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Food + Cooking



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THE KID'S MENU: COOKBOOKS FOR MOMS

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If you've ever, say, set your baby sling on fire while cooking, you probably understand why new mothers need special recipes.



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I never thought motherhood would bring with it a need for a special cookbook. Lots of other kinds of books, sure—in recent months I've found myself reading certain lines over and over again in books about baby sleep, like a young girl with a Harlequin romance—but poring over a cookbook seems like a luxury of the childless. Still, I do remember a conversation with my friend Jennine when she first had her baby. "I have to hold him all the time," she said, looking a little tired.

“Lesley, you have to write a one-armed cookbook.” I had forgotten her request until a recent lunch with my friend Laura and our two newborns. “Did Meg tell you that she set her baby sling on fire while cooking dinner?” I asked her. “Hmm...” said Laura, a faraway look coming over her eyes. “I guess I should stop using a baby sling while cooking dinner.”

So maybe new mothers could use a little guidance. I decided to see what was out there, starting with, not surprisingly, *The One-Armed Cook* by Cynthia Stevens Graubart and Catherine Fliegel. I was immediately thrown by the “TM” next to the title; was this part of some larger business effort that will soon bring One-Armed Dinners to the frozen food section of the grocery store? In any case, I was sort of surprised to see how much of the book is devoted to entertaining (why do so many cookbooks these days assume you’re preparing for guests?), starting with a “Homecoming” brunch for 24 people that includes two pages’ worth of strategy. The idea alone exhausted me, and I hadn’t even hit the recipe section of the book yet.

The recipes, I was disappointed to note, rely on that “sort-of homemade” approach that’s become so hot in recent years. Some of the recipes are elegant and simple, but unfortunately many more of them involve combining several store-bought items rather unimaginatively—say, chicken breast, bottled stir-fry sauce, and frozen “stir-fry mix” vegetables for a stir-fry, or “favorite prepared pasta sauce” and goat cheese for, well, pasta with tomato sauce and goat cheese.

Looking for another take, I consulted a 1981 edition of *New Mother’s Cookbook* by Donna Paananen. The cover photo alone gave me a new lease on life: There, in soft focus, was ostensibly a new mother (never mind the 2-year-old sitting on her lap where a newborn should be) in a puffy-sleeved dress, lounging in the park, a basket of freshly picked field flowers and a transferware plate of cold cuts casually arranged around her. Though such a tableau was just as unlikely in 1981 as it is today, and though few of these recipes strike me as the sort of quickie dishes that new parents could rely on, the recipes still sound fantastic, in an old-school sort of way: Think Yorkshire cheese biscuits, watercress soup, Swiss steak, and Chicken à la King. I liked that most recipes start from scratch (though the occasional can of mushroom soup does rear its head), and the rib-sticking dishes sound exactly right for a hungry nursing mother. Problem is, few seem like they could be thrown together with a baby at the hip. By a hired cook at home while you jaunt around the park in a filmy, ruffled dress, maybe.

Traveling back even farther in time, I looked at *Mother’s Cookbook for Pregnant and Nursing Mothers* by Caroline Liddell and Nickey Ross, from 1977. Giving away its Canadian provenance almost immediately, by following a discussion on morning sickness with “Herring Roe on Toast” and “Kipper Kedgere” in the breakfast chapter, this little volume opens a window into a time when even a new mother needed to know how to whip up a white sauce. Indeed, the illustrations have just that wholesome 1970s quality that calls to mind the original *Joy of Sex* couple, as if after a baby-making romp in that book they would come over to this one to snack on some Souffléed Welsh Rarebit. Though I appreciate the book’s special menus for “Wretched Mothers” (a particularly comforting name for those with nausea) and “Constipated Mums,” I still don’t think a time-crunched new mother would come away with much. But to be fair, I’m not sure any book could really help, since having your nose in a book takes you away from two more immediate tasks at hand: 1. tending to your baby; and 2. cooking dinner. With that in mind, I’ve hatched these tips over the past few months:

1. Do a lot of roasting. Even the most challenging baby can be left on his own for two minutes (whether he likes it or not), which is exactly enough time to give meats or vegetables an oil rubdown, some salt and pepper, and a shove into the oven. This technique actually favors cooks who are too tied up to check on their food, since a little extra browning just brings out more flavor.

2. Do a lot of grilling. The flipside to long, slow cooking, this works well even if your baby sleeps for only short periods; you can grill, eat, and clean up within 20 minutes.

3. Get your baby used to sitting in his high chair. Optimistically, this can buy you up to 20 minutes of time, so if you have to chop or sauté an onion, or wash some produce, now is the time to do it. Get comfortable with singing at high volume; I can attest that even if you have a singing voice that lures geese to the area, it will keep baby calm for an additional five minutes.

4. **Make friends with frozen vegetables.**

5. **When baby is old enough, get one of those jumping toys.** Baby will happily spend so much time in this contraption that you may find yourself glancing towards the door waiting for the social workers to show up.

6. **Encourage naps.** I know what you're thinking. Those naptimes are so precious, there are bills to pay and laundry to fold, and, and, and... try to [make someone else do](#) those things. There won't be any complaining when you sit down to a homemade meal at the end of the day.

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