

The Bento Box Theorem

by G. Murphy Donovan (November 2017)



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Trust is a sometime thing. For a child it begins with breast milk. Alas, the American menu at home usually goes downhill soon after weaning.

Parents can, nevertheless, cultivate culinary trust if they start early. Any dog lover will tell you that savory treats are essential to win over and train the most obstreperous beast. We like to think that children are a world apart, but they aren't. With kids, the ideal, at a minimum, is to train them at least as well as your pets.

Culinary trust is the portal to the more profound bonds that bind family, community, and country. From breast, to bottle,

to the groaning board of a Thanksgiving feast, the experiences that children have at feeding time, for good or ill, are a primary education.

Margaret Visser was correct. Much [depends](#) on dinner.

When the subject is food, the most infamous complaint heard from parents is, “My kids won’t eat that” and “that” could be anything. If truth be told, after mom’s milk, most kids can *learn* to eat damn near anything if they trust the cook.

If children abide the creepy clown at McDonald’s, you have to believe that such idolatry is possible at home.

Anecdotal evidence on these matters is often the best. Years ago our niece would come to our house to do her homework, then stay for dinner. She would often bring a friend. At first we served them things we knew they would eat. Once a measure of culinary trust was established, the kids stopped asking what was for dinner and the menu became irrelevant. They ate what we put before them.

Before she went off to university in Canada, we invited my niece and one of her BFFs for a deck dinner, in truth an ambush experiment. We made some standard sides, but the main course was baked (salmon) fish heads, eyes and all. The kids never blinked, but the boy did ask if he had to eat the globes. Eyes optional, said we.

Sometime after the salmon cheek charade, my niece allowed as how she suspected the fish head dinner was a test—and a savory one at that.

We live in a culture where you can buy most anything readymade—except more time. There’s no wiser way to spend precious time than to cook and eat with children. The kitchen and table are forums for good manners, civility, education and the kind of team bonding that no venue other than family can provide.

Dining with kids is the best and cheapest prep school.

Getting them to the family table is the trick. That only happens if culinary trust is in play. Kids have to believe before they buy in. After that, all things are possible.

Good food celebrates the senses: sight, sound, smell, texture, and taste. Alternatively, junk food caters only to bad taste—and addictions like salt, fat, sugar, carbohydrates, and the “convenience” myth.

I have a neighbor with three kids who orders take-out pizza *for breakfast*—on weekends! Yes, they voted for Hillary.

It’s one thing for adults to trust schools, especially the public variety, to “educate” or feed children. Believing that take-out junk food is adequate nourishment at home is another matter; not really a leap of faith as much as a walk off the cliff of common sense.

Most federal or state funded food programs are garbage disposals, subsidizing rural farmers and urban public school unemployables. “Free” meals are expensive landfill when much of the unwanted and inedible ends up [in the trash](#).

Children will eat junk, but they usually draw the line at garbage.

Think of what follows here as a training wheels drill, a culinary quick step to a kid's best interests, the road from me to thee and then we. Cooking for family is graduate level home economics, the complete antidote to adult selfishness.

Begin with a better class of carbohydrates.

Five Easy Pieces

Macaroni and Cheese

Yes, it's a cliché, but a time-honored winner nonetheless. Nary a child on the planet thumbs their noses at pasta or cheese. Eschew boxed mixes and deli-made. Good cheese and good semolina are the ways to go.

If your cheese comes from a squeeze bottle, you're shopping in the wrong aisle.

The *fromage* of choice might include freshly grated (1 to 1 1/2 cups) white or yellow Vermont cheddar, 1/2 cup California Colby, with a spritz of Spanish Manchego or Mahon as topping. No plastic please, the bag tastes better than the "cheese" in those transparent pre-shredded sacks.

"Convenient" is seldom a culinary virtue and often a euphemism

for lazy.

Any small noodle, including elbows (12 ounces), can be used. If you vary the pasta shapes as the Italians do, your kids will think you to be a Mac & Cheese impresario. Train the sprouts on semolina and then introduce whole wheat or whole grain pasta if you must.

Secret sauce is a cinch. Bring five ounces of evaporated milk to a simmer. Gradually whisk in cheddar and Colby, counterclockwise, until smooth. Stir sauce into noodles in baking dish(es). Top with Manchego and a sprinkle of paprika. Shake to level then bake under a broiler until you have a browned crust.

Finish with fresh grated parmesan and you won't need any salt. You should be able to slice a good Mac & Cheese like a sheet cake after it cools a bit.

Decorate with bright red pimentos for drama and effect.

Earth Apples

Just as butter is an alternative to olive oil, the *pomme de terre* is a kind of Irish pasta. Like pasta, the potato has many faces. Unfortunately, the most common is "French fries" which have nothing to do with France and everything to do with junk food. The noble spud deserves better.

The stuffed, twice baked potato is just one example of tubers at their best.

A whole Idaho potato will do for hearty appetites, half for the average diner. Pierce and microwave for 7-8 minutes. When done, halve the cooling cooked tubers carefully to keep skin intact like a leprechaun canoe.

Scoop out and fork mix innards in a bowl with $\frac{1}{2}$ cup butter, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup cream, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of your favorite shredded melt cheese, and several finely diced caramelized shallots (or raw green onions for drama). Yogurt or sour cream are good stand-ins for cream. Your mixed stuffing should have the consistency of lumpy mashed.

Pasta and potatoes should always be cooked *al dente*. Texture matters. Whipped potatoes are best served to infants and other toothless demographics.

Refill potato skins *loosely*, salt and pepper to taste, and rebake in a hot conventional oven until the tops are browned. The mix should be lumpy and loose so that oven heat will allow trapped air to expand and create a fluffy yet textured result.

Fluff matters in pillows and potatoes.

Baked potato skins might be made by eliminating the butter and cream and most of the potato whites. Garnish baked skins with crumbled sausage or chopped bacon and sour cream. No packaged "bacon bits," thank you.

There's always a surplus of filling after preparing twice-baked or skins. Save the lumpy excess for potato pancakes, just add a beaten egg or two to the mix, shape and sauté. Deep fry as small balls for tater tots.

Serve spud cakes or tots with sour cream and apple sauce the next day.

Tomato Everything

The tomato might be the most useful fruit on the planet. Children however, seem to know instinctively that it is also a member of the nightshade family. Too much skin might do you in.

Taste is a problem also. Old tomatoes, old sauce, and old soup, like aging socialists, become tart with time. Age is the handmaiden of bitter. Hence, salt and sugar are routine additives to commercial canned tomato soups and sauces.

Nonetheless, the ingénue tomato is a world of diversity and invention. Take the ubiquitous and economical Plum or Roma varieties. Easiest to grow, cheapest to buy. Start with soup then move on to sauce.

Sterling home-made tomato soup is idiot proof and second only to borscht in the red soup Parthenon.

Pierce and drop two pounds of ripe Romas into boiling water for a few minutes, remove, and set aside. When cool to touch, peel. Feed the nightshade to the mulch pile or chickens. Return naked pulp and a diced onion to the pot and add a cup or two or three of chicken broth, depending how textured you like your soup.

(Chicken stock is as easy as a browned, dissected chicken in a half gallon of boiling water for 30 minutes. Use the boiled parts as you will. Skim and freeze or refrigerate the stock liquid for any soup or stew.)

When tomatoes are soft to disintegrating, hit the high spots with a hand blender until you get the consistency you like. An immersion blender in the kitchen is almost as useful as a corkscrew or a wine glass.

As the soup cools, add dried oregano, basil, and a pinch of fennel seed. You can strain pith, seeds and cooked herbs, but why bother. A little roughage is a blessing for the Q- Tips in your orbit.

Tomato sauce is a similar drill with less liquid, more spices, and a host of possible emoluments like meatballs, sausage, or mushrooms. The difference between good soup and good sauce is essentially texture. You can thicken tomato sauce with cooking time—or dissolved corn starch.

Some kids balk at tomato anything. Try creaming the soup or adding a teaspoon of honey. If you get your kids to eat red soup, the door to all those pastas and pizzas is sprung for life.

Whilst training your miniature gourmands, add flair and eye appeal to the soup with a dollop of sour cream and a grilled cheese sandwich.

Try American cheese, a slice of tomato on a multigrain, toasted on a flat pan with butter, and sliced diagonally into triangles. Rearranging the quarters like a compass rose on a

plate. Anchor the rose with a tomato heel in the middle.

Presentation and eye appeal matters—especially to kids. Getting children to eat the great red fruit is a threshold of culinary erudition.

Sea Stars

Seafood is an acquired taste for many youngsters. Alas, between pet goldfish, comics, and cartoon characters parents are at a loss to explain why anyone eats fish. Deer meat has never been popular in America thanks to Bambi. Nonetheless, sea going protein is the healthiest and, for the moment, still plentiful and cheap.

All fish and most crustaceans take a sauce and that's the way to introduce kids to the bounty of the seas. Launch your *pescadoras* with a starfish.

Dismember a head of endive and arrange on a round platter in a circle, alternating the small and large leaves. Center one large radicchio leaf. Mix a package of drained langostino tails (see Trader Joe) with homemade Thousand Island dressing. (Usually a mix of mayo, tomato sauce for color, sweet relish, and a spritz of lemon. Horse radish optional.)

Fill blunt ends of the endive with a dollop of tail mix and fill radicchio leaf with remainder. Yes, its finger food, to be held by narrow empty end of the leaf. A star platter can be made with celery and fennel too, or all three on the same plate. Beyond langostino tails, star filling can be made with lobster, shrimp, salmon, tuna or even chicken.

Start with the best just to set the hook.

The sea star is a threefer. Kids get introduced to seafood, and some exotic vegetables on the same plate, accompanied by an auditory surprise. Nothing crunches like endive, celery, or fennel.

For rug rats, the fun in dining is not just taste.

Christmas Salad

Greens are the Rubicon for fussy children—for good reason. Without help, many greens have all the taste appeal of lawn clippings. Lettuce, spinach, broccoli, green beans, Brussel sprouts, and especially kale are alien to the untutored palate. If the truth be told, all greens need help. Many need a crutch.

You might bridge the river of green resentment with something like an Annabelle salad. Here again, you can do no better than to start with eye appeal. The objective is to make a large round platter look like an edible Christmas wreath.

Start with a perimeter of sweet lettuce, butter or romaine. Next, try a circle of endive or fennel. Finally, drop a center of shredded radicchio. Decorate tastefully with apples, raisins, walnuts, grapes, and mini mandarins. For early outings, serve with Thousand Island or blue cheese dressing. After a while, migrate to primo balsamic and good olive oil or the healthier acidics like lemon and oil.

The younger the child, the more likely they are to reject acid, sour, tart, or spicy. Start with sweet or creamy. An active child can handle the extra calories in *dulce* dressings.

Dessert Drama

Here again, with desserts, some kids might be fruit phobic. Fruit instead of sugar sweets, after a meal, like salad, requires, ironically, a little eye candy. Try a brownie surprise. Surprise because the fruit could be anything and the brownie core is camouflaged with whipped cream.

Cookie cut a two inch circle of brownie and place in a shallow bowl. Yes, you can use brownie bites from the bakery if making a sheet of brownies is too much. Surround with a ring of berries and hide the brownie with whipped cream, top with a berry or cherry. Almost any berry will do here and sliced banana or tiny mandarin sections work well too.

Taste any fruit you give to kids. Winter berries or citrus can be tart. Sugar or honey your fruit if necessary. Indeed, if you let sugared berries stand long enough, they'll make their own syrup.

If you vary the fruit, you might not have to repeat any given dessert "surprise" for a week or two.

The End Game

Nearly every child in America knows how to use a tooth brush and a commode before the age of four. How many children at four can, or will, do anything in the kitchen or dining room?

Such questions are not rhetorical.

Literally and figuratively, we care more about what comes out of than we do about what goes into a child.

A good part of the problem is cultural, or to be more candid, political. The vast majority of professional chefs are men. The majority of home cooks are women. If the success of the take-out/junk food industry tells us anything, American parents have much to answer for. Anti-domestic feminism has shamed women out of the home kitchen, and their careerist counterparts spend too much time whining about petty chauvinism in the professional kitchen.

Two or more laments on the same subject are often synergistic.

Nothing happens in a garden, market, home kitchen or dining room that would not benefit, indeed educate, a child. Food preparation and eating are team sports. When children come to believe their only role at home is consumption, their familial status is reduced to that of customer.

Attitudes towards food and cooking are set by family, especially mothers. If there's no sensitivity or respect for cooking and dining at home, we can't complain about subsequent political or marketplace pathologies.

We reap what we sow.

Early on, we spoke of sight, sound, texture, and taste. For a

child, the first threshold is sight. Good example *and* good food is formative; not just the look of a dish, but the [example](#) set by the adults who prepare the plate. Call it the Bento box theorem.

Not that anyone expects American parents, mothers in particular, to start making Bento boxes for their kids. Still, the Japanese lunch box is a triple threat; whimsy, nourishment, and metaphor. Even away from home, the Bento message is crystal clear. Some parents care about good food and how good food looks, even if kids are away at school only for the day.

Cooking and caring, here and there, are team sports; or if we can mix a metaphor, two sides of the same cookie.

Baking cookies at home matters.

Hat tip to Hillary.

G. Murphy Donovan usually writes about the politics of national security but occasionally wanders into the kitchen.

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