minute, until the garlic is fragrant. Add the tomatoes (undrained), oregano, basil, salt and pepper. Simmer for 10-15 minutes, stirring occasionally, until the mixture is slightly thickened. Add additional salt and pepper to taste, if needed.
2. After draining the pasta, return the noodles to the pot and pour in the sauce. Toss to combine. Lightly coat a 9X13-inch baking pan with cooking spray. Place half of the pasta in the dish. Sprinkle half of the Parmesan and half of the mozzarella cubes over the top. Top with remaining pasta. Sprinkle remaining cheeses over the top. Bake at 400 degrees F for 15 minutes until hot and bubbly.

creamy fettuccine with ham and peas

Serves 4-6

Ingredients

- 1 pound dry fettuccine noodles
- 2 cups frozen peas
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 2 garlic cloves, finely minced or 1/2 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 1/2 cups lowfat milk (not skim)
- 1 (8-ounce) light or regular cream cheese, cubed
- 8 ounces thinly sliced deli ham
- 1/3 cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese

Directions

1. In a large pot, boil the fettuccine according to package directions. Add the peas during the last 3 minutes of cooking. Drain the pasta and peas in a colander and set aside.
2. While the pasta is boiling, in a large 12-inch skillet or a medium saucepan, melt the butter over medium heat. Add the garlic and cook for 1 minute, stirring constantly. Stir in the cubed cream cheese, whisking or stirring until it is well combined with the butter and garlic and the mixture is relatively smooth. Slowly whisk in the milk and continue stirring and cooking until the mixture is bubbly and hot, 1-2 minutes. Remove the skillet or pot from the heat and stir in the ham and Parmesan cheese.
3. Return the pasta and peas to the large pot they cooked in and pour in the sauce. Toss to combine. Sprinkle with black pepper, if desired. Serve immediately.

skillet honey garlic chicken

Serves 6-ish

Ingredients

2 pounds boneless, skinless chicken breasts, cubed
Salt and pepper
3/4 cup low-sodium chicken broth
6 garlic cloves, finely minced or pressed through a garlic press
2 tablespoons honey
2 tablespoons soy sauce
1 teaspoon cornstarch
Pinch red pepper flakes
1 tablespoon olive oil
Hot, cooked rice or quinoa

Directions

1. Lightly season the chicken pieces with salt and pepper.
2. Whisk together the broth, garlic, honey, soy sauce, cornstarch, and red pepper flakes. Set aside.
3. In a large, nonstick 12-inch skillet, heat the olive oil over medium heat until hot and rippling.
4. Add the chicken in a single layer and cook, without stirring, for a minute or two until the chicken starts to turn golden on the side in contact with the hot skillet. Flip the chicken pieces.
5. Whisk the sauce to recombine and stir it into the skillet; bring the mixture to a simmer.
6. Cook for 2-3 minutes until the sauce has thickened slightly and the chicken is cooked through.
7. Serve over hot, cooked rice or quinoa.

simple orange chicken with broccoli

Serves 4

Ingredients

1 tablespoon canola oil
1 tablespoon minced or grated fresh ginger or 1/4 teaspoon ground ginger
2 garlic cloves, finely minced or 1/2 teaspoon garlic powder
1 pound boneless, skinless chicken breasts, cut into 1/2-inch strips
Salt and pepper
2 cups fresh broccoli florets
1/4 cup water
1/2 cup low-sodium chicken broth
1/4 cup orange juice
3 tablespoons low-sodium soy sauce
1 teaspoon sugar
1-2 teaspoons freshly grated orange zest
2 teaspoons cornstarch, dissolved in 1 tablespoon water

Directions

1. In a medium nonstick skillet, heat the oil over medium heat. Add the ginger and garlic, stirring constantly, until fragrant, about 1 minute. Season the chicken with salt and pepper and add to the skillet. Saute until cooked through, about 5-6 minutes. Transfer the chicken to a plate and set aside.
2. In the same skillet, combine the broccoli florets and the water, stirring to scrape up any browned bits on the bottom of the pan. Cover the skillet and cook until the broccoli is crisp-tender, about 2 minutes.
3. Return the chicken to the pan and stir in the broth, orange juice, soy sauce, sugar and orange zest. Add the dissolved cornstarch mixture and cook, stirring frequently, until the sauce boils and thickens slightly. Serve over hot, cooked brown or white rice.

cashew chicken lettuce wraps

Serves 6-8

Ingredients

1 tablespoon olive oil
1/2 cup finely diced yellow or white onion
1 cup finely diced (or shredded) carrots
3-4 cloves garlic, finely minced or pressed through a garlic press
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon black pepper
1 pound boneless, skinless chicken breasts or chicken thighs, cut into small pieces
3 tablespoons low-sodium soy sauce
2 tablespoons pure maple syrup
1/2 cup chopped raw cashews (lightly toasted, if desired)
Bibb or green leaf lettuce leaves for wrapping
Chopped cucumbers and tomatoes for serving

Directions

1. In a large 12-inch nonstick skillet, heat the oil over medium heat and add the onion and carrots. Add the garlic, salt and pepper and cook for 2-3 minutes, until the vegetables start to soften.
2. Season the chicken pieces lightly with salt and pepper and add to the skillet with the onions and carrots. Cook, stirring often, until the chicken pieces are cooked through, 4-5 minutes.
3. Stir in the soy sauce and maple syrup and cook over medium heat for 2-3 minutes, letting the soy sauce and maple syrup bubble and simmer.
4. Stir in the cashews, cooking until they are just heated through. Season to taste with additional salt and pepper, if needed.
5. Serve in lettuce leaves topped with tomatoes and cucumbers (the freshness adds a delicious element to the flavors!).

crispy beef and bean wraps

Serves 6

Ingredients

Filling:

1 pound lean ground beef
½ cup diced onion
16-ounce can refried beans
4-ounce can green chiles, drained
1 teaspoon garlic powder
1 teaspoon chili powder
1 teaspoon ground cumin

½ teaspoon paprika

½ teaspoon salt

Wraps:

2 to 3 cups Mexican-style shredded cheese

8 to 10 8- or 10-inch tortillas

Cooking spray or olive oil, for brushing

Directions

1. In a skillet set over medium heat, cook the ground beef and onion until the meat is no longer pink, 3 to 4 minutes. Drain excess grease.
2. In a medium bowl, stir together the refried beans, green chiles, garlic powder, chili powder, cumin, paprika and salt. Add the ground beef and onions and stir to combine evenly.
3. For each wrap, sprinkle about 1/4 cup cheese over the tortilla then spread about 1/2 cup filling down the center in a wide strip.
4. Fold one side of the tortilla over the filling, followed by the other side (so that the tortilla is folded into thirds). Press lightly to flatten. It should be thick and flat, not rounded like a burrito.
5. Heat a skillet over medium heat. Spray **the seam side** of the wraps with nonstick cooking spray (or brush with a bit of olive oil). Place the wraps, **seam side down**, on the griddle or pan and cook until golden brown and crisp, about 2-4 minutes.
6. While they cook, spray the top with nonstick cooking spray (or brush with olive oil) and carefully flip with a wide spatula and press down lightly to flatten just a bit.
7. Cook for another 2-4 minutes until golden and the filling is hot and cheesy melted.
8. Serve warm with sour cream, salsa, or other toppings of your choice!

skillet creamy macaroni and cheese

Serves 4-6

This mac and cheese will be WAY creamier if you shred the cheese yourself (instead of buying it preshredded).

Ingredients

3 1/2 cups water, plus extra if needed
1 (12-ounce) can evaporated milk
12 ounces (about 3 cups) elbow macaroni
1/2 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon cornstarch
1/2 teaspoon dry mustard
1/4 teaspoon hot sauce
6 ounces cheddar cheese, shredded (1 1/2 cups)
6 ounces Monterey Jack cheese, shredded (1 1/2 cups)
2 tablespoons butter, cut into small chunks
Ground black pepper to taste

Directions

1. Bring 3 1/2 cups water, 1 cup of the evaporated milk, the macaroni, and 1/2 teaspoon salt to a simmer in a 12-inch nonstick skillet over high heat. Cook at a vigorous simmer, stirring often, until the macaroni is tender and the liquid has thickened, 9 to 12 minutes.
2. Whisk the remaining 1/2 cup evaporated milk, the cornstarch, mustard and hot sauce together in a small bowl, then stir into the skillet. Continue to simmer slightly thickened, about 1 minute.
3. Off the heat, stir in the cheddar and Monterey Jack, one handful at a time, adding water as needed to adjust the consistency of the sauce (I didn't need any additional water when I made it). Stir in the butter and season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve immediately.

creamy white chili

Serves 6

Ingredients

- 1 pound boneless, skinless chicken breasts, cut into 1/2-inch cubes
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 1 1/2 teaspoons garlic powder or 2 cloves fresh garlic, finely minced
- 1 tablespoon oil
- 2 cans (15 1/2 ounces each) Great Northern Beans, rinsed and drained
- 1 can (14 1/2 ounces) chicken broth
- 2 cans (4 ounces each) chopped green chilies (if you like less kick, add just one can)
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1/2 teaspoon pepper
- 1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 1 cup sour cream
- 1/2 cup whipping cream or half-and-half
- Fresh cilantro, for garnish (optional)

Directions

1. In a large saucepan, saute chicken, onion and garlic powder (or fresh garlic, if using) in oil until chicken is no longer pink. Add beans, broth, chilies and seasonings. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat; simmer, uncovered, for 30 minutes. Remove from the heat; stir in sour cream and cream. Garnish with fresh cilantro, if desired. Serve immediately. This is especially good served with tortilla chips.
2. Slow Cooker Option: In a medium round slow cooker, place 1 pound chicken breasts (fresh or frozen) without cubing them. Add the chopped onion, garlic powder, beans, green chiles and all of the spices. Do not add the sour cream or whipping cream yet! Reduce the chicken broth to 12 ounces (about 1 1/2 cups) and pour in over the other ingredients. Stir the mixture around a bit to incorporate the dry spices. Cook on low for 5-7 hours (if using frozen chicken you'll cook on the longer end of that spectrum, fresh chicken will cook in less time). Remove the chicken to a cutting board and shred in bite-size pieces. Stir back into the slow cooker. In a small bowl or liquid measuring cup, whisk together the sour cream and whipping cream until smooth. Whisk the cream mixture into the crockpot with the other ingredients. Let the soup cook until heated through. Serve.

the best sloppy joes

Serves 4-6

Ingredients

2 tablespoons vegetable oil
2 onions, roughly chopped
2 ½ pounds ground beef or lean ground turkey
2 tablespoons tomato paste
2/3 cup smoky BBQ sauce
1/2 cup ketchup
1/4 cup Worcestershire sauce
1/4 cup soy sauce
Freshly ground black pepper
8 to 12 rolls or buns

Directions

1. Preheat oven to 300 degrees.
2. Heat the oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Add the onions and cook, stirring, until they start to turn translucent, about 4 minutes. Add the beef and cook, stirring and breaking up the meat, until it is finely crumbled, the liquid boils off and the meat begins to brown, about 10 minutes. Drain the grease off the meat and onions. Stir in the tomato paste, and keep stirring until the meat is coated. Add the BBQ sauce, ketchup, Worcestershire, soy sauce, and pepper, and bring to a boil. Cook until the sauce is slightly thickened, 4 to 5 minutes. You can make the sloppy joe meat up to 2 days in advance and reheat it over low heat or in the microwave.
3. Wrap the rolls in aluminum foil and warm in the oven for about 10 minutes. Serve the sloppy joes hot with the warmed rolls.

honey lime fruit salad

Serves 4-6

Ingredients

- 1 (20-ounce) can pineapple chunks, drained well, or about 1 1/2 to 2 cups chopped fresh pineapple
- 1 (15-ounce) can mandarin oranges, drained well
- 2 to 3 ripe kiwi fruit, peeled and chopped into bite-size pieces
- 1 cup green grapes, halved
- 1 cup strawberries, quartered
- Zest from one lime, about 1/2 tablespoon
- 1 to 2 tablespoons honey
- 1/2 to 1 teaspoon poppy seeds (optional)

Directions

1. Combine the fruit in a serving bowl. Add the lime zest and toss.
2. Drizzle the honey over the fruit and gently mix until the fruit is evenly coated. Sprinkle the poppy seeds on top and toss to combine.
3. Serve immediately or within an hour.

no-bake granola bites

Makes about 30 bites

Ingredients

- 2 cups quick oats
- 1 cup crispy rice cereal (like Rice Krispies)
- 1 cup creamy peanut butter
- 1 cup ground flaxseed
- 1 cup mini chocolate chips
- 2/3 cup honey or agave nectar
- 2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract
- 2 tablespoons coconut oil

Directions

1. Combine all the ingredients together in a large bowl, mixing gently so the crispy rice cereal doesn't get crushed. Mix until well-combined.
2. Using a cookie scoop (or roll small amounts in your hands), drop rounded tablespoonful-sized portions onto a parchment or wax paper lined cooking sheet. I used my cookie scoop and then rolled the scooped portion out between my palms.
3. Refrigerate for 1-2 hours. At this point you can serve them or combine the chilled granola bites in a large tupperware-type container or ziploc bags to freeze or refrigerate. They will stay fresh in the refrigerator for up to a week or for a few months in the freezer.

oatmeal peanut butter chocolate chip bars

Makes a 9X13-inch pan of bars

Ingredients

- 1 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
- 3/4 teaspoon baking soda
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1 cup rolled oats
- 1/2 cup (8 tablespoons) butter, softened
- 1/3 cup peanut butter, creamy or crunchy
- 1/2 cup granulated sugar
- 1/2 cup lightly packed light brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 large egg
- 1 large egg yolk
- 1 cup peanut butter chips
- 1 cup chocolate chips, semisweet, bittersweet or milk

Directions

1. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F. Lightly grease a 9X13-inch baking pan and set aside.
2. In a medium bowl, whisk together the flour, baking soda, salt and oats.
3. In a large bowl (or in the bowl of an electric stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment), cream together the butter, peanut butter, granulated and brown sugars until light and well-mixed, 2-3 minutes. Mix in the vanilla, egg and egg yolk until combined.
4. Stir in the dry ingredients, chocolate chips and peanut butter chips and mix until combined.
5. Press the batter into the prepared pan. Bake for 18-20 minutes until lightly browned on the edges. Don't overbake or the bars will be dry! Remove the pan to a cooling rack and let the bars cool in the pan before cutting into squares.

super soft chocolate chip cookies

Makes about 3 dozen cookies

Ingredients

2 sticks (16 tablespoons, 8 ounces) butter, softened
3/4 cup (5.25 ounces) packed light brown sugar
3/4 cup (5.25 ounces) granulated sugar
2 large eggs
2 teaspoons vanilla extract
3 cups (15 ounces) flour
1 teaspoon baking soda
1 teaspoon baking powder
1/2 teaspoon salt
2 cups (12 ounces) chocolate chips

Directions

1. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F. Line baking sheets with parchment paper or lightly grease with cooking spray.
2. In a large bowl or in the bowl of an electric stand mixer, cream together the butter, brown sugar, granulated sugar, eggs, and vanilla until light and fluffy, 2-3 minutes. Add the flour, baking soda, baking powder, salt and chocolate chips. Mix until combined.
3. Roll into balls and drop onto the prepared baking sheets.
4. Bake for 10-11 minutes until the edges are just set and the middles are still light and fluffy. Let the cookies rest on the baking sheets for 3-4 minutes before removing to a wire rack to cool completely.

mini banana chocolate chip muffins

Makes 48 mini muffins

This makes a lot...but remember, they're mini-size! And they freeze great.

Ingredients

2 ¼ cups (320 g) white whole wheat flour or all-purpose flour (or a combination)
1 teaspoon baking powder
½ teaspoon baking soda
½ teaspoon salt
1 cup (242 g) milk or buttermilk
½ cup honey (166 g) or granulated sugar (106 g)
1 large egg
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1 to 1 ¼ cups (236 to 295 g) mashed ripe bananas (about 3 medium bananas)
6 tablespoons (85 g) butter, melted
¾ cup (128 g) mini chocolate chips

Directions

1. Preheat the oven to 375 degrees F. Lightly grease two 24-cup mini muffin pans (if you only have one tin, cook in two batches).
2. In a medium bowl, whisk together the flour, baking powder, baking soda, and salt.
3. In a small bowl or liquid measuring cup, whisk together the milk or buttermilk, honey or sugar, egg and vanilla until well-combined.
4. To the dry ingredients, add the milk mixture, mashed bananas, and butter.
5. Mix with a silicone spatula until a few dry streaks remain.
6. Add the chocolate chips and mix until just combined. Don't over mix.
7. Fill the mini muffin pan(s) ¾ full with batter. Bake for 10-15 minutes until the tops spring back lightly to the touch. Let cool for 2-3 minutes before removing to a wire rack to cool completely.