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DINING & WINE

Make Dinner: A Home Cooking Manifesto

By SAM SIFTON SEPT. 23, 2014

Just cook. That is the message of the moment, the act to embrace. Just cook dinner. It is a habit as easy to form as a bad one, and more beneficial by far.

Of course, home cooking can be stressful, particularly during the week. Never mind the time spent at the stove. There is also the time spent planning, and the time spent shopping: invisible labor, more taxing than it seems. And then someone has soccer practice. Or the traffic is heavy. Someone needs to work late. Time famine grasps us all.

We are here to help. This issue of Dining is dedicated to the core promise of a new website and iPad app that The New York Times introduced last week called Cooking. Built on a foundation of more than 16,000 old and new recipes in the Times archives, the site and app are designed for cooks of all talents, from beginning to expert. The mission: to make each one of us a better cook.

So just cook and see what happens. Gather family or friends to your table and serve them hot food. Maybe it helps the children do better in school. (Studies suggest it.) Maybe it strengthens relationships. (Likewise.) Demonstrably (as you will see!) it is more pleasant than a microwaved stew or takeout curry or a pizza delivered from miles away. Cheaper, too.

Here is one way to get started: Imagine a chicken smothered in gravy, cooked on the stove top, served with white rice and steamed green beans with a pat of butter. It is as pleasant a meal as a September night can offer, and simple to prepare.

The shopping is a breeze. Go to the market for a chicken of moderate size. Get an organic one because it will taste better. Ask the butcher to take out the backbone if you're nervous about doing that yourself. This isn't a time for more courage than is called for in the preparation of a midweek meal. (A bird with its

backbone removed has been “spatchcocked,” and you can lay it out flat in a pan. If you want to know how to do that yourself, there is a short instructional video and other tips on cooking techniques at nytimes.com/video/cooking-techniques.

Buy some unsalted butter and, if you don’t have any, a small amount of flour. You probably have salt and pepper. Maybe there is some chicken stock in your freezer or refrigerator. If not, pick up some at the store, the low-sodium kind, better in all ways than its over-salty cousin in a can or cube. You need little else.

The recipe is a classic, in a collection we’re calling Times Classics, and it comes from Craig Claiborne, a child of Mississippi who started as food editor of The Times in 1957 and did as much as anyone to help bring home cooking into the spotlight. The dish “belongs in the ‘comfort’ category,” he wrote in 1983, “a food that gives solace to the spirit when you dine on it.”

Doesn’t that sound good? You could give your smothered chicken some European flair with mushrooms and small onions in the gravy, as Claiborne did in his experiments with Pierre Franey, then his kitchen co-pilot. Or you could send yourself south to the Creole tastes of the Delta, with a blend of tomatoes, chopped celery, onion and green peppers added to the sauce. They wrote recipes for both.

Sometimes the easiest way is the best.

First, select a pan in which to cook. Claiborne believed a cast-iron skillet to be essential to the dish’s success, probably in part for nostalgic reasons and absolutely because cast iron conducts heat so evenly and well. But any heavy-bottomed pan large enough to hold the chicken will do. Set it over medium heat, and add a couple of tablespoons of butter. As it melts and starts to foam, salt and pepper the chicken. Then add it to the pan, skin side down, and turn the heat to low.

Now, a technique straight out of Claiborne’s mother’s playbook: Put an inverted plate on top of the chicken and weight it down with a full can of tomatoes or beans, a foil-wrapped brick or a small dumbbell — something heavy enough to press the skin of the chicken into the heated surface.

Cooking is patience. Cooking is trust. The low heat of the stove combined with the butter and the rendering fat of the chicken will slowly turn the skin golden brown and crisp, so that it releases easily from the pan. At which point you will turn the chicken over, carefully, and cook it some more. (Use the downtime to make rice and prepare your green beans.) Then, the smothering. When the

chicken has cooked through, take it out of the pan and pour off all but a couple of tablespoons of the fat in the pan, and make a quick gravy.

There is no need to panic at that command. Simply sprinkle a few tablespoons of flour into the hot fat and stir it around with a whisk for a few minutes, allowing the raw taste of the flour to diminish. Then hit the resulting roux with a cup or so of chicken stock, whisking until it thickens. Add salt and pepper to taste.

Return the chicken to the pan with the gravy and allow it to cook yet a little while longer, until it is ridiculously tender, almost coming off the bones. Then remove to a cutting board, hack into pieces and place on a platter. Spoon some of the gravy over the top and serve the rest on the side, with the rice and vegetables.

This is weekday cooking to remember and, we hope, the start of a glorious journey toward the delicious.

Recipe: **Craig Claiborne's Smothered Chicken**

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