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Create a Theme.
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Members Helping Members™

Combating Pandemic Meal Fatigue

As consumers grapple with the ongoing restrictions around COVID-19, they are eating at home a lot more. Pulling out favorite recipes, making bread, watching the cooking shows for tips were all great pastimes – for a while. Now pandemic meal fatigue is setting in as people tire of the same meals day after day and the cooking and cleaning up that goes with it. We hear it anecdotally from retailers, and consumer research also points to this trend. According to the 2020 U.S. Grocery Shopper Trends report, in mid-May, 23% of shoppers said their priority when cooking is to spend as little time as possible doing it.

So, PMA asked some members for their best tips about making meals easy, fun and different. Many of them use convenience items from throughout the grocery store. Using take-out from restaurants could work as well. These tips can spark ideas with shoppers that enliven their at-home meal planning and cut down on prep and cleanup. Use them in your communications with shoppers online, in circulars, on social media and in-store.

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Make the Meal an Occasion

Al fresco Happy Hour: Make a charcuterie board – sausages, cheeses, fresh fruit, olives – and set it up outside, with favorite drinks (fruit juice cocktails – spiked or not).

Date Night at home: Pick up a frozen pizza and pair with a pre-made Caesar salad. Top your pizza with canned or fresh-cut pineapple to make it Hawaiian! For dessert try pre-cut fruit like apple slices or strawberries with a chocolate dip (found in produce department); or try combining peanut butter and yogurt for a delicious dip!

Date Night at home number 2: Pick up a rotisserie chicken; seasoned, microwavable potatoes from produce; a salad kit; and your favorite beverage. Maybe a fruit tart from the bakery department for dessert. Choose your favorite movie or binge-worthy series, and you have dinner-theater. Don't forget to pick up flowers at the store to add to the date-night ambiance.

Dress up for dinner at home: You and your safe 'COVID-19' circle put on your dress clothes as if you're headed out for a fancy dinner to make it a memorable evening. Adding flowers from the store makes it even more special.

Safari Night: Set up a safari with all the stuffed or statue animals you have – or print pictures of your favorites. Learn about what they eat and how they live (and whether they get along with each other). Choose foods that they would eat or foods from the places they call home and have a progressive dinner around the living room or the dining room table.

Virtual reunion meetups: Connect with family or friends, near or far, for a virtual reunion over appetizers and cocktails. Allow everyone a two-minute timer for quick and uninterrupted life updates. Veggie kabobs with sauce/dip. Quick-to-heat frozen snacks. Deli faves. Or have someone 'host' it and give everyone the list of foods and drinks (with recipes if they want but prefer convenience items from the store). Then do it again and rotate the hosting.

Cuisine-themed night: If pizza night is your go-to, add a homemade twist. Make your dough from scratch or use a frozen or refrigerated pizza crust. Find ingredients from your cupboards, like marinara sauce, and pair with cheese, pre-cut fresh or frozen vegetables, and fresh herbs that can be used to put your own spin on an easy and delicious meal that's sure to be a crowd-pleaser.

Let Someone Else Do the Work

Find delicious, nutritious ready-to-eat and pre-prepped options in the produce department and beyond.

Convenient staples include:

- Ready-to-eat vegetables and fruits (e.g. pre-cooked and peeled beets, pre-chopped and washed greens, spiralized vegetables, crumbled cauliflower, bananas and pre-cut fruit).
- Canned beans (e.g. black beans, lentils and chickpeas), fish (e.g. tuna, salmon, sardines), and vegetables and fruits (e.g. corn, beets, green beans, peaches, pineapple) and many more.
- Microwaveable brown rice and baby potatoes; whole grain bread and tortillas.
- Frozen fruits/vegetables (e.g. berries, mango, avocado, okra, spinach, kale, squash, carrots, onion).
- Yogurt, kefir, cheese, and milk.
- Nuts, seeds, and nut butters.
- Stir-fry strips, rotisserie chicken and eggs.

Missing your favorite seafood place? Get the grocery store seafood department to cook your seafood or fish, pair it with a salad kit from produce and/or a veggie side from the deli department. No cooking and quick clean up.

Picnic: Set up your picnic blanket inside (no bugs) or outside with fresh-cut veggies and dips, deli meats and cheeses for sandwiches, and fresh-cut fruit for dessert.

Jazz up store staples: Choose pasta and a sauce or a frozen pizza, then add some veggies and herbs to make it your own. Tried-and-true favorites: Add already-sliced mushrooms, chopped peppers and/or onions, hot peppers for a spicy dish, spinach or other greens. Don't forget the fresh herbs – oregano, basil, parsley, chives.

Deconstruct: Make a favorite easier with convenience items, like a twist on caprese salad. Use grape tomatoes (cut in half or whole, multi-colored ones make it even more beautiful), mozzarella pearls, your favorite store-bought balsamic, and basil (fresh leaves or pre-chopped from the store).

For pasta lovers: Cook frozen tortellini or ravioli with a store-bought tomato sauce, adding frozen or fresh spinach and ricotta cheese.

Add-ons for variety: Vegetables can also be a great addition to tuna salad or other sandwiches. Add celery, cucumber, or leftover greens for a nice crunch. Experiment!

Surround Your Meal With Something Fun

Cook a theme dinner: Try Asian night, Mexican or Italian. It can be fun to try foods or a whole meal centered around a unique culture. Visit the international aisle at the store to help with meal items. You can add a cocktail or mocktail and themed music to match. Look up fun facts about the place/culture. Get everyone involved so no one person has to do it all.

Best meals ever: Recreate the best meal you had on vacation – that romantic dinner from your honeymoon, an adventure with foods from a different culture you visited, the reunion picnic the family is still talking about, the hole in the wall you found with the best Huli Huli Chicken in Hawaii. Pull out the photos and relive the day.

Host a virtual cooking event: Our family heritage is largely from Finland, and we recently had a virtual Finnish Nissua cooking event. Everyone made their own recipe and we gave tips and tricks to our other family members.

Have a topping bar. It makes any meal fun and feel like less work for the ‘cook.’ Try a baked potato that you topped with cooked ground meat or cooked beans, broccoli, cheese. Or a taco bar or fajita bar. The whole family can enjoy topping their own meal to their likings.

‘Mame’ night: Take a cue from this show and have Christmas – or any other holiday you long for (or missed during the pandemic shut-down) – out of season. Break out grandma’s recipes, sing the songs and dress the part!

And they’re off! Have your favorite sporting championship meal: Super Bowl, World Archery Championships, the Kentucky Derby, World Series, World Curling Championship, even the World Dodgeball Championship. Every event has its must-serve foods, so grab the guac, the crudites, the chip-and-dip, etc. Top that beer with a lime wedge!

Skewered: Using skewers can make meals more fun and feel like summer! Pick up pre-cut fruits and vegetables, fresh herbs and cheeses that you enjoy. Try melon pieces, feta cubes, mint and a honey drizzle. Or try grape tomatoes, bocconcini balls, basil and balsamic vinegar glaze. Easy and fun.

Watermelon pizza: Pick up some pre-cut watermelon slices, top with yogurt, fresh or frozen berries, and sprinkle nuts and seeds to add some crunch and healthy fat. Shredded coconut and honey are also nice toppings. This is a fun one to make with kids!

Grill inspiration: Check the produce department for vegetables that are prepped and ready to grill! They can be a great side or topping on burgers or hot dogs. For an even quicker side, try pre-made salads with grains and beans (quinoa, chickpea, or pasta salads) or potato salad. Enjoy grilled fruit for a simple dessert. Try peach halves, pineapple slices or apple wedges – complement it with cold yogurt, whipped cream or vanilla ice cream.

Competitive edge: Have an at-home cooking competition, just like on the food shows. Use food you already have in your fridge/pantry, gather a few ingredients, set a timer, and make dinner time into a fun, interactive competition with family members to see who can make the most creative meal. If you have a big family, depending on ages, give each person their own day, or make teams. Living alone? Make this a virtual competition with family or friends. The goal is to have fun and cook up something delicious.

In-laws' best gift: Most of us have accumulated a collection of cooking appliances, but we don't use them when they are packed away. Break out that appliance – the slow cooker, multi-cooker, blender, air fryer, you name it – and see what creations you can whip up. For example, consider making a pizza crust in the blender, or overnight oats in your slow cooker to have breakfast ready as soon as you wake up.

Game night: Have a meal-time scavenger hunt or reality show. Make a list of the ingredients for your meal and have the family find them and/or prep them (age-appropriate). Then assemble, cook or prepare and enjoy. Don't forget the photos to post on social media.

Beverage hacks: Jazz up your beverage with lemon, lime, or frozen berries. Add cucumber slices or mint for a refreshing twist in water or iced tea. For adult beverages, try some fresh fruit juice, club soda, your favorite adult ingredient(s), and garnish with fruit. Or add herbs (thyme, lavender, basil, cilantro) to make a refreshing cocktail.

Make a 'snack meal': The healthiest, smartest snacks are made from combination of food groups. Make it a game to find items from each food group and pair them to create a unique and innovative snack combo. You can choose go-to faves like apples with peanut butter, but you can also opt for more creative combos, such as a deconstructed pizza with whole grain crackers or pita, marinara sauce as a dip and slices of turkey or regular pepperoni with a cheese stick. Whatever you choose, it will be fun.

Fondue your dinner: Create a spread of meats, veggies, and starches and have each family member select their favorite meat (chicken, steak, or shrimp), some colorful veggies, (asparagus, Brussel sprouts, or zucchini) and a starch (potatoes) to cook. You'll hear the '70s calling you!

Turn Leftovers Into Something New

Homemade Pizza: This can be a fun family affair, and a great way to use leftovers. Grab some pizza dough (or crust alternatives like frozen cauliflower crust, tortillas or naan) and everyone can make their own creation! Some great 'leftover' pizza toppings include: roasted vegetables, rotisserie chicken, taco fixings and even salad blends.

Combatting Pandemic Meal Fatigue

Chopped™ Challenge: Split into team, and give each team a basket full of leftover ingredients. Add a mystery ingredient if you want to. Create a simple scoring system, judge the meals once they're complete, and pick a Chopped winner at the end! Don't forget social media bragging rights.

Refresh: Look at what you have in the way of leftovers and see them as ingredients. Use an app or your imagination to envision these leftovers in a new dish, even a dish for a different meal occasion. You'll need only a few ingredients to make it new. Leftover pot roast? Shred some potatoes as a base, shred the meat and chop the veggies, then crack eggs on top. Breakfast pot roast hash.

Repurpose: Use leftover chicken (or other meats) in sandwiches, tacos, or salads. Try a salad with pre-washed arugula, canned/fresh-cooked beets, and crumbled goat cheese – drizzle with olive oil and seasonings of choice. Add a sweet touch with pomegranate seeds or dried fruit. Or add leftover vegetables to omelets or scrambled eggs. Sprinkle some shredded cheese and serve with toast or in a whole grain tortilla! Add avocado and hot peppers for creaminess and heat.

Power Bowls: Use leftover vegetables in power bowls. Mix leftover veggies with rice and canned/leftover beans, corn or green beans. Make it summery by adding fresh herbs, grape tomato, and a lemon-olive oil dressing.

Frozen treats: Freeze leftover fruit to add to smoothies or blend it up with yogurt for a thick and creamy frozen dessert!