Chapter 1 Making Mealtime Matter

In This Chapter

- Making dinner at home to save time
- Cooking at home for your family's health
- Preparing meals in less than 30 minutes

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Hot and Sweet Chicken
Almond and Scallion Rice

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Recipes in

When your schedule is packed 24/7 or you experience occasional crunch periods, you still have to get dinner on the table as if you had all the time in the world. At times like that, you may nostalgically recall the calm, leisurely meals that you knew as a child. When you cook, you want to make the soups, stews, and hearty skillet recipes that nurture. You want to re-create your childhood dinner experiences.

Food gurus may give you the impression that a dish has to take hours of cooking to be worth eating. Maybe you read magazine recipes that tell you to simmer the dish for 3 hours, and you roll your eyes and wonder what world the food writer inhabits. Certainly not yours or mine!

It's simply not true that you can't make good food fast. In fact, cooking gets a bad rap as a time eater. I hate to see this happen, so I combat that myth in this chapter. I use these pages to outline all the benefits to cooking at home and offer some advice on how easy it is to pull off an at-home meal in a jiff. You can get nutritious and satisfying meals that meet your expectations and serve memorable meals that take 30 minutes or less to prepare.

Dinner Doesn't Have to Slow You Down

To put the task of preparing dinner into perspective, compare cooking with other tasks that you do regularly around the house. You can get a meal to the table faster than you can

- Blow-dry your hair and do your make-up. Or wait for a member of your family to do the same. If you fall into that category, preparing dinner will seem to be much, much quicker.
- Get the children to set the table. This comparative estimate is actually based on repeating the "I've asked you twice, now!" warning five times.
- Run the dishwasher. In case you're thinking about doing double duty, a poached-salmon-in-the-dishwasher recipe occasionally makes the circuits on various Internet message boards and spiral-bound, school-fundraiser recipe books. It's not a technique that I endorse. I tried it, and my dishes had a fishy smell for days.
- Watch the evening news on television. Preparing dinner is also less depressing most of the time.

Making the Case for Cooking

You have demands on your time, but let me share some arguments in favor of your cooking dinner, even though you're on a tight schedule. I'm sure that some cook-at-home benefits have crossed your mind. (After all, you're reading this book.) If not, see what you think. I believe that cooking dinner at home provides three major benefits:

- Actually saving time by cooking.
- Eating a more healthful variety of foods.
- Spending more time with other members of your household, roommates, or friends, or quiet time for yourself that doesn't involve breathing exhaust fumes on your way to the nearest fast-food joint and reading menu boards after you arrive.

Saving time by avoiding the drive-thru

Yes, you read that line right. The food service industry tries to send the message that it's faster to drive to a fast-food restaurant window than to prepare and sit down for dinner. Fast-food commercials ask, "Why cook when you can cruise to your nearby burger joint and pick up a family's worth of burgers or fried chicken?"



One answer to the "Why not fast food?" question is that you don't really save time with that option. Plus, cooking at home is more convenient and less stressful than fighting evening traffic to get to a fast-food place. And after you make it to your local Burger-In-A-Box, you still have to face the energysapping aggravation and wasted time of waiting in line and getting home.

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Time it from the moment you leave your home until you return with dinner. I bet the whole process takes at least 20 minutes, unless you live under two big, yellow arches. Carryout meals offer no advantage either. Standing in line at 6 p.m. at a rotisserie chicken store isn't as speedy as making a quick pasta or soup in your kitchen.



I've packed this book full of great meals that you can have on the table in around 30 minutes or less. Part III is a good place to start if you want to stack up the time factor and the quality of the recipes in this book against fast food and carryout, although almost every chapter contains at least a recipe or two. And if you're looking for even quicker meals, check out Part IV.



If you don't feel like flipping to Parts III or IV, check out the listing that follows for a few dinners that you can make instead of fighting the lines in your supermarket or carryout store. You can get these dishes to the table in ten minutes, guaranteed:

- Chicken soup: Heat a couple of cans of chicken soup with leftover or precooked chicken breast meat and a package of frozen peas. Add a dash of hot red pepper sauce and a squirt of lime juice.
- ✓ Open-face pizza sub: For each sandwich, slather pizza sauce on half a sub or hero roll. Layer on slices of mozzarella cheese, pepperoni, bell peppers, and onion rings. Microwave on high for 30 seconds or warm in a preheated 350-degree oven for 5 minutes.
- ✓ Tortellini au gratin: This dish is navel-shaped, stuffed tortellini pasta topped with grated cheese or buttered breadcrumbs or both. Here's how to do it: Cook a package of fresh tortellini and drain well. Spoon the pasta into a shallow baking dish and sprinkle with a little grated Parmesan cheese. If you have breadcrumbs, add a handful, and dot with butter. Run the dish under the broiler for 30 seconds or until the cheese melts and the breadcrumbs are toasted.

Home cooking for the health of it

This book doesn't claim to be a health cookbook, but that's the beauty of it. Compared to eating in many restaurants, cooking dinner at home is an easy way to eat healthier foods. It's no secret that fast food and carryout dinners are loaded with fat and calories. Just click on the nutrition link of your favorite fast-food restaurant and see what you're eating. A burger with cheese and a medium order of fries alone have almost 900 calories and 45 grams of fat, and that doesn't include a beverage.

I'm not going to talk you out of eating fast food occasionally, and I'm not blaming dining out for the fact that more than half the adults in the United States are overweight or obese. However, I can assure you that dining in means that you're getting the wholesome foods that you want.

Taking control of what you eat

When you cook at home, you're mindful of the ingredients and the quantities of the foods you eat, so you're bound to eat healthier meals. You can make your favorite foods at home quickly — even the items that you love to order in fast-food restaurants — with significantly fewer calories. Your homemade hamburgers made from lean ground beef have fewer calories and less fat than their fast-food counterparts. (If you're a burger lover like me, check out my recipe for the ultimate burger in Chapter 11.) And a serving of frozen, ovenheated fries has 150 to 200 calories, half of what you get in a restaurant order.



When you get behind the wheel in the mealtime driver seat, you benefit because you

- Cook healthier food. You serve more fresh fruits and vegetables than you can order in fast-food restaurants.
- Eliminate "super size" from your vocabulary and from your hips. You control the portions of the foods that you serve. At home, no one is pushing you to eat the Super-Giant size of fattening foods for just 15 cents more.
- Serve what you want to eat. The selection of dinnertime foods that you get to choose from becomes almost limitless. Plus, you can add additional low-calorie, low-fat salads and vegetable side dishes, both of which are in limited supply in many fast-food restaurants.
- Get veto rights on foods that you don't want to serve. Try the l'm-notrunning-a-restaurant line on the family. (However, if you're cooking for one, don't take this as a recommendation to start talking to yourself.)



Knowing what's in the foods that you serve means that you can make adjustments, cutting back on sodium, fat, and calories. The beauty is that you get to choose. For example, as an alternative to adding more salt, squeeze a little lemon juice over a dish. It makes all the flavors livelier. You can't ask the folks behind the counter of the Chicken Machine to do that for you.

According to Hoyle

To balance your nutritional goals with your time constraints, let the Food Guide Pyramid help you. The Food Guide Pyramid (see Figure 1-1) is a visual food plan designed by the U.S. Government. The pyramid shape emphasizes the role that foods play in relationship to each other. The foods that you should have the most servings of each day are at the base of the pyramid. The foods that you should eat sparingly are at the top. (For more information on the Food Guide Pyramid and planning healthful meals, check out the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* online at www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines.)

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Using the pyramid, you can choose from a wealth of from-scratch or convenience foods in every category. Take grains for example. Couscous, dinner rolls, pizza crust, pita breads, and tortillas all count in the grain category. Include whole grains, such as whole wheat bread or quick-cooking barley, in your choices.



I don't follow the pyramid religiously, but I do think about it when I plan meals. I ask myself whether 2 to 4 fruit servings and 3 to 5 vegetable servings are accounted for each day. If I'm falling short, I add an extra vegetable to a stir-fry or serve fruit sauce over frozen yogurt for dinner. (Speaking of stir-fry, it's one of the five techniques at the heart of 30-minute cooking that I detail in Chapter 6. And Chapter 14 has a couple of tempting dessert fruit-sauce recipes.)



Cooking helps people connect

If you're cooking for more than one, and especially if you're cooking for children, the extra effort to prepare dinner at home pays off. Children who eat dinner at home with their parents eat more servings of fruits and vegetables and eat fewer fried foods and drink fewer soft drinks, say researchers. This one is just my opinion, so you're not going to get the expert citation, but when you cook, you're giving your family the message that cooking is an enjoyable experience. You get to spend time with and talk to other people. You're also raising a generation that can feed itself. Or as my daughter says, "At least I won't have to live on ramen noodles."

Creating a recipe that becomes your family's favorite is important. This is the dish that everyone asks for as a reward for hard work or good grades. This doesn't have to be a fancy dish as long as it's delicious.

Cooking is also a great excuse to spend time with friends. Having friends in for a home-cooked meal is a great way to connect without the noise of a restaurant interrupting your conversations. If your friends enjoy cooking as well as eating, have everyone help prepare the meal over a glass of wine.

Recalling the sweet-and-sour Chinese carryout dishes that nourished me through college when I didn't have a kitchen, I was inspired to make a version of this dish at home. It quickly became a mealtime favorite in my house. My Hot and Sweet Chicken recipe in this chapter eliminates the heavy breading and thick cornstarch sauce of the traditional takeout dish. With all the fruit and vegetables in the recipe, I can skip other courses, but I like a rice accompaniment, such as the Almond and Scallion Rice, also in this chapter.



If you add rice to a fast entree, start the rice first. As it simmers, cook the main course.

Making Good Meals Quickly is a Snap

At this point in the chapter, I paint quite a picture about all the reasons why cooking at home is superior to eating out. With all the benefits and considering all the hype about how time-consuming cooking is, you may think that getting a meal to the table in 30 minutes or less is difficult. Well it's not. And you don't have to have your own cooking show on TV or even be a veteran with many hours of cooking under your belt to pull it off.



All you need is a plan, and I just happen to have one:

- ✓ Forget about the way that your mom cooks (or the way that you think you should cook). You don't have to bake your bread from scratch, soak your beans overnight, or collect chicken bones to make your own stock. Take a look through that shoebox or computer file of recipes. Discard outdated recipes and menus to free you up for faster and fresher kinds of cooking. All you have to do is switch to a fun-and-easy style of cooking.
- ✓ Don't think of the dinner table as a Norman Rockwell illustration with platter upon platter of food being passed around. Big lavish meals are great at times, but this is the real world. Pare the number of dishes you fix. A one- or two-course dinner is perfectly acceptable, especially when your main dishes do double duty. Cooking a vegetable, starch, and protein together is faster than preparing each food separately.

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That's the approach I take to my 30-minute meals. But don't worry: I provide plenty of suggestions and ideas for side dishes that you can make when you have the time, energy, and appetite. And I devote Chapter 14 to desserts.

✓ If you're not cooking for one, encourage helpers. I don't know of any law that says that you have to be the only one in the kitchen.

If you breathe a sigh of relief when you get to the front of the line at a fastfood restaurant, you're going to be even more relieved to find out how simple preparing quick meals is when you have a few cooking aids at home. If you can open boxes and have a can opener to handle the metal, you're ready for fast cooking. But you still may want to read Chapter 2 to get the scoop on blenders, food processors, microwave ovens, and other tools to speed you along. Using a few choice appliances and stocking your cupboards with a few key staples (see Chapter 3) can save time and an emergency call for pizza delivery.



Speaking of packages, the food industry offers so many products that have built-in convenience that you're never at a loss for shortcuts. Although I cover these products throughout the book, you may be especially interested in Chapter 5 on vegetables or see Chapter 15 about my love affair with prepared meat products.

But if it's been a while since you prepared a fast meal that you really liked, feel free to skip ahead to Chapter 4 for a bunch of quick tips on getting into a cooking groove. Or you may want to check out how simple the 30-minute cooking techniques are in Chapter 6.

Getting Dinner on in Even Less Time

I like to think that you're always going to have 30 minutes — the time that it takes to watch the evening news — to cook a meal, but I know it's not possible. Still, I value the dinner hour, even though it's shrinking. That's why you can use many of the recipes in this book to fashion delicious meals in 15 or 20 minutes tops.

In the Recipes at a Glance towards the front of this book, I outline recipes you can make in 20 minutes and recipes that take 15 minutes or less. Use this guide to quickly find inspiration for a meal when even 30 minutes is too long.



For recipes and meals that aren't salad or starch based, tear open a bag of mixed greens and top with the vinaigrette dressing in Chapter 5, one of the dressings in Chapter 10, or a packaged dressing. Add some whole-grain bread from your supermarket, and you have a satisfying menu.

Hot and Sweet Chicken

This tongue-tingling dish, inspired by the sweet-and-sour Chinese dishes of the '50s, takes a fraction of the time to prepare because it eliminates the lengthy deep-frying process. Your supermarket produce section features fresh pineapple cut into chunks, saving you a step.

Preparation Time: 5 minutes

Cooking Time: 20 minutes

Yield: 4 servings

1 pound boneless, skinless chicken breast, cut into 1-inch cubes	1 small jalapeno or serrano chile, seeded and minced
2 tablespoons flour	1 teaspoon grated fresh gingerroot
½ teaspoon salt	1 can (6 ounces) unsweetened pineapple
2 tablespoons oil	juice
1 sweet onion, peeled and cut into thin	2 cups pineapple chunks in 1-inch pieces
wedges	½ cup shredded carrots (optional)
1 green bell pepper, cored, seeded and cut into thin strips	Pepper to taste

- **1** Place the chicken in a plastic bag. Add the flour and salt and shake to coat the chicken. Reserve the remaining flour.
- **2** Heat the oil over medium-high heat in a large, nonstick skillet. Add the chicken cubes to the hot oil and brown on all sides, about 5 minutes total. Remove the chicken and set aside.
- **3** Add the onion, bell pepper, chile, and gingerroot to the skillet and sauté 5 minutes. Sprinkle 1 tablespoon of the reserved seasoned flour into the skillet. Stir to brown the flour. Add the pineapple juice and scrape up any browned bits in the skillet. Add the pineapple chunks and chicken. Stir well. Cover and simmer 10 minutes or until the chicken is cooked through. If the mixture is too thick, add 1 to 2 tablespoons water. To serve, sprinkle on shredded carrots (if desired) and season with pepper.

Vary 1t! Use a pound of pork tenderloin cut into 1-inch cubes in place of the chicken. Most pork tenderloins weigh between 8 to 12 ounces, so use two if necessary. Also, you can serve the dish over rice using ½ cup cooked rice per person.

Per serving: Calories 318(From Fat 89); Fat 10g (Saturated 1g); Cholesterol 63mg; Sodium 362mg; Carbohydrate 32g (Dietary Fiber 3g); Protein 24g.



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- **1** Combine the rice, salt, and 2 cups of water in a small pot. Bring the mixture to a boil. Reduce the heat to low, cover the pot, and simmer until the rice is tender and the liquid is absorbed, about 18 minutes.
- **2** Remove the cover, sprinkle the rice with the almonds and scallions and stir well. Set aside for 1 minute for the flavors to blend.

Per serving: Calories 203 (From Fat 17); Fat 2g (Saturated 0g); Cholesterol 0mg; Sodium 293mg; Carbohydrate 41g (Dietary Fiber 1g); Protein 5g.

