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## IN THE KITCHEN

BY EVAN HARRIS

# NO MORE NOT COOKING, AGAIN

*A few things since last time and something at the end about crackers.*

*Editor's note: Several years ago, Evan Harris confronted a phobia that might be foreign to many of Edible's readers: a fear of cooking. In the past, the writing of this author, who lives in Springs with her two sons and husband, sculptor Hiroyuki Hamada, has focused on overcoming mental blocks. Her treatise on changing one's life—The Art of Quitting, recently re-released by Barron's—offers essential encouragement on cutting losses, pulling up stakes, moving on, and even burning bridges (gracefully and not so). Quitting isn't always easy, but it usually changes your life. In the case of Harris's not-cooking habit, the journey brought her closer to some friends, her family, and the landscape that surrounds her. This excerpt from the latest incarnation of her handmade, limited edition book, No More Not Cooking—which grows as the author hones her culinary skills—shows that there is hope even for the most deviant non-cook.*

SPRINGS—Since deciding to put an end to my not cooking (c. fall 2005), there have been various food related incidents and occasions. Here are the ones worth mentioning:

### THE DEMORALIZING QUICHE

The demoralizing quiche came about after a trip to Tucson, Arizona, where Hiroyuki, Cosmo and I paid a visit to our friends Lydia, Kieran and Nola. They are a family like us. They have a person who can cook and they have a person who is not a cook, and Kieran, the dad/guy person, is the cook. One evening for dinner he made us the most delicious quiche I have ever tasted. How did he do it? I don't know! And this is what later gave rise to the demoralizing quiche. If I had done the thing as it should have been done, I would have asked Hiroyuki to be on Cosmo duty, and asked Kieran to give me a cooking lesson right then and there. But how was I to know it would be the most delicious quiche I have ever tasted? This is not the kind of thing that can be known in advance. Though perhaps it was looking like all the elements of deliciousness were coming together, because there was a person in the kitchen watching and taking mental notes while Kieran made the quiche. That person was Hiroyuki.

Over dinner, I asked many questions about the quiche, and believed that these questions would lead me, when I got home and cooking, to a Kieranesque quiche that would earn me the respect of Hiroyuki, super cook, which is the point of all my cooking escapades.

This is not what happened.

When we got home, I attempted the quiche (on a Monday night—see below), and it all seemed to be going well. I put on music, Cosmo played in a semi-wild but still manageable mode, and I was actually having fun. There was no foreboding sign. There was no weird smell. There was no uncertain feeling at the pit of my stomach. There was nothing at all to indicate that the quiche would turn out to be almost completely inedible! And this was the demoralizing thing about the quiche: My delusion was total. It reminded me a little of my feeling when our cat,

Neko, died. He was no place near my list of worries; he was fine and I thought he would be fine forever. Then suddenly he was dead. It didn't matter that I hadn't worried about it, or feared it or felt it coming. How it was and how I thought it would be were not the same thing, not even a little bit.

So also with the quiche. If I seem to be overstating the case, you can ask Hiroyuki. Actually, you could even ask Cosmo, who took a bite of the demoralizing quiche, scrunched up his face and said, "This is not good."

The other demoralizing thing about the demoralizing quiche was that Hiroyuki took the opportunity to explain the elements that had made Kieran's quiche special, based on his careful, experienced, really super-cookish observation. And I could just tell he was right, and that if he had attempted the quiche, it would be like something out of a magazine, only you would be able to taste it and it would be great. I did not welcome this opportunity for education. In fact, I was not a good sport about any of it—not about Cosmo's commentary or Hiroyuki's well-meaning suggestions—and definitely not about the failure itself. Tears and pouting ensued.

### THE COOKS DINNER

It took about three weeks, but I did get over the demoralizing quiche, and when I did I decided to have a to-do at the house for all of my cooking teachers from No More Not Cooking, Round 1. This took a very long time to come to pass on account of scheduling, but eventually I marshaled all but one teacher, and everybody came over to 269 Three Mile Harbor Road for a dinner party. I made everything. Everything! Well, everything except the green salad, which was made by my friend Philippa's beau, Christofer. But he is a person who would be miserable if he were not allowed to help. Everything else included at least one thing that each teacher had taught me, plus chocolate mousse. I think if you asked my cooking teachers how the food was and told them they had to be honest, you would get some positive spin, some mild fibbing and some subject changing. But it's OK.

And let me mention that I love my cooking teachers.

### MONDAYS

At some point after the Cook's Dinner, I had the idea that I should really get right off my bootie and start cooking like a normal person. So I offered to be responsible for dinner at our house on Monday nights. Hiroyuki seemed happy. Every Monday, can you imagine? I don't know what to say or how to account for myself, because even though I have put an end to the not cooking as a policy decision, I have not really quite figured out how to put the actual cooking in place. I still don't know how to cook very many things, and sometimes the things I do know how to cook don't taste very good. As it turns out, the floodgates of food-related confidence, abundance and abandon have not opened.



Nothing has poured forth. As it turns out, I am not a natural.

### THE PREGNANCY

We're having a new baby! I am very excited to meet this person and cannot wait for him to come out. Being pregnant has made me even more determined to leave my not-cooking days behind because it seems really pathetic for a mother of two (!) to be a not-cook, incompetent in the kitchen, and shamefully reliant on her husband for all nutritious yumminess in her life. On the other hand, the only things I feel truly enthusiastic about eating are whole, raw, peeled carrots, raw bell peppers (yellow and orange), hot coffee with lots and lots and lots of milk, and crackers.

None of these things makes a Monday evening meal. Not even if you combine them. None of these things requires the slightest bit of cooking, unless you count the coffee, which no person would count. So, the true food nature of my pregnancy brings me right back to the not-cooking, cracker-eating days of my 20s, which are far and distant now.

Except of course that the cracker-eating part of the cracker-eating days

never ended, not for a minute, not even for the briefest pause. Other things about those days ended or are gone, like the way I was always rearranging my furniture late at night, and the brown suede mini skirt I used to wear with boots, and occasional stay-out-all-night episodes, and Cover Girl plum-brown matte lipstick, and my ambivalence about ever having any children. But the crackers, my friends, are clearly not going anywhere.

Sometimes things that give continuity to our lives are only humble. Long live the continuity of the cracker!

### P.S. THE ANEMIA

During the second trimester of my pregnancy with the new baby, I began to experience waves of amazing tiredness. It was a tiredness that came from deep behind my eyes, and I was pretty sure it wasn't regular pregnancy-while-running-after-a-toddler fatigue, because when the wave hit, it was more like I had been drugged by a bad guy than like I had been exerting myself in the line of duty. I kept complaining to everyone who asked how I was feeling, and after a while my doctor—

who I love and whose name is Sarah Lazar—ran a test for anemia.

Anemia, sure enough! But just a little bit. And Sarah assured me that it was no big deal. Still—even after all that complaining—I was shocked and offended that my body would betray me in this way. Something to do with hemoglobin! And iron deficiency! Yet if the new baby needed my iron, I would be the last one to begrudge it.

In any case, it was obvious that I needed to replenish the iron in my body, and since I don't like to take a pill, I decided to get the iron from regular food. For ideas, I asked Erika Halweil, who is a nutritionist, and I asked my friend Stephanie, who is experienced, and I looked at some books. Here is a partial list of foods that turn out to be rich in iron or beneficial for anemia:

- Liver (yuck!)
- Chick Peas
- Basil
- Nettle
- Molasses

## BASTE: A LESSON WITH BARBARA

### WHAT WAS THE SCENE?

Barbara came to our house one Wednesday afternoon in early March. I had asked my mother, aka Grannie Lea, to come over and take care of Cosmo during the lesson, and logistics dictated that Barbara bring her two kids: Aly of the winning smile and Freddy of the accomplished paper airplane. Having all the kids there created a very high-energy, fun and kinetic background to the lesson.

This does not in any way suggest that the actual lesson was in any way chaotic or hectic, because Barbara is the soul of collection. I don't mean the soul of calm, because surely there is an edge to her, but of collected purpose. She is pragmatic and she is sensible. She has a knack for making whatever she's doing appear to be absolutely called for, as though any regular, well-adjusted person would choose to do just that thing at that time. I've seen her dance on a picnic table to a punk-pop rock band wearing a bikini bathing suit top and short shorts without a trace of either inhibition or exhibitionism, and I think she could run for public office and win in the same outfit if it just so happened to get hot on the campaign trail.

I also really like hearing Freddy's views on the tooth fairy, and learn-



ing from Aly that Cosmo's toy oven is also a car, in which her doll had fun taking a drive, I know not where.

### WHAT DID BARBARA TEACH ME TO COOK?

Barbara taught me how to roast a chicken. And if that's not a powerful piece of knowledge, imagine this: she also taught me how to make gravy. Gravy! Knowing how to make gravy is, to me, like having a secret

weapon: you might think I'm silly, but think again, buster, because I know how to make gravy.

We got started by getting organized and setting out everything I would need. This, she explained, would economize on time and reduce the need for between-chicken-touching hand-washing, since we would orchestrate chicken touching with our powers of organization. Barbara had given me a list of things to get for our chicken roasting adventure, and I managed to get everything except the kitchen string, which we needed to tie the chicken's little legs together. After some searching, including digging around in my ribbon bag, I came up with a shoelace. Barbara delivered a what-the-hay kind of smile and shrug, and we used the shoelace. She also told me that in a pinch she had once used sewing thread, wound round and around and around. This was an interesting piece of information.

Once the chicken was washed; stuffed with onion, celery and carrot; buttered; salted and peppered; and shoelaced, we got ready for roasting. Since Barbara roasts her chicken at a high heat (425°), she has developed a technique to contain chicken juice spitting and thus reduce smokiness in the kitchen. What you do is put tin foil all around the edges of the roasting pan, so that it sticks up a couple of inches. She has several names for this technique:

- The Fat Barrier
- The Tin Foil Liner
- The Great Wall of Tin Foil

We set the timer, which was a holiday gift from my friend and cooking teacher Paul, for half an hour. After this time, it would be time to check the chicken and start basting. It was a very exciting half hour. Freddy came into the kitchen, and while he stalled getting started on his homework, we did a taste test between green apples and red apples. Green won. Barbara and I also discussed basting. I admitted that I had once used a disposable plastic medicine dispenser from the pharmacy (we had an extra one still sealed in plastic from Cosmo's epic bout with

the antibiotics-can't-get-it snotty nose) to baste a Thanksgiving turkey.

(The fact that I have hosted and cooked Thanksgiving dinner complete with guests for seven years is a strange wrinkle in my long-standing, self-inflicted not-cooking situation. I've prepared all the usual Thanksgiving dishes (except the gravy, of course, and also the pearl onions—each is always carefully delegated, the latter once given over to my friend Sarah, with very memorably delicious results). But

**One of the things I like about roasting the chicken is that it makes me feel like I have managed to feed my family, and by corollary it makes me feel very much part of a family.**

Thanksgiving is Thanksgiving. When the leftovers are gone, it's over for another year. I am not one to extrapolate. And I am also not one to get any nifty ideas about other meals I could cook. A total isolationist stance.)

Once we had checked the chicken and basted the first baste, it was time for Barbara to take Aly and Freddy home. I would be on my own for an hour or so until she returned to teach me how to do the gravy. A two-part cooking lesson!

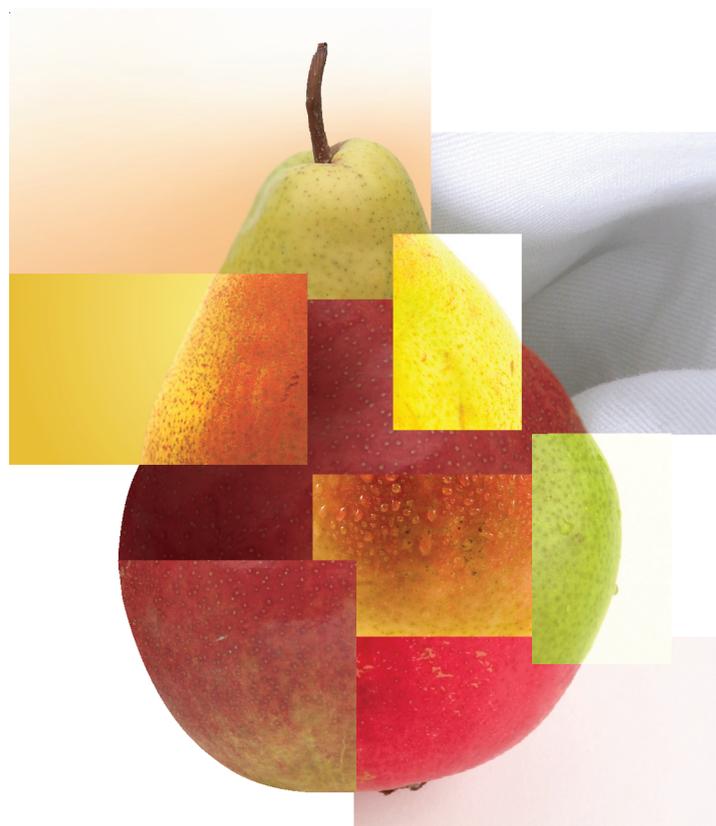
While she was gone, things somehow became very hectic, and by the time Barbara returned for the gravy part of the lesson, minor chaos had engulfed the house. The dogs were fussing, Hiroyuki was hungry, and I believe Cosmo was running around the house naked—or a least half naked. Barbara was completely unfazed, and I did, in fact, learn how to make gravy!

#### DID I TRY THE CHICKEN ON HIROYUKI AND COSMO, AND HOW DID IT GO?

Oh, yes, I certainly did. Success! Of all the things I have ever cooked (not a longish list, but never mind that), this is the one, without a doubt, that would earn me the gold star sticker on my Can She Ever Hope to Cook Chart, if Hiroyuki maintained such a chart, which he does not. What Hiroyuki maintains is his standards.

I love to see Hiroyuki eat. He likes the dark meat. I love even more to see Cosmo eat. He likes the drumstick, and keeps up a steady stream of conversation: "Is this a chicken?" "Is this a bone?" "Is this mine?" I only eat the white meat. And I'm also the only one who touches the gravy, unless you are counting our dogs, ChiChi and Yama. I have not quite mastered the gravy, but I'm getting there, in the sense that it has gone from bad to better.

Recently my good old friend Morgan was here while I was in the process of roasting a chicken, and she remarked that she loves to roast a chicken because it's so easy: "Roasting a chicken makes you feel like a rock star. And you haven't done anything!" Then she laughed her belly laugh. One of the things I like about roasting the chicken is that it makes me feel like I have managed to feed my family, and by corollary it makes me feel very much part of a family. We eat up that whole bird, then Hiroyuki makes stock. Everybody finishes full and nourished, and I get a faint glimmer of why a person of my ilk might find her way to cooking and I think I've got the love and pride to follow through, or anyway to roast a chicken every once in a while. □



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