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Slow Down, You Cook Too Fast

When I spent a weekend with my sister recently, we decided to re-create our favourite childhood meal. My sister assigned me the job of making the homemade buns and I assigned her the task of making chicken noodle soup. She put a fresh whole chicken in a large pot of cold water, added the onion, celery, carrots, peppercorns, bay leaf, and a sprinkling of parsley, tarragon and thyme. She turned the heat to high and put on the lid. I began the process of making dough. She ran out to drop her daughter off at basketball practice and came back to find me kneading and her soup simmering. She rushed out again to buy fine egg noodles, drop her son off at the hockey rink, and take the dog to the vet. She returned home to find me pinching off pieces of the sticky dough and patting them around in my palms to form uniform balls. She strained her broth into a large bowl and began to wash the pot when she remembered she needed to pick up her daughter. She raced out the door. Upon her return, a batch of golden buns cooled on a wire rack. As I slid another pan of buns into the oven, my sister placed the soup pot back on the stove and poured in the strained broth. She sipped a spoonful of the broth to check the seasonings and realized she hadn't rinsed the soap from the pot. "You're too busy. You need to slow down and respect the food," I told her, as I broke one of the buns in half and spread each side with butter and homemade strawberry jam. She told me to keep my food writer criticisms to myself.

Set the table.

Cooking is not about shortcuts and it's not about convenience. Cooking is about taking the time, wanting to take the time, to do something priceless. Our hunger for the twenty-minute gourmet meal, for the one-pot solution, and prewashed, precut ingredients has severed our lifeline to the satisfactions of cooking. We blame the demands of our hectic urban and suburban lives for turning mealtime into crunch time. Is it any wonder that so many of us suffer gastrointestinal problems these days? We consume a quick meal in front of the television or the computer. We devour a grilled sandwich or wrap in the car while waiting at a red light. Convenience food is a short-term fix that is expensive, unsatisfying, often unhealthy, and eaten without joy. I hear people complain daily about their relationships, or lack thereof, with partners and children. That's because relationships are nurtured and enjoyed at the kitchen or dining room table, but these days how many of us sit down to eat with placemats, linen napkins, silverware, and soft music in the background? When did we last enjoy a conversation over a weekday meal paired with a full-bodied red wine? And what, pray tell, is in our refrigerators at this very moment? Expired milk, jar of jam, bottle of ketchup, molding cheese?

It's particularly ironic that we've become so fast food oriented, since our households have never been better equipped for turning out delicious meals. We boast state of the art appliances, designer gadgets, and access to a myriad of fresh food, but what do we do? We use the phone to call for pizza. Is it realistic to expect people to slow down, rediscover flavours and cook in a culture that is always on the go? The answer is yes. We don't have to spend hours slaving in front of a hot stove preparing three meals a day, seven days a week. Set aside some time each day to cook dinner and cooking will

become a rewarding, energy-giving routine. Just start slow. Then take time. Take a long time.

Plan ahead.

In the movie *Kate and Leopold*, Leopold, a 19th century visitor who finds himself in New York in the year 2000, dines with Kate on a meal of tater tots and asks for the next course. Kate laughs. To which Leopold retorts, “Where I come from a meal is the result of reflection and study. Menus are prepared in advance, timed to perfection. It is said that without the culinary arts, the crudeness of reality would be unbearable.”

I suggest we go back in time by paying attention to our cooking. Again I say, start slow. For inspiration, peruse a cookbook and subscribe to *Fine Cooking* magazine. Take a cooking class. In this overdone health-crazed era we have lost sight of a beautifully conceived meal and have become afraid of our food. Woe to butter; we may gain weight, or succumb to a heart attack. Woe to chocolate; we may become diabetic. We need to find a balance where we can enjoy the process of planning, preparing and enjoying a variety of the earth’s bounty. So learn the basics if you don’t already know how. Learn how to make a *roux*, how to peel a tomato, how to temper chocolate, how to steam vegetables and keep them green.

Too often I hear friends complain about how hard it is to plan meals around work schedules and kids’ school and extracurricular activities. Where’s the balance there? We want to succeed in our professions, we want our children to succeed in their activities, but we don’t take our nutrition or culinary culture seriously. Without adequate vitamins and minerals to sustain our bodies, without the ritual and commitment of the kitchen table, we

will never achieve our potential. Just slow down and plan a little. The satisfaction will be more than anything we could order at a take out window on our way to the soccer field.

Take stock.

Grocery stores mean one-stop convenience shopping, but why settle for a snatch and grab affair when you can search out the local butcher, baker, fishmonger, and farmer with whom you can build a relationship? These culinary gurus will supply you with advice as well as fresh, organic, and local produce, like heirloom Brandywine tomatoes, Giant Russian or spicy French garlic, fingerling potatoes, and grass-fed beef or bison.

Meanwhile, stock up with the basics – good quality olive oil, balsamic vinegar, fleur de sel, peppercorns and a grinder, Dijon mustard, Parmigiano Reggiano, and pots of fresh rosemary, basil and dill. And remember, having the proper tools makes the process of cooking all the more enjoyable. Invest in a few heavy-bottomed pots and pans, a wooden cutting board, four high quality knives – a chef’s knife for chopping, a utility knife for slicing, a paring knife for paring, and a serrated knife for cutting bread and tomatoes. Throw on an apron, slide a crisp white dishcloth into the sash and wash your hands.

Add soul.

Food preparation should be approached reverently, with passion and pleasure. A Buddhist chef once told me that if he arrives at work in a bad temper, he leaves. He does not want to transfer his negative energy into the food he prepares, for it will only pass on to his guests, bite by bite.

Start with Risotto

If it's been a while since you spent time in the kitchen and you're not sure where to begin, start with risotto. My Italian friend Rosanna told me that this absolute mainstay of Italian life is simple, simple, simple to make. "As with many simple things," she said, "people tend to think that something so good has to be complicated." You can make risotto in five easy steps, beginning with sautéing vegetables, heating the Arborio rice until it squeaks and pops, adding a ladleful at a time of hot broth, stirring to a creamy consistency and, finally, sprinkling with generous amounts of Parmigiano. You cannot leave the stove for thirty minutes, but the constant stirring proves a fantastic stress-reliever as you become totally absorbed in caressing the dish to perfection. And, as you and your guests indulge in this feel-good kind of dish, you will realize that life is not solely comprised of tasks, but of tastes. As Rosanna said, "Simple things need to be appreciated; the world's complicated enough."

Play with your food.

Your mother probably told you not to do this, but I give you full permission to squeeze your lemons, smell your porcinis and your Gorgonzolas, massage your tenderloin roast with a rub of herbs and peppers, roll up your fresh basil and dice, pat a turkey's rump with one hand and swirl a glass of wine in the other. Realize that there is an erotic, seductive side to cooking. Show me someone who, with gentle strokes, finesses a blow torch over a crème brûlée to achieve the perfect crust or runs their fingertips slowly over a salmon filet, tenderly releasing the fine bones, and I'll show you someone who takes this patience and touch to the bedroom. Slowing down transforms the usually

tedious process of preparation into a soothing, satisfying ritual, one that leads you more deeply into luxurious rhythms. I can't think of a better balm for frantic and fast-paced lives.

Just desserts.

Remember that cooking is ancient. We find something earthy and connecting when we prepare slow-cooked dishes – a connection to the grand tradition of cookery, to hundreds of generations of cooks from the past. Julia Child understood this concept. She believed that “dining with one’s friends and beloved family is certainly one of life’s primal and most innocent delights, one that is both soul-satisfying and eternal.”

Cooking according to traditional recipes, finding the ritual pleasures of repetitive and precise movements, inviting the feel, smell, and look of fresh ingredients contrasts with the chaos in our lives. Cooking unifies life and tenderness, the present moment and the abolished past, imagination and tradition. Cooking makes the world liveable.

So what happened when my sister realized her chicken soup was a soapy disaster? She poured it down the kitchen sink. She washed and dried the pot. Then she slowly and thoughtfully approached her pantry. Later, we sat down at the dinner table, set with fine china, candles, and crystal wine glasses, and reminisced over homemade buns and Lipton’s Chicken Noodle Soup.