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Schooled in family cooking

By Jean P. Kelly

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It was an idea borne out of frustration, not inspiration. My solution to my daughters' mealtime complaining would put me on the front edge of a trend known as "family cooking," a movement I didn't even know existed. In fact, I worried my plan might guarantee us a trip to a family therapist.



My oldest daughter, Ellie, was given the cooking reins after she told me she was never allowed to eat what she wanted. I decided she would plan a week's worth of dinners and cook one of them herself. And I would give up my role as dinner dictator. This would "teach her a lesson," I thought, sweet revenge for the daily questioning of "what's for dinner?"

Ellie was instructed to stick to the gluten-free menu that her youngest sister and I require, include at least two fruits and/or vegetables in each meal, and consider what would happen to any leftovers by incorporating them into either a future dish or leftover smorgasbord.

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My first lesson: Aside from a heavy reliance on ground beef (spaghetti with meat sauce, tacos and chili), it seemed all my lecturing about healthy eating had apparently sunk in. Her menu even included a chicken, edamame and a quinoa dish from my low-cholesterol cookbook.

She cheerfully took to the task that required her to emerge from her room, put down her iPod and give a rest to the adolescent angst. My three daughters always have enjoyed helping in the kitchen, but until a major remodel a few years ago, it was safer to shoo them away while I rushed to get food on the table after a stressful day at work.

Instead of a narrow galley where it was impossible to walk past someone opening the oven, we can now spread out across several food prep areas and two countertops that have indestructible Silgranit sinks. Thanks to self-closing drawers and cabinets with roll-out shelves, I can keep commonly used containers, pantry foods and cooking utensils within reach for the kids. The layout was designed expressly so the daughter setting the table could get necessary supplies without entering the hot food prep area. So it was no problem for Ellie to take charge of Monday's meal: tuna melts, broccoli and sliced cantaloupe.

Lesson two: Ellie's sisters had no complaints about her menu plan, but there was no way they were going to allow her exclusive domain over such an important ritual. As a family, we stick to the commitment of eating together at home most of the time, even when it might be easier to eat in shifts around work and sports schedules, or grab carryout, which is almost impossible now that we are gluten-free. So in the middle of Ellie's week, 10-year-old Maggie demanded rights to the next week; Evelyn, the youngest at 8, was promised the following week.

About this time I mentioned our experiment to my best friend, who promptly instituted the practice with her two sons. She reported another surprising lesson: Her kids took great emotional comfort in knowing ahead of time what was for dinner. That witching hour after school and before dinner was much cheerier without the dreaded question. Perhaps because kids have no control over what is served in the cafeteria—nothing can ruin a school day faster than fish sticks planned for lunch—knowing that fresh pesto sandwiches were on tap in the evening changed their entire outlook.

My middle child couldn't resist her own brand of revenge during her menu week: one night of salmon, another of pork chops. When these offerings prompted gags and groans from her siblings, I simply redirected their ire to Maggie. This was both a joy and

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another revelation: She handled the griping much better than I do. She smirked knowingly and ate her salmon with good-natured relish. Again, her choices showed she understood the principles of balanced eating. Her menu was varied, too, not seven nights of her favorite peanut butter and banana sandwiches. There was a small mutiny when she had to substitute ingredients in my trademark Waldorf salad, but this allowed me to explain the importance of getting the menu to me before my grocery trip.

By the time it was Evelyn's week, I found Ellie lurking in the kitchen asking to help make the planned cranberry-apple relish in the food processor. She even cleaned the dishes after dinner. By this time, I was beginning to realize that carefully planned dinners might be the way to execute my New Year's resolution of simplifying my daily life.

I came to appreciate how my own mother streamlined meal planning for a family of nine, something I found dreadfully boring at the time. Her solution: Monday—pork chops, Tuesday—wildcard, Wednesday—leftovers, Thursday—steak and potatoes, Friday—cheese pizza or fish, Saturday—hamburgers, Sunday—roast beef with all the trimmings. Even if some of us hated lima beans or gagged on salmon cakes, there was real comfort in knowing that the next night there would be a favorite, such as French fries.

I told the girls that a variation on their Nina's strategy was my ultimate goal: a standard weekly menu, less heavy on the red meat, democratically determined and filled with mutual favorites. I fantasized about all the free time I'd have since I would no longer decide what's for dinner sometime after lunch, which systematically required many last-minute grocery trips.

My husband, Perry, demurred when offered his own week of cooking. Fortunately, he isn't a finicky eater, and anything he doesn't have to cook himself he would eat without complaint. It took me almost 15 years of marriage to realize he didn't much care for the asparagus I planted in the backyard, harvested and routinely served. We've come to a negotiated peace on the rare serving of canned green beans, one of his favorites, but too laden with sodium for me. The girls also know it is best to plan a breakfast-for-dinner night only when Dad won't be joining us. Perry and I are a united front against picky kids—in our house, if it is served, it is eaten. We hoped family cooking would end all the drama—such as nicknaming some dishes “barf” or threatening a call to children's services because we were starving them.

I thought the next step in our experiment would be a lesson in



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negotiation, compromise and scheduling, for my kids, not me. Again, I was wrong. My daughters had no problem collectively devising one week's menu of favorites that I could count on every week, with slight adjustments. As instructed, it included one wildcard day, along with possible menus for those nights. Bits and pieces, our name for leftovers, would be eaten for weekend lunches. So we could get to bed before midnight on our busiest nights, at least one dinner per week would come from the crockpot so it would be ready when we walked in the door. All agreed that any evening's chef would be determined in advance by interest, skill and who had the least amount of homework to be done before dinner (myself included).

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All the strategizing was peaceable until I began to meddle; it was difficult for me to relinquish the rank of dinner dictator. I lobbed grenades into their planning session, disguised as friendly suggestions. I tried to flank them during the week by sneaking in my trademark "turk-alo," a combination of ground turkey and buffalo, as a healthier alternative to beef.

But once I stepped back to marvel at the scene of family harmony and cooperation in the kitchen, I gladly surrendered my spatula. I couldn't believe I now had helpers, not hasslers. Collaborators, not cranks. Instead of sneaking a peek at YouTube videos while I was busy in the kitchen, I caught Maggie looking up recipes on the family room computer. Instead of begging for evening dessert during breakfast, I saw my third-grader thumbing through my latest *Bon Appétit*. Thanks to democratic family cooking, indigestion now is a less frequent guest at our dinner table, except Tuesdays perhaps. That's five-alarm chili night.

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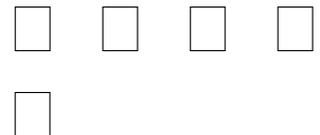
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