

I'm not a cook

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I'm a horrible cook. Not just mediocre, but downright horrible. I have lots of measuring cups, spoons, recipes, spices, a food processor, a slew of handy gadgets, and every other culinary device that a person would need to whip up a pretty decent meal. They nicely line my shelves and kitchen counters, but I never seem to use them when they're needed the most - for cooking. And like millions of other food-channel viewers in television land, I love to watch Emeril or Wolfgang Puck perform magic with a pot or pan, but I always seem to lose them somewhere between throwing in the shallots and sautéing the chicken or beef.

What's really surprising is that all three of my children are not only excellent meal preparers, but both my sons are employed as ... yes, cooks! David works as kitchen head cook at a popular Charlotte bar and grill and Ed works as senior cook at a Hops Restaurant. And Victoria is usually in charge of preparing meals for her many military friends who all seem to congregate at her condo on holidays because they know they will be well fed.

As a child, I used to spend summers with my grandparents in the Catskill Mountains and watch my grandmother prepare a host of Polish dishes, including pirogues (filled dumplings), stuffed cabbage and babka (Polish bread). She'd roll out the dough for the pirogues as thin as a sheet of paper, stuff each one with mashed potatoes, sauerkraut or ground beef, boil them in a huge pot of water, and finally get out a large black skillet and fry them up for my eagerly waiting grandfather. It was an all-day chore, but one she performed lovingly and skillfully.

My mother, as the head of the next female generation, cooked from scratch, but a lot less than my grandmother. Things changed even more when my father brought home a new appliance on the market that changed millions of housewives' lives forever - the wonderful, amazing microwave. And when Mom did prepare a meal from scratch, I was no longer interested and



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dies. Pretty soon, my brothers and I realized that if we were a little late for dinner, my father no longer scolded us but rather nodded in the direction of the microwave and in a matter of seconds, our meal would be piping hot and all was forgiven.

So, naturally, when I married, cooking was not one of my strongest points. In fact, the first meal I remember preparing was meatloaf, mashed potatoes and corn. The meatloaf came out burned because I incorrectly set the timer for two hours rather than one, the instant mashed potatoes were runny with too much milk (peeling potatoes? It never crossed my mind), and the corn ... well, there isn't much you can do to ruin a can of corn.

There was this one time that I vowed not to deviate from the recipe and to follow it exactly as written. I knew the family needed a change from hamburgers, Shake and Bake chicken and spaghetti, so I courageously decided to prepare beef stroganoff. Shopping for the finest ingredients available in our local grocery store and working feverishly most of the day, I felt a sense of pride as I placed the serving platter of the sumptuous stroganoff on the dinner table. My husband ate it sparingly and the children balked at trying the new dish in front of them. After much coaxing, I decided it simply wasn't worth begging them any longer and removed their plates, replacing them with three cereal bowls and a box of Cocoa Puffs. The only one that seemed ecstatic with the new dish was the family dog who quickly devoured the stroganoff scraped

Not to be dissuaded, however, I volunteered to cook our extended family Thanksgiving dinner one year and, proud of myself, at 7:00 a.m., I slipped the 25-pound turkey into the oven. Hours later, and right before the guests were about to arrive, my husband came racing into the living room yelling something about the oven being on fire. It was, for the basted turkey had filled the roasting pan with turkey juices that had overflowed onto the oven floor. Flames were shooting out everywhere, but we managed to put out the fire without using the extinguisher on the bird. The family still laughs about it even today and refers to the episode as the Thanksgiving we all had Cajun turkey at Peg's house.

There were other instances that should be considered in my effort to get elected as the worst cook in history such as the time I almost sent everyone to the hospital with my meatloaf, or the exploding hens, or the many cakes that fell at the last minute. Then there was the time I tried using Seven-Up in my Jell-O mold or, worse, offering my husband scrambled eggs nuked in a microwave. And yes, I did leave the giblet bag in one year at Thanksgiving, but I understand that a lot of newlyweds do that.

However, there is a flickering light at the end of my cooking dark tunnel in that I can make a very good tray of lasagna, especially after one or two glasses of Rose wine. I don't recall where or who I got the recipe from, but my husband, a picky Italian eater who does most of the cooking in our home, continually raves about my lasagna.

I admire good cooks because, frankly, what greater pleasure is there than settling down to a wonderful meal? Cooking is an art form and, like all creative projects, should be embraced, loved and nurtured, improved upon, and displayed with pride. But if you're like me, a klutz around the kitchen, don't despair. I have a pretty good recipe for lasagna any time you want it.

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