

Adulthood 101: How can busy adults find time to prepare a home-cooked meal without involving their mothers?



BY LOW YOUJIN

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Illustration: Anam Musta'in

Since TODAY senior journalist Low Youjin moved out of his parents' home recently, he has begun to wonder about how to find the time to prepare healthy home-cooked meals.

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Adulthood is an invigorating stage of life as young people join the workforce, take on more responsibilities and set their sights on the future. But its many facets — from managing finances and buying a home to achieving work-life balance — can be overwhelming.

In this series, TODAY's journalists help young Singaporeans navigate this stage of their lives and learn something themselves in the process.

SINGAPORE — The Covid-19 pandemic may have brought much chaos and inconvenience to us all, but one silver-lining, for me at least, was that I got to enjoy my mum's home-cooked meals more frequently since I had to work from home.

I love my mother's food. They are not elaborate meals. Sliced fish porridge, bee hoon soup or, if she is feeling fancy, miso butter pasta with tuna and cabbage. Pretty simple, but fairly healthy and cooked with love.

And a good, warm meal goes a long way to putting a smile on my face even on the most trying of days. But since I moved out of my parents' home not too long ago, it's been hard to replicate that feeling.

I'm no stranger to the kitchen, mind you, so I didn't think that providing home-cooked meals for myself and my partner would be a problem.

As it turned out, we would be lucky if I could even find the time to put together a bowl of noodle soup with leafy greens that have gone yellow after weeks of not being used.

Otherwise, it's either reaching for the phone to get a food delivery of something, usually unhealthy, or making a dash to one of the many coffee shops we frequent.

These quick and convenient meals don't leave me feeling good, though, and I'm becoming a bit more conscious about what I'm putting into my body now, as compared to my more youthful years.

With home-cooked meals, I can at least have some control over my diet. But how do you find time to prepare something healthy in the midst of a busy work week?

For this column, I spoke to nutritionists and chefs for some tips and good practices to observe to make this possible.

THE CHEFS' MUST-HAVES

One question I asked chefs Jeremy Cheok and Isaac Henry was: What are some must-haves in terms of appliances and ingredients that should have a place in a busy Singaporean's kitchen?

These are their suggestions:

1. A PRESSURE COOKER

Mr Cheok, the Asia-Pacific business head of food technology company Live Green Co, said that this device can cut down cooking times by up to a third.

"Imagine a six-hour stew ready in the time it takes to watch a movie," he said.

"It also helps cut down your food bill by letting you work with tough cuts like shin and oxtail that are usually cheaper than prime cuts."

Mr Cheok was formerly the founder and managing director of Slake restaurant, which first opened its doors in Opera Estate.

2. CANNED FISH

Sardines, salmon or tuna? It doesn't really matter, Mr Cheok said.

What matters, he added, is that they are a quick and convenient source of protein that can be added to salads or pastas without worrying about defrosting or having it go bad in the fridge.

3. ROCKET LEAVES

These salad greens last a decent amount of time in the fridge — up to a week if stored with paper towels to absorb moisture, Mr Cheok said.

"And it makes most slapped-together meals look fancy. Also, the bitterness (from the leaves) helps provide a foil to the typically acidic diet we have."

4. READY-MADE SALAD DRESSING

Personally, my go-to dressing would be a balsamic vinegar and olive oil combination with wasabi and honey, but Mr Cheok said that ready-made dressings are not a bad idea either, since they can last for some time and come in a wide variety of flavours.

5. SALT, SUGAR AND VINEGAR

Salt and sugar are two ingredients most people would already have in their pantry, but it is also worthwhile to include vinegar as well.

Mr Henry, who has worked in kitchens such as Stellar at 1-Altitude, said that these are key ingredients for pickling foods such as carrots, tomatoes and cabbages, which can go some way to complementing savoury foods.

Pickling is easy, Mr Henry said. You just follow the ratio of three parts water, two parts sugar and one part vinegar. Salt is added to taste.

“Technically, the only thing that will cost you time is measuring everything out and cutting your vegetables. Put it in there, bottle it up and it will keep forever,” he said, adding that it takes up to six hours for the pickled vegetables to be ready for consumption.

PREPARING MEALS IN BULK

Of course, having tools at your disposal is not enough to ensure that you can whip up a hearty meal at the end of a long working day. One convenient strategy that Mr Cheok proposed is to prepare meals in bulk for the week.

However, when I broached this idea with my partner, she demurred because she was concerned about food safety and the potential loss in nutritional value.

So I did what any reasonable person would do to win an argument — I asked the experts.

By and large, two nutritionists I interviewed — Dr Jaclyn Reutens, a clinical and sports dietitian at Aptima Nutrition and Sports Consultants, and Mr Chan Joy Seng of Alive Nutrition Consultancy — said that there is not much to worry about, if proper food hygiene is observed.

However, as Mr Chan pointed out, eating the same meal for several days could lead to monotony.

This is where herbs and spices can come in handy to modify the flavour of the meals and add some variety, he said.

And since it requires some planning, Dr Reutens said that it can be a good option for people hoping to have appropriately portioned and nutritionally balanced meals throughout the week.

“It eliminates impulsive unhealthy food choices as there is always food readily available,” he reasoned.

Here’s a summary of some other points that the nutritionists raised about preparing meals in bulk.

HOW MUCH FOOD SHOULD I BE PREPARING?

Between four and seven meals, depending on the size of one’s refrigerator and schedule for the week.

WHAT SHOULD I BEAR IN MIND?

To ensure the body gets a range of nutrients, Mr Chan said that it is important to have ingredients from all the food groups: Grains, proteins, vegetables and fruits.

When pre-cooking vegetables, Dr Reutens suggested choosing hardy ones such as carrots and celery that will not change colour with prolonged cooking.

“Don’t forget there will be a final round of heating either in the microwave or stove,” she said.

For that same reason, she also said that meat, poultry and seafood should be cooked till just about done, before freezing them.

But if it’s a stew, do not worry about overcooking these since they need to be slow-cooked for at least an hour.

The nutritionists added that it is possible to also consider pre-cutting vegetables such as carrots, pumpkins and mushrooms, rather than pre-cooking them.

Green leafy vegetables, however, are not suitable for bulk preparation since they do not last long, Mr Chan said.

Aside from that, Dr Reutens added that the texture of these vegetables will be altered with freezing and reheating. For the same reason, other ingredients to avoid include soft tofu and thin slices of fish.

WHAT ARE SOME MEAL IDEAS WITH ALL THE MAIN FOOD GROUPS?

- Chicken stew with potatoes
- Spaghetti bolognese
- Slow-cooked creamy parmesan chicken with couscous
- Honey garlic beef rice bowl with broccoli
- Mashed potato with oven-baked salmon and vegetables

WILL BULK-PREPARED MEALS LOSE NUTRITIONAL VALUE OVER TIME?

Any nutritional loss will be minimal, both nutritionists said.

Mr Chan said that there will be a loss of vitamins C and B1, since they are the most sensitive to oxidation.

However, Dr Reutens said that one can still get a healthy dose of vitamin C from eating fruit after meals anyway.

As for B vitamins, which she said are water soluble, they are generally lost in the cooking liquid, but can be retained if the cooking liquid is reused in the sauce.

“Other vitamins and minerals like vitamin A, D, fibre, carbohydrates and protein are well-retained,” she added.

HOW LONG CAN THE FOOD BE KEPT?

Dr Reutens said that after cooking, food has to be kept in the freezer or chiller within two hours to reduce the risk of harmful pathogens from growing.

“If you are eating the food tomorrow, you can keep it in the chiller. Anything past 24 hours should be moved straight to the freezer.”

Once in the freezer, it can be kept for up to three months, she added.

ARE THERE ANY HEALTH CONCERNS ABOUT USING A MICROWAVE TO REHEAT FOOD?

In short, there is nothing to be concerned about, the nutritionists said.

“You have to understand how it works,” Dr Reutens said. “The microwaves excite the water particles in the food to a high temperature and that reheats the food. No microwaves are retained in the food.”

OTHER FOOD SAFETY TIPS

On occasions, I have forgotten to transfer a piece of frozen meat from the freezer to the chiller, and decided to just leave it on the countertop so that it can thaw quickly.

This is a bad idea, the nutritionists said, because there is a higher risk of food-borne pathogens growing on the meat at room temperature.

Ideally, the frozen meat should be thawed overnight in a refrigerator, but if one is short on time, Mr Chan suggested using a microwave, or an oven set to a very low temperature, to defrost it.

Alternatively, he said that it is also possible to put the frozen meat in a storage bag and submerge it in water.

Mr Chan also said that fresh poultry, seafood, as well as minced and organ meats should be kept in the chiller only if it will be consumed within one to two days. If there are no immediate plans to do so, it should be kept in the freezer instead.

For red meat, it should only be stored in the chiller for three to five days before consumption.

YOU CAN BE LAZY

Even though these are all practical ideas and suggestions, I know there will be occasions when I just want an easy way out in preparing my own meals.

One other takeaway I got from my conversation with chef Henry is that depending on my choices, this may not necessarily be a bad thing.

For example, a whole roast chicken bought from the supermarket can be used over several meals, and the bones can even be used for making chicken stock.

Intrigued, I gave his suggestion a go. The meat was enough to last me for about four meals and I got about two litres of stock — all for around S\$13.

Given that I do cook at least one meal over the weekend, I'll consider spending more time in the kitchen to ensure that there is healthy, tasty food available to last over the week.

Now, I just need to get enough containers to store it.

ABOUT THE WRITER:

Low Youjin is a senior journalist at TODAY where he covers the environment, manpower, as well as the court and crime beats.

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