



Coping and Cooking

CHRONICLING MY
QUARANTINED YEAR,
THROUGH FOOD.

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WE'VE ALL HELD ON WITH WHITE KNUCKLES as the roller coaster of 2020 has taken us up, down and all around. And through a combination of adaptation and grit, we find ourselves almost one year into a quarantined reality.

One of the consequences of this forced hometime—and some think a positive one—is the revival of the kitchen as the center of the home. According to a food study by HUNTER (a leading food marketing consultant), 54% of people surveyed are cooking more as a result of the pandemic, 46% are baking more, and of those home bakers and chefs, 50% have reported becoming more confident in the kitchen.

Some people have relished this extra kitchen time, while others feel coerced into a domestic space they had purposely avoided.

The New Cooking

In some ways this has been one of the most interesting eras for food—it restored interest in scratch cooking, sparked recipe innovation to help us “use what was available,” and even inspired celebrities to take to social media to share their favorite dishes.

I learned “Pasta Tina,” a kid-approved white bean noodle dish from Jimmy Kimmel, “Easy Peasy Eggplant, Tomato and Feta Stacks,” from Kate Hudson, and the aptly named “Keep Calm-lette” riff on huevos rancheros from Antoni of *Queer Eye*.

It felt personal to be invited into their homes and evoked the communal sense that if nothing else, we’re all in this together. Our relationship with food and cooking over the past year has been a progression—sometimes exhilarating, other times infuriating and eventually leveling out somewhere in between.

When we were first sent home from our respective daycares, workplaces and schools, the combination of stress, novelty and food shortages plus stockpiles was a perfect storm of diet destruction. Early quarantine was a free for all, giving life to a new term, “the quarantine 15.”

As time went on, though, it became clear we might be here a while, and we reluctantly emerged from our sugar- and carb-laden cocoons to start plotting a more wholesome existence.

There was even a period of time when many of us embraced the extra time, turning our attention to scratch baking, sourdough starters, vegetable canning and DIY pickling. It was a way to embrace the space and use our hands to ease our worried minds.

Some New Habits

If you’re like me, you may have made your own tomato sauce, started a compost bin, tried to organize your spices, and even attempted to start using dried legumes instead of canned. All to varying degrees of success.

Some of us diversified our food shopping, trying local farmers’ markets, meal kits and direct-to-consumer online retailers.

Of course, the weeks turned to months and the energy behind

these new endeavors dwindled. The allure of a big weekday breakfast fades with the realization that it's simply too many dishes to tackle each day. The idea of soaking dried beans and slow cooking them the next day becomes a pipe dream when dinner needs to be on the table in 20 minutes or your youngest will have a meltdown.

Some of our newfound hobbies stuck (I am still composting), others faded (my sourdough starter began to feel like a third kid), and we began reclaiming parts of our former lives. We figured out how to grab takeout safely, how to set up socially distanced dining outdoors, and we settled once again into a new iteration of normal.

A New Balance

The key to sustainability is balance. When we talk about balance and food, it's generally the balance of flavors. But in these moments it's the balance of so much more. It's balancing simple and complex, indulgent and wholesome, frugal and extravagant, exotic and comfortable.

Throughout this time, my shopping cart has found some shiny new gems, like almond flour tortillas and coconut aminos, but has continued to include old faithfuls, like whole-milk yogurt and frozen peas (see my MVP list below).

As quarantine stretches on and blurs together, I have found equilibrium in creating daily and weekly anchors. I begin my mornings with a pour-over coffee, afternoons are accompanied by green tea and a hunk of chocolate. Wednesday dinners are reserved for Indian takeout, and Friday is family pizza and movie night. Carving out these rituals sets the cadence for our week and offers us a small but necessary hint of predictability.

As much as our daily and weekly routines have been upended by the pandemic, the natural rhythm of the seasons remains untouched. In early spring when nothing felt steady, tulips and crocuses still burst out of the ground with enthusiasm. When back-to-school felt more like back-to-confusion, the cooler nights and changing leaves ushered us gracefully into autumn. It is a welcomed reminder that the beating of Mother Earth ticks away in rhythm, as it always has. It



offers perspective, grounding and a focus for my palate.

And A Simple Approach

Not only do fruits and vegetables taste the best in-season, they also parallel our anatomic cravings. A vibrant Caprese salad hits the spot on a hot summer's evening, but a crockpot stew fits the bill on frigid winter nights.

We can use this synergy to help solve the unrelenting riddle of "what's for dinner." With the smorgasbord of food bloggers, recipe sites and cookbooks, it's easy to be overwhelmed. That's when I use this little search equation: Seasonal ingredient + meal you are looking for. *An example:* I type *Acorn Squash + Dinner* and am led to a wonderful recipe for Sausage Stuffed Acorn Squash from *Well Plated by Erin*. Give it a try, you might just find the perfect idea.

I know for a fact I have both grown and regressed during the pandemic. I have made my own granola and handed my kids scrambled eggs for dinner more times than I care to admit. I have enjoyed trying new recipes and fallen back on my tried and trues.

I believe the key is to simply continue showing up, in our kitchens and around the table with an open mind, sense of humor and healthy appetite for whatever comes next.

MVPS OF MY QUARANTINE KITCHEN

I'm grateful for every pan, ingredient, and recipe that has helped me make it through the last 10 months, but a few stand out above the rest. Here are some true MVPs from my quaren-time.

STAPLES WITH STAYING POWER

I have a new-found adoration for foods that aren't perishable and won't lose favor immediately. Here are two MVPs.

- **Frozen Peas** – I love to add them at the very end to give a pop of green and cool the dish down to serving temperature. These little gems deliciously decorate stir-frys, curries, pastas and more.
- **Whole Milk Plain Yogurt** – The richness makes any breakfast parfait a treat, but the uses don't stop there. We top tacos with it in lieu of sour cream, swirl it into pureed soups, and even bake into banana bread to keep it moist!

SOME RECIPES WITH SCRAPS

First, it's what to make for dinner, then it's how to use up the leftovers we can't stand to look at one more time.

- **Frittatas** – Turns out, you can insert almost any combo of cheese, protein, vegetables and starch into whisked eggs and end up with something delicious. Want to take it the extra mile? Pour into a flaky pie shell and make a quiche.



Favorite Combo: Roasted root vegetables, spinach and feta (bacon never hurts either).

• **Flatbreads** – Another frequent winner when I'm playing "Chopped" in my kitchen. Roll out pizza dough (most stores have it these days), or arrange your toppings onto store-bought naan bread.

Favorite Combo: Shredded BBQ chicken (reinvented leftover chicken in BBQ sauce), sauteed onion, mozzarella and cilantro.



QUARANTINE DINNER, QUICK

- **Pesto Pasta with Peas and Shrimp**

For a meal in absolute seconds, try this out:

Boil water, add fresh pasta. 2 minutes later (pasta starts to float), add frozen cleaned shrimp. Wait 1 more minute (until water starts to simmer again), add frozen peas. Drain water, put back in pot, add generous amounts of store-bought (or made and frozen) pesto. Finish with Parmesan cheese.

- **Superhero Sauce: Frontera Enchilada Sauces**

As the weather turned colder and my motivation took a dip, I found myself embracing these sauce packets more and more. At lunchtime, I add my protein and sauce to the crockpot. By dinner time, I have a succulent main dish to ladle over rice or into a tortilla.

MORE MVP MOVES

- **Greatest Gadget: High Powered Blender**

For me, this one had to go to my Vitamix. It was there for me when my coffee came in whole beans, when I could only

get almonds and not almond butter, when my basil bolted and I needed to use it all at once (blended with oil and froze into cubes).

Second place goes to a luxurious extra: the milk frother. Even in the midst of monotonous mornings, it's an absolute treat to sip a frothy coffee or golden milk latte in the comfort of my PJs.

Tip: You can make a little foam even if you don't have a frother. Take whole milk, pour it into a tightly sealed container, shake vigorously until bubbles form, then microwave until warm.

- **Travel (While Trapped): Thai Larb**

When real trips aren't an option, the next best thing could be exotic cuisine. This Southeast Asian dish is absolutely delicious, and can be made with *any* ground meat or crumbled tofu and can be served with *any* green/cabbage that's sitting in your crisper.

- **Bread Baking**

The early days of quarantine were marked by bread baking, home brewing and many more long lost pastimes. For most of us, the scales have tipped back in favor of convenience, but I'm still whipping whole grain banana bread (from the September issue, on CountyLinesMagazine.com) whenever I get the chance.

- **Beverages**

To get through these tumultuous times, we have to find and create joy in the little things. I find catharsis in the process of slowing down to steep a pot of tea, and I delight in the whimsy of sipping on sparkling water adorned with pretty garnishes.

- **Popsicles**

It's been quite a year, but we have happily stumbled on a few fun and frugal recipes along the way, like these yogurt and jam pops that kept us going all summer long. Use plain whole milk yogurt, swirled with Tait Farm Blackberry Jam, and poured into reusable popsicle molds. ♦

