

Why Cook on the Weekend?

You've just finished the weekday crunch—fitting in as much work and as many school activities, household chores, and social activities as you can manage. On the weekends, perhaps you just want to relax and not think about cooking; or maybe your weekends are just as action-packed as your weekdays and you just can't seem to find the time for cooking.

There are so many alternatives to cooking as well: going to restaurants, stopping for takeout, picking up a prepackaged heat-and-serve “meal” (even gourmet meals are readily available these days) at the market; you can get adequate nutrition almost without dirtying a dish or breaking the bank. So why, even on days off, go to the trouble and time to cook when it can be done for you so conveniently?

Because weekend cooking can be a fun experiment, a creative outlet to unwind from the week, or a chance for you to connect with your family. You can cook a dish that uses exotic ingredients or that might involve a technique you've been wanting to learn, such as Braised Salmon with Caramelized Fennel and Wasabi Mashed Potatoes. Or you can prepare foods that are classic favorites but just take a little time and effort. Who doesn't love serving a rich, filling stew in the winter or surprising someone with a knockout cake for a special meal? With these dishes, both the creating and the eating are rewarding. And if you are sharing the meal with your family—wow, everyone's actually at the table at the same time—or with friends you don't get to see often enough, the meal is the bonus to the gift of quality time with people you care about.

So where do you stand on weekend cooking? Ask yourself a few questions:

1. Do you feel you are spending too much time and money eating out?
2. At the end of a busy week, do you think you are too exhausted to plan and cook something good for your family?
3. Do you feel you and your family could be eating better quality and more healthful food than you are?
4. Do you find yourself dreading the time spent in the kitchen?
5. Would your family benefit from sitting down together for dinner a bit more often?
6. Would you like to invite friends over more often but planning a party or special dinner seems too overwhelming a task?

If you answered yes to any one of these questions, this book is for you. Cooking can give you a great return for your time invested. When the meal is done, I bet you'll be happier that you cooked. Sounds simple, but with the amazing variety of activities you could enjoy in the modern world, the age-old activity of cooking fulfills both basic human requirements—the need to be fed (actually, the need to be well-fed), the need for sensory stimulation—and the grander goals that you may not think about all the time, like the need to learn, achieve, and contribute.

How? Here's a scenario: It's Saturday afternoon, raining cats and dogs, and everyone is suffering from cabin fever. You need something good for dinner that will perk up attitudes as well as appetites. Chili is just the thing. You have some good ground beef in the freezer, bacon in

the fridge; everything else is in the pantry. The sizzle of the bacon and the combined aroma of cooking onions and garlic drifts throughout the house and heads begin to pop into the kitchen, accompanied by queries of “What’s for dinner?” Add the tomatoes and fresh herbs, along with the heat of some good chiles and the complex fragrance wakes up the senses. The process of adding a little more of an ingredient you like, a little less of something else, gives this chili a personal touch and gives you the satisfaction of being involved not just in combining ingredients together, but of creatively developing it. Gather together the add-ons like grated cheese, sour cream, chopped green onions, and lots of steaming hot tortillas, and you will have turned what could have been a dismal weekend into something a lot more fun.

Your result is something simple yet different, terrifically flavored, filling, and fairly cheap to make—quite an achievement. In fact, it’s a small but personal triumph. To top it off, your family is so happy you cooked this homemade meal that they finish off the entire pot of chili. That’s a lot of good stuff happening and it’s just from making a little dinner.

Okay, so maybe dinner at your house won’t be like that every weekend, but it’s worth striving for. Take some satisfaction that by accomplishing the smaller, mostly unacknowledged steps of cooking, you benefit. A tasty pasta dish one night, a slow-cook braise another night, or a comfortable brunch for friends on a Sunday—these are little perks in your life, and they add up to keep you going, to help you face the rigors of the week to come.

For many people, including me, cooking is also part of “the good life.” The time we put into cooking is valuable time, not wasted time. Many culinary experiences last well beyond the food and flavors of the moment. Every time you cook, what you bought, how you cooked it, and how you and your family responded register in your mind, giving you a bank of ideas for future reference—about how to cook more efficiently, more creatively, and more precisely, just for starters.

Also, good food, good meals—especially weekend meals—can become lasting memories. Even if your own family didn’t cook much, you may still be nostalgic for the fried eggs on Sunday ritual, or the coconut cake your mom made. For me, there are plenty of great memories: my grandmother’s latkes, my grandfather’s weekend morning pancakes, my mother’s melt-in-your-mouth cookies.

Our life experience is the sum of all the good and bad we take in. Cooking allows us to stack the deck in our favor. Knowing there’s something to look forward to at the end of the week makes life’s ride a little easier, whether you are thinking about the delicious steak you’re going to make for dinner or anticipating your child’s reaction when you make his favorite dessert. To me, the good life is about pleasurable experiences. The more of these experiences you create in the kitchen, the happier you and your family will be.

Enjoying the Journey

You have likely heard the expression, “Life is about the journey, not the destination.” In the same way, you could also say, “Cooking is about the process, not what’s on the plate.” My guess is that if you’ve picked up this book and are still reading, you probably do love food, or can imagine that you might, if only you knew some of the techniques needed to cook well. To help you enjoy the process of cooking, you first have to downshift your brain from autopilot (often needed to handle your busy everyday life) to manual, in order to appreciate what’s happening when you cook. Going back to the example of making chili, there was the sound and aroma of the bacon and garlic cooking in the pan. Making other sensory connections to food and cooking means paying attention, being curious, and being adventurous: knowing how to pick the most fragrant melon; trying new vegetables just to see how they taste; grinding your own spices to release maximum fragrance and taste. Actually, tasting, in particular, is an essential thing to do all through your cooking (except with potentially unsafe foods, like raw poultry, of course). Tasting tells you if your cooking is going in a direction you like or if alternative action is needed. And if the result is good, you’ll be quite pleased with yourself!

Fit Cooking into Your Life

In my years of working with home cooks, I’ve heard just about every reason for not cooking, including no time, hectic schedules, the ease of having restaurants on every street corner, and the availability of takeout and delivered meals.

First, let me be clear that I am not a proponent of cooking every meal. It's fun to get out and try new restaurants or frequent old favorites. And if you want or need to bring home takeout on occasion, or have something delivered to the door, do it by all means. But because there are so many benefits from cooking, the scale should be tipped well in favor of cooking at home.

I've found that teaching someone how to cook is not the tricky part. It's helping him or her fit cooking into his or her life that isn't easy. That often takes a little outside-the-box thinking and creativity. But fitting cooking into your weekend life is really no different from fitting in other things that you want and need to do. You just have to make the time.

Advance planning really does work. I urge you to spend some time looking at your calendar and giving some thought to what you are doing with your time. There might be one little change you can make or one thing you might say "no" to that will free up enough time for you to cook. If cooking is a priority, the time appears somehow. Try not to fall into a rut of thinking you have "no time." Yes, you need to do the bigger weekend chores like clean the house, mow the lawn, or possibly redecorate a room, plus fit in shepherding your children to friends' homes, the mall, or other activities, and you want to rest somewhere between Friday evening and Monday morning. But, if you take away that edge of stress normally associated with cooking fast on weeknights and imagine that cooking can be a fun, social (if you get your family and friends in on the act), even cathartic activity, it can be something anticipated, rather than dreaded.

Once you find the time, you need to think about planning the details. Spend 10 to 15 minutes planning the shopping and cooking in advance, visualizing how you are going to get it done. Which store has what you need? Do you need to check that any necessary equipment—like cake pans, the grill, or a fondue pot—is available? Ask yourself what's the first thing you should do to get started? Just a little forethought can make everything go more smoothly once you are ready to cook. It's okay to wing it now and then, but cooking almost always turns out better when you put a bit of thought into it. As great athletes will attest, visualizing the task (or at least thinking it through) before starting really improves performance.

Another reason people don't cook is that they feel apprehensive about even the idea of cooking. Few want to admit it, but they are a bit scared of cooking because they never really learned how. Part of it may

be because the traditions and legacy of cooking stopped in their parents' generation. Their mothers (the family cooks for the most part) weren't in the kitchen every day, sharing their culinary skills. So, today, they may know how to get by in the kitchen—program the microwave, turn on the stove, or follow the directions on the back of a box—but there's no comfort, pleasure, or confidence in cooking. (So, keep in mind that your cooking in your own kitchen, making it an integral part of family life will actually help you develop more self-reliant children.)

If this represents your situation, and you think you want to get past rudimentary skills and the fear of failure, first you have to tell yourself, "I can be a good cook," and "I can enjoy this—mistakes and all." Remember, it's just food. If it doesn't turn out the way you want, you'll have another chance very soon to do it right. You have to eat every day, don't you? My goal in this book is to help you address what your cooking issues are—fear of cooking, lack of skills, lack of time, lack of ideas—and help you cook foods that work within your world. I'll also help you shore up your cooking ability and confidence so that weekend cooking doesn't feel like a chore, a bother, or an insurmountable challenge.

The key to good cooking lies in a simple equation: Good Ingredients + Good Techniques = Good Food. It's really that simple.

So, let's get started.

Defining and Dealing with Cooking Challenges

There are 150 recipes and lots of cooking information in this book, and you can use this any way you like. Pick your three favorite recipes and make only those until they are your specialty. Or, look in the index for an ingredient you might already have in the kitchen in order to make a spur-of-the-moment meal. Or, try all the recipes—one at a time. They are all simple-to-make and tasty and the majority of the recipes can be prepared in an hour or two—less, once you have made them a few times.

Make a list of things you and your family like to eat. If you like, make a computer file with the list, so you can print it out and use it as a shopping list, adding to it the things you might need for particular recipes. Keep a copy by the refrigerator and take it with you when you shop.

(continues on page 5)

What to Cook

The Situation	Type of Recipe Needed	Recipe Suggestions
1. It's Saturday afternoon and your neighbors are coming for dinner.	You need something interesting that doesn't need a lot of last-minute attention.	Try Maryland Crab Cakes with Chipotle Aioli Sauce (page 34), Three-Cheese and Herb Lasagna (page 78), or Country Pot Roast with Potatoes and Green Onions (page 116).
2. The budget has taken a real hit because the hot-water heater died, but you have a family celebration coming up.	You need good food that you can do on a shoestring.	Try Minestrone (page 65), Meatloaf Burgers with Italian Tomato Jam (page 98), or Brined Herb Pork Chops with Grilled Polenta (page 107).
3. Your son's birthday party is on Saturday and you have ten 8-year-olds on the invitation list.	You need easy but tasty fare for party-fueled appetites.	Try Mrs. Sarrett's Chocolate Cake (page 207), vanilla ice cream (page 175), or any of the pizzas from the Adventures in Pizza chapter (page 66).
4. You and your family will be out all day, involved in your favorite sports. Appetites will be hearty and time short.	You need rib-sticking food ready when you are.	Try anything from the Cooking for the Week Ahead chapter (page 165), or Three-Cheese and Herb Lasagna (page 78), or big bowls of Ribbolita (page 61).
5. Bathing suit time is coming.	You need weekend food that's good for you and tastes good, too.	Try Marinated Shrimp on a Stick (page 32), Franny's Granola (page 21), Green Bean and Herb Salad (page 42), Minestrone (page 65), or Sage and Shrimp White Bean Chili (page 138).
6. Your bridge buddies are coming Saturday evening.	You need something wonderful to serve with coffee.	Try anything from the Bake the Cake chapter (page 202), or make some Chocolate Chip Mousse Brownies (page 187), or a Chocolate Ice Cream Roll Cake (page 210), or even Mom's Fruit Pizza (page 73).
7. It's your turn to have the neighbors over for cocktails.	You need terrific simple finger foods and dishes you can make ahead.	Try several recipes from the Finger Foods chapter (page 27), or Herb-Cured Salmon with Rye Bread and Sour Cream Dressing (page 53), or wedges of Endive, Pancetta, and Fontina Pizza (page 72).
8. You want to bring the kids into the kitchen with you.	You need appealing but easy recipes you can do together.	Try any of the pizzas in the Adventures in Pizza chapter (page 66), or the Hot and Spicy Chili with Beans (page 134), or Mahogany Chicken Wings with Crumbled Blue Cheese Sauce (page 149), or bring out the ice-cream machine for Peach Ice Cream (page 177).
9. Weekend breakfast is a family tradition.	You need some new ideas.	Try any of the scone recipes (pages 23–25), or make a Country Frittata (page 20), or Papa's Pancakes (page 19), or even Stuffed Bread Pizza (page 70).

Add a line that says “Foods to Try” and on a regular basis jot down one or two items—like arugula or panko bread crumbs—so you remember to look for them in the supermarket or figure out where there’s a specialty food store nearby that might have them. Trying a new food from time to time will keep cooking interesting and creative.

Next, and most important, make a list of things that you consider challenges to your weekend cooking. I’ve done this for myself and with cooking students and we have all found it helpful in making cooking regularly more manageable.

Maybe you are stressed from the week’s work, or too tired catching up on chores to cook, or your kids are picky eaters. It’s possible that there are several challenges at the same time. But try to figure out what is the primary issue for you on a given day, and then look for recipes in this book that will satisfy your needs. Keep checking back here to figure out where to start, and then just keep the categories in mind when thinking about dinner or food shopping. Here are a number of situations you might recognize and some of my suggestions.

Other tools you might find useful in choosing recipes for weekend meals are the phrases listed below the recipe titles, highlighting dishes that offer certain benefits, such as Easy Preparation (for moments when you want something that requires only a little attention); Make-Ahead (letting you get the preparation out of the way in advance, so there is little to do at mealtimes); No Cooking Needed (just do some simple prep work

and plate it attractively); Take-Along (foods that will travel to a bring-your-own-dish dinner, or might be the hit of an impromptu picnic); and Something Special (a dish worth the effort it might take to produce that little something extra for your family and friends).

This isn’t a cooking bible with thousands of recipes, but a source of ideas based on real-life needs. Some weekends you will want to cook special foods, either for family celebrations or perhaps for a much awaited dinner party; other weekends you might want something ready and waiting in the oven when you return from skiing, or that all-important ball game. Cooking at home naturally ebbs and flows with the yearlong schedule of activities and obligations. Even the most sophisticated cooks (professional or home-based) have secret cravings for junk foods—just like the rest of us. Even if you, on occasion, use prepared seasonings, bottled salad dressings, even boxed cake mixes when the need arises—you will still want to make good home-cooked dishes when energy and time permit.

I know people who might think it’s not permissible to serve an omelet for dinner, or who wouldn’t call salads real cooking, but good food is good food at any time. Do not feel hemmed in by convention; cook what you and your family like to eat. As long as you keep an eye on nutrition and aim for variety, you, as the cook, have the final say about what to prepare.