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Meals with Meaning

Cooperative Extension Service
Michigan State University



The Gist of It All

Meals with Meaning

- meet nutritive needs
- bring satisfaction and enjoyment
- fit your budget for food
- may be prepared and served with relative ease

This publication may be used as a companion piece to CE-26, "NUTRITION FOR YOU", which discusses some fundamentals of human nutrition with suggestions for meeting the daily requirements of members of your family.

Meals with Meaning

BY ANITA DEAN

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Plan Appealing Satisfying Meals

WHY ARE SOME MEALS MORE APPEALING than others? What makes a meal distinctive?

Satisfying meals do more than nourish the body—they appeal to our senses. Eye appeal of food frequently influences our acceptance of a food. A glance is enough to judge color, texture, consistency and design. Unappetizing looking and tasting food may be rejected no matter how nourishing.

Food preferences vary considerably. To fully understand why people eat as they do, we must recognize that each person is the product of his own background. This background is composed of customs which stem from national, regional and, in some cases, religious sources.

To these customs are added the attitudes toward food and mealtime of the individual family. As he grows older, the attitudes of others with whom he comes in contact help to determine his tastes and philosophy about food.

Each person's eating pattern is the result of the manner in which he has combined and modified all these influences.

In addition, each person, without being aware of it, is constantly rearranging his food habits in keeping with current social and economic trends and technical progress.

No Need for Monotony

Monotonous combinations of food can be avoided by planning for variety in flavor, color, texture, method of preparation and form or shape of food. The secret of successful combinations lies in skillful use of contrast. When you plan meals, try to picture the plate or platter of food as it will look to your family or guests. Can you anticipate how it is going to taste? Do the flavors go together well? Is it too dry or too much the same in texture?

Skillful Use of Contrast

FLAVOR . . . *strong . . . mild . . . distinct*

- Avoid several strong or distinctly flavored foods in the same meal. Make certain that the ones you want appreciated are not masked by strong flavors.
- Some flavors enhance one another.
- A meal made up entirely of mild flavored foods lacks zest.
- Don't repeat flavors of foods in same meal.

TASTE . . . *bitter . . . salt . . . sour . . . sweet*

- Looks are not everything. Food must taste good too.
- A meal pleases most when all taste sensations are felt.

TEXTURE . . . *hard or soft . . . moist or dry . . . crisp or wilted . . . smooth or lumpy*

- Some textures such as smoothness, crispness, and moisture are pleasant. Others such as lumpiness, dryness, and stringiness, are not.
- You can see and feel textures.
- Provide an assortment of textures in each meal.

COLOR . . . *lemon yellow . . . bright orange . . . pumpkin . . . sage green*

- Food itself can be beautiful. Dress designers and cosmetic manufacturers often borrow food colors to popularize new fashions. The color of ripe tomato, pepper, or melon; the structure of an onion or a grapefruit; the varied textures of an avocado, a peach, or a coconut add to this beauty.
- The psychological effect of a colorful combination of foods makes meals more appetizing.
- Use your knowledge of color when combining and serving food. Avoid the monotony of foods of all one color. Scrambled eggs will be less appealing when served with corn than with a few slices of tomato. A dish of cauliflower requires an accent which may be provided by combining with a more colorful vegetable such as green beans or a suitable garnish.
- Most foods are attractive in their own natural color . . . a bowl of fresh strawberries . . . bright green peas . . . tomato wedges. Vegetables must be

properly cooked if they are to retain their natural colors. Artificial coloring should seldom be attempted and then only with great care. A suggestion of color is more effective than an intense color. Avoid serving food of unnatural colors. Colorful effect can be achieved by adding chopped parsley, pickle, mint, chopped cherries and cherry juice. Sometimes it is necessary to add a few drops of red coloring to canned tart cherries to make them look more natural.

—Choose dishes and tablemats or linen to complement the food you serve. A frosty white dessert will look more appealing when served on a colorful plate which offers contrast. The color and style of the centerpiece should harmonize with the food and table service.

FORM OR SHAPE . . . *round . . . diced . . . slices . . . wedges . . . strips*

—A meal made up of foods in similar forms is likely to be uninteresting. Shapes and sizes of individual pieces of foods should differ.

—Food should look like what it is. What is the point of making a tomato look like a rose? (You would never think of trying to make a rose look like a tomato.) A cake should look like a cake and not a football or a house. The only possible exception would be foods prepared for a child's party.

—Food should not lose its identity. Vegetables in stew should be colorful, attractive, and easily identified.

—Vary the shapes of vegetables, especially those served frequently. Carrots can be cut in circles, strips, chunks, diagonals, halves, or left whole.

—Section citrus fruits into whole firm wedges. Slice fruits along their natural contours so they look like what they are.

—Limit the number of mixed dishes in a meal. Avoid serving a combination such as beef stew with a mixed vegetable salad.

METHOD OF PREPARATION . . . *boiled . . . creamed . . . fried . . . sautéed*

—Vary the method of preparation to add interest. Too many fried foods as well as repetition of other methods may be monotonous.

TEMPERATURE . . . *pipng hot . . . chilled*

—Serve hot foods piping hot and cold foods well chilled, for maximum appeal. This is seldom achieved. To accomplish, heat or chill serving dishes and plates as needed. Some foods are best when served at room temperature.

—Generally include both hot and cold foods in one meal.

A meal offering some contrast in tastes, a pleasing combination of flavors, some difference in textures, and a contrast in temperature will be sure to please. It should also provide the kinds and amounts of food

to stave off hunger pangs until the next regular meal. Meals containing adequate amounts of protein and fat will be more satisfying than those composed entirely of carbohydrate.

TO HELP YOU IN PLANNING

1. Choose your main dish first. This provides a focal point for the meal.
2. Plan the rest of the menu around this main dish. Other dishes should be subordinate to or complement the main dish.
3. To avoid repeating of flavors, plan appetizers, salads and desserts simultaneously.
4. Select dessert in relation to the main course . . . a light dessert with a rich filling main course. Serve the rich dessert with a lighter main course.

Helps for Busy Homemakers

Women today combine homemaking successfully with numerous outside activities. Many work outside their homes. Others devote hours to community or charitable work, study, or other satisfying leisure activities. No longer must they devote a large percentage of their day to activities concerned with feeding their family. Other members of the family, including the men and boys, participate in meal planning, marketing, cooking, and serving.

HELPS ON PLANNING MEALS

Suggestions and colorful pictures of food are everywhere . . . recipes appear on packages, in cook books, in leaflets from commercial companies, in food columns of magazines and newspapers, on television and radio.

Chances are good that you have a kitchen drawer packed with clippings of recipes and pictures of food.

Why not organize them in a recipe file or notebook? Limit the recipes in it to those which you have personally tested. Actually you may have two files . . . a tentative one for suggestions and another "permanent working file." Keep only your tried and true recipes that are family favorites in the permanent file.

"Ready-made" menus clipped from magazines and newspapers may not be too helpful. Frequently you discard them because they include foods not well liked by your family, or foods which are too fussy, rich, or expensive to prepare.

Since you need to adapt menus to your family's needs and tastes, why not devise your own "mealtime memo"? These ideas will be handy for quick reference on a particularly busy day when you can't seem to think of a thing to prepare. They will be easier to use if you organize them . . . meats according to variety, vegetables by color or food value, and salads by type.

Desserts are less of a problem since it is easy to think of favorite pies, cakes, puddings, cobblers, and cookies.

Still, it might be challenging to develop a list of light desserts which spare calories and satisfy the family's appetite for sweets. If suppers or luncheons are a problem, ask your family to help you list the main dishes which they especially enjoy. Such a list may remind you of a favorite food that you have somehow overlooked.

PLANNING AHEAD—PROS AND CONS

Probably few family meals are planned very far in advance—at least on paper. Some homemakers feel it's easier to plan day by day or meal by meal. Besides, they say, "I like shopping for food." Planning your meals ahead can still offer these satisfactions plus more. Homemakers who do plan ahead in varying units of time know the advantages of such planning. A meal planned is a meal half-ready.

What are the advantages of planning meals ahead?

1. Better chance of serving more interesting, varied, balanced meals.
2. Better use of your time in:

Planning

- One planning session can take care of decisions for several meals.
- At the same time you can make out your shopping list for these meals.

Shopping

- Fewer trips to the supermarket.

Preparing meals

- You can use your equipment more efficiently . . . preparing whole meals in a skillet, broiler, or oven.
- More efficient use of equipment results in lower fuel costs.
- You can dovetail different jobs—cooking in advance and sometimes preparing dishes for two meals or more at the same time.

3. Better use of your money—actual savings, or more food per dollar.
- Fewer shopping trips mean less "impulse buying."

- Fewer costly last minute purchases (chops, steaks, ready-to-eat dishes, bakery products.)
- More inexpensive meats requiring slower cooking.
- Leftovers become "planned overs."
- Greater use of certain economical home produced foods.

Planning means more than writing down menus for a period of time. It means you are conscious of the importance and desirability of serving foods which meet nutritive needs. Planning does not have to be in great detail. Delicious well balanced meals appear on family tables day after day in many homes across the nation. How do homemakers accomplish this? They are doing more planning than they realize.

Experienced homemakers apply their knowledge of nutrition as they shop for food. When selecting a package of meat from the counter, they visualize the way this food will appear on their family table. This instinct serves them well when selecting other food products.

BASIC FOODS SUPPLY TASTY MEALS

Each homemaker always keeps certain basic foods on hand. They vary according to her tastes and needs. She automatically replaces these when the supply is depleted. She counts on them to provide many tasty meals—fluffy omelets, cheese souffles, casseroles made from easily stored ingredients such as rice, noodles, tunafish, cheese or canned meats and vegetables.

Besides these supplies, emergency items are also kept for extra busy days or unexpected company meals. These items, too, will vary considerably. Canned chili con carne, a wedge of head lettuce with a choice of dressings, bread and butter, beverage and ice cream topped with frozen strawberries might be one family's choice on a busy day since all ingredients are readily stored and easily assembled.

How many interesting well balanced meals could you prepare from the list of basic foods on page 6?

What items would you keep on hand for emergencies? Would a matching check list make it easier for you to remember to purchase these "must have" basics?

"MUST HAVE" BASICS

	SHELF STORAGE	REFRIGERATOR OR FREEZER
Staples:	Baking soda Baking powder Catsup, Chili sauce Cornstarch Cocoa, Chocolate Coffee Flavoring extracts Flour Mustard, prepared Pepper Pickles Mixes (your favorites) Shortening: vegetable fat, oil Salt Spices Sugar: granulated, brown, confectioner's Syrup Tea Vinegar	Dairy products: Milk: whole, skim or buttermilk Cheese: cottage, American type Butter or margarine Ice cream, sherbets ices Lard Mayonnaise or salad dressing French dressing Eggs Fruits: fresh, frozen, dehydrated Frozen orange juice concentrate Lemons, fresh Citrus fruit, fresh Vegetables: fresh or frozen Lettuce Carrots
Bread & Cereals:	Spaghetti, macaroni, rice Bread Crackers Cereal: cooked and/or prepared	
Processed Foods:	Tomato sauce or puree Tomato juice Soups: canned or dehydrated Fruits: canned or juice Vegetables: canned or dehydrated Non fat dry milk solids	
Fresh Vegetables:	Potatoes Onions	

QUICK MEALS CAN BE PLANNED MEALS

With so many prepared and partially prepared foods available today, homemakers can produce colorful, tasty, nutritious meals in a short time. Two things make this possible:

1. simplifying the menu
2. preparing the meal from foods which require little cooking or preparation time

With this in mind, list the foods which can be prepared quickly-

Main dishes	Vegetables
<i>ground meat,</i>	<i>canned</i>
<i>canned meats,</i>	<i>frozen</i>
<i>thin steaks,</i>	<i>fresh (cut small)</i>
<i>thin chops,</i>	<i>pressure cooked</i>
<i>fish,</i>	
<i>liver</i>	

Appetizers	Salads
<i>fruit juice</i>	<i>tossed greens</i>
<i>vegetable juice</i>	<i>molded</i>
<i>half grapefruit</i>	<i>raw vegetable</i>
<i>canned fish</i>	<i>canned fruit and cheese</i>

EMERGENCY SHELF	ORDER AS NEEDED
<i>Tuna fish, canned</i>	<i>Meat, poultry, fish or substitute</i>
	<i>Vegetables</i>
	<i>Fruits</i>

Desserts
<i>fruits: fresh, canned, frozen and dried (if thawed or prepared ahead)</i>
<i>instant puddings</i>
<i>prepared cakes, pies, cookies: mixes, frozen prepared, ready baked</i>
<i>cheese and crackers</i>

TIMING MAIN DISHES

The meat, main dish or casserole usually determines the timing of other foods in a meal. Main dishes frequently require the longest cooking periods and the rest of the meal is timed so that it may be served promptly with the main dish.

What meats and main dishes can be prepared in the following time periods?

15 minutes or less

*hot dogs: plain, stuffed, barbecued;
hamburgers; ground beef patties;
canned meats and meat products;
thin steaks and chops; liver;
sandwiches; salads; cooked
meats, reheated; eggs: scrambled,
poached, etc.; dishes made
from cooked meats*

less than a half hour

*steamed dishes: tuna, eggs, meat;
broiled thick steak;
omelets*

less than 1 hour

*meat balls
thin pork chops*

more than 1 hour

*roasts
meat loaf
casseroles
chicken, baked
baked stuffed pork chops
spaghetti*

FIND OUT FOR YOURSELF

For you, what cooking methods require the least time? The least effort? Use the chart below to evaluate your favorite meat recipes.

Method of cooking	Least time	Least effort	
		Cooking	Cleanup
Baking			
Broiling			
Braising			
Panbroiling			
Deep fat frying			
Boiling			
Steaming			
Pressure cooking			
Sauteeing			

IS EVERYTHING UNDER CONTROL?

Considering the normal interruptions and activities in your home, how do you manage to prepare foods so they are all ready to serve at one time? Inexperienced homemakers sometimes find this difficult. It helps to check which food takes the longest to cook, then next longest. Remember to include the preparation time before and after cooking. For example, in the memo below, ten minutes were added to the 25 minute cooking period to allow 5 minutes for peeling and 5 minutes for mashing potatoes.

Cooking Time Memo

<i>Braised pork chops</i>	<i>70 minutes</i>
<i>Baked custard</i>	<i>45 "</i>
<i>Mashed potatoes</i>	<i>35 "</i>
<i>Green beans</i>	<i>30 "</i>
<i>Coffee (drip)</i>	<i>22 "</i>
<i>Set table</i>	<i>15 "</i>
<i>Apple salad</i>	<i>10 "</i>
<i>Cream gravy</i>	<i>5 "</i>

It also helps to prepare some food ahead of time. To the list below, add other foods which may be prepared ahead of time without sacrificing nutritive value or eating quality.

Foods to prepare satisfactorily in advance

Molded or frozen salads

Chex, crisped mixed greens may be refrigerated. - dressed last minute

Congealed or frozen desserts

Your "Studio" or Work Center

How well do you like your kitchen? How much do you enjoy working in it? Look around. . . . Does it reflect your personality, taste and needs? It can't be denied—some delicious meals were created in old fashioned kitchens. Even though the best meals in the world can be prepared in unhandy kitchens there are, nevertheless, certain things which make this work more enjoyable.

A conveniently arranged kitchen will save steps in meal preparation. A sink near the refrigerator and range plus adequate work and storage space at each work counter area will make kitchen work easier.

Store equipment near the place where you use it first. . .the coffee pot near the sink since the first step in making coffee is to put water in the pot. . .pot holders near the range. . .dishpan, cloth, towels near the sink.

Make good use of your small appliances and other equipment. Let your equipment work for you. Be sure to have good tools. . .a good can opener, sharp knives, peelers, rubber scrapers, tongs, kitchen shears, etc. A minute timer lets you concentrate on other things. A food mill or chopper and a wheeled cart save energy.

Double duty dishes, casseroles and saucepans that can go from range to table cut down on dishwashing. Those that go from refrigerator to oven to table are most convenient.