MY ZERO WASTE KITCHEN

HOLISTIC LIVING · CLEAN COOKING

The 5-Day Cascading *Meal* Challenge

One big cook on day one, five different dinners by Friday, and nothing left forgotten in the back of the fridge.

Chicken cascade
Roast, tacos, fried rice, broth, soup

Vegetarian cascade
One pot of beans, five meals

Safety clock
USDA timing for every leftover

Design your own
A blank cascade worksheet

myzerowastekitchen.com

2026 edition

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Cook once. Let it fall forward.

A cascade is a plan where each meal hands something to the next one. The roast becomes tacos, the bones become broth, the broth becomes soup. You cook less, and leftovers have a job before they're made.

Day 1 Big cook → **Day 2** Remix → **Day 3** Fry it → **Day 4** Broth night → **Day 5** Soup & reset

The safety clock

A cascade only works if it respects the leftovers window. Here's the timing I build every plan around.

RULE	WHAT IT MEANS FOR THE CASCADE	SOURCE
Refrigerate within 2 hours	Pick the meat and portion the rice the same night you cook. Within 1 hour if it's above 90°F.	1, 4
Cooked leftovers: 3 to 4 days	Day 1 food is eaten by day 4. Anything for day 5 goes in the freezer on day 1.	1, 2
Cooked rice: 3 to 4 days	Day 1 rice is fried rice on day 3, well inside the window.	5
Soups and stews: 3 to 4 days	Broth made on day 2 is used by day 5. Freeze extra, 2 to 3 months for best quality.	2
Shallow containers, about 2 in. deep	Large amounts cool faster divided up. An ice bath helps a pot of broth.	1, 6
Cook poultry to 165°F, reheat to 165°F	Check with a thermometer. Bring broth and soup to a rolling boil when reheating.	1, 3
Thaw in the fridge	Move the frozen portion to the fridge the day before you need it.	1, 4

Label with day numbers
Write "D1" and the date on everything from the big cook.

Keep a scrap bag going
Trim from every meal goes in the freezer bag for broth night.

Fresh add-ins each day
A new sauce, herb or crunchy topping keeps day 4 from tasting like day 1.

When in doubt, freeze it on day 1. Frozen food kept at 0°F stays safe; the freezer only costs a little quality over time (source 2). It's the cheapest insurance a cascade has.

PLAN ONE

One roast chicken, five dinners

DAY 1

Roast chicken, vegetables and a big pot of rice

Roast a whole chicken to 165°F (source 3) with a pan of carrots, onions and potatoes. Cook twice the rice you need. **Same night:** pull all the meat and split it three ways: tacos (fridge), fried rice (fridge), soup (freezer). Spread the extra rice to cool, then refrigerate. Carcass goes in the fridge.

Hands forward: 2 chicken portions, 1 frozen portion, rice, carcass, veg trim

DAY 2

Chicken tacos, and broth on the back burner

Warm the taco portion with leftover roasted vegetables, cumin and lime. Add quick cabbage slaw. While you eat, simmer the carcass with your scrap bag, a bay leaf and peppercorns. Strain, then cool it fast in shallow containers or an ice bath (source 1).

Hands forward: broth, roasted veg odds

DAY 3

Chicken fried rice

Cold day-1 rice fries best. Add the second chicken portion, a couple of eggs, frozen peas, the last roasted vegetables and soy sauce. Broccoli stems and green onion ends are perfect here.

Uses: rice and chicken from day 1, both inside 3 to 4 days (sources 1, 5)

DAY 4

Brothy noodle bowls

Bring half the broth to a rolling boil (source 1). Add noodles, greens and a soft egg. **Tonight:** move the frozen chicken portion to the fridge to thaw for tomorrow.

Uses: day-2 broth · **Moves:** frozen chicken to the fridge

DAY 5

Chicken and vegetable soup, then reset

Rest of the broth, the thawed chicken, and every fresh vegetable still in the crisper. Eat what you want and freeze the rest in portions for a future lunch. Day 5 is also when you plan next week's big cook.

Uses: broth from day 2, chicken thawed in the fridge (sources 1, 2)

Broth tip: onion ends, carrot peels, celery tops and herb stems all belong in the pot with the carcass. Go easy on cabbage and broccoli (bitter), potato peels (cloudy) and beets (everything turns magenta). Our root-to-stem post has the full method (source 7).

PLAN TWO

One pot of beans, five dinners

DAY 1

Beans from dry, roasted vegetables and a pot of grain

Cook a big pot of black beans or chickpeas, roast two pans of seasonal vegetables, and make extra rice or farro. Dinner is a grain bowl with tahini. **Same night:** freeze one portion of beans in their liquid for day 5, and refrigerate the rest within 2 hours (source 1).

Hands forward: beans, 1 frozen bean portion, grain, roasted veg, veg trim

DAY 2

Bean and roasted-vegetable tacos

Mash some beans with garlic and lime, pile on roasted vegetables, top with slaw and a yogurt or avocado sauce. While they're on the table, simmer the scrap bag into vegetable broth and cool it quickly.

Hands forward: vegetable broth

DAY 3

Vegetable fried rice with eggs

Day-1 rice, a few eggs, the rest of the roasted vegetables, frozen peas and a handful of beans. Chopped herb stems go in with the garlic.

Uses: grain and vegetables from day 1, inside 3 to 4 days (sources 1, 5)

DAY 4

Stuffed sweet potatoes

Bake sweet potatoes and fill them with the last of the day-1 beans, greens wilted in a splash of broth, and any leftover sauce. **Tonight:** move the frozen beans to the fridge.

Uses: day-1 beans (last day) · **Moves:** frozen beans to the fridge

DAY 5

Minestrone, then reset

Vegetable broth, the thawed beans, a little pasta and every fresh vegetable left in the crisper. Freeze extra soup in portions. Plan next week's big cook while it simmers.

Uses: broth from day 2, beans thawed in the fridge (sources 1, 2)

Make it vegan: skip the eggs on day 3 and use tofu, and use the avocado sauce on day 2. Everything else works as written.

Beans from a can?
Fine. Once they're cooked into a meal, treat them like any leftover: 3 to 4 days (source 1).

Save the bean liquid
Freeze the day-5 beans in it. It thickens the minestrone.

Swap the grain
Farro, brown rice or quinoa all fry well cold.

YOUR TURN

Design your own cascade

Day 1 big cook _____

Freeze on day 1 (for day 5) _____

Broth or stock day _____

DAY	MEAL	USES (FROM DAY)	FRESH ADD-INS	EAT-BY CHECK
1		Big cook		
2				
3				
4				Last day for day-1 food
5				From the freezer

Sources

1. USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service, "Leftovers and Food Safety." fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/leftovers-and-food-safety
2. FoodSafety.gov, "Cold Food Storage Chart." foodsafety.gov/food-safety-charts/cold-food-storage-charts
3. FoodSafety.gov, "Safe Minimum Internal Temperature Chart." foodsafety.gov/food-safety-charts/safe-minimum-internal-temperatures
4. FoodSafety.gov, "4 Steps to Food Safety." foodsafety.gov/keep-food-safe/4-steps-to-food-safety
5. Nebraska Extension, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, "Freezing Rice and Pasta" (2022). food.unl.edu/article/freezing-rice-and-pasta
6. Lisa Franzen-Castle, Nebraska Extension, "Making Leftovers Planned-Overs." food.unl.edu/cook-it-quick-documents/makeover-your-leftovers.pdf
7. My Zero Waste Kitchen, "5 Root-to-Stem Recipes That Slash Kitchen Waste" (scrap broth method). myzerowastekitchen.com/root-to-stem-recipes-kitchen-waste/

Want the whole week planned? The Zero-Waste Meal Prep System is our premium guide: a 2-hour Sunday session, storage charts, four sample plans and printable worksheets, at myzerowastekitchen.com.

This guide is general guidance, not medical, nutrition or food-safety advice. Follow standard food-safety practice and keep your fridge at 40°F or below and freezer at 0°F (source 4). © 2026 My Zero Waste Kitchen, a Dan Duda Ventures company.