For most folks, November marks the beginning of the festive feasting season, which usually lasts until January. Most households have already started stocking their pantries with their favorite herbs and spices, fresh bottles of pure vanilla and lemon extract, sugar, cornmeal, and cans of cranberry sauce, chicken broth, and evaporated milk. All of these items are purchased in anticipation of upcoming gatherings, where family and friends come together to thank God for the year's blessing.

Before I get too misty-eyed, I want to rewind just a little. I need to ask a rather personal question. "Are your pantries clean??" If the answer is no, stop right now and step away from the pantry. Let's talk about simple and budget-friendly ways to bring order to your cabinets and pantries so that you can successfully host the holiday dinner that you that have been seeing in your mind's eye.

1. Clear It All Out

Whether you have a shelved walk-in pantry or cabinets, the first step to creating order is to remove all of the contents. This way you can take inventory of what you have and make a list of what you still need to purchase. This is also a great opportunity to combine the two half-used boxes of salt into one. (Remember to toss the empty box.) In addition, throw out items having expired "use by" dates. (At least, don't serve the expired food to guests-food poisoning has a funny way of ruining an otherwise happy Thanksgiving feast!) As you are pulling the food out of the pantry, group similar items together. You don't have to be a neat freak for this to work. It really is easy to gather the spices, the soup cans and the pastas into groups so they can be stored together.

2. Make Food Visible

One great way to take advantage of the vertical space in your pantry is by using tiered storage racks. For around $10, you can find a three-shelf spice rack, which not only gives you more space, it gives your garlic powder a permanent home. In addition there are three-tiered systems for cans, with prices starting at around $15. This way, you can see at a glance what you have and also what you need. You can also find under-shelf-racks, which are made to slide

onto existing shelving to create storage underneath the shelf. They are inexpensive and typically require no tools.

3. Use Baskets and Air-Tight Containers

Another helpful strategy for keeping that pantry user-friendly is to place open items, such as various pastas, in a tall air-tight container. Simply keep items in their original packaging and place them all in one large container. Baskets make efficient storage solutions as well. Use one basket to store various types of muffin mixes and other small boxed quick meals, and use a second basket for chips, crackers, and popcorn. Using a box or basket system also helps make rearranging food very simple. To encourage the entire family to participate, label the baskets and shelves, and give the family a brief overview of the new storage system.

Is your ketchup hiding behind the can of coffee? Have you been searching for the nutmeg that you bought last month? Don't allow a messy pantry to slow you down during meal preparation. Especially since the holiday season is around the corner, commit to rethinking your current food storage plan. Make it more efficient with a few simple strategies and items. Not only will you save time, you'll also save money by not making so many duplicate purchases. And ultimately, those two savings-time and money- will produce another huge benefit; less stress! Enjoy!

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