



Home » Writings » Essays » Cooking for my Sons

# Cooking for my Sons

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) | | 26

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At one point in my life I actually believed that having a dog might be good preparation for having kids. I was wrong about this. I now know that taking care of a dog has absolutely nothing to do with taking care of kids, no more so than having a coffee table might be good preparation for having a dog simply because they both have four legs.

Somehow, though, my first wife and I bought a coffee table and then we got a dog and then we had a couple of kids, as if we were players in **a frothy 1930s musical** believing we could simply dance over the realities of our own limitations. Then the marriage fell apart, and I began to realize just how poundingly stupid I could be about these kinds of things. Sitting in the car one day, staring out of the windshield with my two young sons asleep in their car seats, it sank in. It wasn't all about me anymore. It was about me and those two boys. I was now responsible for something bigger. It also struck me that my own father hadn't been much of a role model, and that I'd have to somehow invent for myself—and for them—what being a dad was. I can still remember where I was parked. That's the day I became a father.

When it came to the basic necessities of food and shelter, shelter turned out to be the easy one. We had a house. Food, on the other hand, well, let's just leave it at we started solidly in the **fish sticks**, frozen peas, and tater tots category. I'd always liked to eat well, though, and on occasion I'd scan some fancy foodie magazines, mostly so I could whip up something jazzy to impress friends. Carter and Reid, on the other hand, didn't much care for **bouillabaisse**, even if I could've figured out how to make the stuff. They were little kids and liked their fish sticks.

## JULY 4TH RECIPES



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I was learning. It took me months to figure out that my lovingly prepared croissant sandwiches stuffed with brie and grapes were being traded for Froot Loops at school. That's when it dawned on me that cooking for kids isn't about being a chef. It's about being a line cook, coming home every day and looking around the kitchen and slamming the cabinet doors, trying to come up with something everyone will eat. If we were to move beyond fish sticks, we'd all have to learn together.

Guys being guys, the kids were generally pretty good eaters, though we had our challenges. Carter at one point simply decided he didn't like green beans. I had gotten into the habit of playing my guitar at the table after dinner, so while waiting for Carter to finish one evening, his older brother, Reid, and I composed the following:

Eat those beans, Carter  
Gotta eat those beans...  
If you wanta reach for the sky...  
If you wanta grow this high...  
If you wanta Eskimo Pie...  
Gotta eat those beans.

Sung raucously and at full volume, it worked. We ALL liked **Eskimo pies** [now renamed **Edy's Pies-ed.**] for dessert.

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Reid, the quieter son, was the first to evidence any curiosity about what went on in the kitchen. While his younger brother watched "educational programs" about adolescent Ninja turtles, Reid would slip into the kitchen and perch on

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a high stool, watching, commenting, asking. Eventually he asked if he could help. Nothing quite prepares you for watching your eight-year-old son wielding a 10-inch chef's knife as he dices his first carrot. Reid picked up other kitchen skills, too, perfecting his omelet-making by practicing on the family dog. Twenty-odd years later, he's a pretty good cook.

[pullquote\_left]It took us years for a simple sautéed chicken breast to evolve into a breaded chicken cutlet, and still longer for it to be stuffed with goat cheese, sautéed in duck fat, topped with homemade chutney, and served over couscous. It was as if we were tracing the evolution of Western cooking. [/pullquote\_left]

As we all grew up, I snipped recipes from newspapers, cribbed ideas from the backs of soup cans, and added all sorts of stuff to rice in an effort to "make it my own," like the back of the box suggested. We tried everything. It took us years for a simple sautéed chicken breast to evolve into a breaded chicken cutlet, and still longer for it to be stuffed with **goat cheese**, sautéed in duck fat, topped with homemade **chutney**, and served over couscous. It was as if we were tracing the evolution of Western cooking itself. We're talking YEARS. Along the way, though, as I was figuring out how to cook and the guys were learning how to eat, the most important thing we learned was that it wasn't about the food.

Early on, almost by chance, my sons and I decided that each night we would eat dinner together at the dining table, and that we would all eat the same thing. Strangely, we didn't think about this much or actually talk about it. They were just little kids, after all, and it was just easier for me that way. I can't help but wonder if maybe the guys were a lot wiser than I suspected. Maybe they and I each somehow knew that we needed, wanted, this time together. Just us.

Anyway, it happened. I don't recall us ever talking at the table about big ideas like Honesty or Patriotism or even, as time went on, Sex. Mostly we just chatted and teased each other and ate. And with time I learned the almost profound everyday joy of making dinner for my family and presenting it to them. A sort of giving of myself. From my fractured Italian learned at the

University of Kentucky came a humble benediction. "*Mangia. Ti amore.*" Eat this. I love you.

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Eventually another woman entered our lives, more of an eater than a cook. One of the few recipes she arrived with was a concoction of refried beans, sour cream, cheddar cheese, and green onions that's scooped up with corn chips and called Shit In A Pan. Not surprisingly, the guys fell in love with her. With time, she's smoothed some of our rougher edges, and together she and I have been able to illustrate for them what a loving couple might look like. I think that will serve Reid and Carter well somewhere down the road.

Twenty-some years later, my sons have turned out well—adventurous and smart, honest and true. They call just often enough, sharing bits of their lives, sometimes asking for recipes. I think you'd like them.

**HUNGRY FOR MORE?** 

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Chicken Fingers



Microwave Chicken Stock

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[Grilled Pizza with Summer Tomato Sauce](#)

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## About Rick Casner

Rick Casner is an architect and part-time ski instructor, or a ski instructor and part-time architect, depending on how and when you ask. He divides his time roughly evenly between Tacoma, Washington, and Stowe, Vermont, according to whim, work, and snow conditions. During his long drives back and forth across the country he thinks about stuff. He also writes a little.

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# COMMENTS

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## Rick Casner

Sep 08, 2018 at 10:43 pm

I know nobody in their right mind would be reading this but, well.....So Carter grew up and then he found a girl and then they got married and now ....I'm a Grandfather. Juniper is her name. And Reid, the older thoughtful one .....well, he's gone and done pretty much the same thing; there's a grandson on the way. No name yet but he'll be interesting for sure. I've asked to just be called 'Blue' because I can't stand most grandparent nicknames. Poppy and Pup-Pup and Grampy and so on just make my skin crawl. 'Blue will have to do.

) REPLY

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## David Leite

Sep 09, 2018 at 10:59 am

Dear Blue. Thank you for the update. I'm glad to hear the boys are men and starting their own families. I do hope you teach them all to cook...?

) REPLY

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## Bad Home Cook

Jun 12, 2012 at 3:32 pm

Love this post. But it was the description of Shit in a Pan that made me snort coffee out my nose. I think I'm gonna have to try this one. Thanks for a lovely read!

) REPLY

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## Rick Casner

Jun 13, 2012 at 10:36 am

For festive occasions we scatter some chopped green onions over our... ah jeez, even I can't finish that sentence. This stuff really is pretty tasty and was hugely popular with the guys when they were kids, mostly because they got to use one of *those* words. It was kind of like having a

couple of parrots in the house for a while there. Hey, thanks for reading this old post and taking a minute to comment.

) REPLY

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Lindsay Myers

Jun 13, 2012 at 3:07 am

Sorry for that inadvertent nasal caffeination, Julie! But we're glad we could provide a fun read.

) REPLY

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Nich60

Jun 25, 2011 at 7:04 pm

this was great, what`s next?

) REPLY

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Rick Casner

Jul 05, 2011 at 11:26 am

Thanks John. "What's next?" World domination.

) REPLY

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Sally Alger

Jun 21, 2011 at 8:12 pm

Like your wife I'm more of an eater and was seldom even allowed in the kitchen as a kid. So reading about your moments with your kids makes me a bit wistful. You two created a great family, and (I happen to know) watching you cook is magical.

) REPLY

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Rick Casner

Jun 23, 2011 at 4:51 pm

Thanks Sally. I think the 'Truth' of any of this, is that it's what happens AROUND the table that really matters. I think I may have learned how to cook mostly so I could make 'bait' to lure folks to join me for dinner.

) REPLY

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Judy

Jun 19, 2011 at 7:48 pm

What a great story to read on Father's Day. Thanks.

) REPLY

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