

Cook the simple thing

A short book about ordering in every night because
cooking has turned into an event

unbry · Free to read, yours to keep

<https://unbry.com/read/cook-the-simple-thing>

First edition

Written by AI with human guidance. It can
contain mistakes, which later editions correct.

Contents

1. Before you start
2. Seven o'clock, the app, and the box on the side
3. Why the order makes sense
4. "I'm too tired to cook"
5. "I can't cook"
6. "It's quicker"
7. "It's cheaper, or near enough"
8. "I've earned it"
9. "I'd only be cooking for one"
10. "The kitchen's a mess"
11. "I don't know what to make"
12. "There's nothing in"
13. "A ready meal is basically cooking"
14. "A takeaway now and then is fine"
15. "I'll cook properly at the weekend"
16. "I need a recipe"
17. "The kids won't eat it"
18. What the order costs you
19. What it does to cooking
20. The shelf
21. The six

22. Decide before you're hungry

23. The decision

24. Shift work, no kitchen, fatigue, the flat-share, and when it's
more than dinner

25. When the app came back

26. Seven o'clock, the pan

27. Notes

Before you start

This is a short book and you can read it in two or three sittings. It's about one habit, which is getting to seven in the evening, opening an app or the freezer, and eating something somebody else made, again, not because tonight is special but because tonight is a Tuesday and cooking has become, somewhere in your head, an event. An event needs a recipe, a shop, an hour, a clean kitchen and a result worth all that. You haven't got any of those at seven on a Tuesday. So you order.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that the order makes sense from the inside. You're tired, you're hungry now, there's nothing in, you don't know what to make, and the app knows exactly what to make and will bring it to the door. The second is that the event you're avoiding isn't the thing that's on offer. Most cooking that people actually do on weeknights is a small repertoire of five or six things that take fifteen to twenty minutes, need no recipe and get made in one pan, and the reason it looks like an event to you is that you haven't done it for a while, and the longer you don't do it the bigger it looks. There's research on what makes people cook and what stops them, and the shortage that stops them is mostly the feeling of having no time, not the time. The third is practical. Keep a shelf of things that don't go off. Know six plain plates you can make without looking anything up. Decide what's for dinner before you're hungry. Chapters 19 to 22 cover how, and none of it takes an hour.

This book isn't a diet book, and it isn't a recipe book. It won't tell you what to eat, and it won't tell you that a takeaway is bad. It's about the default, the night when nothing was decided and the app decided. Chapter 13 is about the takeaway you chose on purpose, which is fine.

Three cautions.

If you've stopped cooking because you've stopped doing most things, and you've felt low most of the day, most days, for a fortnight or more, the NHS says to see a GP. Dinner can wait until you have, and the app is doing a job for now.

If your relationship with food is the problem, if you're eating very little, or eating and then trying to undo it, or spending a lot of the day worrying about your weight and shape, that isn't this book. The NHS says to see a GP as soon as you can, and the charity Beat has a helpline.

And if you have a condition that makes standing at a hob for fifteen minutes hard, or you don't have a kitchen, chapter 23 is written for you and some of the method changes.

The notes at the back give my sources and their limits. Where I'm giving my own reasoning and not a finding, I'll say so.

Seven o'clock, the app, and the box on the side

It's ten to seven. You've been in for twenty minutes and you've done the things you do when you get in, the coat, the bag, the sitting down for a second that became ten. You're hungry, not starving, but hungry enough that the question has arrived. What's for dinner. You open the fridge and look at it the way you'd look at a cupboard in someone else's house. Half a pepper. Some cheese. A jar of something. Milk. You shut it. You know there's pasta in the cupboard and you know there's a tin of tomatoes, and neither of those feels like dinner. Dinner is a thing on a plate that someone thought about.

So you open the app. It's been used enough that it opens on the place you order from, and the place you order from remembers what you had. Two taps, a card that's already saved, and a screen that says forty minutes. You put the phone down. The hunger, which was a question, is now a wait. You do a bit of nothing while you wait. The doorbell goes. You eat it off the box on the sofa, and it's nice, and it's more than you wanted, and afterwards the box is on the side, and the kitchen is exactly as clean as it was, and tomorrow is Wednesday and you'll do it again.

Or it's the freezer version. A tray, a film to pierce, a microwave, and a plate you didn't really need because the tray was fine. That's the same habit with less waiting.

These are invented, but I'd guess yours is close. Some words. **The event** is cooking as it looks from the sofa, a recipe, a shop, an hour, a clean kitchen, and a result that has to be worth all of that. **The**

plain plate is cooking as it mostly is, something starchy, something with protein in it, a vegetable, and one thing that makes it taste of something, done in fifteen or twenty minutes with no recipe. **The seven o'clock question** is "what's for dinner" asked at seven with nothing decided. **The order** is the two taps, or the tray, whichever it is tonight. **The wait** is the forty minutes between ordering and eating. **The shelf** is the stock of things that keep, which chapter 19 is about. **The six** is your repertoire of plain plates, which chapter 20 is about. And **the box on the side** is the morning after.

Before you go on, do one thing. Write down what you ate for dinner in the last seven nights and how each one arrived, cooked, ordered, tray, or something on toast standing up. Then, the next time you order, look at the clock when you open the app and look again at the first mouthful. Write the number down. You'll want it in chapter 5.

Why the order makes sense

Nobody orders a takeaway on a Tuesday because they've weighed it up and decided it's the best use of the evening. They order because at seven o'clock, with the question in the room and nothing decided, it's the only answer that doesn't need anything from them. It's worth being honest about what the order gives you, because a habit that gave you nothing wouldn't be a habit.

It gives you relief from the question. The moment the order goes in, the deciding is over, and the deciding was the hard part. It gives you food without effort at the hour when effort is at its lowest. It gives you food you know you'll like, because the app has learned what you like and the kitchen at the other end is better at it than you think you are. It gives you a small pleasure at the end of a day that didn't have many, and the pleasure is real. And it gives you back the evening, because the wait is time you can spend on the sofa rather than at the hob.

Underneath those there's usually a set of beliefs, and they're the chapters that follow. That you're too tired. That you can't cook, or can't cook well enough for it to be worth it. That ordering is quicker. That it costs about the same once you've bought the ingredients. That you've earned it. That it's not worth cooking for one. That the kitchen's a mess and you'd have to clean it first. That you don't know what to make, and there's nothing in anyway. Each of those has something true in it, and each of them is doing the same job, which is making the event look like the only alternative to the order.

The order is an answer to a real question. This book isn't going to tell you the question isn't real. It's going to look at whether the event is the only other answer, because I don't think it is, and the research on what actually stops people cooking points the same way. Then it'll look at what the order costs, which is more than money and not mainly health. And then it'll give you a way to answer the seven o'clock question before seven, so that the app stops being the only thing in the room that has a plan.

"I'm too tired to cook"

You are tired. This chapter isn't going to argue with that. You've worked, or looked after people, or both, and at seven the tank is low, and the thought of the event, the shop and the hour and the washing up, is the thought of something you haven't got. If cooking were the event, being too tired for it would be a good reason.

But look at what the tiredness is measuring. Jennifer Jabs and Carol Devine, reviewing the research on time and food, describe time scarcity as the feeling of not having enough time, and they're careful to call it a feeling, one that's been linked to less cooking at home, more fast food and more convenience food. The feeling is real. It isn't the same as the clock. Pablo Monsivais and colleagues, in a survey of around thirteen hundred adults in the United States, found that people who spent under an hour a day on food preparation and cleaning up were the ones who ate out and used fast food most, and that they tended to be working adults who put a high value on convenience. Under an hour a day is still an hour a day for some of them. The gap between the people who cook and the people who order isn't a gap between people with evenings and people without. It's narrower than that.

Here's the thing the tiredness doesn't see. A plain plate takes fifteen minutes, and about ten of those are the pasta or the rice or the potatoes doing their own thing while you stand there. The part where you do something is chopping an onion, opening a tin, and stirring. That's less effort than the wait, if you count the forty minutes of low-level hunger as effort, which I do. And on the far

side of the fifteen minutes there's a plate of food and a pan to rinse, rather than a box and a slightly sick feeling from a portion sized for someone who runs.

I'm not saying you're not tired. I'm saying the event is the thing you're too tired for, and the event isn't on the menu. A plain plate is. The question for tonight isn't whether you've got an hour and a recipe in you. It's whether you've got fifteen minutes standing up in you, and on most nights you have, because you'll spend more than that standing in the kitchen waiting for the doorbell.

"I can't cook"

You'll have said this, and you'll have believed it, and some of the belief comes from watching people cook on television, where cooking is a performance with a knife and eleven ingredients and a sauce that has to be exactly right. Measured against that, most people can't cook. Measured against what dinner needs, most people can.

Jean Adams and colleagues looked at the cooking skills of just over five hundred adults in the UK National Diet and Nutrition Survey. Around ninety per cent said they could cook a main dish from basic ingredients without help, and almost two-thirds cooked a main meal at least five times a week. That's the general population, not a cookery class. The skill you think you haven't got is one most people have, and most people got it not from a course but from watching a parent. Fiona Lavelle and colleagues, surveying a thousand adults across the island of Ireland, found that people who learned to cook as children or teenagers had more skills and more confidence in them as adults, and that the mother was the main source. If you didn't get that, you're at a real disadvantage, and I don't want to pretend otherwise. But the disadvantage is a start you didn't get, not a ceiling.

What does the plain plate actually need you to do. Boil water. Put a thing in a pan with some oil and move it about until it changes colour. Open a tin. Grate cheese. Put salt on it and taste it. Those are the whole skill set for the six meals in chapter 20, and none of them is the kind of thing anyone learns and then forgets. The confidence is the missing part, and confidence is what goes up

fastest. Ada Garcia and colleagues, reviewing community cooking programmes, found that the one result those programmes produce consistently, across ages and settings, is that people come out more confident in their cooking. Changes in what they eat were less consistent. Confidence is the easy bit, and it comes from doing it, not from being taught.

It's like driving to the shops. You don't need to be able to drive well to drive to the shops. You need to be able to drive. The "I can't cook" belief is comparing you to the people on television, and dinner doesn't need them.

So the test isn't whether you can cook. It's whether you can make one plain plate badly tonight. If you can, you can cook, in the only sense that matters on a Tuesday, and the second one will be better than the first.

"It's quicker"

Go back to the number you wrote down in chapter 1, the time from opening the app to the first mouthful. If you didn't write it down, the app will tell you, because it gives you an estimate before you order. Forty minutes is common. Thirty is a good night. On a Friday it can be an hour. A tray in the microwave is quicker, seven or eight minutes, and I'll come to it.

A plain plate is fifteen to twenty minutes. Pasta water takes eight minutes to boil and the pasta takes ten, and in those eighteen minutes you've opened a tin, softened an onion, and grated some cheese, and the whole thing is on a plate at minute twenty. Rice is similar. Eggs are five minutes from cold pan to plate. A jacket potato in the microwave is ten. The tray wins on time, and I'll give it that, though what it wins is seven minutes against fifteen, and what it loses is anything you'd choose to eat if you had the choice.

So why does the order feel quicker. I think it's because the order is quick for you. Two taps and the deciding is done, and the forty minutes that follow don't feel like cooking time because you're not in the kitchen. But you're not doing anything else either. You're hungry and waiting, and hungry and waiting is a state, not free time. If you're honest about what you do in the wait, it's usually the phone, and the phone in a state of hunger isn't rest.

This is my interpretation and not a finding, but I think "quicker" is a word for "less of my attention", and the order does win on that. It asks for two taps and then nothing. The plain plate asks for fifteen minutes of attention, most of it mild. What you're buying with the

order is the attention, not the time, and it's worth knowing which so that you can decide whether the attention is really something you haven't got. Some nights it is. Chapter 13 is about those. Most nights, the fifteen minutes of attention would have been spent on the phone, and the phone was a worse use of it than an onion.

"It's cheaper, or near enough"

I'll keep this short, because money isn't this book's argument, and because there's an earlier book in this series, Put the card away, about spending you don't look at, and another, Ask the price of the evening, about the evening that costs more than you'd have chosen. If the order is on a card you're not watching, those are the books.

The belief is that once you've bought the ingredients, the oil and the rice and the things that go off, cooking costs about what ordering costs. It doesn't, and you know it doesn't, but the belief survives because the comparison is never done. The order arrives with its price on the screen and the ingredients arrive across three shops and a fortnight, and the mind doesn't add up the fortnight. Monsivais and colleagues found that the people who spent the least time on food preparation spent significantly more on food away from home. That's a description of the same money going out through a different door, and the door with the app on it is the more expensive one.

The point I'd rather make is that the price isn't the reason to cook. The plain plate is cheaper than the order by a wide margin on most nights, and if that's what moves you then let it. But people who cook on a Tuesday mostly don't do it because it's cheaper. They do it because it's what dinner is. The money is a side effect, the way the box on the side is a side effect. If you get the habit, the money follows, and you'll notice it in the statement a month later, and

that's the right way round. Cooking to save money is a diet, and diets have a way of ending. Cooking because the seven o'clock question has an answer is just how the evening goes.

"I've earned it"

This one's the most honest of the beliefs, because it names what the order is actually for. It's a reward. The day was long and there was nothing good in it, and the takeaway is the one thing in the day that's for you. Taking that away sounds like taking away the good bit.

There's an earlier book in this series about sugar as a reward, The biscuit tin, and the argument is the same here. A reward is a reward because it's not the default. The first takeaway of the week is a treat. The fifth is Thursday. When the order happens every night, it stops being the good bit and becomes the shape of the evening, and the evening loses the good bit while still paying for it. What you've earned, on a hard day, is something that's different from other days. When every night's the same, nothing is.

Notice also what's being rewarded. Not the day. The seven o'clock question. The order comes with a reason attached, "I've earned it", but the reason is usually found after the app is open, because a reason is needed and this one's always available. On the days that were genuinely hard, fine, and chapter 13 is about those. On the days that were ordinary, the treat is being spent on an ordinary Tuesday, and it's cheap because nothing's been paid for it, and then when a hard day comes there's no treat left to have, because you had it on Tuesday.

I'd put it this way, and it's my view, not a finding. The person who cooks a plain plate on Tuesday and orders a curry on Friday has a treat. The person who orders every night has a habit and calls it a

treat. Both eat the curry. Only one of them enjoys it as a curry rather than as Friday's version of Tuesday.

"I'd only be cooking for one"

If you live alone, this belief has weight. Cooking is for people, the picture goes, a table and a conversation, and there's something a bit sad about standing at a hob for fifteen minutes to make something nobody will see. The order, by contrast, is what people who live alone do, so it feels like the normal thing.

Susanna Mills and colleagues, in a systematic review of thirty-eight observational studies on home cooking, found that close personal relationships were among the things that went with cooking more, alongside being female, having more time and being in work. So the belief isn't imaginary. People do cook more when there's someone to cook for. But look at what that finding says. It says a partner or a family is one reason people cook. It doesn't say the cooking is for them. And the thing the review was clearest about is that what makes people cook is more complicated than whether they've got the skills, which means it's also more complicated than whether they've got an audience.

Turn it round. The plain plate is the natural size for one. A pan of pasta for one is the easiest meal in the book. Cooking for a family is where the event lives, the picky child and the timing and the different plates. Cooking for yourself is a bowl and a fork and no one to please. What you make is what you feel like, and nobody's checking.

And the sadness, if I can say so, is in the picture and not in the kitchen. Fifteen minutes at a hob with the radio on, making a thing you'll like, is one of the better parts of an evening alone. Eating

something out of a box on the sofa is one of the emptier ones. The order looks like company because it comes to the door and somebody made it, but you eat it just as alone as you'd eat the plain plate, and with less to show for it. If there's anyone who deserves fifteen minutes of your cooking, it's the one person who'll definitely be eating it.

"The kitchen's a mess"

You'd have to clear it first. There are pans in the sink from something, and the board's got crumbs on it, and the counter's got post and keys and a mug on it, and before any of the cooking could begin there'd be twenty minutes of putting things right. That's the belief, and it's the one that turns the plain plate back into the event, because it adds the clean-up to the front of the job.

There's an earlier book in this series about exactly this, The dishes take four minutes, and I won't repeat it. The short version is that the mess is smaller than it looks and takes less time to clear than you'd guess, and that a kitchen used every night stays clearer than a kitchen used never, because the pan gets rinsed while the pasta drains and the board gets wiped while the plate's on the table.

What I want to add is about the plain plate itself. It needs one pan, one board, one knife and a wooden spoon. It doesn't need the whole counter. It needs a foot of counter next to the hob and a pan that's clean, and if the only clean pan is the small one, the small one will do. The mess is a reason not to cook the event. It's not a reason not to cook the plain plate, because the plain plate doesn't go near most of it.

And the mess is partly the order's. Look at what's on the side. Some of it is the box from last night, and a plate that was used for one thing, and cutlery from a tray. A kitchen that cooks makes the mess of cooking and clears it as part of cooking, because the pan has to be washed for tomorrow. A kitchen that orders makes a different mess and never has a reason to clear it, because nothing in there is

needed for tomorrow either. The clean kitchen you're waiting for isn't going to arrive on its own. It arrives on the second night of cooking, when you rinse the pan because you'll want it again.

"I don't know what to make"

This is the seven o'clock question in its purest form, and I think it's the belief that does most of the work. Not "I can't", not "I'm too tired", but "I've got no idea", and the app has an idea, and so the app wins.

Look at when the question gets asked. Seven o'clock, hungry, standing in front of an open fridge. That's the worst possible moment to design a meal. Hunger narrows what you can think about, tiredness narrows it further, and an open fridge presents you with parts rather than dinners. Half a pepper isn't a dinner. Neither is a tin of tomatoes. Turning parts into a dinner is a small act of planning, and the one time of day you can't plan is the time you've chosen to try.

Pauline Ducrot and colleagues looked at meal planning in a large French cohort, over forty thousand adults, and found that people who planned their meals ahead, even just occasionally, had more varied diets and were more likely to meet their national guidelines, and among women were less likely to be overweight. That's a cross-sectional study and it can't say that planning causes any of it. But it's consistent with something anyone who cooks will tell you, which is that the deciding is the work, and the deciding is easy at a time when you're not hungry and impossible at a time when you are.

The people who cook on weeknights mostly don't know what to make at seven either. They knew at nine that morning, or on Sunday, or they don't need to know because there are six things

they make and it's one of those. That's chapter 20, and the deciding at a better time is chapter 21. The point here is only that "I don't know what to make" is true and isn't a fact about you. It's a fact about seven o'clock. Ask the question at a different time and it has an answer.

"There's nothing in"

You open the fridge and there's nothing in, and this is true in the sense that there's nothing that looks like a dinner. What's usually in is half of things. It's what's not in that matters, and it's the same short list every time. An onion. A tin of tomatoes. Pasta or rice. Eggs. Something frozen and green. Cheese. Oil. Salt. With those in, there's always a dinner, and with those out, there isn't, whatever else the fridge holds.

The NHS Eatwell Guide, which is the government's picture of how a diet should balance out over a day or a week, says to base meals on starchy foods like potatoes, bread, rice or pasta, to have some beans, pulses, fish, eggs or meat, and to eat plenty of vegetables, and it says in so many words that fresh, frozen, tinned and dried all count. I mention that not because this is a diet book but because the belief that there's nothing in usually means there's nothing fresh in, and fresh isn't the test. A bag of frozen peas is a vegetable. A tin of chickpeas is protein. A jar of pesto and a bag of pasta is a dinner, and nobody will come round to check.

Fiona Lavelle and colleagues interviewed twenty-seven people in Ireland about what stopped them cooking with basic ingredients, and among the things that helped was the ability to plan and prepare ahead, and among the things that stopped them was the wish for meals that took no effort. "There's nothing in" is where those two meet. If nothing's been planned, the fridge is parts, and the effortless meal is the one on the app.

The shelf, in chapter 19, is the answer, and it's a boring one. It's the short list, kept in stock, bought once a week without deciding. With the shelf in, "there's nothing in" stops being true, because the shelf is always in. There's still the seven o'clock question, but it's a question with an answer in the cupboard, which is a different question from the one you've been asking.

"A ready meal is basically cooking"

You put it in the oven. You use a plate, sometimes. You might add a bit of salad. It's not a takeaway, and it's food at home, so it feels like the honest end of the habit. I don't want to be snobbish about ready meals, and some of them are fine, and on the nights when a plain plate really isn't going to happen, a tray in the oven is a better fallback than the app. But the belief is that the tray is a version of cooking, and it isn't, and the difference isn't about the food. It's about what you learn.

Matthew Lam and Jean Adams, using the same UK survey as chapter 4, found that people who cooked a main meal at least five days a week, and people who were confident cooking a range of foods, got a smaller share of their energy from what the researchers call ultra-processed foods, which is the category most ready meals fall into. That's a cross-sectional finding and I won't lean on it for more than it carries. What it describes is a pattern where the more you cook, the less of your food arrives pre-made, and the less you cook, the more of it does.

Here's the difference in plain terms. When you make a plain plate, you do something, and it goes slightly better than last time, and the next one is easier. When you heat a tray, nothing happens to you. You're exactly as able to cook afterwards as before. The tray gives you dinner and takes nothing from you, and that sounds like a good deal until you notice that nothing being taken is also nothing being built, and that after a year of trays the event is exactly as big as it was.

So I'd put the ready meal where it belongs, which is as a stopgap. It's what's in the freezer for the night when the shelf has run out or the fifteen minutes really aren't there. It isn't cooking, and calling it cooking is how a person who could cook ends up not cooking for a decade. Keep one or two in the freezer and use them the way you'd use a spare tyre.

"A takeaway now and then is fine"

It is. This chapter agrees with the belief, and then asks what "now and then" means in your kitchen.

Louis Goffe and colleagues, using four waves of the UK National Diet and Nutrition Survey, found that adults who had takeaway meals at home at least once a week took in between about sixty and ninety more calories a day, averaged across the week, than those who had them rarely. That's a modest number, and it's a description of weekly takeaways, not nightly ones. I give it to make a point in the other direction. A weekly takeaway is a small thing, measurably. The research doesn't have much to say about the nightly one because it isn't a common enough pattern to study, which tells you something about how far from "now and then" the habit has drifted.

The word "fine" in the belief is doing two jobs. It's saying the takeaway isn't harmful, which at once a week it isn't, and it's saying that this takeaway, tonight, is one of the fine ones. The first is true. The second depends on last night. If last night was a plain plate and the night before was a plain plate, tonight's order is the now-and-then one, and it's fine, and it's also better, because a curry after two nights of pasta tastes like a curry. If last night was an order and the night before was a tray, tonight isn't now and then. It's the pattern, and the pattern is what this book is about.

So keep the takeaway. Keep it on purpose. Decide, at a time when you're not hungry, which night is the night, and have it then and enjoy it, and don't have the other five. That's not a rule about

takeaways. It's a rule about defaults, and the takeaway that's chosen is the one that was never the problem.

"I'll cook properly at the weekend"

This is the event, wearing a Sunday outfit. The plan is that the week is for ordering and the weekend is for real cooking, a roast, something from a book, a shop done on Saturday for it. And sometimes the weekend arrives and the roast happens, and it's good, and on Monday the question is back and the roast is gone.

The belief is that cooking is a thing you do properly or not at all. Properly means the event. Not at all means the app. And the six weekday dinners fall on the not-at-all side because they don't deserve the event, which is right, they don't. What they deserve is the plain plate, which is neither. The weekend cook who orders all week isn't a person who cooks. They're a person who does an event once a week and eats out of boxes in between, and the event, because it is one, gets skipped on the weekends when there's something on.

There's a version of this belief that works, which is batch cooking, a big pan of something on Sunday that becomes Monday and Tuesday. Lavelle's interviewees mentioned it as one of the things that helped them cook with basic ingredients, and if it suits you, do it. But I'd be careful with it, for a reason that's my own view. Batch cooking is still the event. It needs the Sunday, the shop and the hour, and on the Sunday when those aren't available, the week has no dinners in it at all. The plain plate doesn't need a Sunday. It needs fifteen minutes on the night, and it can happen on a Tuesday after a Sunday that went wrong.

Cook at the weekend if you like cooking at the weekend. But don't let the weekend carry the week. The week needs its own cooking, and the cooking the week needs is small.

"I need a recipe"

If you think you need a recipe, cooking is the event, because a recipe is the event's script. It has ingredients you don't have, in amounts you'd have to measure, in an order you'd have to follow with the phone propped against the kettle. A recipe turns dinner into a task with instructions, and a task with instructions is a thing you can fail at.

The plain plate has no recipe. It has a shape, and the shape is the same every time. Something starchy, which is the pasta, the rice, the potatoes, the bread. Something with protein in it, which is the eggs, the tin of beans, the cheese, the bit of chicken or fish if you've got it. A vegetable, which is whatever's in the fridge or the freezer. And one thing that makes it taste of something, which is the onion and garlic, or the jar of pesto, or the tin of tomatoes with salt, or soy sauce, or a squeeze of lemon and some butter. Put a starch, a protein, a vegetable and a flavour in a pan in an order that makes sense and you have a dinner, and the order that makes sense is the order that things take to cook, which you'll learn by the third time.

That's how most people who cook every night actually cook. They don't follow recipes on a Tuesday. They make the thing they make, and they make it a bit differently depending on what's in, and it's never quite the same and never quite wrong. Recipes are for Saturday, if you like Saturday cooking. They're also, I think, part of what built the event. Cooking on television and in books is recipe cooking, so recipe cooking looks like what cooking is, and the pasta

with the tin of tomatoes looks like not really cooking. It's the other way round. The pasta with the tin of tomatoes is what cooking is. The recipe is the exception.

So the plain plate needs you to know the shape and to have the shelf. It doesn't need you to know anything else. Chapter 20 will ask you to write down six of them, and you'll notice you didn't need to look any of them up.

"The kids won't eat it"

If you're cooking for children, the app has an extra argument, which is that the app knows what they'll eat and the pan doesn't. You make a plain plate and half of it comes back and there's a row, and the pizza doesn't come back and there isn't. Lavelle's interviewees named family food preferences as one of the things that stopped them cooking from basic ingredients, and anyone who's fed a six-year-old knows why.

I don't have a study for what follows and I'm not going to pretend I do, so take it as one way of thinking about it. The plain plate has a feature the takeaway doesn't, which is that its parts come apart. Pasta, sauce, cheese, peas. The child who won't eat the sauce can have the pasta and the cheese. The child who won't eat anything touching anything else can have the parts in a row. A takeaway is one thing, and the child either eats it or doesn't. A plain plate is four things and a child can usually be found who'll eat two of them.

The other feature is that it's the same six things, and the same six things are what children come to eat. A child who sees pasta with tomatoes on Tuesday every week starts to eat pasta with tomatoes, not because you argued but because it's Tuesday. Nothing in a takeaway rotation is ever the same twice, so nothing ever becomes familiar.

And the row, if I can say so, isn't about the food. It's at seven, when everyone's hungry and the question's unanswered and the answer's been argued about. Decide the six things once, with the children in the room if they're old enough to have a say, and the argument

moves from seven o'clock on Tuesday to a Sunday afternoon, where it's a conversation. What's on the plate on Tuesday is then just what's on the plate on Tuesday.

What the order costs you

The order costs money, and chapter 6 said the money isn't the argument, so I'll leave it there. The other costs are the ones nobody adds up.

It costs the wait. Forty minutes a night, hungry, on the phone, five nights a week, is over three hours of the week spent in a state that isn't rest and isn't dinner. The plain plate spends fifteen minutes on the same job and hands the other twenty-five back.

It costs the evening its shape. An evening that waits for a doorbell is organised around the doorbell. You can't go out, you can't start anything, you can't have a bath, because the food's coming. A plate that's on the table at twenty past seven leaves the evening open at half past.

It costs the box on the side, and the plate you didn't wash because it was only used for one thing, and the sense that the kitchen is a room you keep the fridge in.

It costs something to your health, and I'll put this in its place, which is supporting rather than central. Julia Wolfson and Sara Bleich, looking at nearly ten thousand adults in a United States survey, found that those in households where dinner was cooked six or seven times a week ate less overall, and less fat and sugar, than those where it was cooked once or not at all. Mills and colleagues, in over eleven thousand adults in a UK cohort, found that eating home-cooked main meals more than five times a week went with more fruit and vegetables and a greater chance of being

in the normal weight range than eating them fewer than three times. Those are associations and can't prove cause. They describe two groups of people, and the group that cooks eats a bit better, and it's the group you'd expect.

And it costs the thing chapter 18 is about, which is the cooking itself. Every night that's ordered is a night the plain plate didn't get made, and the plain plate doesn't get easier by not being made. The event grows in the dark. That's the cost the app never shows you, because the app doesn't know what you could have done.

What it does to cooking

The less you cook, the bigger cooking gets. That's the mechanism, and I think it's the one that keeps the habit going long after the reasons in chapter 2 have stopped applying.

Garcia and colleagues found that confidence is the thing cooking programmes reliably raise. Turn that round. Confidence is the thing not cooking reliably lowers. Every week without a pan, the plain plate looks a bit more like something you're not sure you can do, and the not-sure adds to the event, and the event makes tonight's order more reasonable, and tonight's order is another week without a pan. Nothing in that loop is a decision. It's just what happens to a skill that isn't used and a picture that isn't checked.

The event isn't fixed. It's the sum of everything you haven't done for a while. When you cooked every night, if you ever did, there was no event, there was just dinner. The recipe, the shop, the hour, the clean kitchen, those got added one at a time, each on a night when you didn't cook and needed a reason. Now they're the picture, and the picture is what you consult at seven, and the picture says an hour.

The good news is that it runs the other way at the same speed. The first plain plate is a bit awkward and takes twenty-five minutes and the onion's cut badly. The second one takes twenty. By the fifth, it's not a thing you decide to do, it's what happens at seven, and the picture of the event has gone quiet because the thing you actually

did was small. Confidence, as Garcia's review found, is the result cooking produces most reliably, and it doesn't need a course. It needs a pan and a Tuesday.

So the answer to "cooking's such a big thing" isn't to argue with the picture. It's to cook one small thing and let the picture correct itself, which it will, because the picture was built out of not cooking and can't survive contact with a plate of pasta.

The shelf

The method has three parts, and this is the first. The shelf is the short list of things that keep, bought without deciding, so that "there's nothing in" is never true.

What's on it. Pasta and rice, or whichever of those you'll actually eat. Potatoes, which keep for weeks in a dark cupboard. Onions and garlic. Tinned tomatoes, several. A tin or two of beans or chickpeas. Eggs. A hard cheese that keeps. Oil, salt, pepper, and one or two things that make food taste of something, a jar of pesto, a bottle of soy sauce, a lemon, stock cubes, a tube of tomato purée, chilli flakes. In the freezer, peas, spinach or sweetcorn, and one or two of the things you like that freeze, a bag of prawns, some chicken, fish, sausages. Bread, in the freezer too if you're one person. Butter. That's the shelf. It fits in one cupboard and one drawer of the freezer and it makes twenty dinners.

The standing shop. Once a week, at the same time, you look at the shelf and replace what's gone. It's a five-minute list because it's always the same list, and it can be done online with the last order repeated. The point is that it isn't decided. You don't shop for a meal. You shop for the shelf, and the meals come out of the shelf on the nights they're wanted. The fresh things, the pepper and the salad and the things that go off, are extras you add if you'll use them that week, and if you don't, the shelf still has dinner in it.

What it's for. The shelf makes every plain plate possible on every night. It isn't a menu. It's the ingredients for the six, which is chapter 20, and it's the reason the seven o'clock question has an

answer in the cupboard rather than only on the phone.

The Eatwell Guide, as chapter 11 said, counts frozen, tinned and dried alongside fresh. The shelf leans on that. A kitchen with a stocked shelf and an empty fridge can make dinner. A kitchen with a full fridge and no shelf usually can't, because the fridge is parts and the shelf is the thing that turns parts into a plate.

The six

This is the second part, and it's the one to do with a pen.

Write down six plain plates you can make without looking

anything up. Six dinners, each fifteen to twenty minutes, each made mostly from the shelf, each following the shape in chapter 15, a starch, a protein, a vegetable and something for flavour. If you can't think of six, think of three and borrow three. Pasta with tomatoes, onion and cheese. Eggs on toast with something green. A jacket potato with beans and cheese. Rice with a fried onion, a tin of chickpeas, spinach from the freezer and whatever spice is in the cupboard. Pasta with pesto and peas. A stir-fry with frozen prawns, soy sauce, and whatever vegetable's in. Those are six, and none of them is impressive, and all of them are dinner.

Put the list on the fridge.

Not in your head and not on the phone. On the fridge, where the seven o'clock question gets asked, so that the moment you open the door there are six answers in front of you before the app can offer its one.

Make each one once in the first fortnight. Badly, if that's how it goes. The first time takes longer and the onion's in lumps and you'll forget the salt. That's the point of the fortnight. By the end of it, each of the six has been done, and each one has moved from the event to the thing you did last Thursday, and the picture of cooking in your head has been checked against six real plates.

Then stop expanding. Six is enough. You'll get bored of them at some point and swap one out, and that's fine, but the repertoire stays small on purpose. The people who cook every night aren't the people with the most recipes. They're the people with the fewest, made most often. A small repertoire is what makes the deciding easy, and the deciding, as chapter 10 said, is the work. Six things you can make with your eyes closed beat sixty you'd have to look up.

I've written this with one adult in mind. If you're cooking for more, the six are the same six with the amounts doubled, and chapter 16 is about the children.

Decide before you're hungry

This is the third part. The shelf makes dinner possible and the six make it easy. This is what makes it happen, and it's the smallest part.

Sunday, five minutes. Look at the week. Which nights are you in. Which one is the takeaway night, if there is one, chosen now, on purpose. For the other nights, put one of the six against each, or don't, and just know that it'll be one of the six. That's the whole of it. You're not writing a menu. You're moving the seven o'clock question to a time when you can answer it.

The morning look. If Sunday's too far away, the morning is close enough. Before you leave the house, or while the kettle's on, ask what's for dinner and answer it. One of the six. Take the chicken out of the freezer if it's that one. That's ten seconds and it means seven o'clock arrives with the answer already in the room.

At seven, don't decide. This is the bit that makes the difference. When you get in, hungry, and the question comes, the answer is the one you gave this morning, and you don't reopen it. The app's offer is a reopening. It says, are you sure. The answer is that the deciding's done, and the pan goes on. If you find that you're standing at the fridge deciding anyway, the morning look was skipped, and that's the thing to fix tomorrow, not the dinner.

Ducrot and colleagues, as chapter 10 said, found that people who plan meals ahead, even occasionally, eat more varied and better-balanced diets. I'm not claiming the five minutes on Sunday will do

that. I'm claiming it takes the seven o'clock question away, and the seven o'clock question was where the order lived. Hunger is bad at deciding. The morning is fine at it. Let the morning do it.

The decision

Here's the rule. I keep the shelf stocked, I know six plain plates, and I decide dinner before I'm hungry.

That's it. It isn't a rule about takeaways, which you can still have, on purpose, on the night you chose. It isn't a rule about health, and it doesn't ask you to eat anything you don't like. It's a rule about the default. When nothing was decided, the default used to be the app. Now the default is one of the six, and the app is what you choose on Friday.

Three when-then plans, which are a form the research on planning supports, a specific situation paired with a specific act, so the act doesn't need deciding in the moment.

When I get in and the seven o'clock question comes, then I look at the list on the fridge and put the pan on before I sit down.

When I open the fridge and think there's nothing in, then I look at the shelf, not the fridge, and make the one of the six that the shelf can make.

When I find the app open in my hand on a night that wasn't the night, then I close it and set a timer for fifteen minutes and cook, and if I still want the takeaway at the end of the fifteen minutes I can have it tomorrow, on purpose.

What to expect, and this is my expectation and not a finding. The first week is awkward, the plates are plain and one of them goes wrong. The second week is easier because each of the six has been

done once. Somewhere in the second month the pan going on at seven stops being a decision and becomes what happens, which is what Phillippa Lally and colleagues found in a study of everyday habits, where a daily behaviour in a fixed setting became automatic over weeks and a missed day didn't undo it. The takeaway on Friday will taste better than any takeaway has in a year, because it'll be the only one. And the box on the side will be gone, replaced by a pan in the rack, which you'll notice one morning and not think much about, which is the point.

Shift work, no kitchen, fatigue, the flat-share, and when it's more than dinner

Shift work. If you get in at eleven at night or eat your main meal at three in the afternoon, the seven o'clock question is the eleven o'clock question or the three o'clock one, and the rule is the same. The shelf and the six don't care what time it is. What changes is the morning look, which becomes the look before the shift, and the takeaway night, which might be the one after a run of nights. The habit of deciding before you're hungry matters more on shifts, not less, because the hunger arrives at stranger times and the app is open all night.

No kitchen, or half of one. If you've got a kettle, a microwave and a fridge and nothing else, the six are different but they exist. A jacket potato is a microwave meal. Couscous is a kettle meal. Eggs can be done in a microwave if you look up how once. Tinned beans heat in a mug. The shape still holds, a starch, a protein, a vegetable, a flavour, and the shelf is smaller. The point is the same. Decide before you're hungry, and have the makings in.

Fatigue and disability. If a condition means that fifteen minutes standing at a hob is fifteen minutes you can't always give, the method bends. A stool at the hob. The six chosen so that three of them are sit-down meals, the jacket potato, the eggs, the couscous. The ready meal kept as the honest fallback, as chapter 12 said, and used without guilt on the days the body says so. The rule is still about the default, and the default on a bad day can be the tray. What matters is that it's the default on the bad days and not on all of them.

The flat-share. If the kitchen's shared and the shelf gets eaten, the shelf gets a name on it, and the six are chosen to fit one cupboard. If it's the sight of other people's washing up that keeps you out of the kitchen, the pan and the foot of counter in chapter 9 are all you need, and the earlier book on dishes covers the rest.

Low mood. If you've stopped cooking because you've stopped doing most things, and this has gone on for two weeks or more, the NHS lists losing interest in things you used to enjoy and lacking energy among the symptoms of depression, and says to see a GP. This book's method is small, but it's still a method, and a person who can't get up isn't going to be helped by a list on the fridge. Get the help, and the app can carry dinner while you do.

When food itself is the problem. If you're eating very little, or eating and then trying to undo it, or the takeaway is part of a pattern of eating a lot very fast and feeling out of control, the NHS says to see a GP as soon as you can, because those are signs of an eating disorder and there's treatment for it. The charity Beat has a helpline and its details are on the NHS eating disorders page. This book is about a default and not about a disorder, and I'd rather you closed it than used it in place of help. An earlier book in this series, *Eat when you're hungry*, is about eating for reasons other than hunger, and is the right neighbour for readers whose evenings are about feelings rather than dinner.

When the app came back

It'll come back. A week of late finishes, a cold, a fortnight when the shelf ran out and the standing shop didn't happen, and one night you're on the sofa with the box and it's been five nights in a row and the list on the fridge has a splash of something on it.

The first thing to know is that five nights isn't the habit back. Lally's study found that a missed day didn't materially set back a habit that was forming, and I'd extend that, as my own view, to a missed week. The six are still on the fridge. You still know how to make them. What's gone is the shelf, probably, and the morning look, certainly, and both of those are ten minutes to put back.

The second thing is not to make the return an event. The temptation, after a lapse, is to plan a proper week of cooking, a shop, a menu, a fresh start on Monday. That's the event again, and the event is what got you here. The return is one plain plate tonight, from whatever the shelf has left, and the standing shop tomorrow. Not a plan. A pan.

The third thing is to ask which belief let the app back in. Usually it's one of chapters 3 to 16, and usually it's the same one each time. If it was tiredness, the six need a couple more sit-down meals in them. If it was "there's nothing in", the standing shop needs a fixed day. If it was "I've earned it", the takeaway night needs choosing on Sunday so that Tuesday can't claim it. The lapse tells you which part of the method was thin, and that's useful, and it's the only use to make of it.

And no counting. Not five nights in a row, not a streak, not a score.
The plain plate on the sixth night is just dinner, and the person
who made it is the same person who ordered on the fifth, with the
pan on.

Seven o'clock, the pan

It's ten to seven. You've been in for twenty minutes. The question comes, and the answer was given at eight this morning, so it isn't a question. It's pasta with the tin of tomatoes, because it's Tuesday and that's what Tuesday is.

The pan of water goes on. While it heats, an onion gets chopped, badly, and goes in the other pan with some oil. The tin gets opened. Salt. The pasta goes in the water. Ten minutes of standing there with the radio on, stirring occasionally, tasting once. The pasta gets drained, the sauce goes on it, some cheese gets grated over, and it's on a plate at twelve minutes past seven. The pan gets a rinse while you find a fork.

It wasn't an event. It wasn't anything. It was dinner, and it was nice, and the evening's yours from twenty past. On Friday you'll order a curry, on purpose, and it'll be the best curry you've had in a year.

One action. Write down six plain plates, now, before you close this. Put the list on the fridge. Tomorrow morning, before you leave, pick one. That's all the method is. The rest is a pan.

Notes

These notes give the sources behind the claims in each chapter, and say where I'm giving my own interpretation. The book isn't medical or dietary advice. If you have a condition that affects what or how you eat, your GP or a registered dietitian is the person to ask. The examples throughout, the half pepper, the app that opens on the usual place, the curry on Friday, the child who eats two of four parts, are invented to illustrate and aren't drawn from real people. Cooking times are my estimates for ordinary hobs and ordinary pans.

Studies were checked on 26 September 2026 by reading their published abstracts. None was read in full, and none carried a retraction or correction notice at that date. Where a paper is cross-sectional, it describes an association at one point in time and can't show what causes what, and I've tried to say so each time.

Chapter 1. No sources. The terms are the book's own.

Chapter 3. Jabs and Devine, "Time scarcity and food choices: an overview", *Appetite* 47, 2006, pages 196 to 204. A review, not a study. Monsivais, Aggarwal and Drewnowski, "Time spent on home food preparation and indicators of healthy eating", *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 47, 2014, pages 796 to 802. 1,319 adults in a population survey in the United States, 2008 to 2009, cross-sectional. The claim about the attention the wait takes is mine.

Chapter 4. Adams and colleagues, "Prevalence and socio-demographic correlates of cooking skills in UK adults: cross-sectional analysis of data from the UK National Diet and Nutrition Survey", International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity 12, 2015, article 99. 509 respondents, self-reported confidence. Lavelle and colleagues, "Learning cooking skills at different ages: a cross-sectional study", International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity 13, 2016, article 119. 1,049 adults aged 20 to 60 in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Garcia, Reardon, McDonald and Vargas-Garcia, "Community interventions to improve cooking skills and their effects on confidence and eating behaviour", Current Nutrition Reports 5, 2016, pages 315 to 322. A narrative review. The driving comparison is mine.

Chapter 5. No research sources. The timings are my estimates, and the claim about attention is my interpretation.

Chapter 6. Monsivais and colleagues, as above. The earlier books referred to are Put the card away and Ask the price of the evening.

Chapter 7. No research sources. The earlier book referred to is The biscuit tin. The argument is mine.

Chapter 8. Mills and colleagues, "Health and social determinants and outcomes of home cooking: a systematic review of observational studies", Appetite 111, 2017, pages 116 to 134. 38 studies, mostly cross-sectional, from 13,341 records. The claims about cooking for one are mine.

Chapter 9. No research sources. The earlier book referred to is The dishes take four minutes.

Chapter 10. Ducrot and colleagues, "Meal planning is associated with food variety, diet quality and body weight status in a large sample of French adults", International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity 14, 2017, article 12. 40,554 participants in the NutriNet-Santé study, cross-sectional, self-reported weight and height. The claim that hunger is bad at deciding is my observation.

Chapter 11. The NHS Eatwell Guide, at [nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk), read on 26 September 2026. Lavelle and colleagues, "Barriers and facilitators to cooking from 'scratch' using basic or raw ingredients: a qualitative interview study", Appetite 107, 2016, pages 383 to 391. 27 interviews on the island of Ireland. A qualitative study, which describes what people said and can't say how common it is.

Chapter 12. Lam and Adams, "Association between home food preparation skills and behaviour, and consumption of ultra-processed foods: cross-sectional analysis of the UK National Diet and Nutrition Survey (2008-2009)", International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity 14, 2017, article 68. The same 509 adults as chapter 4. The claim that heating a tray builds nothing is mine.

Chapter 13. Goffe and colleagues, "Relationship between mean daily energy intake and frequency of consumption of out-of-home meals in the UK National Diet and Nutrition Survey", International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity 14, 2017,

article 131. The figures of 63 to 87 kilocalories a day are for adults having takeaway meals at home at least weekly compared with rarely, from four-day food diaries.

Chapter 14. Lavelle and colleagues 2016, the interview study, as above. The reservation about batch cooking is mine.

Chapter 15. No research sources. The shape of the plain plate is my description and loosely follows the Eatwell Guide's food groups.

Chapter 16. Lavelle and colleagues 2016, the interview study, as above, for family preferences as a barrier. Everything else in the chapter is my suggestion and is said to be.

Chapter 17. Wolfson and Bleich, "Is cooking at home associated with better diet quality or weight-loss intention?", *Public Health Nutrition* 18, 2015, pages 1397 to 1406. 9,569 adults in the 2007 to 2010 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey in the United States, cross-sectional. Mills and colleagues, "Frequency of eating home cooked meals and potential benefits for diet and health: cross-sectional analysis of a population-based cohort study", *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity* 14, 2017, article 109. 11,396 adults aged 29 to 64 in the Fenland cohort. The other costs are my observations.

Chapter 18. Garcia and colleagues, as above. The mechanism described is my interpretation.

Chapter 19. The NHS Eatwell Guide, as above. The contents of the shelf are my suggestion.

Chapter 21. Ducrot and colleagues, as above.

Chapter 22. Gollwitzer and Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement: a meta-analysis of effects and processes", *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 38, 2006, pages 69 to 119, for the when-then form. Lally, van Jaarsveld, Potts and Wardle, "How are habits formed: modelling habit formation in the real world", *European Journal of Social Psychology* 40, 2010, pages 998 to 1009. 96 volunteers, 82 with usable data. The rule hasn't been tested as a package and what I say to expect is my expectation.

Chapter 23. The NHS pages on the symptoms of depression in adults and on eating disorders, at [nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk), read on 26 September 2026. The earlier book referred to is *Eat when you're hungry*. No claim is made about the effectiveness of any service.

Chapter 24. Lally and colleagues, as above. The extension from a missed day to a missed week is mine.

Looked up and not used. Wolfson and colleagues, "What does cooking mean to you?", *Appetite* 2016, had no abstract available to me and isn't cited. Reicks and colleagues' 2014 review of cooking interventions found positive effects but weak designs, and says nothing this book needed beyond Garcia. Burgoine and colleagues' 2014 study in the *BMJ* of takeaway outlets near home, work and commuting routes in Cambridgeshire is about the environment rather than the evening, and isn't cited. Taillie's 2018 study of cooking trends in the United States found cooking increasing, especially among men, but is about another country and isn't cited. Jaworowska and Force's 2025 analysis of fat in London takeaway meals was read and left out because this isn't a book about what's in the box.