



A New Year to Empower Kids in the Kitchen

TIPS TO FOSTER CULINARY INDEPENDENCE

Courtney H. Diener-Stokes

ABOUT SIX MONTHS AGO, IT DAWNED ON ME that I had to begin empowering our three kids in the kitchen. I decided 2025 would be the official launch for their newfound culinary independence. After all, our oldest was nearing 16 and was still announcing “I’m hungry” and “I’m thirsty,” while looking to my husband or me to feed and hydrate him. It was clear that being able to satisfy his own hunger and thirst was an essential first step.

With more unsupervised time at home, our kids — now all teenagers — should begin to be more self-sufficient. In turn, this would allow my husband and me to worry less about the kids starving when we’re away from home and save us time preparing meals for when we’re gone. Another advantage: our kids could help when we host guests by taking ownership of a dish, whether for a formal holiday meal or a casual cookout. Win-win.

COLLABORATORS IN THE KITCHEN

Some background: we began having our kids work with us in the kitchen when they were in preschool by doing simple tasks like peeling and chopping vegetables, adding pre-measured ingredients for baking, and forming balls for energy bites with their tiny hands.

Looking back, this was a great foundation for today as we begin to build their self-sufficiency before they head off to college. Their comfort level in the kitchen by contributing to our home life and being able to satisfy their own needs was likely helped by their early involvement there.

EMOTIONAL TRANSITION

There’s also an emotional aspect to this process for me. As I let go of my desire to helm the kitchen, I’m keenly aware of my desire to provide for my family and connect with them, especially as our teens seek more independence in their lives. It’s a bittersweet process.

I’ve always found cooking for my family, while exhausting at times, a very nurturing experience. But I realized my desire to dote was hindering our children spreading their wings. And so, I officially committed to relinquishing my provider and nurturer approach and becoming instead a mentor and cheerleader. Not an easy transition.

I talked individually with each child about a few basics — easy homemade lunch and snacks they enjoy, consistent with their maturity and ability to use certain kitchen tools and equipment (think stove). Next, I gradually introduced recipes to them, one at a time.



Allowing kids to have freedom in the kitchen can build culinary confidence



Be sure to use kid-friendly knives when chopping ingredients

THE PROCESS

Our oldest, who was 15 when we began this process, is a meat lover who shared how much he enjoyed helping me make homemade chicken tenders. He was already familiar with the overall process, so we needed to work on setting up the coating station and safely managing hot oil in a pan on the stove for pan-frying. This recipe was one he could cook for family meals, which would comply with our no-stove-when-parents-are-out rule.

For our bean-loving, 14-year-old middle child, nachos would be his first solo performance. He enjoys layering each ingredient and the ease of popping our mini baking tray in the toaster oven.

Our youngest, who recently turned 13, chose making guacamole to eat with tortilla chips as her first mission. She’d already served as my kitchen assistant by mashing avocados on taco night. Now she’d learn to extract the avocado flesh on her own (using a dull kitchen knife) before mashing, and then add the right amount of lemon and salt.

EASY RECIPES

Easy recipes let kids learn the ingredients and steps. My plan was to focus first on recipes with five ingredients max, plus demonstrating, repeating and discussing safety. This approach has been the key to their success and excitement, leading them to want to expand their repertoire.

Our oldest branched out to burgers, grilled cheese and chocolate chip cookies. Our middle child added candied nuts, stovetop popcorn and quesadillas to his favorite recipes. And our youngest now makes colorful charcuterie boards, mango smoothies, a Mediterranean-inspired plate and avocado toast. Next on her wish list are homemade soft pretzels, sushi and creamy soups. Not a bad collection of snacks!

NEWFOUND CONFIDENCE

Now that they each have their own growing collection of recipes beyond the classic PB&J, it’s rewarding to watch as they satisfy their basic needs. And as their newfound kitchen confidence grows — and my husband’s and my trust keeps pace — the kids want to add even more recipes to their lists.

Read on for easy, tasty recipes to get your kids cooking in the kitchen in the New Year!

Three-Ingredient Guacamole with Chips

This super-simple guacamole recipe I taught my daughter is also requested by friends for potlucks. Its clean, refreshing taste comes from its limited ingredients — a perfect match with the robust flavor of blue corn chips. The single serving size is designed for a child to make and enjoy.



- Serves 1
- 1 ripe avocado
- Juice from ½ small lemon
- Salt to taste
- Blue corn tortilla chips (or white or yellow corn)

Cut avocado in half with a dull, kid-friendly knife and remove pit. Scoop out avocado flesh with a spoon and place in a small bowl. Mash with a fork and add lemon juice and salt to taste. Stir to combine.

Serve on a plate with tortilla chips.

Easy Mediterranean Plate

This works well for younger kids, since it’s basically assembling store-bought ingredients. The plate creates a no-cook snack or meal in a colorful presentation that’s also very tasty. Great for your child to make and serve a sleepover buddy.



Serves 2
 7-oz. container of refrigerated pitted olives with cubed feta cheese in olive oil
 2 mini cucumbers, sliced into rounds, medium width
 ½ red pepper, sliced
 8-oz. container of store-bought hummus
 1 flatbread round, cut into 8 triangles (cut after arranging other ingredients to preserve softness until ready to serve)
 * ¼ of an avocado, sliced (this sixth ingredient adds more texture to each plate)

On two separate plates (one per person), arrange half of each ingredient, side by side, in their own groupings.
 Add a large dollop of hummus and fan out the pita triangles.
 Refrigerate any leftovers in separate airtight containers. Store for up to three days.

Kid-Friendly Baked Potato Bar

Save leftover breakfast bacon for your kids to create this simple, delicious potato bar. They can serve to each other or contribute to a family meal. Add a pop of color and flavor with chopped chives for garnish. Consider a sweet potato variation in place of russet, and offer cumin-spiced black beans instead of bacon bits.



Serves 4
 4 medium to large russet potatoes, skins scrubbed
 ½ stick butter
 1 C. sour cream
 1 C. shredded cheddar cheese
 4 strips bacon, cooked and crumbled into bits
 Salt and pepper to taste
 Chives, chopped (optional garnish)

Preheat oven to 425°. Pierce potatoes with a fork and place in the oven. Cook for 45 minutes to an hour (larger potatoes need longer cooking time).

After 45 minutes, remove one potato from the oven and carefully squeeze, using an oven mitt to determine if it's done (feels soft on the inside, with crispy skin on the outside). Cook another 10 to 15 minutes if the potatoes feel hard inside.

Place potatoes on a tray. Using a standard kitchen knife, make one cut across the potato, two-thirds deep into potato, and a second cut to form a letter X. Squeeze the potato from the bottom to loosen the potato's flesh.

Put each topping in a separate bowl, arranged in a line on a serving table. Recommended order to aid melting of ingredients: butter, shredded cheese, sour cream, bacon bits, chives (optional), salt and pepper.

Each person can take a turn going down the line with their potato and help themselves to their own toppings.

Refrigerate leftovers in separate airtight containers. Store for up to three days.

Kid-Approved Candied Nuts

These irresistible candied nuts are well worth the time to make them, and their incredible flavor makes a perfect snack. If your kids have leftovers, which is doubtful, they may be generous enough to let you toss them in a salad.



Serves 1 to 2
 1 T. butter
 1 C. shelled walnut or pecan halves (not pieces or chopped)
 ¼ C. sugar

Line a medium-sized cookie sheet with parchment paper.
 Melt butter over low heat in a large saucepan. Then add nuts and sprinkle sugar over nuts.

Using a wooden or other large spoon, mix ingredients to coat the nuts. Turn up heat to medium and continue mixing for a few minutes to toast the nuts.

Transfer the nut mixture onto the parchment-lined baking sheet and spread out evenly in one layer. The candy coating will harden around the nuts as they cool.

WARNING NOTE: Let the nuts fully cool before eating them to avoid burning mouths. Nuts are very hot right out of the pan.

Store leftovers in an airtight container at room temperature for up to one week.

Simple Spoonworthy Mango Smoothie

This refreshing and creamy smoothie — on the thicker side — can be enjoyed any time of year and provides a nice boost of vitamin C. Our kids enjoy making their own smoothies for dessert after dinner — a sugar-free option.

Serves 1
 1 C. cubed frozen mango
 Water, enough to fully immerse the mango

Place mango in a blender (or Nutribullet, Ninja) and add water until the mango is covered, with about a quarter inch more water

above (too much water produces a thin, watery smoothie).

Pulse until smooth and creamy. If the blender stops pulsing because the mango is too thick, add a little more water.

NOTE: It might take your child a few attempts to customize the texture to their liking. Once they do, you might see daily smoothies because this is so tasty and easy to make.

Place leftovers in an airtight container and freeze. ♦



Courtney Diener-Stokes is an award-winning journalist, author, food writer, photographer and food stylist. Most recently she co-authored the Kimberton Whole Foods Cookbook and Farmhouse Manna: Nourishing Recipes and Rituals for Head, Heart, Hands & Soul. She lives in the Oley Valley countryside with her husband, three children, two Babydoll Southdown sheep, a flock of bantam chickens and a Bernedoodle named Daisy.



For more great recipes visit CountyLinesMagazine.com