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## Food + Cooking



LESLEY PORCELLI

# THE KID'S MENU: AN ODE TO NIGHT FEEDINGS

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A piercing cry in the middle of the night, a baby's insatiable appetite, a mother's chronic sleep deprivation. What's not to love?



I have never eaten a midnight snack. Even during pregnancy, when occasionally I'd wake at 3 in the morning with a growling belly and thoughts of fried eggs, I would stay in bed until I returned to sleep, saving my hunger for the morning. But when a baby enters your life, you suddenly become roommates with someone whose hunger knows no time of day, someone who's happy to snack around the clock.

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Early on, as I faced the second or so wake-up of the night, I would look at my son, eating away hungrily, and I would start to get hungry, too, as if I was watching a friend eat a grilled cheese sandwich.

In the beginning, his meals were epic, up to 45 minutes: He'd sip daintily, and take breaks, and sometimes nod off; I'd pinch his toes or scratch his head to wake him up again, in the hopes that he'd fill his belly enough to give us both a few more hours of sleep without interruption. Lots of couples split the night feedings, in order to maximize sleep for everyone: For one of them, Dad gives a bottle while Mom stays in bed; for another, she nurses or gives the bottle. In our case, we were all too lazy to mess with preparing bottles and pumping, so I did all the feedings, and the deal was that whenever the baby didn't return to sleep easily, Dad would have to do the soothing. Most nights our system worked pretty well.

Around the three-month mark, we hit a rough patch: After weeks of being able to count on four- or five-hour stretches of sleep, the night wakings became more frequent, every two hours or so. One theory is that babies go through growth spurts and need to eat more often. But, desperately sleep deprived, I sought advice from the nurse at my pediatrician's office, who warned against turning these nightly visits into a cocktail party. "Be all business," she said. "No kissing or playing of any kind. Keep things dark and boring." Our sleep book, *Healthy Sleep Habits, Happy Child*, warned that if the baby didn't eat during these periods, I shouldn't go to him at all.

But darn it if the little bugger ate every time. So I kept going, but used only a flashlight to do a quick diaper check and the feeding; when the battery became old enough to provide a high beam at the beginning of the feeding and fade to darkness by the end, I thought about patenting it as a flashlight for nursing mothers. Slowly, things returned to a manageable state: My son could now finish eating in about 15 minutes, and rarely needed to be soothed back to sleep. And a few months ago, he started waking up only once per night—some wonderful nights, he doesn't even wake until morning—and he can now, at 11 months, eat in just ten minutes, so I have been able to start counting on a pretty good night's rest again.

The night feedings, I thought, were surely the bane of the new parent's existence. But I secretly love them. During the day, my son grows more into a little boy seemingly every hour, and nothing could be more magical. His curiosity spills over into his eating: Every day, he's a little more distracted while drinking his milk, interrupting to flash me his two-tooth grin, or to look at the basketball game that my husband has on the television; he's become more interested in the little bits of food that we feed him as he sits in his high chair. But at night, in the dark, while the rest of the world is still, I have my infant back for a few minutes, curled up on my lap while he drinks his milk in huge gulps, his eyes closed. I bring him over my shoulder for a burp and he nestles his warm face into the crook of my neck. In a few months, I know, our intimate little night meals will be behind us completely. But for now, I'm happy to hold on tight.

PHOTOGRAPH BY STEPHANIE FOLEY

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