

Why Cook for Your Family?

Any day of the week, cooking for your family is a challenge. With changing schedules, homework, soccer practice, and meetings always getting in the way, you often may feel that cooking is something you have to squeeze in or avoid in order to make everything else happen. The easier choices are to go out to a restaurant, go to the drive-through, buy a take-out dinner from the supermarket, or have something delivered. Your family can get by just fine—takeout gives you and your family proper nutrition. Or does it?

Studies have shown that families eat up to 75 percent less fruits and vegetables when they eat on the run. Children are less likely to try new things when left to their own choices, sticking to just a few beloved favorites. Foods that are store-bought or from takeout are usually higher in calories, fat, and sodium than home-cooked foods—not to mention the fact that servings are often double or triple what is appropriate for one meal. If health reasons aren't enough, we know that family time around the dinner table provides every member with the stability and interaction they need to meet life's problems together—or at least as a more cohesive whole.

Why do it? Well, cooking even just a couple of times a week for your family will make a difference. I see the proof every day during the course of my work teaching people how to cook, and in cooking for my own family.

Ask yourself a few questions:

1. Could you get more out of your food budget by eating out less?

2. Would you prefer to spend more time with your family?
3. Could you and your family be eating better-quality and more healthful food than you are at present?
4. Do you dread the time spent in the kitchen?
5. Do you feel you alone are bearing the brunt of preparing the family meals?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, this book is for you. Cooking for your family and with your family shouldn't have to be an unpleasant chore; it can provide you with a tremendous amount of satisfaction in your life.

How? Here's a scenario: It's the weekend and you are planning the foods you will need for the next few days. We know that most Americans shop for groceries on the weekend. We also know that you will be in the grocery store at least once more to pick up things on the way home. You can save time by planning out at least three meals per week. These meals might include something that is quick to prepare, something that is simmered in the slow cooker, and finally something made from a leftover chicken or beef dish from the weekend—I call those made from leftovers “encore” meals.

The week you plan looks like this: Over the weekend you do your regular grocery shopping. You also will choose some specific recipes and buy the special ingredients to make them. For example:

(continues on page 3)

A Week of Recipes

Herb-Crusted Lamb Chops (page 107) • Quick and Easy Chicken Pot Pie (page 94) • Lamb and Brown Rice Salad (page 119) • Classic Roasted Chicken (page 78) • Hands-Off Pasta Sauce (page 139)

Shopping Lists

	Pantry Staples		Needed from the Supermarket	
Herb-Crusted Lamb Chops	Dried basil Dried thyme Sweet paprika Dry mustard Onion powder Garlic Powder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black pepper • Cayenne pepper • Salt • Lemons (for zest) • Olive oil 	Dried dill Lamb chops—12, each 1 1/4 to 1 1/2 inches thick	
Quick and Easy Chicken Pot Pie	Olive oil Chicken—in the freezer, or leftover from Classic Roasted Chicken Butter Flour Chicken broth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Milk • Salt • Black pepper • Dry Sherry • Frozen peas • Frozen pie crust 	White onion Carrots	Celery Italian flat-leaf parsley
Lamb and Brown Rice Salad	Extra-virgin olive oil Brown rice Salt Black pepper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooked lamb—in the freezer, or leftover from Herb-Crusted Lamb Chops 	Garbanzo beans—1 can Tomatoes—2 Italian flat-leaf parsley Green onions—3 bunches	Lemons—8 (more than normally kept on hand) Fresh mint Butter leaf lettuce—1 head
Classic Roasted Chicken	Olive oil Garlic Lemon Salt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black pepper • Chicken broth • Flour 	Roasting chicken— 7 pounds	Fresh thyme Marsala wine
Hands-Off Pasta Sauce	Olive oil Salt Garlic Bay leaf White wine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chicken broth • Tomatoes—canned whole • Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese • Kalamata olives 	Onion Fresh oregano Fresh rosemary Tomato sauce— 28-ounce can	Capers—in vinegar or salted Italian flat-leaf parsley

During the weekend you can make the Classic Roasted Chicken (page 78) for a traditional Sunday dinner. In my home if I think about roasting one bird, I usually roast two. It only takes about 20 percent more time to double a recipe when you are already making one.

On a busy Monday, you might throw together the Hands-Off Pasta Sauce (page 139), which can be doubled and the leftovers frozen to bring out in a week or two for a quick pasta or pizza.

On Tuesday night, the leftover roasted chicken can be cut into pieces and used for the Quick and Easy Chicken Pot Pie (page 94). Did you know that leftover chicken can be frozen? You might have even more leftovers if you roasted two chickens over the weekend. Just shred or dice the chicken and freeze it in tightly resealable plastic bags. Then, you can have a chicken quesadilla or a chicken salad any time you don't know what to make for dinner.

On Wednesday, you may have a free night and decide to make Herb-Crusted Lamb Chops (page 107). Cook extra lamb chops to use for an encore recipe for Thursday like the Lamb and Brown Rice Salad (page 119).

On Friday you can either let someone else in your family cook the meal of his or her choice or you can all go out and have some fun!

Before you know it, you've served your family almost a full week's worth of wholesome, tasty meals, and have stocked the freezer with chicken and pasta sauce for later. Okay, so maybe dinner at your house won't be like that every week, but it's a goal worth striving for. Take some satisfaction in accomplishing the smaller, mostly unacknowledged, steps of cooking, from which you and your whole family benefit. Even a quick tasty meal will be highly appreciated.

For many people, including me, cooking is also part of "the good life." So don't cheat yourself of this rewarding aspect of cooking, even if you are single or a two-person household. You are not alone—more than 65 percent of American households are now made up of one or two people. Besides enjoyment, the health benefits you gain by cooking for yourself are considerable as you have control over the quality and quantity of ingredients, the cooking method, as well as the serving size. Treat yourself to a great meal and freeze the leftovers to enjoy later. Many of these recipes provide you with freezing instructions. No matter what the size of your family, it's worthwhile for you to cook.

The time we put into cooking is valuable time, not wasted time. Many cooking and eating experiences last well beyond the food and flavors of the moment. Every time you cook what you bought, how you cooked it, and how you and your family responded to it, register in your mind and accumulate, giving you a bank of ideas for future reference about how to cook more efficiently, more creatively, and more precisely.

Good food and enjoyable family meals become lasting memories. I was lucky enough to have my mother's and grandmother's recipes and treasure memories of them cooking in the kitchen and serving wonderful meals. But even if your own family didn't cook much when you were growing up, you can work with a few recipes to make them your own. You may want to take the Rotisserie Chicken and Matzo Ball Soup (page 38) recipe from my grandmother and turn it into one of your own creations. You can also improvise with the recipes from the Poultry Encores chapter (page 88) and use rotisserie chicken from the supermarket or deli if you don't want to roast one yourself. Or if you want to cook the more sophisticated dishes associated with restaurant dining (but much more simply) take on the Chicken Enchiladas with Tomatillo Sauce (page 97). You can make them quickly, take all the credit, and satisfy the entire family.

Knowing there's something to look forward to at the end of the day makes life's ride a little easier, whether you are thinking about the grilled chicken you're going to make for dinner at 3 pm because your stomach is grumbling, or because you are anticipating your child's reaction when you make her/his favorite treat. To me, the good life is about pleasurable experiences. The more of these experiences you create in the kitchen, the happier you and your family will be.

Enjoying the Journey

You have likely heard the expression "Life is about the journey, not the destination." In the same way, you could also say, "Cooking is about the process too, not just what's on the plate." My guess is, if you've picked up this book and are still reading, you probably do love food, or can imagine that you might, if only you could figure out a way to keep family meals interesting but manageable in the midst of demanding schedules. To help you enjoy the process of cooking, first you have to get out of that

frenetic weekday mode and slow down in order to appreciate what's happening when you cook. Enjoy the sound of the onions cooking in the pan, the scent of breakfast bacon, the aroma of something roasting in the oven. Making other sensory connections to food and cooking means paying attention, being curious, and being adventurous. You will find yourself sorting through the lettuce bin to pick the freshest, heaviest head; searching out the best local vegetables; tasting the cheese before adding it to a dish.

Actually, tasting, in particular, is an essential step all through your cooking. Tasting tells you if your cooking is going in a direction you like or if alternative action is needed. And if it is good, you'll be quite pleased with yourself!

Fitting Cooking into Your Life

In my years of working with home cooks, I've heard just about every reason for not cooking, including no time, hectic schedules, fussy eaters, the ease of having restaurants on every street corner, and the availability of takeout and delivered meals.

First, let me be clear that I am not an overzealous proponent of cooking every single meal. It's fun to get out and try new restaurants or head right for your family's regular booth at your neighborhood favorite. And if you want or need to bring home takeout on occasion or to have something delivered to the door, do. But because there are so many benefits from cooking, the scale should be tipped well in favor of cooking for and with your family—often.

I've found that teaching someone how to cook is not the tricky part. It's helping them learn to fit cooking into their daily lives that isn't easy, especially on busy weeknights. That concept often takes a little outside-the-box thinking and creativity. Fitting cooking into your life is really no different from fitting in other things that you want and need to do. You just have to want to do it enough to make the time. The way that I look at it, you have to eat, sometimes you even have to cook, so why not enjoy the process?

Try not to fall into a rut of thinking that you have "no time" every week. Obviously, your family's schedule will vary each week. Some weeks you might not have any time at all to cook. That's when you pull something out of the freezer that you have made ahead. It doesn't mean

that you won't have something great to eat, it just means that this is the time when you make a withdrawal from the freezer or pantry "bank" you have built up ahead of time. Other weeks, when you have time, make extra or freeze the leftovers as an investment in future meals. Look at the upcoming weeknights: which nights might you have an hour or so to cook? Most of the people of whom I ask that question are surprised when they realize that they have more nights available than they might originally imagine. If cooking is a priority, typically, the time appears somehow. So take a good look at your calendar.

Once you find the time, you need to think about planning the details. Spend 10 to 15 minutes planning the shopping. Plan some extra time to build your pantry; build it up a little each week. Your pantry includes your freezer, refrigerator, and dry goods cabinets. Some people even have extra storage in a garage or basement for canned goods. Look at the space that you have and plan around it. Build a pantry you can truly cook from (so don't just stock it with drinks, snacks, and paper products). I have found that most people use their pantries for dead storage. A pantry by most definitions seems to be a place to put nonperishable foods that are leftover, like an extra can of tomatoes or foods that were bought for a specific recipe then not used. Even though the pantry is full, you are often left with the feeling that there is nothing to eat, unless you have specifically shopped for it. That extra can of tomatoes (and the boullion cubes, tin of sardines, and various spices) languishes unremembered for months or even years.

To use the contents of your pantry more efficiently, make up two shopping lists. One is for pantry items you know you can use in a pinch, any time. I only shop for these things once a month. That's the time to go to a bulk food store, a specialty store, or a butcher shop—places you don't have time for most of the month. You may only have a small amount of space, so use it wisely. Buy two cans of tomatoes, olive oil, ground beef for the freezer, an extra roasted chicken to shred or dice and freeze. Every time you run out of one of these items, buy a replacement. These items are your answer to your family's question, "What's for dinner?"—and don't be surprised if, once you begin cooking more often at home, you hear this quite frequently.

The other shopping list is your weekly list. Items on this list include your family favorites: vegetables, fruits, milk, cheese, yogurt, and lunch

items. Don't forget to include family breakfast ideas. Most of us eat some type of cereal, fruit, or yogurt. How about making a batch of hearty steel-cut oatmeal? These unprocessed oat groats are much higher in fiber, vitamin C, and protein than rolled or instant oats. The longer cooking time takes them out of the instant breakfast category, but the result is wonderfully chewy oatmeal filled with the natural nutty flavor of the original grain. With a little forethought, it only takes about 40 minutes to cook on the back of the stove the night before you want to serve it, requiring just an occasional stir while the family is cooking dinner. Refrigerate it, then each family member can warm up a bowl of oatmeal in the microwave in the morning. Add some fruit and milk, and they will have a satisfying, whole-grain breakfast in no time—turning a long-cook dish into a very healthy instant meal.

The key to good cooking lies in a simple equation: Good Ingredients + Good Techniques = Good Food. It's really that simple.

So, let's get started.

Cooking with Your Family

One of my favorite passions is spending time with my family. The other passion that I have is cooking. Why not bring those two forces together? Cooking together gives you so much more than just a meal. It is an experience, a journey that helps you get to know one another in a way that you may not have yet discovered.

When my grandfather used to come home at the end of a long hard day, he would loosen his tie, and sit down at the dinner table. Within minutes of his sitting down, my grandmother would give him a plate of whatever she had cooked for dinner. The process that she went through to get dinner ready was one that he missed entirely during the 55 years that they were married. Don't let your family fall into that rut—make meals a real family affair. Even four-year-olds can set the table and feel important. Invite your children to join you in the kitchen for more family time together. Teach them simple techniques and tasks that will contribute to the overall meal, take some of the pressure off you, and give them a sense of responsibility for the well-being of the whole group. Trade off cooking nights with your spouse to share the responsibility, and the reward, of getting a home-cooked meal on the table. Or, learn to cook together.

As I have said before, I firmly believe that cooking can be a way to bring a family together. One of the greatest compliments that I ever received was from a couple whom I had taught to cook together. It gave them something fascinating and new to talk about. The discussions that they had went beyond the problems of the day, the issues with kids, or work. In the kitchen, those issues melted away for this couple. They thanked me for giving them an interesting hobby that brought them together as friends again.

I have also had experiences with families that really needed help just working together in the kitchen. I can remember one instance where we needed to split the couple up because they were fighting over who should do what in a recipe. Once we worked through the different cooking styles, and gave them each a recipe to prepare, each one had a great time. Cooking can still be a family affair even if family members don't work together side by side, but each concentrates on his or her own element of a meal.

Cooking is different for each person. If you are the part of the couple who likes everything neat and organized, you might have trouble cooking with a significant other who trashes the kitchen. Alternating meals might be an answer. All of these issues can be worked out. Everyone can find his or her passion in the kitchen.

Here are some ideas to help your family find its cooking style:

- Talk about what you like to cook. Most of us—even children—have an opinion about what they would like or not like to do in the kitchen. You may love to put together desserts; your spouse grills like mad; your daughter prefers fixing foods for special breakfasts; cookies are the younger children's idea of cooking. Explore the types of cooking that you want to do, so that each of you gets the chance to make things that excite you.
- Get together and choose recipes all of you are interested in (or ask each person individually to select recipes he or she likes, then pool them to see where there are similarities or conflicts). Make the shopping lists, and then head to the store for some additional couple or family time. It makes the job a lot easier if two of you go to the store together. It can be fun exploring places like the grocery store, wine shop, or gourmet shop when you are not alone and rushing to beat the clock.

- Once the shopping is done, let the family help organize everything in the refrigerator, clean the vegetables, and put everything away. They'll know where everything is and feel more comfortable preparing something spontaneously or following your directions if you are running late and need someone to start the meal for you. This can be done several days before you're ready to use them.
- Now, you and your family are ready to cook. The time has come to get ready for a dinner, family baking, or a party for friends. Start out by carefully reading the recipe, getting all of the ingredients ready, and figuring out how you will divide the work. Some of us prefer to let one person be the executive chef and the other the sous chef. My son is always the one who slices, dices, and chops while I put the recipes together.

If you want to cook together, there are two different ways you can divide up the recipes. The first option is to work on the recipe together. Things will go very quickly if you both want to work this way. It also gives you a chance to work together and learn new things. Your child or spouse might never think to put a whole meal together alone, but with your help and guidance on one dish at a time, he or she will be a cook in no time. Creating foods together can help avoid mistakes. The best part is that you get to work together, the drawback is that you have to work together—that old catch-22.

The second option is to divide the recipes up and each work on a different dish. One of you can make the salad, while the other works on the main course. Just the process of creating a meal together and spending time in the kitchen can be really satisfying, rather than the decision of who does what.

- Usually, in every family, one person ends up doing the majority of the cleanup. Talk about this before you start. When will the dishes get done? How will the responsibilities be divided? You may have to compromise if you usually do the dishes at the end of the cooking process because it is hard to keep a kitchen organized with all of the dirty dishes piling up. Remember, most professional cooks clean up as they go along, leaving little to do except the table dishes once the meal is over. It's a good habit to get into.

Defining and Dealing with Cooking Challenges

There are 160 recipes and lots of cooking information in this book and you can use what's here any way you like. Pick your three favorite recipes and make only those until they are your specialty. Or, look in the index for an ingredient you have in the kitchen to make a spur-of-the-moment meal. Or, try all the recipes one at a time. They are all simple great family ideas.

Here are some other ways to get yourself in gear for family cooking:

- Make a list of things you and your family like to eat. If you like, make a computer file with the list, so you can print it out and use it as a shopping list, adding to it the things you might need for particular recipes.
- Add a heading to your list for "Foods to Try" and on a regular basis jot down one or two items like arugula, artichokes, or panko bread crumbs—so you remember to look for them in the supermarket or figure out where there's a specialty food store nearby that might carry them. Adding a new food from time to time will keep cooking interesting and creative. For a family, trying new foods should be very important, and can be a kind of shared adventure.
- Remember, your family may turn away a new food, but it is very important that you continue to introduce that ingredient again—and again, and again. It might take being introduced to a new food up to 15 times, gently, creatively, before a child will try it—but once he does, the effort is well worth it.
- Next, and most important, make a list of things that you consider challenges to your making dinner on a regular basis. I've done this for myself and with cooking students and we have found it helpful in making cooking regularly more manageable.

Maybe you are stressed from work, or too tired to cook, or your kids are picky eaters. It's possible that there are several challenges at the same time, even so try to figure out what is the primary issue for you on a given day. Then, look for recipes in this book that will satisfy your needs. Keep checking back here to figure out where to start, then keep the categories in mind when thinking about dinner or food shopping. Here are a number of situations you might recognize and some of my suggestions.

The Situation	Type of Recipe Needed	Recipe Suggestions
1. Chicken is on special at the supermarket, but you are sick of the old stand-by recipes.	You need a new chicken recipe to get your menus out of a rut.	Perk up your menu with Chicken with Feta Cheese and Tomatoes (page 82), or try Chicken and Yogurt Pitas (page 89), or, a personal favorite, Chicken and Rice—with Variations (page 80).
2. The remains of Sunday's roast beef are languishing in the refrigerator.	You need a new way to serve beef to the family.	They will love Lentils with Shredded Beef and Feta Cheese (page 120), or Roasted Beef or Lamb with Gnocchi and Sherry Cream Sauce (page 115), or even Stuffed Eggplant Mediterranean (page 118).
3. The kids are getting finicky about what they will eat.	You need a new dish or two to inspire your family to eat their vegetables.	Try Baked Onions (page 126), Oven Ratatouille (page 127), or Mixed Vegetables and Quinoa (page 122).
4. Fish is going to be a regular part of your family's fare from now on.	You need a few appealing recipes to get started.	Pick out anything from the Fish and Shellfish chapter (page 65) and they will ask for more, or give them Shrimp and Pesto Pasta Salad (page 50), or even Asian Broiled Salmon Salad (page 48).
5. Friends are invited for winter Saturday night dinner after a day of sports together.	You need something ready to put on the table as soon as you return.	Spicy Scalloped Ham and Potatoes (page 155), Baked Cannelloni with Meatballs (page 152), or even Chicken Provençal (page 147) are all perfect.
6. You miss the aroma of freshly baked bread, but don't have time to start from scratch.	You need a quick but satisfying solution.	Use refrigerated dough and make our Poppy Seed Bread Sticks (page 166), or Tabasco Cheddar Cheese Bread (page 163), or make Quick and Easy Cinnamon Pull-Apart Loaf (page 202).
7. The holidays mean a dessert party to bring close friends together, but you are at a loss for what to serve.	You need a few ideas that will appeal to everyone.	Anything or everything from the Delectable Desserts chapter (page 170) would be perfect. Or try Chocolate Chip Cookie Pizza (page 203) from Cooking with Kids.
8. The temperature outside has hit 90°F and you just cannot bear the thought of fixing a hot meal.	You need something special that won't heat up the kitchen.	Light up the grill for a quick outdoor cooking session and try Broiled New York Strip Steaks with Baby Greens (page 46), or Mediterranean Seared Tuna Salad (page 49), or Butter Leaf Salad with Glazed Scallops (page 51).
9. A business trip means two nights away from your family.	You need dinners ready and waiting in the freezer for them to pop in the oven.	Stuffed Flank Steak with Roasted Peppers and Feta Cheese (page 144), Turkey and Green Chile Enchilada Pie (page 150), or Grandma's Baked Spaghetti (page 154) should fill the bill.
10. It is your turn to bring the snacks to the neighborhood's monthly drinks get-together.	You need several new recipes to awe the guests.	Choose three or four dishes from the Appealing Appetizers chapter (page 20) such as Hot and Spicy Spinach Crab Dip (page 21), Herbed Cheddar Cheese Spirals (page 24), or Crusty Pizza Rolls with Tomato Dipping Sauce (page 30), and your reputation will be made.

Other tools you might find useful in choosing recipes are the symbols next to the recipe titles, highlighting dishes that offer certain benefits, such as:

Easy Preparation (for when you don't have the energy to do much chopping and washing and the like); No Cooking Needed (for time-strapped or just plain hot nights); Take-Along (for foods you and your family can take with you on busy nights, or to the next potluck occasion); Make-Ahead (so you can finish it off right before you need to eat); Freezer-Ready (for when you want something that you can make and freeze to eat a few days or even a few weeks later); Ready and Waiting (for something that you have roasting or simmering while you are out); Something Special (for when you need or want to make something with a little extra effort for yourself, your family, or guests).

This isn't a cooking bible with thousands of recipes, but a source of ideas based on situations I know many cooks are faced with. Some days

you want to cook like a chef on TV; other days your kids only want to eat peanut butter. Cooking naturally ebbs and flows this way. Even the most refined chefs have secret fetishes for junk food—I sometimes use prepared seasonings and bottled condiments or ready-cooked foods in my meals one night, then feel inspired to bake a quiche from scratch the next. An award-winning chef might long for a late dinner of scrambled eggs or a pizza from the local pizza delivery.

I know some people might think it is sacrilegious to serve French toast for dinner or wouldn't call making salads cooking, but you know that the demands and challenges you face every day could keep you out of the kitchen altogether if you let them. If you are the cook, you make the call about what's right for you and your family. As long as you keep an eye on nutrition, and aim for variety, go with the type of cooking you know your family will eat and enjoy, and that will make you glad you cooked.