

Can We Have Dessert Now?

When kids eat just enough of their dinner to "earn" dessert & other dangers of cooking . . .



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Creamy Chicken with Pasta (top with parsley if you wish—and I DO wish—and maybe add mushrooms or broccoli; I think that'd be a dream . . .)

Now, listen: I've never believed in "rewarding" my children with dessert, telling them that they have to totally empty their plates, or forcing them to finish eating something they just tried for the first time & did not like. These are young *human beings* at my table *with feelings* who I happen to love, & even *like*, & after all, what did I just do all this cooking for if I

didn't want them to enjoy themselves & create new memories around the dinner table? (Not to mention, I want them to have healthy relationships with food, including sweets, & I don't believe forced eating, isolation at the table, or sweet rewards encourage that. *Moving on . . .*)

That all said, sometimes, it's exhausting, disheartening, & even a little hurtful when I put the work in to make a delicious, well-balanced meal (especially if I felt like I did a pretty darn good job on it) & they look at the food at the table or take a single bite & say they're "full" or "don't like it." In those situations, we have to set boundaries & expectations, & we determine together what they will eat before they leave the dinner table &/or have dessert (or "sweet things," meaning a few pieces of candy on those nights when I haven't baked, prepared, or purchased anything sweet).

As you can probably tell by now, tonight was one of those nights.

It started in the kitchen. I'd sauteed chopped chicken, coated in salt, cayenne red pepper, & paprika in a delicious mixture of butter, parmesan, & basil, & it was on the verge between cooked & developing that light, crisp edge that is still edible to the kids before they start accusing the meat of being "burnt." In the meantime, I'd prepared a very simple pasta of elbow pasta, butter, salt, basil, & parmesan, with a white roux reduction on the side (that I already knew they wouldn't eat; hence, *deconstruction*).

With the pot of pasta coated, stirred, & still steaming on the stove, & the chicken developing that delicious crust, I greeted my daughter as she entered the kitchen.

She said nothing, put her hand on her hip, & deadpanned, "Pasta again."

A scoff escaped me. It hadn't been a question; it was a pointed statement at the end of a long, ridiculous week of work, a (different)

client who won't quit, personal life stress, not enough sleep, not enough time outside, & just not enough *time*. I looked at her & pointed out that there was this pasta, the rice in the fridge from the night before, & the fact that the two sides all three of these kids consistently eat . . . are chicken & pasta (so guess what I make frequently?).

She rolled her eyes & said, "I guess . . . It's not bad; it's just boring."

My first son, my middle kiddo, agreed from the couch, followed by his little head, who rapidly nodded his head. They then quickly turned back around, focused on the video game they'd been playing together.

To say I felt discouraged would be an understatement.

I'm not going around, looking for applause, a medal, or a pat on the back. Though I do carry the emotional load of meal planning, grocery shopping, & cooking, at the end of the day most of the time, it's just dinner (*shrug*).

But here I was, having made one of the kids' favorite dishes (just chicken & pasta) after making their other favorite dish (meatballs & rice) the night before, only to hear that it's . . . now boring . . . & they don't want to eat it.

Now, once they had bowls of the steaming mixture in front of them, they were more than happy to eat it (Cadence & Grayson, in fact, had two servings, & Landon proudly showed me his cleared bowl), & they were full, so they didn't even ask for dessert tonight . . . but their feedback stayed with me.

Now that I've heard more than enough of myself (I'm whining; I'm complaining), here's what I will do next.

(First of all, I turned on *Julie & Julia* for the *millionth* time this summer, comforting like a loved one's heartbeat, & I know I'll do two more work tasks tonight after writing this, which will take a little weight off of my weekend—small bliss.)

What Requests?

I've never been opposed to ideas & requests from my family when it comes to cooking—it saves me time & decision-making, & you know what, sometimes a particular meal just sounds fantastic.

But for the rest of the summer (when all the kiddos go back to school), I won't be taking requests, with the exception of Landon's birthday. Instead, I'm going to focus on leaning into saved recipes & neglected cookbooks, & I'll see what new promising dishes I can find for all of us to sink our teeth into.

Leaning Paleo

Up to this point, I haven't shared much about my shifting health journey on Substack, but long story short, I had to see a bunch of doctors, who all agreed that "something" was wrong but couldn't pinpoint what. We entertained celiac, Hashimoto's, & more, but it was likely long-term complications from experiencing Long COvId (three years long, in fact). I've started being able to factor in the 40 foods that I had to cut (yes, 40), but I still admittedly feel *much* better when I don't eat them. Removing these foods very comfortably placed me in a Paleo diet—namely, food you could forage, hunt, or easily assemble from nature (say, greens, fish, & olive oil)—with express importance placed on anti-inflammatory foods & drinks.

This is a hard diet to follow in Croatia, despite living on the Mediterranean (& the Mediterranean Diet & Paleo boast many similarities), but with the emphasis & social expectation on meat, bread, coffee, & alcohol, it's hard to strike a balance. I'm going to do my best to follow it at home & as much as possible in social settings.

& of course, when I share recipes, I will share how I prepared them, along with sidenotes about how I would ideally prepare them (I adore garlic, for instance, but often cut it out or use far less than I would like because of the swelling I feel after eating it in my arms & legs).

Return of the Recipe Cards

I love freedom & creativity in the kitchen, but I also love a good recipe. I keep a log of my favorite recipes, which I will also pass down to my children (we've talked about it before, & they're *excited* about it; they've already picked out their own recipe books for me to fill & everything), & I also have a separate section of recipes I wrote down to try.

I admittedly haven't visited that section in a while, largely because I got sick. Cutting out so many foods & having to adjust recipes so much took the fun & adventure out of trying new meals & deterred me from wanting to convert anything new. But I miss exploring, trying, & learning in the kitchen—it's time I take that part of my cooking journey back, even if I have to cut back on the black pepper, garlic, & onion *sig-nif-i-cant-lyyyy*.

Photograph It Sideways

A fun little hack I learned once by accident: photograph your meal you've created sideways! I was taking a picture of a meal I was especially proud of, & the angle I was holding my phone caused it to crop sideways.

Seeing it from that angle, I reexamined the meal, appreciated the deliciously-crustied meat & side of green beans & rice, but it made me rethink how much rice I'd placed on my plate as opposed to vegetables, & I realized an orange or red vegetable (carrots, red bell peppers, etc.) would be delicious & aesthetic options, too.

Neurologically speaking, I assume this comes from the same place where, when you're cleaning, decluttering, &/or decorating a room, & you find yourself unsure what to do next, interior designers will

recommend you take a picture of it & examine the photo for what you're missing while physically standing in the space. It removes some of the emotional subjectivity & allows you to look at what's in the space (or on your plate) more objectively & find things you could improve.

I don't know—it worked for me in that moment, & if I'm feeling stuck in the next month & a half, I just might scroll through photos of my cooking & look at them sideways.

Probably Your Fourth Croatian Lesson

Unless you're like me or have Croatian family or friends, you more than likely didn't choose Croatian as your next language study! Most language learning apps, like Duolingo & Rosetta Stone, do not offer Croatian, but some lesser-known ones like Mondly & Drops both do.

Here's a little Croatian for you, just for the fun of it!

- Cooking - Kuhanje (coo-hann-yeh)
 - Try something new - Probaj nešto novo (pro-buy nesh-toe no-vo)
 - Fresh Start - Novi Početak (no-vee po-chet-tok)
 - Summer - Ljeto (lee-yet-oh)
 - No Substitutions! - Bez Zamjena! (Bezz zahm-yen-ah) - *Cue Gérard Depardieu, very pleased with himself, saying "No substitutions!" with Queen Latifah's support in The Last Holiday*
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Thank you for joining me! I'm excited to get back on track.

Until next time! Želim vam prekrasan tjedan! (Have a wonderful week!)

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