

#140 - Time to Create Your Winter Dinner Queue

Hi there! 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. I'm really excited about today's episode because it's about food, and I love food. More specifically, I love putting the proper importance on food and meals and gathering around the table but not wasting energy on the wrong things. Those wrong things look different for everyone listening, but today we're going to figure out what matters and what doesn't around your winter table in this 140th episode. We're going to talk about what a dinner queue is, why it's important, how to make one, and how I make mine. I also have a blog post that lists out all of those meals if you're interested in seeing it in black and white. They aren't all actual recipes are even links. Some are but not all. Just a heads up, but the list is there all the same.

First, I want to let you know about my favorite resource if you are a writer, and it's called Hope*Writers. I've been a Hopewriter since the community started several years ago, and it's been a huge part of my writing life. Their library of resources helped me write my first proposal and a really good one because I signed a book deal out of it. It helped me narrow in on my message. Being a Hopewriter has been such a gift because the point of this online community is to bring you creative and personal success. Creative success in your actual writing however that might look but also personal success in that you still feel a person with a soul. Writing is really personal and often difficult, so having a group of like-minded people makes such a difference. Hope*Writers is a membership site which means you pay monthly to be a member and gain access to everything Hopewriters offers. They only open doors for membership two or three times a year, so now is one of those times! They're accepting new members now through Friday, January 17, at midnight. If you would like to learn more about Hope*writers and just got some great advice on being a writer, Lazy Genius mascot and my real life friend Emily P. Freeman is hosting a webinar on Wednesday, January 15, about how to go from dreaming about writing to actually doing it. There's a link in the show notes for you to reserve your spot for that webinar. I am a proud affiliate of Hopewriters, and by being an affiliate, I do get a percentage of the membership fees for folks who discover Hopewriters through me, but I hope that you know that I'm not an affiliate in many places nor do I share ways for you to spend your money that I don't think are incredibly valuable. I take your attention and trust and your actual dollars very seriously, so any time I share something like this, I'm not blowing smoke. Hopewriters is a great community, and they have an incredibly dedicated staff that can help you figure out if this is right for you. So you have until Friday to join this time around or at least explore what it's about, so check the show notes for a link to get you there, including to save your spot for Emily's webinar on Wednesday. Cool.

Okay, let's create our winter dinner queue. First thing, what's a dinner queue? A dinner queue is basically a chosen list of meals you're going to make for dinner. If you're new here, you might think this is weird because isn't the whole Internet a list? Aren't all my cookbooks a list, Kendra? Yes, they are, but that list is way too big. Most likely, your dinner overwhelm is because there is too much to choose from. A dinner queue limits those choices to ones that make sense for your life.

A dinner queue can be ten meals you repeat, thirty meals you do for an entire month and repeat, or maybe even more than that if you're not a fan of repetition. My winter dinner queue has 35 meals on it, but a few of them are recipes I haven't tried before so it might be that by the end of the season, that list is smaller since not all the new ones might have worked.

So that's what a dinner queue is and why it's important. It's a pre-made list of choices that are not overwhelmingly long, and we want to limit overwhelm as much as we can. Now how do you make one? I've talked about this in other dinner queue episodes, but here's the basic idea. First, name your season. That first includes the actual season. Right now where I am and when I'm saying words, it's winter. And where I live in North Carolina, winter is cold but often sporadically so. Like in my ten day forecast, there's both a 71 degree day and a day with a chance of snow. So who knows. But for the most part, I'm not grilling. I'm making warm bowls of cozy things because it is mostly cold. Winter is a great time for that kind of food, so first name the season you're in.

Also, name the season you're in, as in the season of life. The next two or three months could be extra busy because you just got a new job and you're adjusting to a new schedule. Maybe you're like my friend Haven who just had a baby and since she already has two small boys is going to depend on meals from others and lots of spaghetti. Different seasons of life create unique circumstances, especially around food since we have to eat every day. So name the season you're in and don't expect something of your meals that your season isn't prepared to sustain. It's not fair to you or your people to set yourself up for failure and frustration when you don't have to. And the good thing about seasons is that they change. We think in smaller chunks of time on purpose so that we stay present where we are and limit the amount of doom and gloom we feel that it'll always be this way. It won't. Let's just think about the season we're in right now and leave the next one for whenever it comes.

So once you name the earth's season and your life season, you're better equipped to give yourself some parameters on what should be on your dinner queue. If a meal doesn't make sense for this winter and for your schedule and priorities, it doesn't go on the queue. That doesn't mean it never will; it just doesn't belong here this season.

Your parameters might be meals that are prepped in advance since you get home from work so close to dinner. They could include teaching your teenagers how to cook for themselves, so the meals need to be really simple and basic skills that they can build upon. When I had tiny babies, one of my parameters was meals I could make with one hand since I was always holding a human. Anything counts. Just give yourself some parameters on what makes sense right now which will make choosing the actual meals so much easier.

The next step is to initially fill your dinner queue with brainless crowdpleasers. If you're new here, this is a concept I talk about often and it's so important. In fact, there's an entire podcast episode about it in the show notes if you want to listen, but a brainless crowdpleaser is a meal that is easy for the cook to make to the point where you can kind of go on autopilot or don't have

to constantly consult a recipe *and* it's a meal is generally pleasing to the people eating. A crowdpleaser isn't necessarily a general crowdpleaser like if you're having a big party or something. It's whatever pleases the crowd that's regularly around your table. That might be just you, you and a spouse or roommate, or you and your gaggle of picky children. We want meals that are easy to make and will be met with as few complaints as possible. You might not eliminate them altogether, but it helps to keep them at bay to the extent you can.

So list out some brainless crowdpleasers and then fill in the gaps if there are any with recipes you've saved on Pinterest or in that new cookbook you got for Christmas. Just choose as many recipes to fill in the queue to the point you'd like it to be filled. Maybe you only want a dozen recipes for now. If you already have ten great brainless crowdpleasers, grab two recipes you're excited to try, and call it done. Don't make your queue longer than it needs to be. Otherwise you're back where you started, you'll have too many choices, and you'll still be frustrated about getting dinner made.

And that's it! You've made your winter dinner queue. It's pretty simple really, but the simple things are often the most impactful.

Okay, I want to spend a couple of minutes explaining what I'm doing with my own winter dinner queue. So my queue is 35 things, and I counted - of those 35, 20 are brainless crowdpleasers. So that's - what's that math - I don't know, it's more than half. The other 15 are new recipes I want to try. Now my queue is usually not that loaded with new recipes, but I mentioned in last week's episode that one of the things that matters to me this season is enjoying being in the kitchen, and something that brings me a lot of joy is learning new methods of cooking and new flavor combinations and being inspired by great food. I don't usually have as much time for that, but this winter, I do. I have more time for that than I will for at least the spring and summer of this year, so I decided to add more new recipes. Now none of those are just huge swings in terms of completely new foods that my kids will definitely not go for. I'm not doing that because I still want to mostly keep complaining at a minimum. But all of the new recipes use ingredients we often use so they're not new and scary, and they're mostly variations on methods or types of meals we already eat.

So for example, one of the brainless crowdpleasers on the list is chicken noodle soup. My middle son Ben loves chicken noodle soup, and the other two kids will eat without a ton of complaint. It's not their favorite, but it's not a huge deal. That vehicle is familiar. Soup with chicken and carrots and noodles is familiar. One of the new recipes I want to try is not actually a recipe but a riff I want to attempt and that is Asian-inspired chicken noodle soup. There will still be chicken and carrots and noodles, but the noodles will be egg noodles which is a little different. I might even buy longer noodles at the international grocery store to give it a little fresh take, and I'll do things like saute fresh ginger and a little garlic to create a flavor base. I'll still use chicken stock, but I might add some dashi which is a Japanese soup stock that's made of seaweed and fish it's fine it's delicious and maybe some soy sauce, so in many ways, the recipe is familiar. We do those flavors in other brainless crowdpleasers and we do that kind of soup,

too. This marries both worlds, isn't anything crazy or adventurous, but it's still inspiring to me as the cook, and it offers a little more variety.

So that's one of the versions of a new recipe and why I'm making more this season. Now here's another thing that might be helpful as you put together your queue or more specifically I guess as you plan meals from that queue. I mentioned on Instagram sometime a few days ago that I meal planned our entire month of January. I don't usually do that. I don't usually plan a month's worth of dinners, but this month felt like it would work. Part of that is because like I shared in last week's episode, our schedule is pretty relaxed this month. There aren't a lot of things going on, so it's easy to assume our plans won't drastically change. So if you want to try making a plan for the entire month, here's my quick order of operations.

First, categorize your dinner queue. That all depends on the kinds of foods you normally make, but my categories are rice meals, pasta meals, soup, and then other. We eat a lot of rice meals, and as much as we love them, I don't know that we would make an entire week of meals that are all rice related. We want to spread it out, so I categorized the winter dinner queue and did include those new untried recipes by the way. So we have eleven rice meals, seven pasta meals, four soup meals, and then fourteen that count as other. I didn't break down the other category any further because the balance of meals is fine as it is. If it was 25 other meals and then five rice and five pasta then yeah I might break it down further, but that's enough of a breakdown for my own purposes.

So if I look at the numbers, here's what I'm working with. The entire queue is 35 meals which is more than I need for a month, not just because there are less than 35 days in a month but also because we have dinner out with family or go over to a friend's house or have dinner with our church community group. Also when I look at the numbers, if I have 15 new meals on my queue and were to just roughly assume I cook the entire queue just about every month, that means I'm making a new recipe almost every other day. I don't want that. I want to make something new maybe once a week, more likely once every two weeks. So for me, it's not as straightforward as just writing down the next meal on the queue in the next block on the calendar, and it might not be that straightforward for you either. The way to think about it is in terms of categories and spacing out those categories. As I look at my categories, guess what category I'm missing? New recipes! I want to space those out just like I want to space out rice meals, so what I did on my list that I wrote out in my little meal plan book is I put a star next to the new recipes. That way when I'm choosing based on the category of the kind of meal, I'm able to more easily see how often I'm choosing new recipes.

All of this is really personal. You get to decide how to do this and what your categories are, how often you want to repeat things, but having the queue helps that so much, especially if you break it down even further into categories that make sense for you. So we do one pasta a week, two rices a week, one soup a week maybe, and fill in with the others, all paying attention to not putting too many new recipes on the calendar at once. Also choose the right day for making something new. Choose a day you're at home. Choose a day close to a meal prep day if you do that so you're making the process even easier. I would also add as a final month-long meal

planning tip to have one meal each week that can easily be scrapped. In other words, something that doesn't rely on fresh produce. For us, that is always grilled cheese and tomato soup. The ingredients for that are always in our house, will always get eaten in other things, and they won't go bad really if we need to scrap a meal because of a surprise invitation to a friend's house or a school fundraising dinner at the local pizza place, that kind of thing. It's nice to have one meal a week, especially if you're planning a month in advance, that you can just scrap.

So go make your winter dinner queue. Think about your season, your season of life, and what you need from your cooking experience right now. Set appropriate expectations. Then choose recipes that fit that season. Start with brainless crowdpleasers so there are always easy options on the docket, and then fill in with new recipes to try that fit your needs. If you want to take it a step further, try planning a week or two or even a month in advance, and categories will help you get there. And remember, you're the boss. You're the boss of this meal plan. If you need to switch meals, do it. If you need to scrap a meal, do it. A meal plan is just a plan. It's not set in stone, and it's not a failure if you change it. In fact, changing it sometimes means it's working for you, that you're able to roll with whatever comes up in your life and more easily make a dinner that fits with that change. It's just a place to start. It's a literal placeholder for dinners, so change the plan if it needs to change. It doesn't mean it's not working or that you're a bad planner. It's completely neutral. It's just a tool.

I hope this episode gets you excited about planning your meals this winter, and I love that thinking about things like this really do enhance your life. You are funneling your energy in a direction that makes sense for you, and you're eliminating the need to make decisions further down the road because you've already made them. You've already put them on your queue. And you're choosing meals that make sense, that you'll be excited about, that don't feel overwhelming or too much or whatever. We started, well we ended 2019 and carried over into 2020 a ton of sickness, and I gotta tell you having this month's meals planned has saved my sanity in huge ways. Huge. It's such a worthy investment of your time to make this dinner queue, and if you want to spend a few extra minutes actually plugging meals into calendar boxes, do it. You won't regret it. Even if it changes, it still helps. I promise.

Okay, that's all for today. Check the show notes for all the links to all the things that will help you along if you'd like a little extra help.