

#109 - Food in a Bowl: Hacks and How-To's

Hey, everyone! Welcome to The Lazy Genius Podcast! I'm Kendra Adachi, and I'm here to help you be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't! Today is our final episode in a three part series on Food in a Bowl! In part one, we talked about the basics of dinner bowls. Contrast is king, and you can build that contrast using the main four building blocks to dinner bowls. Last week, I became a Flavor Bible evangelist and we talked about flavor. One of the scary things about bowls is figuring out what ingredients go together, so last week, I shared some tips on how to figure that out. This week is hacks and how-to's. Let's figure out the logistics of actually making this a staple in your meal planning without feeling like you're prepping literally everything always. I love episodes like this where we can make life simpler but also more full but filling it with things that matter, like delicious meals in a bowl.

First, I want to make sure you guys are on my VIP list and are getting my monthly Latest Lazy Letter. I'll send out the next edition in another week or so, and it's VIP because those folks get stuff no one else does. I share book reviews which this month's has some year-to-date favorites, podcast episodes I loved to save you from listening to lame stuff before getting to the good stuff, info about the razor that's changing my life, and news about things like what happened when I turned in my book manuscript. Which I did a couple of days ago. It's one of my favorite things to write every month, so if you like being a Lazy Genius, you should be a VIP to make sure you get that Latest Lazy Letter every month. Click the link in the info section of your podcast app by clicking that little I icon or just swiping until you see links, or you can go to thelazygeniuscollective.com/join. Amen.

Okay, let's break down some hacks and how-to's for food in a bowl! First, we're going to talk about essential ingredients, at least by my standards. Next, we'll talk about limiting prep time and dirty dishes because it feels like this is so much work and mess. After that, we'll talk about kids, and we'll wrap it up with the timing of getting everything done at the same time ish.

First up, essential ingredients. It's important to have a base that can be ready to go quickly or is mostly hands-off. Choose one to be your go-to, especially when you're riffing at the last minute. Our go-to base is white rice. It does take about 45 minutes to cook in the Japanese rice cooker my father-in-law insists we use that doesn't have English words on the buttons so I actually have no idea all the other things it might be able to do, but he's right. It's the best rice. I use Kokoho Rose rice that I get from the Asian market, and we use that almost exclusively. I don't like brown rice, and I just never buy wild rice. If you love white rice but struggle making it on the stove, I can't say enough about investing in a rice cooker. I can press a button and walk away. I use it multiple times a week and will never go back. If you don't have a rice cooker and want to cook rice on the stove, I think Mark Bittman has great thoughts on how to cook rice simply and effectively. Our other main family base is noodles, both regular pasta and then Asian noodles like soba and ramen. If I'm making lunch bowls for myself for the week, I'll often make quinoa as my base and just use it all week. But that's it for us. Three main bases with 90% of our dinner bowls being rice. That's mostly because we love rice as a family, and it doesn't lead to complaint. Pick what works for most people in your family. If you have dietary differences, like one of you is grain-free or doesn't like rice or something, bases keep well either prepped over

the weekend and kept in the fridge or even frozen. Cooked quinoa and barley and farro freeze well. A lot of stores like Trader Joe's and Whole Foods have a lot of convenient bases ready to go like cauliflower rice and even cooked rice. It's frozen and you just heat it up. I know that it feels weird buying foods that you could make yourself, but that might also be why you're stressed out about dinner because you're not spending the extra 75 cents on something that's already cooked for you rather than making it yourself. Your time and sanity cost something, too.

So have a base that's brainless to make. Ours is rice. Sometimes if my meal plan is wonky, I'll just make rice around 4:30pm, and if we eat it for dinner, great. If we don't, I get rice bowl lunches for the week. Rice always gets eaten in our house, so if you have an ingredient that's that way, make it even if you don't know exactly how you'll use it. It'll get used.

Next up, essentials for proteins. Canned beans and eggs are the easiest options here since they cook up quickly and feel less overwhelming than cooking a piece of meat at 11 in the morning. Rotisserie chicken is also great since it's cooked well, easily chopped or shredded, and it's not seasoned which makes it super versatile for any group of flavors. One of my favorite hacks for quick dinner bowls is keeping cooked ground meat in the freezer. I'll often use the mushroom ground pork mixture from the pork and mushroom lettuce wraps on my site and cook up a big batch to freeze. I can either use the entire recipe for our family dinner, or I can pull out a little at a time for lunches. Just microwave it, and it's done.

Toppings. It's taken me awhile, but I've focused in on my essential toppings that I always have around. Always. Cucumber, avocado, carrot, and green onions. Cucumber and green onions both add great flavor, color, and texture to tons of cuisine destinations - Japanese, Greek, Mexican, Turkish... lots of options. Avocado is great it's an automatic creamy texture and great fatty flavor, but it can be mashed into a sauce with other ingredients, too. And I love carrots because it's one of the few vegetables my kids choose to eat (sometimes), and it has options. You can grate it raw for crunch, roast or steam it to go on top of the protein, or pickle it. I also have a jar of pickled ginger in my fridge for amped up Asian-ish bowls which I buy at my local Asian grocery store.

Essential toppings are tricky because we all like different things. Maybe you don't like cucumbers or avocado. The trick is to name three or four ingredients that you and your family generally like and that can be used in a couple of different flavor profiles. Olives are a good example. They can be put in Italian bowls, greek bowls, Mexican bowls, French, Moroccan, and Spanish bowls. And they come in a jar and can be kept around forever. Find just three or four toppings that you commit to for awhile and see where they lead.

And essential sauces? That's up to you, too, but a good rule of thumb is something creamy, something spicy, and something bright. Our go-to's are yum yum sauce, sriracha, green salsa in a bottle that I get at Trader Joe's, and some kind of Italian dressing. Those can be used alone obviously but also in tandem sometimes. Oh, and jarred red salsa. That's not in a bottle which is why I forgot to list it, but that's such an easy sauce to add to burrito bowls which you probably already knew, but there you go.

Your essential list needs to be what's essential to you. We all like different things, but start small. Pick one base, one or two protein possibilities and think of how to keep them more or less on hand, three or four toppings that can span across a couple of cuisines that you're trying out first,

and sauces that cover the creamy, spicy, and tangy realms. Start building from there, and add slowly as you need to.

Okay, next up, let's talk about limiting prep time and dirty dishes. A lot of you have said something like the following "it seems like this kind of meal would be so much more work with all the prepping!" Seems like might be true, but until you do it, you don't know how simple it really is. Don't assume. Your base is likely easy - just a grain cooked in a pot, maybe even far in advance or pulled from the freezer. So at most, that's one pot and hardly any hands-on time. For the protein, it might be beans from a can, chicken from a rotisserie case, or something you sautéed, roasted, or grilled. The nice thing about cooking your meat when you're making the dinner bowl is that you can cook any vegetables the same way using the same pans. You can even use a saute pan to make a sauce after you cook some chicken and peppers. I don't make any meal that requires more than two pots ever, so I promise that bowls only need something for your base and maybe something for your protein or vegetables. If you're going to make the sauce, don't go crazy on the toppings. Just tear some herbs off a stem or cut up some green onions with kitchen scissors. If you're using sauce from a bottle that's already made, take three minutes to chop up two or three fresh things. Cutting boards go in the dishwasher if they're plastic and can just be wiped down if they're wood. Knives need to be hand-washed, but you already washing one or two pots. That task will take literally two minutes max and will go faster if you start dinner with a sink of hot soapy water and wash as you go. And in terms of the whole build your bowl for an entire family where you feel like you have to have tiny bowls of a million things out, two tips. First, don't have as many topping options if it helps, but more than that, you guys use your cutting board to serve your toppings! No bowls! Just piles! And if some things are fatty or wet, I'll layer a sheet pan with parchment paper and pile everything on that. There is literally zero cleanup. Do not ever put everything in bowls ever again.

You likely think it takes a long time and uses a lot of dishes because you think you have to make literally everything from scratch and serve up the entire produce and cheese sections as topping options. You do not. Keep it simple, serve it simply, and wash your pans as you're done with them or just dunk them in the water for somebody else to wash later.

Okay, let's talk about picky kids or husbands or you. Let's reframe pickiness. It's just preferences. Yes, kids seem to have stronger preferences than the average person, but we're all just human trying to eat what we like. Don't hold it against your kids for only wanting rice and meat or meat and cheese or chips and salsa. It's okay if it stays simple for them, too. Dinner bowls are great ways to visually have more options than they're used to, and maybe they'll surprise you one day by putting olives on something. We don't even encourage the kids to add certain toppings. We just put them out and let them choose. Most of the time, they don't. Occasionally, they do. Keep doing it.

In terms of kids who don't like food to touch, I get it. Sometimes we run into that with certain bowls. My daughter is more likely to eat salmon and rice if they're separate, but the opposite is true with meatballs and polenta. It's weird. So I'll just say, "I'm putting this in a bowl for myself. Do you want a bowl or a plate?" And then go with it. You can have a dinner bowl while the components are separate on a plate for your kids. Or your husband. Or you. Don't let it be too dramatic. It's okay to eat off plates or bowls or change your mind from meal to meal.

And finally, timing logistics. Again, I think this feels more overwhelming if you assume you're making everything yourself and serving twenty components. Just start with the simplest dinner

bowl. Have a base, a simple protein, a sauce from a bottle, and two toppings. The base will likely be fine sitting until it's ready to serve things up; just keep the lid on the pot or the rice cooker closed. The protein is the same. Most meats are just fine hanging out for a few minutes. The only exception to that might be fried or scrambled eggs, so don't make those until the very end when it's time to assemble bowls. Toppings can be chopped in the morning and pulled out last minute. Dinner bowls are such a great place to use The Magic Question for cooking - what can I do now to make dinner easier later? You can chop up a cucumber and stick it in the fridge. Really, getting everything together at the same time is easiest when you keep it simple, and dinner bowls are better the simpler they are. It's like pizza. You're likely going to enjoy a simple but thoughtful pizza with sausage, ricotta, and arugula than you are a pizza that's covered with literally every topping at the store. Dinner bowls are the same way. Simple is good, not a copout. And it makes prep and cooking so much easier.

I hope this series has been encouraging to you as you've thought about food in a bowl. This is literally my favorite way to eat, and once you start practicing simply, you'll see other recipes that will give you ideas. That would be a great sauce! That would be a great protein! Build slowly and enjoy the process. Don't do everything yourself. And for the love stop putting all the toppings in individual bowls.

And I think that's it for now. If you have questions, join me this Thursday on Instagram. Follow me @thelazygenius, and I'll be there live around 12:15pm EST to answer all of your dinner bowl questions. So until next time, be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't. I'm Kendra, and I'll see you next week!