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## Cooking Basics for Beginners

When it comes to cooking, it is important to keep in mind that everyone started somewhere. I do not know of a single person who was born with a wooden cooking spoon and ready to go. There is a lot of learning that must be done in order to become a prolific cook and then there is always room for improvement. Not only do you need to begin with the basics when it comes to cooking but you almost need to begin again when learning to cook a new cuisine such as Chinese, Thai, or Indian food.

This means that at any given time in your cooking learning cycles there is quite probably someone somewhere that is better and/or worse at cooking than you. Take heart from this because even the best have bad days when it comes to cooking. There are many people who cook for different reasons. Some cook in order to eat and survive while others cook because they actually enjoy the process of cooking. Some cook during times of emotional upheaval and others cook out of sheer boredom. Whatever your reason for cooking or learning to cook you should always begin with the basics.

The first thing that you need to learn is what the different terminology you will find in recipes actually means. There are many new and sometimes foreign sounding terms that you will find in common recipes. These terms can mean the difference in recipe success or failure. You should be able to find a good section in any inclusive cookbook that explains the different definitions for unfamiliar terminology. If you aren't absolutely certain what is meant by "folding in the eggs" it is in your best interests to look it up.

Another great bit of advice when it comes to cooking basics is to try simpler recipes for a while and then expand your horizons to the more complex recipes that abound. Most recipes will have a little note about their degree of difficulty and you can read through the recipe to see whether or not it is something you are interested in preparing or confident that you can prepare. Remember Rome wasn't built in a day and it will take quite some time to build a reliable 'repertoire' of recipes to work into your meal planning rotation.

The good news is that once you've learned the basics of cooking it is unlikely that you will ever need to relearn them. This means that you can constantly build up and expand your cooking skills. As you learn new recipes and improve your culinary skills and talents you will discover that preparing your own meals from scratch is much more rewarding than preparing prepackaged meals that are purchased from the shelves of your local supermarkets.

You will also discover as your experience and confidence grows that you will find yourself more and more often improvising as you go and adjusting recipes to meet your personal preferences. If you prefer more or less of ingredients or want to make a recipe a little more or less spicy in flavor you can make simple adjustments along the way in order to achieve this goal. In other words you will begin in time to create recipes of your very own. And that is something you won't necessarily learn when it comes to basic cooking skills for beginners but you would never learn if you didn't master those basic cooking skills.

## Cooking for Sunday Dinner

From as far back as I can remember there have been special church occasions when dinner on the church grounds was the order for the day. Far too many times I watched as person after person walked in with store purchased fried chicken. Whether the reason for this was lack of time, lack of planning, or lack of ideas I was never quite certain. I was certain however, that this was not isolated to my church alone.

It may seem odd but I have traveled all over the country and lived in many different areas of the culture. One thing that seems constant no matter where I live is that someone inevitably brings fried chicken from a local restaurant or deli as his or her potluck offering. There is nothing wrong with this of course, but there are so many great recipes available for Sunday dinner cooking that it seems odd that so many would resort to this tired old tradition rather than spicing things up with a spicy taco casserole or sweetening the deal with some delightfully delicious and simple to make dessert.

Sunday dinners obviously aren't the only time when cooking a casserole or making a dessert is a good decision for the day. They are, however, the most common from my childhood, which is why I often refer to them. There are also 'pitch ins' at work that require a contribution and these are an excellent opportunity to make coworkers envy your culinary talents. Even for those who are health conscious however, there are many wonderful types of salads that can be prepared for occasions such as this that will provide you with a guilt free entrée at the event for which you are preparing your offering.

You do not have to choose calorie or fat filled dishes for your Sunday dinner cooking. In fact, when you are doing the cooking you should cook the things you enjoy eating. Most of us are much more likely to put our best efforts into preparing the foods we enjoy rather than those that feel as though they are a chore for us to make. The same holds true when cooking for potlucks and such. Just be careful that you do not prepare the exact same dish every time or people will think that it is the only dish you can prepare.

I recommend checking out casserole recipes online and in your favorite magazines. Even magazines that offer healthier eating options often have a casserole, large salad, or even a healthy dessert you can prepare for these events. My personal solution has always been to collect recipes over time that I would like to try out and use the potluck audience as my recipe guinea pigs. This way if my family or I do not like it, we won't be stuck with leftovers for a week and if we do like it, we can put it into our rotation of recipes for use at home.

Sunday dinner cooking doesn't have to be nearly as stressful as many of us make it out to be. Many wonderful crock-pot recipes can actually be prepared while you sleep. Just load your slow cooker with the proper ingredients and turn it on before turning in. You should awaken to the wonderful aroma of whatever delightful dish you have prepared and still manage to get ready for church in record time. This tried and true technique is a great way to make Sunday dinner cooking quick and easy.

Even if you are one of the many who have very limited culinary talents it is quite possible to wow your friends, relatives, and fellow church members with the correct 'simple to make' recipe. Desserts are by far the best way to go in this effort and can also be made the night before (in many cases) and stored in the refrigerator. Desserts are almost always a good bet and very few people ever complain about them regardless. The Kraft foods website offers some fabulously easy to make and delicious desserts if you are in need. The next time it is your turn to join in on the potluck preparation don't resort to fried chicken. Dish up something that will truly turn heads instead.

## **Beat the Summer Heat with Crock Pot Cooking**

When the weather outside warms up, the kitchen can be a terrible place to be. There are many things you can do however, when it comes to cooking a nice home made meal that doesn't require traditional stove top or oven cooking. Learn to utilize some of the lesser heat producing equipment in your kitchen, such as the crock pot, in order to truly beat the summer heat and keep your cool while preparing a nice hot meal for friends and family.

So, how does crock pot cooking really help beat the heat? Simply put, the crock pot in and of itself puts off far less heat when cooking than an oven or stove top. This is the first and possibly the best reason to utilize the crock pot in your summer meal planning. You should also consider the fact that by not heating the house by using your stove top or oven you are also preventing your air conditioning (or other cooling methods) from working overtime in order to compensate for the additional heat that other cooking methods introduce.

This makes crock pot cooking a win-win situation as the costs involved in operating a crock pot are far less than the costs involved in operating a stove or oven in general. Whether electric or gas, your stove and oven are often serious energy hogs. Add to that the fact that you are not raising the temperature in your home by traditional means of cooking and you are using even less electricity.

Unfortunately for most, the general consensus has been that crock pots were meant for comfort foods and hearty winter meals. The truth is that the crock pot should be one of your best loved and most often utilized cooking methods if you can manage it. When it comes to cooking with a crock pot, the options are almost limitless. Almost anything that can be baked can be made in the crock pot and many, many more wonderful and enticing meals and treats as well.

### **Benefits of Crock Pot Cooking**

In addition to the cost benefits mentioned above when it comes to crock pot cooking there are many other benefits that are well worth mentioning. First of all, the bulk of the work involved in crock pot cooking takes place early in the day when you are refreshed rather than at the end of a hectic work or play day. This means that you are less likely to forget an ingredient or make other mistakes that often occur as we hurriedly prepare a dinner when we are exhausted from the activities of our day.

Second, many great crock pot recipes include the vegetables that insure we are getting the nutrients we need. So often, when preparing a meal at the last minute, vegetables and other side dishes are left out in favor of expedience. Crock pot cooking in many instances is a meal in one dish.

Another great reason to use a crock pot for your summertime cooking is the ease of clean up. Unlike pots and pans, most crock pot meals are made in one dish. This means that there will not be mountains of dishes to be either hand washed or loaded into the dishwasher (or if you are like me-both) afterwards. You can spend less time cleaning just as you spent less time slaving over a hot stove. Oh wait! Make that no time slaving over a hot stove. Once clean up is complete you can get back to enjoying the sun set, chasing the lightening bugs with your little ones, or waiting for the first star.

While there will never be a one size fits all best cooking method, crock pot cooking comes very close. If you have a crock pot collecting dust somewhere in the back of your pantry it is time to get it out, dust it off, and dig up some great summertime crock pot cooking recipes.

## Cooking Cajun Food

Cooking in the heart of Cajun country is an art form. There really is very little science to this particular form of cooking that includes a lot more than mere lagniappe from the pantry or the spice cabinet. Cajun cooking is something that has often been imitated around the country and around the world but can very rarely be accurately duplicated.


One of the fascinating things about Cajun cooking is the fact that there are very few exact recipes. Most, if not all authentic Cajun cooking is done to taste rather than measurements. Even more amazing is that from day to day one person can make the same dish over and over and it is quite likely to taste a little bit different each and every time it is made. The major reason for this is that in addition to being an art form in and of itself, Cajun food is often made even more delicious or mysterious simply by the mood of the one doing the cooking.

I'm sure that many of you have watched as Emeril Lagasse makes some special concoction and exclaims "Bam!" there is a good bit of that when it comes to Cajun cooking. Something that goes far beyond the ingredients in the recipe and somewhere into the heart and the soul of the cook in question. There is a reason that many southern cooked dishes are referred to as soul food and you should not for one second forget that New Orleans is in the heart of the Deep South.

The most difficult thing, perhaps when it comes to preparing good Cajun dishes outside of the New Orleans region is finding the right ingredients. It is nearly impossible to find the fresh seasonings and spices that are essential to most Cajun cuisine outside the heart of the old south. Not only that, but fresh crawfish and andouille sausage are a little difficult to come by during the heart of a Michigan winter.

If you are determined to learn to make Cajun food of your own, you must first find the ingredients. Specialty food shops or those that will special order might be your best bet. There are some grocers that will carry a limited stock of Cajun seasonings on their international food aisles. Keep in mind that these sources are extremely limited. Once you have the ingredients, it's time to let a little jazz blare from your speakers in order to set the mood. Most of the best Cajun dishes require a substantial amount of time for simmering and this should be considered. Cajun food is not to be rushed-much like the citizens of the Big Easy. The food will be ready in time and as the one cooking the food you must learn to accept that about Cajun food. It has a way of letting you know when it is ready that is almost mythical until you've experienced it for yourself.

Cooking Cajun food will try your patience, try your talents, and in some cases zap your energy, as it tends to be an emotional process for many. On the other end however, Cajun food is some of the richest and most delicious food on the planet. Mastering the ability to cook this wonderful food will make you a slave to its flavor for many years to come.



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## **Cooking Classes for the Masses**

Whether you are a seasoned pro when it comes to the fine art of cooking or an utter novice there should be some cooking classes or resources in your area that can help you learn and improve your existing skills. Surprisingly few people manage to utilize the many wonderful opportunities that are available to them when it comes to cooking classes.

If you are considering a cooking class you should be glad to know that many communities offer them for a nominal fee at night and sometimes on the weekend. These classes are rather basic and often designed to help women learn the basics of a few economical and healthy meals to prepare for their beginning families. If you fit the bill for this, then you should check out your local library for possible leads for these sorts of classes in your area. Even if they do not have the information available it is quite likely that they can point you in the right direction.

If you are looking for cooking classes that you can take with your children, check out your library once again for the first resource. There are also many gourmet food shops that offer cooking classes for parents to take with their children. This is a great opportunity to bond with your child while you both learn to prepare a new dish or two together. It is quite likely that you will be quite surprised by the things you can learn from your child as well as the things you can learn by simply taking the class.

For those among us who are seeking culinary experience with very specific cuisines you will have to search a little more for the perfect cooking classes in which you can achieve your goal. They do exist however, though your chances of learning Thai cooking are much greater in a larger city than in smaller towns throughout the country. If you are really interested in learning some exotic cooking techniques perhaps you should consider a vacation in which you can try out a few new cooking classes while you are there. If you prefer other things on your vacation to cooking you could make a point of attempting one basic class in the cuisine of your choice for each vacation you take. This will give you a little more than the same old souvenir to bring back from your trip and an experience that in many cases is quite memorable.

Finally, if you are looking for a romantic idea, how about signing up to take a couples cooking class? Believe it or not, these classes are often offered in both big and smaller cities. They seem to be all the rage around Valentine's day, perhaps the hint is that the other partner in a relationship can share some of the cooking responsibility or perhaps the idea is that there is more than one way to steam up the kitchen.

Regardless of the reason for taking cooking classes they can bring not only a great deal of enjoyment to your dining room, but also increase your ease in your kitchen. If you've never taken a cooking class, there is no time like the present to do so. No matter how skilled you are in the kitchen there is always something that can be learned.

## **Cooking for Crowds Shouldn't be a Frightening Proposition**

Most people balk at the idea of cooking for large crowds of people. With images of huge stockpots boiling over and becoming chained to a hot stove and oven for countless hours on end, it's no wonder that so many people avoid the idea of cooking food for large crowds with more tenacity than they avoid being last in the dinner line.

The good news is that it doesn't have to be the frightening proposition that so many make it out to be. When it comes to cooking for a large crowd, the planning phase is the most important. You absolutely must plan your meals when feeding a large group of people. This goes far beyond the notion of spaghetti or fried chicken as the meals you are planning. You need to know how many servings you will need. While obviously you never know how hungry people will be or who will eat how much when it comes to cooking for a large crowd it is a good idea to always plan for a few extra mouths in case some need a little more than you may think (you might want to double servings for teen and college aged men that will be dining).

You need to know at least a general number of servings to prepare and adjust your recipe in order to accommodate those needs. Some people find it much simpler if they can double or triple recipes rather than scaling them to specific serving sizes. If this works best for you then by all means incorporate this practice when cooking for crowds. One thing you must be aware of is that you will need to include in order to create the meal you are planning.

Having the proper ingredients and the proper amounts of ingredients is more important in bulk recipes than is often necessary in smaller recipes as there is less leeway when it comes to creating the proper consistency. You should keep this in mind when making purchases for your cooking for a large crowd event.

Some people find the best route to take when it comes to cooking for crowds is to keep everything as close to their normal cooking routine as possible. This would mean that instead of cooking one really huge pan of lasagna for a triple sized crowd, they would instead cook three normal sized pans of lasagna. This accomplishes two things really and is something you may wish to keep in mind despite the extra time spent in the kitchen.

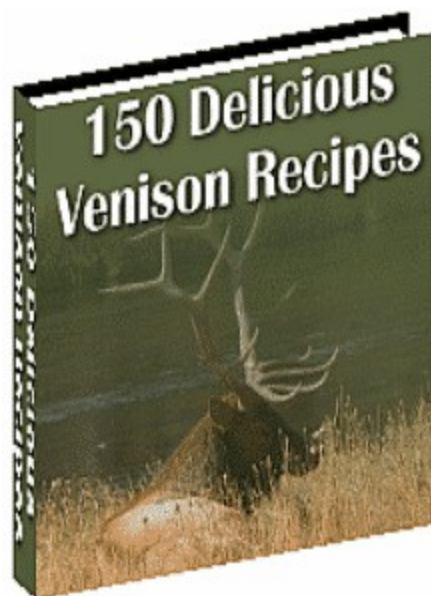
First of all, if something goes, wrong only one third of the meal is in shambles rather than the entire dinner. Second, you have a greater possibility of finding consistency issues before the baking begins if you are using measurements and cooking containers that you are familiar with and comfortable using. It is always best to discover errors and omissions sooner rather than later when it comes to cooking as very few ingredients can be properly added after the fact.

While cooking for crowds may send some into dizzying spells with heart palpitations it helps if you take a few deep breaths, sit down, plan your menu, plan your meals, make a list of your ingredients, and cook in a manner that is comfortable for you. If you would rather get it all over with in one fell swoop, then by all means do just that. If you are more comfortable making multiple dishes of family favorites then that is probably going to be the best course of action in order to meet your large crowd cooking needs.

Most importantly you should remember when cooking for crowds is that you might have just earned yourself a well-deserved night off afterwards. Cooking for crowds is time consuming and should be



approached when well rested (if that is even possible) for the best results. There is something that is actually very satisfying about knowing that you have fed a crowd and fed them well.



## Cooking for Little Ones

Cooking for toddlers and growing children presents some unique challenges along the way. While you want to provide them with those ever so important nutrients, it is often difficult to get them to eat those foods that are best for their growing bodies. We are all probably well aware of the food pyramid and the number of servings our children need of healthy grains, proteins, fruits, vegetables, and calcium products. Getting them to eat these nourishing products is another matter all together unfortunately.

The good news when cooking for children is that you do not necessarily need to incorporate all the important nutrients into dinner food. The truth of the matter is that raw cucumbers, which are thinly sliced and sprinkled with salt make a much healthier snack than potato chips and many little ones love this for a snack. You get a vegetable in their system and they are getting a treat at snack time. The same holds true for melon and cantaloupes. These make excellent snacks and are a much-needed fruit in these important diets for little ones.

When it comes to cooking for little ones, however man, woman, and child cannot live on macaroni and cheese alone. It's been tried and tested and failed miserably. Try mixing things up whenever you can while keeping meals kid friendly. It is important that you try to introduce whole grains, proteins, and vegetables whenever possible at meal times around your home. The good news is that there are many prepackaged convenience foods that are introducing whole grains like never before in order to meet the growing demand of consumers for healthier meals that can be prepared with little fan fare or fuss.

Cooking healthier meals for kids is now easier than ever before. Fresh fruits and vegetables are best whenever possible. However, if you cannot manage fresh, you should avoid canned (fruits especially as they are often swimming in sugary sweetness) whenever possible. Frozen is far preferable to canned when it comes to both fruit and vegetables, as there are often fewer additives.

If you need some great meal ideas that are kid friendly and easy on the budget, you can often find recipes readily available online. You can meet your child's calcium and dairy product needs by adding milk as the drink of choice for meals or a slice of cheese melted over their favorite vegetable. Ice cream, yogurt, and pudding also make excellent calcium rich treats, in moderation of course.

Encourage your children to try new things rather than cooking the same few meals over and over again that you know they are likely to eat. This prevents two things from happening. First of all, it helps you not to get bored when cooking for your children. Second, it allows your children to try new flavors and textures and form opinions about them. By trying new things they will learn not only about the things they dislike but also the foods they really enjoy.

You should also keep in mind that your children are people too when cooking for them. Just as you have foods you like and dislike they also will develop tastes over time. Those tastes may also change in time as well. It's frustrating, I know, to spend time and money preparing a meal only to have your child push the plate away and refuse to even try the meal. For this, I recommend enlisting their help in the kitchen. Children are much more likely to eat the things they had a hand in preparing as a matter of accomplishment and pride. It's psychological warfare I know but all is fair in war and dinnertime.

Perhaps the greatest gift you can give yourself (much greater than the help in the kitchen) by 'forcing' your little ones to help prepare dinner is that they will learn to better appreciate your culinary efforts and eat peacefully rather than sullenly. This tactic has met with great success in my household when

cooking for little ones. I hope you will enjoy the same degree of success as well.



## **Cooking for Special Occasions**

We all have those moments in our lives when we feel as if everything needs to be exactly right. It is these moments that we often refer to as special occasions. When it comes to cooking for special occasions, many of us find that we drop the ball in our anticipation and feel as though we have ruined the moment. While this is often far from the truth, it does serve to diminish the moment in many of our minds. For this reason, you need to work up a repertoire, if you will, of simple to make special occasion cooking recipes.

You will be shocked and amazed at all the sinfully rich and delicious meals and side dishes that are out there, that are amazingly quick and easy to prepare. This means that you will not run the all too common disaster scenarios that you hear about and will still manage to have a wonderful meal that is enjoyed by all.

The trick is in choosing a rather simple meat dish and dressing it up with the more decadent side dishes. Incredibly rich side dishes that are simple to prepare are greater in number than meat dishes that require little culinary effort. You should also keep in mind the audience for your special occasion. Sometimes a family favorite makes the occasion seem much more special than an all out effort for chicken cordon bleu or veal Marsala. There is no point in going to an extreme effort to create a culinary masterpiece if it is going to be riddled with picky children proclaiming that they do not like this or that about your meal.

Another great idea when it comes to cooking for special occasions is to prepare as much as possible ahead of time in order to alleviate the pressure during the event and to allow you more time to enjoy the event rather than dealing with the details of meal preparation. The greatest gift you can really give yourself when cooking for special occasions is the time necessary in order to enjoy these special occasions. This is not to say that there isn't some cooking that will need to be done.

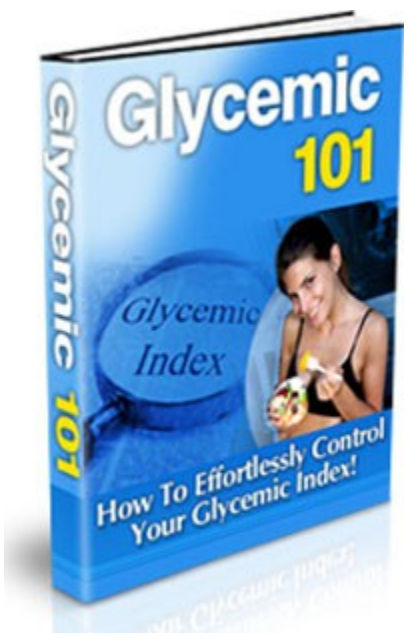
Foods that can be prepared ahead of time and reheated just prior to serving are often the best when it comes to cooking for special occasions. There are all kinds of appetizers, entrees, and desserts that will work perfectly in this particular instance. You can often find them by performing a simple Google search online or by sorting through many of your favorite cookbooks at home. The important thing is that you do not get so caught up in the idea of cooking for special occasions that you forget to actually enjoy the occasion.

If this is not the way you prefer to do things that is perfectly understandable. Some of us do thrive in high stress situations. The key for those who prefer to do all the meal preparation when cooking for special occasions at the time of cooking is planning properly and allowing plenty of time for possible hiccups in the process. Mistakes occur when people feel rushed and hurried in their culinary efforts.

Another common mistake that is made when cooking for special occasions is cooking outside of your comfort zone. When you are preparing a challenging recipe it is best if you do this during a time when you are not going through the stress of potential visitors or insuring the best possible of circumstances. In other words, it is best to challenge your culinary talents when you do not have a vested interest in success.

Special occasions are a great time for friends and family. The hope is that you will have many special occasions throughout your life. Do not waste too much time and energy fretting over cooking for

special occasions. Instead, put all of your effort into enjoying those occasions.



## Cooking for Two

Whether you are cooking for two out of a sense of romance or necessity you will find that there are many resources online and off when it comes to finding the perfect combinations for those terrific twosomes. One thing to keep in mind however is that when cooking for two, it is sometimes best if two are doing the cooking. This gives cooking an opportunity to become a communication event rather than a chore.

Despite the fact that there are many resources and recipes available to those that are cooking for two there are also equal occasions to take traditional recipes that are designed to feed four and make them an opportunity to stretch your food dollars even further. By cooking traditional meals for four and feeding a portion you have managed to cook two meals for the time investment of one. It's a good deal for many, particularly those that do not relish the idea of cooking at all, much less of cooking for two.

Young couples and older couples alike often find that it is easier and almost as inexpensive to hit the fast food or other casual dining establishments than it is to prepare a nice healthy meal for two at home. The one thing they often forget is that cooking for two can be an interesting way to bring a little romance into the evening when done right of course.

Cooking is an art that most people have forgotten as it is also a necessary act unless you wish to live on sushi and raw vegetables. Even in these situations however there is typically some degree of preparation that is involved in the process. Food is beautiful and can be beautifully arranged if you are of the mind to do so. This means that you can spend a great deal of time not only creating new and delicious foods, but also visually appealing food combinations as well.

When cooking for two you will have the most opportunity for experimentation when it comes to food as any other time in your life. You have the option of trying great new cuisines and the knowledge that if you do not like the food, you are not wasting multiple servings. You can try to mix and match flavors and textures. You can make works of art on your plate or go for the guts, gore, and eyeballs galore. Cooking for two opens doors that aren't necessarily available when cooking for larger crowds with more limiting tastes.

Cooking for two is a great way to get your partner involved in the cooking process as well. When cooking for two you can discover the many great things that you both enjoy and those that aren't so appealing to one or the other of you. Make sure that when you are cooking for two that you invite an open and honest dialog about the things that you like and dislike about the meals being prepared. This will help you discover things to add to your regular menu as well as things to avoid making a part of your dinner rotation.

Perhaps the greatest thing about cooking for two is the fact that you can afford to enjoy special occasion cuisine more often when you are only feeding two than when you are feeding larger crowds. Bring on the steaks and lobster tail. Learn how to make shrimp scampi and filet mignon. Take the time, when cooking for two, to prepare those dishes that you love most. After all, it is really living when you live to dine rather than when you dine to live.

Cooking for two is so much more than a cliché. It is a great way to explore the culinary universe while exposing your palates to some wonderful surprises along the way. The Internet, bookstores, and libraries are filled with books about cooking for two. Take advantage of the opportunity to do just that

and you'll be amazed at the world of flavors you've invited into your kitchen.

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## Cooking On the Grill

Summertime is rapidly approaching. This means it is time to begin preparing meals without heating the house whenever possible. If you haven't considered the value of cooking on the grill in the past, perhaps now is a great time to adjust your way of thinking.

Cooking on the grill is a great way to keep the heat of cooking outside your home as well as to bring the family together for the entire cooking process. Moms read: this is a great way to get dad to help out with meal preparation. While this is said somewhat in jest, there is some truth to the fact that men are much more inclined to slave away over a hot grill than a hot stove. More importantly, most of the mess of cooking on the grill remains outside your kitchen. I don't know about you, but that is a huge bonus for me, when it comes to cooking.

Cooking on the grill is also a great way to get the kids involved in the meal preparation and clean up process. We like to use disposable plates when grill cooking and keep the dining <I>al fresco</I>. If you are hoping for instant family unity over the picnic table you might want to think again but there isn't anything quite like it when it comes to not worrying about spills or dropped food as you can rest fairly certain that the animals will take care of anything that gets left behind.

Even small children can help when cooking on the grill by bringing utensils to the grill, holding plates, and 'setting' the picnic table for your dining experience. If you intend to do a good deal of cooking on the grill you may want to invest in some portable and 'kid friendly' containers for things such as condiments, napkins, plastic ware, and tablecloth holders. Be sure to find containers that can handle a decent gust of wind without flying off too. These may be a little heavier for your little ones to hold but they won't be nearly as difficult to chase when blowing across the lawn.

Cooking on the grill is a great way to enjoy nature after a long day of work. Be careful that you do not reserve this as a weekend event as you will find you miss out on some of the relaxing qualities it can bring to your midweek slump. One thing that can definitely be said about grill cooking is that the selections are almost as limitless as they are when cooking on the stove. You must use your imagination for maximum effect though very few meats and vegetables are truly off limits when it comes to cooking on the grill.

In addition to cooking meats on the grill, it is important to keep in mind that you can also cook all kinds of fresh fruit and vegetables on the grill as well. You should also keep in mind the awesome side dishes that go great with grilled foods such as baked beans, potato salad, and nice cool deserts and pies.

Cooking on the grill is a great way to bring family and friends together. The next time you plan to have a get together why not make it a night of cooking on the grill? You can have the best of all worlds with no muss, no fuss clean up and great food with good friends. Cooking on the grill is certainly a great way to get the neighbors out and about. There's nothing on earth that can quite compare to the aroma of meat, fruit, and vegetables grilling over hot charcoal. If you don't remember and your mouth isn't watering just reading about, it's been far too long since your last barbecue experience.

The most important thing to remember about cooking on the grill is that it should be an experience rather than a chore. Most of us truly enjoy the thought of having a good dinner under the sun or stars (whichever applies in your case). If you haven't tried this in a while, it's time to dust off the grill and refresh your memory and your taste buds.



## Cooking with Children

I am fairly certain that most of us have either seen or at the very least heard of the hit situation comedy "Married with Children" that dominated television for quite a few years and is still shown in syndication in many markets around the world. There are some wonderful insights that are shown by this often dysfunctional family and a few pearls to bring into your every day lives. The same can be said when it comes to cooking with children.

There is little on this earth that can teach you about yourself and the way your children view you as easily as cooking with your children. Of course, this is the perfect opportunity for many of us to let our hair down a little, relax, and have fun in the kitchen. Unfortunately, if you are anything like me, this is a difficult process to say the least. I am a bit of a control freak in my kitchen. It is my domain or sovereign territory so to speak. For this reason it is difficult to give up that little bit of control and hand over the reigns to any one of my children.

On the other hand, I know they are learning important skills that they honestly need to know in life. This knowledge of course doesn't make it any less difficult when I'm scraping tomato sauce out of places I would never have thought to discover it on my own. If you are considering cooking with children you need to make sure you have the proper ingredients on hand before beginning. You certainly do not want to be caught without that cup full of patience you will be requiring nor do you wish to need to leave in the middle of things for a run to the local grocery store to pick up the missing ingredients.

Another great rule of thumb when it comes to cooking with children is the KISS rule. Keep it simple silly. This rule will help out more than you ever realize. First of all, most children have relatively short attention spans. While they want to learn and help mommy out, they also do not want to have enough time to get bored with the details. Use simple recipes when cooking with children and your chances for success will be much greater than with overly complicated or ingredient intense recipes.

As if this wasn't enough to absorb another very important rule when it comes to cooking with children is to clean as you go whenever possible. Trust me on this. While there is part of you who will want to put off the task of cleaning the messes that are made until later, or wait till the end and only clean once, this allows the opportunity for messes to layer and compound themselves. Constantly clean throughout the process for the best possible results. You should enlist your children in the cleaning process as well. While it may be easier to do yourself, it is far more important to teach them the basics of cleaning as you go. Remember one day they will more than likely invade your kitchen while you're not looking.

Cooking with children can be an incredible way to have a fun day if you are able to let go of the control that you too often hold over the kitchen. Give over the keys to your kingdom for a day of fun and frolicking among the flour and sugar and see just how many wonderful memories you can make with your little ones along the way.

## Gluten Free Cooking

When it comes to cooking, there are many dietary restrictions that will be encountered along the way. One restriction that is gaining some degree of notoriety in recent years is the need for a gluten free diet. Gluten is a substance that is commonly found in flour products that a decent sized portion of the population has a negative reaction to in some form or another. For these people, gluten free isn't a choice it is absolutely necessary.

Gluten free cooking does impose many restrictions and often makes it quite difficult to enjoy something the vast majority of us take for granted-dining out. The good news from those who require gluten free cooking is that more and more restaurants are beginning to acknowledge this condition and offer some selections that are gluten free. It takes time, just as it did with low carb craze for the demand for these products to make it worth the industries while to make adjustments in their way of preparing foods.

While on the one hand it is frustrating to not have the option of dining out, there is some challenge to finding new and tasty foods and combinations for cooking each and every night without falling into a rut of the same old foods that you know you can eat without worry. Consider cooking gluten free a challenge rather than a chore and you may find that the process is much more enjoyable. You might even find that you appreciate the meals you've worked hard to prepare even better because of the great sense of accomplishment.

There are many resources available for those who need to eat gluten free foods. There are even more and more 'convenience' or prepackaged foods that are designated for gluten free cooking. This means that those who once had no option but creating meals from scratch do now have the occasional shortcut available to them. We are even finding cookie and cake mixes that are now gluten free in order to enjoy some of the finer things in life for those who would have been completely deprived only a few short years ago.

Changes are being made and resources are being shared through the Internet that help not only adults that require special gluten free cooking and diets but also support for the parents of children who must have gluten free diets. Cooking for children in the best of circumstances is often difficult. It is even more difficult when there are excessive dietary restrictions that often eliminate the possibility of our children enjoying childhood favorites. That is why it is so important to seek out the many resources and recipes that are available for gluten free cooking.

If you require a gluten free diet and have no idea where to start or what you should be cooking you should check out the many websites and blogs online that address the issues and needs that are faced by those requiring gluten restrictions. You will probably be amazed at the wealth of information that is available. Also, if you have a Trader Joes or Whole Foods store in your area, most of them either offer or will order gluten free products for your cooking needs.

Gluten free cooking does not have to be the chore many of us think it must be and all gluten free food doesn't taste like cardboard. Take the time to get to know the wonderful gluten free recipes that abound and incorporate them one at a time into your cooking repertoire. You will be amazed at how wonderful you feel as well as how great the food tastes.

## **Gourmet Cooking for Pleasure**

Gourmet cooking is a style of food preparation that deals with the finest and freshest possible ingredients. This means that to enjoy authentic gourmet food you must prepare your food immediately after purchasing the fresh ingredients that will comprise your meals. Not only do you want to purchase the freshest ingredients when cooking gourmet meals but you also want to insure that you are purchasing ingredients of superior quality.

Those who excel at gourmet cooking and food preparation have many options available to them. From catering to opening up their own restaurant these talented individuals who are entrepreneurial in spirit often do quite well in the world of business if their talent is sufficient.

When it comes to cooking gourmet food the two rules mentioned above are the only hard and fast rules. Everything else is purely a matter of adventure and taste. Now this doesn't mean that any and everyone can become a gourmet cook simply by going out and purchasing the finest and freshest of ingredients and throwing them into a pot. There is some degree of art involved when it comes to gourmet cooking and a large degree of skill that is necessary in order to achieve these culinary masterpieces.

You should also understand and be prepared to discover that fresh ingredients are not always available so there are times when compromises must be made when cooking gourmet meals. For this reason you capitalize on what is in season and plan your meals accordingly whenever possible. One important quality when it comes to cooking gourmet food is the layering of flavors. You should be able to taste the meat or seafood as well as the vegetables, herbs, and spices that comprise your skillfully prepared meal.

You should not however rely on taste or aroma alone when cooking gourmet foods. As I mentioned above gourmet cooking is a large degree skill but there is some degree of art involved. For this reason, presentation is a key component of the gourmet dining experience. Through a few freshly chopped herbs on the plate before placing the food or top the food with appealing and aromatic herbs that will compliment the flavor of the meal you have prepared. Present the fruits and vegetable sides in a visually appealing fashion rather than simply tossing them onto a plate.

With proper presentation even foods that were simple to prepare can take on the flavor of a gourmet feast. This is something you should keep in mind whether your cooking plans for the evening involve the gourmet or the every day. The thing about gourmet cooking is that it is to some degree more art than science. This means that there is always room to improve your skills and stretch your limits as a cook. There will always be the next great challenge or the 'what if' when it comes to flavor combinations.

In fact, some of the greatest foods began with someone asking, "What would happen if I added this?" Always ask what if and always seek to improve your skills. The good news if this is an avenue you wish to pursue is that there are often gourmet cooking classes offered at gourmet food shops in your area. Some colleges or local community programs will also offer these sorts of classes for a few if you are interested. This means that there are almost always opportunities to broaden your experiences with gourmet cooking and expand your horizons.

Whether this is your first time considering gourmet cooking or you are an old pro, keep in mind that skills can be learned over time with the proper motivation and an open and honest desire to learn. If

you want to learn more about gourmet cooking there is really nothing to stop you from doing so other than yourself. The Internet, your local library, and many bookstores across the country have countless volumes of information that can help you get started on your journey to gourmet cooking bliss.

## Healthy Cooking is a Must for Families

When it comes to cooking healthy meals for our families, there is always some degree of dissention among the ranks. The good news is that there are recipes that are very healthy but the healthy nature of these recipes is somewhat disguised. What they do not know in these instances truly should not bring harm their way (outside of allergies, which should never be ignored).

Healthy cooking is often difficult as most of us do not want to spend time planning and preparing meals that our families refuse to eat. At the same time, we want our families to be healthy so we feel compelled to learn new and improved ways of cooking healthy foods for our family to enjoy (and unfortunately in some cases scorn).

With weight and nutrition being known as the culprit in so many health conditions it is impossible to ignore the importance of not only eating healthy ourselves but also of teaching our children the importance of eating healthy. One way to insure that your loved ones are in fact eating healthy is to make sure that you are cooking healthy and nutritious foods for them. This does not mean that you cannot enjoy the occasional calorie splurge or even that you shouldn't. The key to cooking healthy is learning to control portions and understanding the importance of moderation.

For those that are hoping to incorporate healthy cooking habits into their daily routines, there are no more resources available than ever before in order to assist you in those endeavors. You can seek the services of a professional nutritionist, your doctor can offer advice, you can find all kinds of books on healthy eating, cooking, and living at your local library, and the Internet is an outstanding source of all kinds of information when it comes to leading a healthier lifestyle all around.

There are many books and magazines that are filled with recipes that encourage healthy cooking and eating habits. If you truly love to cook, then there is no shortage of recipes that you can try out along the way. The really good news is that you can incorporate healthy cooking into your cooking routine whether you are cooking for one or a household of ten.

There are many that will argue that cooking healthy food costs more than cooking the prepackaged foods that pack on the calories and additives. The truth of the matter is that when you compare the costs with the medical bills of the future for failing to do so, they seem rather slight by comparison. Yes, good food costs more money. In many cases, that is a simple fact of life. However, by learning portion control and eating the proper portions you just may discover that you are actually spending less as you adjust to the proper amounts of food you should be consuming in order to maintain a healthy and active lifestyle.

Cooking healthy isn't an overnight change; it is a lifestyle change that should be implemented one step at a time. You do not have to go into your kitchen and through out every little thing that you deem 'unhealthy' only work to not buy more of these items once they've been used. Make wiser decisions when purchasing fats for food preparation and you will discover that you've made a vitally important step in the process of incorporating healthy cooking and eating habits in your home.

It's those small steps you take towards your goal of cooking healthy foods for your family that will matter far more than any giant leap. Before you know it you will find that you all have more energy and a better sense of overall health than you would have imagined before changing your cooking habits. If that isn't enough to encourage you however, you can always check out the excuse to go

shopping for new clothes after you drop a size or two.

## Italian Cooking in American Kitchens

Most of us have found some sort of Italian cuisine that has become a favorite for our families and ourselves. Unfortunately, far too many of us discount the possibility of bringing Italian cooking into our very own kitchens for fear that many of the recipes are far too difficult. The truth is that learning to cook Italian food just might make your home the favorite drop in dining spot for friends and family all over.

Believe it or not, most great Italian recipes have an easier version that can be made with very similar effects when it comes to flavor and aroma. Also, despite the commercials of old, all Italian cooking does not require an entire day of simmering in order to achieve great flavor. Though you do not have to let your friends and family in on that little secret. Be a martyr for flavor and they will love you even more. You do not have to let anyone in on your best-kept secrets when it comes to preparing these often simple dishes.

The biggest challenge that most Americans face when it comes to Italian cooking is basically learning a new set of essential ingredients. The cheese, meats, or grains that are used in their creation most often identify or define Italian cuisine. It's the combination of these primary ingredients that create some of the most distinctive flavors on earth. Learn about these ingredients. Identify the flavors and study the combinations of flavors and you should be able to not only follow many great Italian recipes but also to invent a few of your very own Italian inspired recipes.

The greatest thing when it comes to cooking Italian food is that most of these dishes are rather difficult to destroy. This of course does not indicate that it cannot be done, only that it isn't as simple as with some of the more delicate cuisines around the world. Italian food is durable and flavorful but for the most part not too terribly delicate when it comes to flavor. You can go a little heavy with some spice or cheese without completely ruining the dish in most instances. If you are anything like me, this is a regular occurrence when cooking and one of the reasons I enjoy cooking Italian food so much.

Whether you are a beginner when it comes to the culinary arts or a seasoned pro there is something that will provide the appropriate challenge for you when it comes to Italian cooking. Take a look around there are recipes in abundance across the Internet, at your local library, in specialty cook books, and even in your favorite block buster best selling novels.

Another thing you should keep in mind when cooking Italian food is that nothing seems to bring out the flavor of Italian food better than a good bottle of wine to match. Perhaps this is the reason that it is difficult to ruin an Italian meal, no matter how bad it is, the good wine paired with it, will erase all ill will and tastes in very short order. You will want to spend a little time researching and studying the science (though some will argue that this is truly an art form) that goes along with pairing a good bottle of wine with the right flavor combination when it comes to Italian cooking. Once you've mastered this, there is nothing to prevent you from being the diva of all things Italian when it comes to food preparation.

The most important thing for you to remember when cooking Italian food is not to take the cooking too seriously. Good Italians know that the enjoyment of the meal is far more important than the process of preparing the meal. Make your meal an event with plenty of time for pleasant conversation and enjoyment of your company in between courses. You should also never rush a good Italian meal or you will find that all your efforts cooking Italian will be for naught as the true pleasure of Italian cuisine has

been lost somewhere in translation.



## Low Carb Cooking

Around the world people are paying more attention to their bodies and their health than perhaps at any other time in history. One method that has shown great success in helping people quickly drop those unwanted pounds is through low carb cooking and dieting. This method of weight loss seems to have taken the world by storm promising quick results for the simple (or not so simple) lifestyle change of eliminating as many carbohydrates as possible from our diets.

The notion sounds simple on one hand and is appealing to not only women hoping to drop those vanity pounds but also men who welcome the idea of eating all the steaks they can handle throughout the year. Low carb cooking is becoming a way of life for many families as a result though the idea of this particular lifestyle change and the reality of it do on occasion seriously collide with one another.

If you are interested in dropping those unwanted pounds and keeping them off, this is a doubt that without a doubt gets results. The problem is that you must stick to the diet in order for the results to remain consistent even after you've met your weight loss goals. This means that you are not really embarking on a diet so much as a complete overhaul in the way you eat.

The excellent thing about low carb cooking is that it is so widely popular. This means that you will have no trouble finding resources, tips, tricks, advice, and even amazing substitutes for those things you often miss most when engaging in the low carb lifestyle. Popular stores such as Whole Foods and Trader Joes are great places to go for specific foods that are low carb in nature and designed to meet the chocolate or breading needs of those who feel more than slightly deprived by the rigorous restrictions of a low carb lifestyle. Many mainstream grocery stores are also beginning to see the value of catering to this 'high end' market of consumers and offering a wider variety of low carb friendly foods to consumers.

You can find recipes that are low in carbs by the mouthful at your local libraries and bookstores around the world. You can also find many resources on the Internet to help assist and encourage you in your low carb lifestyle incorporation. In addition to the cookbooks, recipes, and encouragement you also need to weed out the fact from the fiction when it comes to low carb cooking. The best way to do this is to go straight to the source. If you are going to incorporate this lifestyle altering diet into your way of life, you want to make sure that you are following it to the letter and not some knock off version that may not be as effective.

When it comes to low carb cooking you have the perfect excuse to use your grill well and use your grill often. In fact, I highly recommend a George Foreman grill (or some similar knock off) for your home for those days when grilling outside simply isn't an option. Around our house, those are the days when the snow reaches the bottom of the grill but we are the exception rather than the rule. Most importantly about low carb cooking you should keep your goal in mind. If you aren't making progress, check what you are doing and adjust your cooking and eating accordingly.

## **Microwave Cooking is the Wave of the Future**

When it comes to cooking there are few tools that are more versatile in the kitchen than the microwave. This device offers so many functions when it comes to cooking that most people never bother to utilize. It's sad really. In most homes, the microwave has been relegated to doing duty as a meat defroster, popcorn popper, and coffee warmer rather than using it as the fabulous device for actual food preparation that it really is capable of being.

Before you set up to change your ways, you need to understand that when it comes to microwave cooking, not all microwaves were created equal. Wattage is vitally important as is the quality of your microwave. The average cheap microwave that you can find in discount stores will simply not stand up to the rigors of regular full meal preparation though they are perfectly acceptable for many wonderful dishes that can be prepared as side dishes. The correct microwave however, can actually brown and bake a full sized Thanksgiving turkey.

Microwave cooking is definitely not something that is meant for those who are afraid of trying something new or those that are afraid of making mistakes along the way. This is a process that is one part science and one part figuring it out. Research helps a great deal but even many of the recipes you will find for microwave cooking are written for microwaves of varying wattage so you will need to ferret out what times and temperatures would be appropriate for your microwave. This is to a large degree going to be a process of trial and error unless you are using the recipe book that came with your microwave.

Do not despair however, most that have tried microwave cooking find it to be a much better process for their meal preparation needs. While microwave cooking is great for big families it is an outstanding way to save money when cooking for and feeding one. It is also rather simple. In other words, even college students can benefit by learning microwave cooking for one or more as it will help them limit their expenses while still eating healthy fresh made meals.

Another great thing about microwave cooking that is often overlooked is that there are far less messes to be made than when cooking part of a meal stove top, part of a meal in the oven, and part of the meal elsewhere. By and large, microwave cooking keeps any spills and splatter isolated to your microwave. Most of these can be cleaned and controlled rather easily by using a removable plate in your microwave (that can be washed in the dishwasher) and covering your food whenever possible to avoid splatters.

Microwave cooking is gaining popularity despite the fact that it hasn't caught on as well as the inventors would have liked. The proof of this is in the many products that have been created to make microwave cooking a little bit easier. From omelet makers to special trays for cooking bacon in the microwave industrious people are working to make the easy way of cooking that much easier.

If you have a microwave in your home that is used mostly for melting butter and warming pizza, then you have a microwave in your home that is being terribly under utilized. It is time you hit the search engines for recipes that will be appropriate for your microwave and get busy trying something new and different that will have your family awed and amazed. Imagine having them toss accolades for your tireless devotion and standing over a hot stove for hours when in actuality you only checked on the microwave when the proper time approached.

Microwave cooking very well may be the wave of the future. Get a head start and begin building your collection of wonderful microwave recipes right away for the best selection. The day will arrive when you can make microwave cooking the rule rather than the exception.

## Once a Month Cooking

If you are like most moms around the world, there never seems to be enough time or energy at the end of most days to prepare the nice home cooked meal you would love to have ready made for your family. Unfortunately, cooking a good family meal requires both time and energy. A few wise moms have discovered a concept that has become known as once a month or freezer cooking to assist in those nights when time, energy, or both are in short supply.

The thought behind once a month cooking is that for one or two days (if you prefer to spread the process out over a couple of shorter days rather than one long day of cooking) of intense culinary effort your family can dine well for an entire month. Many women who have tried this have also discovered that not only does it help by always having something nice and home cooked for dinner, but also helps families stay within budget.

Far too many mother's will guiltily raise their hands when asked whether or not they've ever resorted to fast food or junk food meals simply because they were too tired to cook or were missing one ingredient for a meal and did not feel up to running to the grocery store in order to pick up the missing ingredient. This practice can get expensive over time and rob your family of some well-earned fun money.

There are some important things you must keep in mind if you are considering once a month cooking as a way of life for your family. The first thing you need to keep in mind is that planning is the key. You will need to set aside a day (or two) for the cooking when nothing else is on the calendar. It is simply too difficult to see to all the details if you are planning your cooking event around car pools, soccer games, or dance practices. You need a full day that will be relatively uninterrupted. If you have a spouse, partner, or family member that can take the children for the day this will be the ideal situation. Otherwise be sure to have plenty of distractions on hand for the little ones or find a way to enlist their help with any cutting, chopping, slicing, dicing, or peeling that may need to be done.

You should also create a thorough menu followed by a list of each and every ingredient you will need. Shopping needs to be done on a day other than when you are planning to cook. This means that you aren't likely to rush through the shopping trip and forget something as a result. Bring your menu and your list and get everything you need in one trip whenever possible. You can also save money by planning your meals for the month according to the sales circulars and coupons you have for the week in order to stretch your budget a little further.

Finally, you need to make sure that you have all the supplies, dishes, and containers you need in order to prepare and store the meals you've prepared properly. You should also make sure that the recipes you are using for your once a month cooking marathon are recipes that freeze well. It is even better if you have recipes that double well so that you can get twice the results from the same effort.

You should also make sure you are mentally prepared for your marathon cooking session. Beginning with a nice and tidy kitchen is a great start. Folding card tables make an excellent flat surface for storing things out of the way and freeing up valuable counter space for preparing and assembling the foods that will be prepared. You should also utilize as many appliances in your kitchen as possible for maximum efficiency. Don't limit all cooking to the oven. Find dishes that freeze well and can be prepared in the crock pot or on the range top. Once a month cooking is a challenge but many women will agree it is well worth the effort on those nights when the thought of cooking seems unbearable and the wallet has been stretched to its limit.

## Pleasure Cooking

Far too often we get caught up in the necessity of cooking in order to eat and forget the absolute joy that can be found through the act of cooking. Of course this isn't limited to stovetop cooking. There are many men and women around the world who find baking to be an extremely pleasurable pastime in addition to traditional stovetop cooking or even barbecuing on a grill. The main distinction occurs in how you perceive your cooking projects.

### How Do You View Cooking?

While this question is asked somewhat rhetorically, it is a question you should ask yourself and answer. Do you view cooking as a chore or duty or do you view it as a project? There is something much more exciting about embarking on a new project than getting around to a loathsome chore. If you do view cooking as a chore the more important question might be why?

Some common reasons that people dislike cooking include the following: lack of skill, lack of confidence, boredom, or you could simply dislike the inevitable clean up far more than you enjoy the process of cooking. For each of these, there are solutions if you are willing to make the effort.

A lack of skill when it comes to cooking can be easily corrected in most cases by taking a few cooking classes. Classes are offered for varying degrees of skill sets and are meant to help you develop your cooking talents while teaching you the basics of meal planning and preparation. You can increase your skills by taking more classes down the road.

While a lack of confidence is a little more difficult to address having a few 'dinner parties' in which your guests can compliment your culinary talents can often solve this particular dilemma. The key in this process is to plan your menu carefully and remain well within your comfort zone. You will be amazed at the wonderfully rich and delicious meals that can be prepared with very little effort if you are willing to sift through the recipe books in order to find them.

Boredom in the kitchen is perhaps one of the easiest problems to fix there is. The solution is exceedingly simple-find a challenge. Try cooking Thai or Indian cuisine. Try more difficult recipes. Try making only meals from scratch or simply try broadening your use of spices and seasonings. There are many things you can do in order to bring some excitement back into your kitchen. You may even discover hidden talents and tastes in the process.

There will always be clean up. My suggestion is to make a deal with either your partner or your children and they can draw straws over who cleans up. Of course if this won't work in your family, you could always turn over a new leaf and clean as you go whenever possible. This makes the clean up process after dinner so much simpler to handle that it is well worth a few extra minutes during meal prep.

Cooking for pleasure is really the only way to cook. If you have difficulties when it comes to finding the enjoyment and entertainment value of cooking, perhaps it's time you bring some fun back into your kitchen. If you're barbecuing, put on some Jimmy Buffet and dance around your kitchen. If you're cooking Italian find some nice Italian music to set the mood. Bring the fun back into your kitchen and you will find that cooking is a pleasure rather than a chore.

## **Quick and Easy Lunches for the Cooking Challenged**

Let's face it, cooking is not a top priority in the lives of every man, woman, or child on the planet. In fact, far too people have made learning to cook a priority in their lives. This means that we often exist on convenience foods and boxed mixes rather than taking the effort to prepare healthy meals for our families and our own personal enjoyment.

The same holds true for lunches when we often resort to a can of soup or box of macaroni and cheese or some other such product rather than putting our creative efforts into making a quick and easy yet delicious lunch. You will see many ideas in this article and the hope is that these ideas will not only get you off to a great start for ending the lunch rut we all seem to find ourselves in at some time or another but also to try new things on your own.

First of all, not all great lunches require actual cooking in order to prepare. Some of them will require the use of the microwave and some of them will need to be cooked or at least prepared before hand and reheated. The choices are virtually limitless once you understand the creative concept that must be in place. You should also find that many of these ideas are so simple you will wonder why on earth you have never thought of them. I certainly hope that some of these ideas will become main features within your own home.

Lettuce wraps. These make delightfully delicious lunch treats and the filling can be prepared ahead of time, which leaves only reheating the filling and wrapping when you're ready to eat. This is a fun lunch to share with your little ones and it teaches them that lettuce is much more versatile than people often give it credit for being. Some people choose to go with a teriyaki inspired filling; my family likes taco inspired fillings for our lettuce rolls. You are perfectly free to come up with a favorite filling of your very own.

Try sandwiches with different breads. Believe it or not, my children love trying new things. It's a rare trait for which I am extremely grateful. Believe me I understand all too well how fortunate I am. My youngest however, has a little difficulty with thick or crusty bread. Her favorite sandwich choice has become Hawaiian sweet rolls. We put the meat, cheese, mustard, and pickle in her roll as if it were a bun and she's thrilled. Other great ideas include hollowing out crusty rolls and filling them with roast beef and cheddar. You can broil this in your oven for a few minutes for a rare sandwich treat. The cooking part is very minimal and you do not have to have in depth knowledge of anything to prepare or enjoy these simple treats. Other great bread ideas include croissants with ham and cheese or chicken salad, taco pitas (another great favorite in our household), and paninis (this works really well if you have a George Foreman grill or a panini press).

While this is by no means the end all be all guide to cooking quick and easy lunches it is good food for thought. The hope is that this will get your own creative juices flowing so that you can prepare wonderful lunches for your family without needing to do too terribly much heavy cooking in the process.

## Southern Cooking Brings Soul to Food

I was born and raised in the heart of the Deep South. From as far back as I can remember I remember long summer afternoons spent drinking iced tea and shelling peas and butterbeans on my grandmother's porch. I have moved on from my roots and have made my way into other regions of the world. One thing, however, that has remained constant in my life is my deep and abiding love for southern cooking and cuisine.

I was probably well into my teen years before I realized that tea could be served any other way than loaded with sugar and over ice. It was about that same time that I realized some folks would eat vegetables that hadn't been soaked in batter, dredged in cornmeal, and deep fat fried. Southern cooking is not for the faint of heart though it can cause many hearts to grow faint. One thing that can be said is that you'll never find anything else like it on earth.

People in the south learned to make do with little in many instances. Some of the poorest people in America live in the southern part of the country. Of course, you will find that many of these people despite their poverty are also among the most generous. The same can be said of food. It's the one thing that seems to be in ample supply in most southern homes and very few will turn you away with an empty stomach.

Perhaps it's the seasonings that are often used when cooking southern food. From the crab boil and gumbo file of Cajun Cuisine to the secret ingredient that almost every southern kitchen contains for their fried chicken recipes (and no one on earth can fry chicken like a born and bred southern grandma). Perhaps it's the Sunday church dinners where everyone shares a little of what they have with others or the love that goes into preparing these meals that are shared with friends and family. Whatever the case may be, if you ever have the occasion to experience real southern cooking, do not pass it up. You might shave a day off your life, but a good southern fried chicken leg is really living and well worth the sacrifice if you ask me.

Of course it would be remiss to mention southern cooking without bringing up some of the more delicious desserts that seem to be perfection for the south. I mentioned banana pudding above but there are so many more. Pralines are a perfect for those living down around New Orleans as is bread pudding. A little to the east there are grandma's who have taken their lemon icebox pie recipes to the grave with them so coveted were these delicious deserts and the same holds true for pecan pies as well. We should never forget the flavorful Mississippi Mud cake though, and so many other wonderfully delicious treats that southern cooking has introduced to the world at large.

Favorite vegetables in the heart of the south as I mentioned above included peas and butterbeans, snap beans, corn, summer squash (after all, it's summer all year in the south), and okra (fried or boiled in many southern kitchens). Not all vegetables were deep fried though few were off limits. I remember eating my share of fried okra, fried squash, and yes, fried green tomatoes. Life was good back when calories weren't counted and no one really worried about clogging arteries. While I wouldn't make these a daily dish in any household, I certainly would recommend trying them out if you ever find the opportunity.

Another great thing about southern cooking is the wonderful fried seafood that seems to abound. From fried fish (almost any variety works well when it's southern fried) to fried oysters, seafood just seems to taste so much better in the south. If you are hoping to learn some of the southern cooking and cuisine

you will most likely need to order your spices and have them shipped unless your grocery store has a rather extensive 'exotic' foods selection. You can sometimes find great southern seasonings on the International food aisles in grocery stores as well. If you want to really treat your family to an outstanding meal, you should really try southern cooking for the night.



## **The Wonderful Tools of Cooking**

Far too often people overlook the importance of using the proper tools when cooking fine meals. While there is nothing in the world that can quite compare to cooking with the finest and freshest of ingredients, these things can only be enhanced by making use of the perfect tools for the job at hand.

When it comes to pots and pans and skillets you should keep in mind that conductivity is of extreme importance. You should also select pots and pans that are made of a heavier gauge. This allows your pans to heat evenly avoiding hot spots, which can lead to food that may 'stick' to your pan or scorch during the cooking process. This means that simply stopping in at your local mass market retailer and purchasing any old set of pots and pans is probably not the best course of action for the best possible quality in your kitchen.

Kitchen knives are also important ingredients in the kitchens of today. If you plan to prepare many meals in your kitchen, then the quality of your knives is of the utmost importance. Your knives are an investment you shouldn't have to make too often in your lifetime. For this reason, select a really good set and be prepared to make a sizeable investment in your knives. You will never understand, unless you've tried to prepare foods with knives of inferior quality, just how important it is to purchase good quality and well-balanced knives for your kitchen. You should also try the handles in your hand to see how comfortable they feel before purchasing a set of knives. If you do a lot of chopping and cutting during your meal preparation and cooking you will want to make sure that the knives you are using feel comfortable in your hands.

If you are like me and plan on cooking a great deal of meat then you should also invest in a jacquard. This useful tool helps not only when it comes to tenderizing rather rough and tumble cuts of meat but also pierces the surface so that rubs and marinades can penetrate for a more flavorful experience. This is by far one of my favorite kitchen gadgets and it isn't a sizeable investment for the added value it provides to meals.

A good quality grater is another tool that no kitchen should be complete without. There are many who feel that with all the pre shredded cheese products on the market today this tool is obsolete but nothing could be further from the truth. First of all, pre grated and pre packaged cheese simply doesn't touch the quality of flavor that freshly grated cheese provides. Second, cheese isn't the only thing that these graters are useful for grating. Graters are excellent tools for grating citrus fruits, spices, garlic, chocolate, and even onions. If you do a good deal of baking in addition to your cooking you should not overlook the value of having a quality grater in your kitchen.

Of course there are many more cooking tools than I could possibly mention here. Those mentioned above simply happen to be among my personal favorites. There are all kinds of appliances that in my humble opinion no kitchen is truly complete without. In addition to these great appliances there are many tools that are simple matters of preference. Do you peel enough potatoes to warrant a special device for doing so or do you simply opt to purchase an ergonomically designed potato peeler and peel them by hand? There are no one size fits all answers when it comes to kitchen tools and many of us are often limited by serious budget constraints and restrictions. My best advice if this is the situation for you is to purchase the best possible quality you can afford and build from there. Even if it means replacing one pot or knife at a time until you can manage a complete set of superior quality cooking tools you will find it well worth the price you've paid in the long run.

## Trouble Free Cooking?

Believe it or not, trouble free cooking is a common desire around the world. Even those among us who love cooking and eating almost equally will be the first to confess that being able to cook without the worry of creating a mess, spilling, or burning would be a blessing. Truthfully speaking there really is no such thing as trouble free cooking though there are things you can do that will take a good deal of trouble out of your cooking.

Most of the tips here will be beneficial to novice or beginners in the culinary arts however, there are some great refresher tips for those who are more experienced when it comes to cooking as well. Hopefully you will learn some things through the next few paragraphs or at least remember some things you had forgotten.

First of all, cleaning as you go will take a lot of the trouble out of what comes after the cooking. When asked the least favorite thing about cooking a wide margin of women proclaim without a second of hesitation that the clean up by far is the worst thing about cooking. To make things easier, clean as you go. Keep a sink of hot sudsy water ready to go the entire time you are cooking and wipe up any spills that occur immediately to avoid sticky messes that are much more difficult to clean afterwards. You should also note that if you transfer your food to serving dishes and immediately wash your pots and pans they will be much easier to clean than if the food is allowed to sit in them while your family dines.

My best friend is constantly burning her dinners. The reason? She believes in high or low when it comes to cooking and there is nothing in between. Very few meals should be cooked on high truth be told. You are much better off to begin the food preparation at a medium or medium high temperature and to adjust accordingly.

Make sure your oven is preheated. The temperature of the oven does indeed make a difference in the cooking process. While there are those that believe preheating is a simple waste of electricity it is what is required in order to achieve the optimal results when cooking. Most modern electric ovens will signal when the proper temperature has been achieved.

Select recipes that fall within your comfort zone in order to avoid making mistakes or becoming too stressed about the cooking process. Once you've decided on your recipe read it through a couple of times in order to be certain that you not only understand all the steps involved but also have all the necessary ingredients before beginning.

Wash your hands thoroughly and wash your hands often. Remember the sink of sudsy water I mentioned above? You'll want to use it quite frequently in order to wash any surface, cutting board, plate, or utensil that has come into contact with raw meat in order to avoid cross contamination. The same holds true for your hands.

While to some degree these tips may seem a bit simplistic, when it comes to trouble free cooking there really is no such thing. The more you do to make the cooking process seem as effortless as possible the more trouble free your cooking will really be.

## **Conclusion**

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