

# **Flavour First**

by Mary Sue Waisman

## **Introduction**

FLAVOUR FIRST is the motto I live by when I cook. While food is necessary to nourish both the body and the soul, it does a much better job of both when it's full of flavour. When food tastes delicious, it's easy to eat well; when food tastes delicious, it's easy to linger at the table, savour the taste, and indulge in conversation.

Bringing families back to the dinner table is something worth talking about. Families are dining together less and less for many reasons. Watch any family in action these days and you'll see they're torn in several different directions. Our busy lives are ruining our ability to sit down to the table and eat together—and not without consequence. My opinions about the importance of dining together are born out by recent research showing that there are good reasons to eat together. Families who dine together more often have less family tension and stress and better communication. Teens from families who dine together often say that their parents are more proud of them. These teens also smoke less and have lower rates of alcohol and illegal substance abuse.

Families also dine together less often because we are losing our ability to cook! Cooking skills are not being handed down the way they were 'in the old days'. If we're not careful, I believe we will soon be in a cooking crisis. Not that it's necessary that we all know how to make a crème brûlée, but if we put a generation forward that can't scramble eggs, make a pot of soup from turkey bones, roast some beef, or bake a cake, I fear what will become of the cooking skills and eating habits of generations to come.

We're faced with thousands of new food items on the grocery store shelves every year. I'm just as grateful as the next person for pre-washed spinach, packaged red Thai curry paste, frozen mango, and the occasional ready-roasted chicken. New food items can save time, make it easy to try new tastes, and provide great nutrition. But we would be doing ourselves a great disservice if we came to rely solely on pre-packed, precooked foods for our everyday lives. While some of the flavour may be there, there's a great loss in not learning how to plan a meal, seek out the ingredients, enhance the flavour, and then enjoy the meal at the table.

Cooking shows are one of the hottest genres on television right now—but don't just be an observer; learn from the best and then pick up a few ingredients, a pot, a wooden spoon, and get cooking! There has been a tremendous surge in home renovations, gardening, etc. We should add cooking to the growing list of do-it-yourself trends. Don't just watch the cooking shows, get creative in your own kitchen; take pride in the accomplishment of doing it yourself. Experience the satisfaction of bringing your family and friends to your

table to enjoy your food and one another's company. This wonderful feeling will make you want to cook again and again!

Great things can happen at a dinner table, and great tasting, flavourful food is the way to get people there. While growing up, it was easy to say "Right away" when Mom said "Please come to the table". Those words from my mother have echoed through my life for nearly fifty years, and I find myself repeating them daily with my family and friends. While growing up, I have fond memories of my family dinner table. Dad was often already at work by the time my brother and I arrived at the breakfast table, but Mom was usually there in the morning to put something simple yet delicious in our stomachs before heading off to school with a brown bag lunch. On the odd time that I came home for lunch, I always found the same sight: Dad sitting at the table, reading the paper or doing a crossword puzzle, and eating homemade soup right out of the pot. After all, "Why dirty another dish when the pot worked fine and kept the soup warm."

Supper time was special as we finally got to see our dad, who had worked hard all day selling appliances and furniture. Thursdays were *really* special as Dad would always bring home donuts from our favourite bakery. My special treat was called a 'half-moon'—a cake-like cookie that was frosted half with chocolate and half with white frosting to resemble both sides of the moon. The weekends brought wonderful bounty to the table, surrounded with aunts, uncles, and cousins, and the good fortune of grandparents from both sides of the family—a truly tight family unit where no one wandered off till much later in life.

These may not sound like great things, but I've realized something over the years: sitting at the table was not just a time to nourish our bodies, it was a time to nourish our souls and instil precious family values. We shared events of the day, sought counsel (without even realizing it) on the tribulations of our life, laughed with each other, celebrated birthdays and anniversaries, and felt rather lost when one of us wasn't present. Without knowing it, the table became the place where we all learned about life.

History also teaches us that great things can happen at the 'table.' If you happen to be a believer in The Last Supper, you'll know that great things happened at that table. Imagine how history could have been different if the guests at the table had to run off to an Olympic event! Closer to home, Canadian history shows us that during the settling of Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, the hospitality at the table was instrumental in building the nation: "Canadian hospitality was so lavish that the delegates were on board eating and drinking until late in the evening...sufficient unity persuaded the gathering to permit the unofficial proclamation of the new nation." E.W.P. Bolger, "Nation Building at Charlottetown" *Canada's Smallest Province. Charlottetown, The Prince Edward Island Centennial Commission, 1973, 135-155.*

I can't claim to build nations or religions at my dinner table, but nonetheless, great things also happen there. Rare is the day when we don't have a friend of one of my children

joining us at the table. Not long ago, my daughter and several of her teenage friends showed up for dinner with two large zucchinis in tow. They wanted me to make a traditional fried zucchini dish that they had tried at our home months ago. I felt honoured and seized the opportunity to pass on a flavourful, traditional item. I pulled out the ingredients and proceeded to teach them all how to make it! My children know their friends are always welcome to share a meal with us and share a little bit about their lives. The same is true for ‘grown up’ friends—it’s always easy to set another place for someone who drops by, even if it’s left-over night!

*Flavour First* will give you wonderful food ideas to help bring your family back to the table. I hope you enjoy making and sharing these foods with your family and friends, and please be sure to enjoy them at the table.