

Who's the Cook Around Here?

by Michael Ball

"I'm tired of my cooking," my wife announced at dinner last night.

In other circumstances, that could be the stuff of a sitcom or the warning of a sudden state change in the family. In our house, she simply meant she had thought through, baked and sautéed all in her mental cookbook. Although in this case, she had also hit up some cooking websites for recipes.

Both my mother-in-law and my maternal grandmother had considerable identity in being the family cook. Neither taught her daughter to cook nor encouraged anyone to work in *her* kitchen. The major difference is that my mother-in-law was insecure about her cooking while my grandmother knew she was a fabulous cook and who guarded her domain against all comers. Even my grandfather, who was an innovative cook on his own, dared prepare meals only when she was away.

When we met, my wife could cook fewer than a half dozen dishes. There were a quite passable red sauce for pasta and fried chicken. In contrast, food combining and preparation fill my head and hands. I chose to cook from elementary school days. I have been the principal cook in three cities for over three decades.

With my recent surgically repaired broken leg though, I am not much good in the kitchen or even getting to the kitchen. Even after I stopped the painkillers, I am in no condition to stand for long, move ingredients from pantry or fridge to counter to range or anywhere. Instead, Cindy has been cooking for several weeks.

I inherited some traits from my grandmother, but not her proprietary defensiveness of the kitchen. I teach our sons to cook. Cindy has learned both from me and on her own. I am pleased and proud when other family members turn out a tasty — and attractive — meal.

When she said she was tired of her cooking, she acknowledged that she had circumnavigated her whole culinary realm. She was at the boundary and could really only repeat the dishes, which would be certain to produce the derision of the teen still living home.

Therein lays one of the differences among cooks. Some of the two-types of distinctions are:

- Cooks who follow recipes and cooks who have learned what goes with what and just do it.
- Cooks, really chefs, who have the prime restaurant virtue of producing the same dish exactly the same way every time for the many customers or family members comforted by that. Others adapt any dish on the fly, a little or a lot.

- Cooks perfectly capable of doing what they have done before and others who take what's in the pantry and cooler to do the best with whatever's available.

Cindy is far less sure, maybe I should say far less arrogant, about what's for dinner than I am. For me, it is an adventure. I don't know how many thousands of good or better dishes I have never recorded to recipe as a result. There would surely be a sameness to many of those, but with few or many ingredients before me, I am never at a loss.

Cindy has done a fine job compensating for the broken old guy. She did not have to feed all three of us the five days I was off-site in the hospital. Plus the teen would eat Hot Pockets or pizza every meal given the choice.

When I returned, she took her promotion to family cook seriously though. She has shopped for (I am normally the food shopper too) and prepared dinner after dinner. As well as a daily main dish, she has produced tasty and pretty (I am much on presentation) salads and side dishes.

Now that competence has worn and frayed. I love the chopping and displays in a bowl or on a platter. She, more sensibly, sees all that fussiness as chores. Likely in a few days or a week at the most, we both can return to the natural order of our household. When I can stand awhile and then move from fridge to pantry to range to blender to sink and then carry colanders or dishes, I can play in the kitchen again.

It is frustrating how limited the carrying ability is for someone on crutches or a walker. If those were permanent requirements, I am sure I could rig up or buy trays for food prep. With some planning and logistics, I could arrange to do much of my prep work seated. Meanwhile, I am holding out for being able to stand and support myself long enough to cook a meal.

I suspect Cindy will be a little more confident and inspired to cook a bit more. I admit I make it easy for her to be served and be surprised. We have both been outside our comfort zones for long enough.

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