

Chapter Eight

Food Eats Time Like a Hungry Dog



According to Cousin Geraldine, her dog Jesse could open the refrigerator, help himself and close the door with his nose.

I don't know whether I believe this, but I do know that food shopping, cooking and clean-up eat up time every bit as fast as Jesse could sneak out a pot roast.

With a salute to the Italians, who praise "the process," I must confess I've turned to "processed" and "fast" and sometimes just a bowl of cereal.

Deliver Me from the Big Oven, Please

Its demise was poorly timed.

I had cleverly scooted out the door to run errands and left my daughter and mother up to their elbows in chilled cookie dough to roll and cut and bake. Sadly, I hadn't hit more than two stores before my pager went off.

First, it was the baker's apprentice. "Mom! There was a spark, then a lot of smoke. I had to shut the oven off!"

Then it was the Grand Baker herself: "I told you so."

She had. It came as no real surprise that after 25 years, our gold-enameled oven had finally exploded. There had been a few warnings, but I'd discounted each one as unimportant in my larger life.

The time-bake function had kicked in a full 12 hours early one day and turned a frozen chicken into charcoal. But with a small microwave, who really needs time-bake? Cookies had always burned on the bottom rack, but how often did we bake cookies? Cakes never rose very well, but how often did we bake cakes?

"Believe me, it works well enough for my needs," I had told my mother.

To which she had countered: "I simply don't understand how anyone can function without a working oven."

This statement came just an hour before the oven's dramatic end, while it was still barely working and she was calculating the time it would take to bake several pounds of dough one sheet at a time.

Rushing home to inspect the remains, I was nonchalant.

"It's probably just the heating element," I yawned.

But the discussion didn't end there. We embarked on the household debate that ensues with the death of every harvest gold major appliance in our '70s house. Should we keep repairing at substantial cost? Or, at exorbitant cost, should we go look for a

Food Eats Time Like a Hungry Dog

replacement, only to make the inevitable discovery that the year ours was installed, the bottom quarter panel was one-quarter-inch shorter than standard?

Those who argued that the oven is 75 percent dead anyway, an unfashionable color and probably even dangerous won out.

The one person who argued that the relic could be salvaged well enough did not.

So it has been that for the last month and a half, we have not called a repairman and have not had a working oven. We are instead looking forward, eventually, to some sleek black “flat-top” model that will allow me to bake incredible delicacies never before possible and to cook large quantities of food for legions of dinner guests.

Anyone who has seen the commercials for these big ovens knows that they are frightening. Women once completely sane are now surrounded by huge quantities of gourmet food they are obsessed with making – whole turkeys and cherry pies and chocolate cakes and clove-studded hams and tuna noodle casseroles for 24 with hand-crushed crumb toppings.

The truth is that in the last month and a half, we have been operating ovenlessly and nicely in a minimalist sort of way. Bagels toast to perfection in the toaster oven. Meat chars itself neatly in a Lean Mean Fat Grilling Machine. And dinners in tiny boxes pirouette happily for nine to 12 minutes on a turntable.

As for dinner guests and meaningful contributions to potluck dinners, they have simply been postponed in favor of the day — someday and faraway — that our oven comes back.

The lesson in this has been unmistakable. I don't have a working oven, but compared to the TV Food Woman, I am saving hundreds of hours.

“Enjoy the break!” the Grand Baker advised with astonishing flourish the other day as the supplier, still searching for the right size, announced another delivery delay.

What does she think I was doing all along?

'Gourmet' All Comes Down to Garnish

Next summer, I'm raising nasturtiums. I'm convinced after a weekend at a country inn that nasturtiums might be the only thing standing between me and *Gourmet Magazine*.

"Wow!" said every guest, staring at a bright Fiestaware platter mounded with fresh melon, pineapple and grapes. "Look at those flowers!"

"You can eat them," offered the hostess, who had immediately disclosed herself as a naturalist by garnishing the salade nicoise with organically grown flowering garlic. I hadn't felt so exotic since I ate the orchids off the sherbet at a wedding.

"It's all in the presentation," whispered the woman in line behind me. "There's really nothing to it."

I think she has a point.

Look at any gourmet magazine. No recipe stands alone.

Take the beet carpaccio with goat cheese and mint vinaigrette touted in one magazine as a winner for an elegant brunch. On top of the soft fresh goat cheese, fresh shallots, walnut oil and a dozen other items we all keep around the house, we are to "sprinkle with chives." After removing the vanilla bean from which we have previously scraped the seeds, the lemon panna cotta with blackberry sauce requires a garnish of fresh mint and three blackberries. The smoked salmon benedict (a winner with kids everywhere) requires a "garnish of dill sprigs, if desired."

I might not have time to mince the shallots; whisk them with mustard, wine and cream; poach eggs one at a time in hot water; make cream sauce in a double boiler and transfer everything to toast triangles. But I bet I could manage to nestle a couple of dill sprigs and an orange slice just to the right of an Egg McMuffin.

The truth is that garnishing is what it's all about. Only innkeepers buy these magazines to cook from them. The rest of us buy them to put in the bathroom rack, the only place we have time to look at the pictures. But for 10 percent of the effort, we can get

Food Eats Time Like a Hungry Dog

90 percent of the effect.

Imagine a mold of Hamburger Helper encircled by three-quarters pound of plum tomatoes, halved and seeded, interspersed with sprigs of fresh rosemary. Or a hand-painted pasta bowl filled with steaming blue-box mac-and-cheese accented with mint sprigs and fresh cilantro.

Or even a *salade nicoise*.

“This doesn’t look like it would be *that* hard to make,” I announced to the innkeeper, who had just presented a platter glistening with herbed potatoes, beans and tuna. “Pretty much beans and potatoes with a few garnishes, huh? I bet you could make that ahead.”

She blanched. “I’d be happy to share my recipe,” she said.

It went on for only a single-spaced page but required peeling a half-inch band around the center of 24 small potatoes and trimming and cooking two pounds of beans, all just before serving, so that the homemade herbal dressing (eight ingredients) was absorbed to the max.

I did notice she placed it all on a bed of lettuce leaves and added a garnish of garlic flowers, tomatoes and olives.

The perfect setting, I think, for a drive-thru potato salad.

Cooking in Italia Cannot Be Rushed

It started innocently enough in the laundry room. The wall above the set tub was boringly blank.

“It needs something,” I told my husband, “a piece of art.”

“In the laundry room?” he said.

“I seem to spend a lot of time there.”

As it turned out, I was only an arts festival away from finding just the thing — a quaint photograph of laundry hanging between two buildings that lined a narrow street. The street happened to be in Italy.

“A place I’ve always wanted to go!” I said each time I saw it.

By the 730th load, my family was ready — no, eager — for me to go there.

“Go while you still can,” said my mom, in a worrisome reference to my age. “It will be my treat.”

Some serious clicking on the Internet produced a boatload of Italian touring opportunities. Without elaborating on my culinary interest or abilities, let’s just say everyone was pleased and astonished to learn I’d chosen cooking lessons in Tuscany, where food is known as an art, not a carryout meal.

The week-long itinerary was mind-blowing: three hands-on cooking lessons with Italian chefs on top of shopping and museum jaunts into Florence and demos by artisans making everything from olive oil to Gucci bags.

Once there, I’m not sure whether I was more astonished by Tuscany’s postcard vistas at every turn or the fact that I went an entire week without a salad bag or a mini-peeled carrot.

I sensed that my fellow travelers from around the country — seven women and one share-the-cooking couple — had worked a bit harder at the chopping board than I before flying to Italy for further instructions. They asked probing questions.

“Could you use an immersion blender for that?” one

Food Eats Time Like a Hungry Dog

wanted to know.

“What is an immersion blender?” was my question.

But novice or master, each one of us was mesmerized by the passion and care with which our Italian chefs approached their cooking.

“The food must be fresh,” said Vincenzo, breathing in handfuls of just-picked basil, “and you must take your time.”

As he chopped and philosophized, it became clear that in Italy, it is the process of cooking, not simply the final product, that is valued. Like the air-dried laundry in the picture above our set tub, the process cannot be rushed.

In that spirit, our chef-instructor proceeded to defile food processors and half-cooked mushrooms in favor of working with a knife or mezzaluna and sautéing mushrooms until they were “golden.” I tried to be unfazed by the fact that it was taking 10 of us two hours to chop, sauté, squeeze lovingly and crumble our way to cold bread salad and meat “purses” laced with a sauce of red wine, raisins and capers.

“Don’t worry,” said Vincenzo, “You can make it all ahead.”

With that, there was a collective sigh of relief. Not that we would rush things, of course. But, as one southern hostess in our group pointed out, “We need time to visit with our guests.” It was a display of wisdom that I would not fully appreciate until I got home.

Exactly when we would have time to make it all ahead did not come up in Italia. But mentally calculating on the trip home, I figured that between two and four on Wednesday morning looked promising for cooking, peeling and hollowing out potatoes, and filling them with mushroom parmesan béchamel sauce.

If I could freeze them, I figured I could substitute my Tuscan potatoes for the usual tater tot and canned mushroom soup recipe on our Christmas Eve buffet. But there was some dispute between the chef and our tour leader about whether freezing was advisable.

The question was still not resolved by the time I arrived

The Dog Ate My Planner

home with a wad of Tuscan recipes and to a husband who had issued dinner invitations to the entire neighborhood.

“They can’t wait to see what you’ve learned!” he said.

“Well, I learned more about the process of cooking than the final product,” I tried to explain. “The real joy is in drinking a little wine, doing a little chopping, taking all the time you need.”

He seemed puzzled.

“If they really want to learn about Tuscan cooking, tell them to be here at three wearing aprons.”

So he did. We ate around nine.

Serial Cooking's Out, Cereal's In

I was surprised to learn the other day that the fast-food breakthrough of the moment is no longer low carb, dough-less pizza. It's cereal.

College students in Arizona are giving rave reviews to a restaurant concept called Cereality, at which waiters clad in pajama tops serve them 33 choices of cereal with 34 choices of toppings in leak-proof containers flooded with milk.

"A dream come true!" claims one of these students on the company's Web site. "Since I was five, I wished I could have a different cereal every morning. Now I can have all of them at the same time too!"

Cereality fans predict the concept will sweep the nation, with milk-laden cocoa puffs and malted milk balls (which the menu calls "The Devil Made Me Do It") soaring above burgers and fries as the fast food of choice. And the implications for home cooking are boundless.

"I'll never have to cook again," I announced to the family the other night, after a glance into the pantry. "We have ingredients here for 33 meals!"

There was no denying it. Just on the bottom shelf, there were Lucky Charms, Shredded Wheat, six kinds of flavored oatmeal, raisins from last December and a 3-inch pouch of dark brown sugar with a twist-tie. An elbow-length reach into the boxes above produced enough circles, buds, flakes and shreds to mix countless combos that could be topped with leftover coconut, bananas, chocolate chips and marshmallows.

"How about a Chocolate Chip Coconut Shredded Bonanza for breakfast?" I offered. "Or an Oat-So-Good Mallo Rumba Rhymer for dinner?"

My husband groaned.

"How about a chicken dinner?" he asked. "How about grilled halibut and steamed vegetables?"

But I continued, undeterred. "Do you have any idea how

The Dog Ate My Planner

much guilt and money we could save if we actually finished off all this stuff?" I asked.

Reaching for the Eggbeaters and a skillet, he seemed unmoved, like a man unacquainted with the true Cereality of life, like one who had never felt the guilt of cleaning the pantry by cramming handfuls of honey oat granola grains down the disposal late at night.

The fact is that there's nothing less appealing than several inches of lifeless cereal snoozing at the bottom of what was once a \$5 box of crunch. I did not grow up in the Depression, but the idea of reviving these sad particles on cookie sheets at 250 degrees or tossing them with a dash of Worcestershire and garlic salt has crossed my mind. And the thought of layering them in creative parfaits has me practically breathless.

"Think of all the time we'd save!" I pressed, envisioning the kitchen island set out like a self-service motel breakfast bar where frosty colored circles and pillows of dried wheat would sun themselves in goldfish bowls beside stacks of bagels in plastic sleeves.

"What about cooking?" he wanted to know.

"Fortunately, it would end."

Despite my best efforts, the idea of a Seinfeld-esque existence at home did not sell. And our daughter, then just a couple of years away from campus life, predicted it would be a sure-fire failure at other colleges and at airports where the pajama-topped waiters are headed next.

"When you go out for breakfast, you want breakfast," she explained. "Eggs. Pancakes. Bacon. Nobody goes out for a bowl of cereal. You can eat that all the time at home."

All the time. Yes! What an excellent idea.

Backyard Grill's My Dirty Little Secret

A long time ago, I figured out that the only way to cook in the summer was to fire up the grill.

“Isn’t that a lot of trouble?” my husband asks.

“Not if you’re doing it,” I say.

But the truth is that even if he’s not, there’s nothing easier than throwing some chicken breasts in a plastic bag after breakfast, dousing them with Italian dressing and tossing them onto the backyard inferno after work. Plopped on the contents of a salad bag and garnished with a strawberry, they’re as dressy as a \$12.99 dinner entrée at a patio restaurant.

The only question is whether the easier part of grilling is the cooking or the clean-up.

“With grilling,” I pointed out the other day, “there’s no clean-up at all. And there’s no limit to what you can do. I overheard a woman at the grocery store who makes pizza on the grill. How easy is that?”

The moment I said it, I knew I was in trouble.

“What do you mean ‘no clean-up’?” our daughter asked.

Ever since she took a Family Consumer Science class in middle school, my germicide-ability has been questioned

“Do you know,” she’ll say, “that a sponge is the filthiest thing in the kitchen? Don’t ever wipe the counter with a sponge.”

“Did you touch raw meat?” she’s apt to say, noticing eight hamburger patties laid out to be grilled.

“No, they simply appeared.”

Guiltily, I head off more questions by professing to have washed my hands the absolute instant I made the last patty in total compliance with the safe-handling instructions on the package.

She gives me a look. It says, “I’m lucky to be alive.” Which explains why I should never have raised the subject of grilling.

“What do you mean there’s no clean-up?” she asked.

The Dog Ate My Planner

“Well, I scrape it off with a brush, fire it up and kill the germs.”

“That’s it?” she said.

“That’s all anybody does.” An unofficial poll of my busiest and most laid-back friends confirmed the truth of this statement.

“Some people only use a wad of aluminum foil instead of a brush,” I informed her. “Liz, for example, can’t believe anyone would do more than fire up and scrape.” I didn’t mention that Liz had also confessed to using bacon and Tylenol way beyond the expiration dates.

I also didn’t mention how my friend Linda’s grill looked this spring after it was packed away for the winter with barbecued chicken pieces still on it. Or how she redeemed it in seconds by simply firing up and scraping.

I did disclose that an Internet search turned up a guy in South Carolina who cleans his grill at the beach by kicking sand on it and rubbing it with the soles of his shoes. This was to show the bizarre ways in which grill-cleaners behave.

“Gross!” I exclaimed impressively. “Imagine the grit!”

I also mentioned the red-letter warning that appears on bottles of grill cleaner.

“How can something that can’t touch your children, your eyes or your skin be safe to put on your grill?” I asked.

I was making progress, and I believe I would have completely won the grilling-cleaning wars if I hadn’t mentioned the pizza. The thought of throwing a round of well-oiled dough on blackened char bars even made me queasy. But oddly enough, she seemed willing to try it.

“Could be good,” she said, “but the grill would have to be like new.”

“New?”

“You would need to scour it completely with antibacterial soap and water, then put it in the dishwasher and rinse it off really well to do pizza,” she said.

Even I had to agree that the thought of white dough picking up charcoal bits was too revolting.

Food Eats Time Like a Hungry Dog

“Are we having the pizza soon?” she asked, almost too hopefully.

“It may take years,” I said. “But I promise. It will be the first thing we make on our next new grill.”

Leash Laws



Simple meals. Even if your oven's working, you can pretend you don't have one. Call it being environmentally responsible. If you rely exclusively on the toaster oven and microwave, you'll save lots of energy and simplicity is almost guaranteed. A baked potato, frozen entrée and a salad. How much time can that take?

School snacks. With food allergies on the rise, some school districts are banning snacks brought from home. If at all possible, move into one of these districts. It will save you a lot of time. If you cannot move, then bring only store-bought snacks with the ingredient label intact on the pretext that it will be easier to check for allergens. Tell them that, otherwise, you would have baked from scratch.

Garnishes. Just say yes to them. A few basil leaves, some sprigs of fresh rosemary, and you'll look like you know how to identify a few basil leaves and some sprigs of fresh rosemary. If you don't, just be sure it's not poison ivy.

Food Eats Time Like a Hungry Dog

Not-so-fast food. Invite an army of friends over if you want to prepare a slow-cooked meal that requires a lot of dicing and chopping. Even better, have them bring some of the ingredients you'll be chopping and dicing. Bill the evening as a gourmet cooking experience for which chefs charge \$69.95 a head, plus wine. Your new name is Tom Sawyer.

Serial cooking. Or was that *cereal*? Breakfast for dinner could have a whole new meaning if the ever-popular self-service cereal breakfast could pass for dinner at least once a week. A real food pyramid builder: grains, dairy and fruit. With a bowl of salad topped with tuna or chicken for lunch, yay! If you built any more pyramids, you'd be an Egyptian.

Drive-thru meals. Even with the healthier versions that have been concocted since the publication of *Fast Food Nation*, your best bet is a cooler full of apples, arugula and other fruits and veggies. In case you've ever indulged in a fast food salad and saved the plate, it fits right on top in a cooler. Good health and recycling all in one!

Grilling. Non-stick aluminum foil is my nominee for most "likely to cause a clear conscience about grill cleaning." Poke some holes in it so the smoke still comes through, and you're all set. Even food that normally burns onto the grill will lift off this stuff. It will still taste way too dry if you overcook it, but that's what barbecue sauce is for.