Get Kids Cooking

I’ve never understood why people buy frozen meals, canned soups, or countless other packaged foods. They seldom taste good, and they’re typically loaded with sodium and saturated fat. Restaurant foods aren’t any healthier. At some places, you can get your whole day’s worth of calories before dessert. Great.

So why do we put up with that? It’s more convenient, for one thing, especially in families with a single parent or where both parents work. But the truth is that many of us have no choice. You see, over the past 50 years, we’ve largely stowed our cooking gear and surrendered our taste buds. I hate to say it, but many Americans simply don’t know how to cook.

We don’t have to. We can afford to let Betty Crocker and Marie Callender and Ronald McDonald prepare our food for us.

And the result is...blah!

The way to escape today’s Corporate Cuisine is to know how to make your own food. The good news: you’re never too old—or too young—to learn.

I started late myself. When I lived in a college dorm, I had a little cupboard that never contained much more than cans of soup and boxes of macaroni and cheese. In graduate school, I don’t think I cooked anything fancier than hamburgers and frozen potatoes.

But soon after that, I was fortunate enough to stay at a group house in Ann Arbor for a week where I was drafted into the cooking brigade. That’s when I first learned to chop an onion, shred a cabbage, and make brown rice...and to savor delicious vegetable stews.

I never did mature into what you could call a great chef or a foodie. But I got my cooking basics down, and I can throw together some favorite recipes with confidence and ease.

Things are worse now. When I was growing up, most mothers (it was rarely the dads) really knew how to cook. But few transferred those skills to their children. Those kids are today’s parents, and many, much as they’d like to, simply don’t know how to teach their children to prepare great-tasting, great-for-you foods.

But if our kids don’t learn that now, they’ll be sunk later, as will be their kids.

How to reach every child? In school. Scouts and other youth groups could help, but school is the only way to get to all kids.

Cooking classes should be practical. Forget haute cuisine. Children would learn a few breakfast options—maybe oatmeal with topplings and scrambled eggs or omelets (sans some yolks) with vegetables. For lunches and dinners, youngsters could be taught how to prepare hearty bean or vegetable soups, veggie stir-fries, simple salmon or tofu recipes, easy salads, baked sweet potatoes, and other healthy basics.

The trick is for kids (and for kids at heart) to learn to cook a modest number of healthy recipes that they love to eat. That puts them—not Betty and Marie and Ronald—in control.

Cook your own food? How radical!

Can’t fail. Teach kids to cook when they’re in school and you’ll grow healthier adults.

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