

SPOONS AT DAWN

EATING IS SUCH A NATURAL HUMAN ACTIVITY, FOOD SUCH A PLEASURE OF EVERYDAY LIVING. IT'S AS EASY AS ABC; THE BREAD AND BUTTER OF LIFE. I USED TO THINK FOOD WAS A LITTLE ABOUT NOURISHMENT, A LOT ABOUT HEALTH AND ALL ABOUT PLEASURE. AND THEN I HAD A BABY.
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Shortly afterwards, I entered the wonderful world of weaning. Suddenly, food was a little about pleasure, a lot about nutrition and all about willpower. Hers that is, just in case there was any doubt. The jury is still out on who is winning the battle of the wills, although I can firmly say my 17-month-old daughter long ago won the battle of endurance.

It started out peacefully enough. The ridiculous pleasure that first teaspoon of baby rice brought, quickly usurped by the insatiable satisfaction of pureed apple (organic of course), boiled to an inch of its life and lovingly poured into delicate ice-cube moulds (heart shaped, naturally). Oh the joys of motherhood! Oh the pleasure of spooning pure unadulterated nourishment into my child's gummy gaping mouth! The pleasure only intensified as her precious palate explored the culinary feasts of pear, carrot, sweet potato, broccoli, courgette, peach and plum. Oh the joys of motherhood! Oh the love of sharing a rainbow of tastes and pouring pure goodness into the body of my child! I could almost see Daisy's insides glow with glorious goodness, the sight of her soft pink lips open and gaping like a baby sparrow enough to dispel the growing exhaustion of organic food shopping, washing, peeling, coring, chopping, steaming, boiling, containing, freezing and defrosting.

And then it all got complicated. As the recipes became more interesting, and dishes deserving of more advanced palates had to be prepared and cooked, so my ➔



Feeding

daughter too was developing and becoming more interesting as her personality emerged. And just as her palate matured, so did her mind, and with chicken and broccoli pie came determination, and with fish and potato surprise came willpower. As I was discovering life was now about kitchen slavery, she was discovering life was now about choice and control. Hers that is, just in case there was any doubt.

The unrivalled pleasure of ensuring only goodness went into my child still drove our foray into food together, and I scoured the baby books for recipes that drizzled with imagination and colour, hung out like a groupie at organic markets to buy the best vegetables, planned weekly meal charts around food pyramids and colour nutrition (yes, nutrition is all about colour, apparently), and graduated from ice-cube trays to tupperware containers. Each new week brought a new adventure – sauces, fish, herbs, pulses. Some were even hugely enjoyable – pure fruit jellies and heart-shaped pizzas. But when pureed foods were replaced with texture and diversity, so my cherub, all gaping mouth and devotion, was replaced with teeth – both mental and physical. I was prepared for the fact that each new flavour or dish might take a couple of attempts before passing the ‘swallow stage’ – precipitated by the ‘put in the mouth, make strange face and spit out again’ phase. I was even prepared for the fact that the odd dish might never make the grade. C’est la vie – I’ll never be an offal fan, everyone has tastes. So, when I’d lovingly spent an hour making cottage pie with extra vegetables (all neatly chopped to mini-baton size) that would cover at least eight lunches, and it went down with a smile and a thumbs up, the pride would burst from my chest. Oh the joys of motherhood! Oh the exhausted pleasure of doing something right!

What I wasn’t prepared for was the confusion. Mine that is, just in case there was any doubt. How could she love ham and cream-cheese triangle sandwiches with the crusts cut off on Monday and loath them on Thursday? How could chicken and vegetable fried rice go down a treat on Tuesday and end up on the floor on Saturday? How could Weetabix with homemade blueberry smoothie be the love of her life in March and the devil incarnate in

April? And, more importantly, how was I meant to know? Oh the heartbreak of motherhood! Oh the exhaustion and frustration of throwing good food out and trying to mind-read a toddler! And it wasn’t just the food itself. Some days she would eat like a horse and the next eat virtually nothing. She’d have days where she only wanted fruit (oh the nappy joys of those times) and others only bread. Well planned out weekly food charts grew dusty with neglect as desperation to get anything into her took over. I became fraught and deranged. And so I consulted. Upon reading tomes of baby books and websites on feeding and eating, I discovered that her display of will power was perfectly normal and her ever-changing appetite levels perfectly acceptable. She wasn’t a devil child. I wasn’t a disastrous mum. This was just toddlerhood. This was just motherhood. I came to realise that, on the whole, she ate really well and over a period of time, generally covered all the nutritional necessities. But it was a shift in my mindset, not hers, that brought harmony. I had to relax my near manic obsession with seeing her eat three whole meals a day, with nutritious snacks in between, and go with the food-fetish flow of a toddler. If I looked back on a week as a whole, I realised she always ate what she needed, so at least I could relax that she wasn’t going to starve. I grew to accept the haphazard regard for different foods she had loved one week and refused to eat the next – sure, I had to tell myself, it showed spunk and spirit and made me love her even more.

Now we try and have a new attitude to food. A little about routine, a lot about nourishment and all about fun. We play games, we try new things, we make a mess and if they don’t work out, we go back to the old favourites – if I can figure out what the current old favourite is of course. I still have many frustrated, over-exhausted moments where I have to walk out of the kitchen to take a deep breath, regain my perspective and go back in to pick up her tasty home-cooked food from the floor and make her a sandwich instead. But, on the whole, we enjoy our exploration of taste and touch and texture, and on the days she eats my new Annabel Karmel spinach and cheese lasagne, freshly made and happily eaten with a toothy grin, I lovingly put her to bed with a satisfied knowledge that the future is peachy. Or pear or plum, depending on Daisy’s taste, of course. ■





EACH NEW WEEK BROUGHT A NEW ADVENTURE – SAUCES, FISH, HERBS, PULSES. SOME WERE EVEN HUGEY ENJOYABLE – PURE FRUIT JELLIES AND HEART-SHAPED PIZZAS.