



A Guide to Easy, Weeknight dinners in four steps

“Dinner is a challenge. It’s not that we don’t know how to cook but after a long day at work and with a dozen things to do at home, it just takes time and energy. We need easy weeknight dinner ideas.”

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What do we fix for dinner?

We could put something in the crock-pot before we leave for work. We're not that organized (I'm not that organized) and the crock pot is utilized for Sunday duty. I love stir-fries but Merri Ann, my wife, doesn't like them. There are other choices like casseroles (they usually take too long), tacos, and soups, but what to fix for dinner usually centers on four basic decisions.

Just make four decisions!

Step 1: Choose a meat for the main dish.

I'm looking for a meat to fry. The oven takes too long, I rarely deep fry, and the grill is a good choice but a summer choice. So I choose one of these for an easy dinner idea:

- Burger (either patties or crumbled).
- Steak (either whole or sliced—lesser cuts lend to slicing)
- Pork chops or other thin cuts of pork
- Chicken (usually, it's chicken breasts)



Choose one of these four, and you're well on your way to dinner.

Step 2: Choose a seasoning, sauce, or gravy.

Gravy:

Most of the time, it's gravy. I like gravy on my meat, on my potatoes, and even over rice. Once you've done it couple times, gravy is easy. I keep a restaurant gravy mix on hand so that I can mix up as much as I want even if I'm cooking on the grill.

Even when I'm making gravy from pan drippings, I use my gravy mix for starch in place of cornstarch or flour. Gravy mixes come in chicken, beef, and turkey. I use the chicken mix with pork but turkey will do.



MAKE RESTAURANT GRAVY

Just like fine restaurants! Just add water. Choose from chicken, turkey, or beef!

SEE YOUR CHOICES >>

Do yourself a favor and pick up a gravy mix.

Sauces:

I keep a half dozen sauces in the refrigerator:

- A barbecue sauce or two
- An Asian sauce or two, including Thai Sweet Chili which is an essential
- Marinara (spaghetti sauce)
- Salsa

Choose your sauces here.

Seasonings:

Meat needs seasoning. Several nights ago, I made a fried a pork chop seasoned with Ras el Hanout. I used two tablespoons of bulk gravy mix to make the gravy in the frying pan. The spices left in the pan after frying the pork chop were perfect to make the gravy special.

Do yourself and your family a favor and invest in a half dozen blends. You'll create a whole new vista of possibilities for dinner. These are in my cupboard, my basics:

- A steak and burger seasoning. My favorite is Colorado Cattle Company Original.
- A taco and Mexican seasoning.
- An Italian seasoning blend, one with

basil and oregano that I can use on pizzas and pasta.

- A barbecue rub. I use it mostly on chicken. My favorite is no longer available. We're looking for a replacement to carry in our store.
- Vindaloo. This is my first choice for beef though it's really more versatile than that.
- Ras el Hanout, my first choice for pork.
- Persian Adwiya. This is my first choice for chicken and fish.
- A lemon pepper blend.
- A poultry seasoning blend. I use this for soups and dressings (stuffing). I recently discovered Za'atar which reminds me of poultry seasoning but has no sage.

The other night, I cut a pork loin cut into thin strips and sautéed it with onions and peppers. I seasoned it with Za'atar and made gravy with my gravy mix. I served it over Spring Rice. It was superb and took less than 30 minutes.

My cupboard is stacked with seasonings. I love the marvelous international choices of Teeny Tiny Spice Company spice blends.

One final note, the smoked and flavored salts now available are fantastic. (Yes, they do smoke salt.) Sprinkle a little apple wood smoked sea salt or hickory smoked salt on your meat and it tastes like it came right from the smoke house.



SHOP THESE CHOICES IN SPICES AND SAUCES

- All American spices by the Prepared Pantry.
- Western spices by the Colorado Cattle Company.
- BBQ and Western spices by Gresham and Myers.
- International spice blends by Teeny Tiny Spice Company of Vermont
- Gourmet BBQ sauces from Pit Master BBQ.
- Authentic Asian and Pesto sauces from Elki.
- Traditional Alfredo sauces from Bertolli and Classico.

SHOP SPICES >>

SHOP SAUCES >>



[See the amazing flavors of salt for you to choose.](#)

Step 3: Choose a starch.

For us, that means choosing one of these:

- Potatoes
- Pasta
- Rice

Potatoes:

We live in potato country, Eastern Idaho. Most nights, I'm not going to take the time to peel potatoes. I'll boil red potatoes; that doesn't take long and they are better not peeled. You can eat them as a vegetable with butter and seasoning or add a gravy. You can make garlic mashed potatoes with the skins on. For other easy dinner ideas, consider oven roasting potatoes. (See Oven Roasted Rosemary Potatoes.)

Increasingly, I choose seasoned and flavored dried potatoes. This is the quickest starch. They're incredible, much better than I remember growing up. I love the flavors like

garlic mashed and four cheese. I stick them in the microwave for just a few minutes.

Pasta and Rice:

Pasta and rice do not have to be boring. We have a great selection: 12 different kinds of rice and rice blends and 16 choices of orzo and couscous. So there are lots of easy dinner ideas here.

You can use a microwave rice steamer but I don't bother. I set the rice going while I cook the meat and side dish. Here's how:

1. Measure two cups of hot water, one cup of rice, and half teaspoon of salt into a saucepan for which you have a lid.
2. Bring the water to a boil. I set the heat to medium high and set the timer for five minutes. (I wear an Everywhere Timer around my neck while I'm cooking or baking.) The timer keeps me from forgetting my rice and burning it. There is nothing magic about five minutes; it just works on my stove with my pan.
3. After the rice comes to a boil, turn the heat to very low and set the timer for 15 minutes. Do not lift the lid.
4. After fifteen minutes, fluff the rice with fork and set the lid back on the rice until you are ready to serve.

Step 4: Choose a side dish or two.

Typically, this is where I invest the least time. Frozen vegetables work well in my house. So do bagged salads. But it doesn't take long to steam fresh vegetables and I like them.



Putting it All Together

The key is keeping what you need on hand so you don't have to stop at the store and you don't have to worry about what you are going to fix. It takes a bit of investment in seasonings and sauces—which you can buy online—and then it's a breeze.

- **For the meat**, keep a stock in the freezer. We prefer to choose the meat the night before and put it in the refrigerator to defrost. When we forget, we have to thaw it in the microwave.
- **Pick** your restaurant quality gravy mixes.
- **For the seasoning**, keep a selection in the cupboard. Keep several sauces on hand.
- **For the starches**, keep a selection of potatoes, pastas, and rice on hand. Keep a stock of seasoned and flavored dried potatoes on hand. Buy some red potatoes from time to time.
- **For side dishes**, pick up a bag of pre-made salad once a week and a couple fresh vegetables from the produce aisle. Stock the freezer with a selection of frozen vegetables.

them down to these four basic choices and if we have the ingredients on hand, dinner is a snap.

Starting on the next page, we'll share with you some suggestions for easy weeknight meals including all of these steps we have shared.

We hope this helps! Happy Cooking!

For us, it's easier to plan meals if we break