

README for Mel's Meal Planning System

How to use Mel's Meal Planning System

#1 Make a fresh copy of the template

 Mel's Meal Planning System [Shared]

#2 Set your food intentions for the year

How do you want to feed yourself this year? How much effort do you want to put into cooking? Do you want to focus on quick, easy, repeatable recipes? Or, would you prefer to try lots of new things?

Is budgeting important to you? Is your goal to use more coupons? Reduce food waste? Are you following any new dietary guidelines for your health or for the health of somebody in your household?

Set some intentions.

For example, my intentions for 2026 look like:

- Reduce food waste as much as possible
- Eat 30 unique plants each week
- Stick to a budget of under \$1,000 / mo

#3 Start your Recipes inspiration list

On the 'Recipes' tab in the Meal Planning System, take a few minutes to pull together some resources for recipe inspiration.

Do you have a Pinterest board where you keep ideas? Link it here.

A favorite food blog? Link it.

A folder of phone photos you took of old family recipes? Drop it in.

#4 Schedule your inventory / cleanout sessions

Schedule 4x per year to take total inventory of the food items in your house.

Generally, I may have as many as 200 food items in my kitchen at any given time—especially if I'm counting things like spices, condiments and liqueurs.

That means, for me, the inventory and cleanout process generally takes a full hour. You may need more time or less time, depending on the size of your kitchen and the items you have stashed.

Here's the process for those deep inventory / cleanout sessions:

- Cabinet by cabinet, shelf by shelf, take every item you have out and put it on a neutral space like a counter or a table
- Check items for expiration dates → toss anything that's past date
- List items in the rows on the 'Inventory' tab on the Meal Planning System spreadsheet
 - Note if you have any multiples x 2, x 3
- Before you put items back, clean and wipe down the shelf or cabinet space
- Put items back in "first in, first out" so open items and old items are the most visible

I like to schedule my inventory / cleanout sessions once per quarter, with a more thorough cleanout over the New Year holidays.

#5 Schedule your weekly planning sessions

Block out time every week to do a mini-inventory session and plan for the week ahead. My planning generally takes about 30 minutes on Saturday mornings.

Here's the process for those weekly planning sessions:

- Spot-check your inventory
 - You don't have to go through every item every week; just throw out any rotten perishables and identify the things you definitely want to use up in the week ahead
- Cross-check your weekly calendar
 - Dinner party invites? Traveling out of town? Family gatherings? Mark any days where you anticipate you won't need to cook because of other priorities in your schedule
- Pick your recipes!
 - For me, because I'm trying to reduce food waste, I usually start by Googling for the most perishable food items + recipe or Googling for a list of items I want to use, i.e. "romaine miso recipe" which might yield a link to a Miso Caesar Salad
 - ChatGPT also works great for this
 - Then, I fill in with items from my 'Recipes' tab where I've identified things I want to try or things I want to cook again
 - I write down dinner recipes for each day in the 'Calendar' tab of the Meal Planning System spreadsheet
- Build your grocery list
 - Compare your recipes for the week against the list of items in your 'Inventory' tab
 - Any ingredients for your recipes that you don't have in stock become first on your 'Groceries' list for the week
 - Break out your grocery shopping list by store (optional)

[New] Restaurant Rotations

How to set up a restaurant rotation

Do you have a set of restaurants you like to visit over and over again?

You may find it helpful to add a dropdown menu with your top most frequented restaurants for dine-in, take out or delivery.

C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	
25						
26					Restaurant 1	
26					Restaurant 1	
26					Restaurant 2	
26					Restaurant 3	
26					Restaurant 4	
26					Restaurant 5	
26					Restaurant 6	
26						pen icon

If you need help identifying which restaurants are worthy of the regular rotation, you can use the 'Restaurant Rotation' tab to list out everywhere you dined last year.

You might find it helpful to cross-reference your credit card spending or budget tool for an average spend per restaurant if you want to optimize for meals under a certain budget threshold.

If you use a tool like [YNAB](#) you can search across All Accounts and filter by restaurant to quickly get an average spend for last year.

All Accounts

						-\$943.81		
						Selected Total (9)		
		Cleared Balance	Uncleared Balance	Working Balance				
		Add Transaction	File Import	Undo	Redo			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	ACCOUNT	DATE	PAYEE	CATEGORY	MEMO		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Delta SkyMiles® Pla...	11/16/2025	LA PARRILLA #1	Dining Out  Restaurants		\$119.87	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Delta SkyMiles® Pla...	09/14/2025	LA PARRILLA #1	Dining Out  Restaurants	Late lunch	\$56.22	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Delta SkyMiles® Pla...	07/21/2025	LA PARRILLA #1	Dining Out  Restaurants	Drinks, chips, guac, etc.	\$116.14	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Delta SkyMiles® Pla...	06/23/2025	LA PARRILLA #1	Dining Out  Restaurants	Margs, chips, guac, etc.	\$119.02	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Delta SkyMiles® Pla...	06/09/2025	LA PARRILLA #1	Dining Out  Restaurants		\$77.10	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Delta SkyMiles® Pla...	04/21/2025	LA PARRILLA #1	Dining Out  Restaurants	Drinks, guac, tacos	\$75.51	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Delta SkyMiles® Pla...	03/16/2025	LA PARRILLA #1	Dining Out  Restaurants	Dinner with Michael	\$95.44	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Delta SkyMiles® Pla...	02/21/2025	LA PARRILLA #1	Dining Out  Restaurants	Dinner with the fam	\$136.20	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Delta SkyMiles® Pla...	01/16/2025	LA PARRILLA #1	Dining Out  Restaurants	Girls night	\$148.31	

Some transactions are hidden by your search for "la pa".