

Cooking Up a Compromise

Fed up with her picky eater's mealtime battles, this weary mom didn't throw in the towel — she turned over her apron instead

BY LISA YAKOMIN

Idea of the Month

When I was a child, I ate whatever my mother served almost without question and was always willing to try new foods. My daughter, Christina, used to be just like me — as an infant she practically licked her baby food jars clean — but as she's grown, her tastes have changed dramatically. So how did I wind up with a first grader whose culinary tastes seem to change more frequently than the guards at Buckingham Palace?

I think our troubles began when Christina started having play dates with her

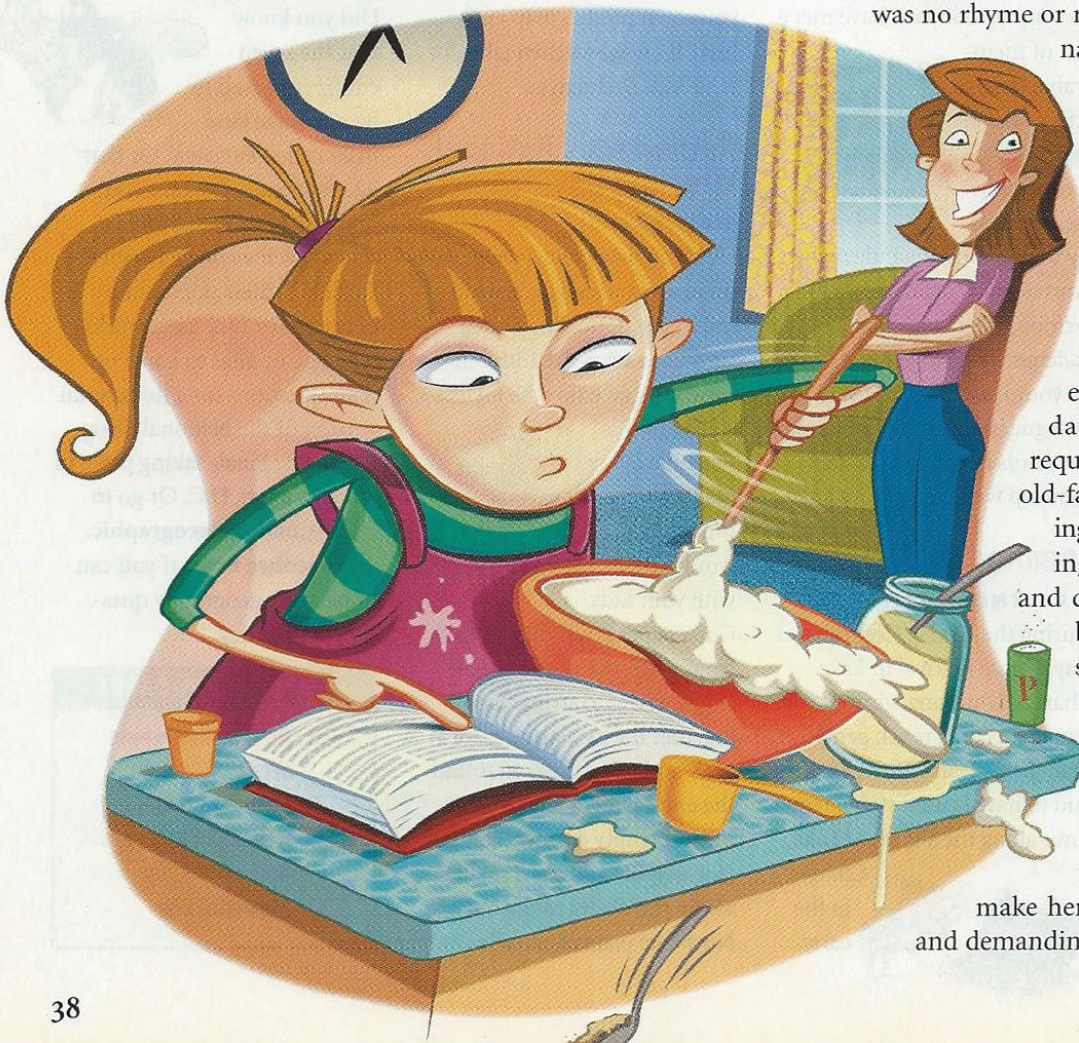
school friends. "You know, Mom," she'd say, "Maggie's mother cuts the carrots into sticks, not circles like you." After a while, Christina became more insistent in her preferences, gradually transforming into a hard-to-please, "I-know-I-used-to-like-that-before-but-now-I-don't" picky eater. It wasn't simply a matter of taste, either: she enjoyed the control of having things her way.

Family dinners became a nightly battle zone. Just looking at certain foods sent Christina into uncontrollable gagging fits, and regardless of what I'd prepared, she always wanted something else. On top of that, there was no rhyme or reason to her newly adopted culinary choices. One day, she would

eat raw carrots, but not cooked.

Then she had to have her pasta with butter and cheese because tomato sauce turned her stomach — unless, of course, it was on pizza. At first, I tried cooking separate meals for her, but that quickly became expensive and time-consuming and merely encouraged my three-year-old daughter, Amy, to make special requests too. I even reincarnated the old-fashioned rule of "eat this or nothing," which only led to heart-wrenching tears, stubborn refusals to eat, and candy bars being smuggled into bed. Could this possibly be the same child who, just a few years earlier, willingly tasted everything that was offered to her — including fried octopus?

I wasn't about to force my daughter to eat something she genuinely didn't like, but I needed to make her understand just how inflexible and demanding she had become. I also worried



about her nutritional well-being: after all, it's one thing to crave your favorite foods, but it couldn't possibly be healthy for a growing child to eat nothing but chicken nuggets, cheese cubes, and peanut butter crackers every single day, could it?

How could I help Christina understand that I wasn't trying to be mean; I just wanted her to eat balanced meals, try new foods on occasion, and stop ordering me around at mealtimes — barking out menu requests as if I were a short-order cook? If only she could see what it was like to be in my shoes. Then I realized *that* was my answer. I decided to appoint my daughter Guest Chef for one evening. On her designated Guest Chef Night, I would serve as her assistant. She would have a say in planning that evening's menu, accompany me to the store to buy the ingredients, and even help cook the meal (except, of course, for the hot stove maneuvers).

Christina was thrilled with the idea.

Our first hurdle: coming up with enough foods that she liked that would also satisfy my requirements for a balanced diet. Since the object of this whole exercise was to make mealtimes fun again, I turned this first chore into a game and had Christina create her own loose-leaf paper cookbook. After a bit of spirited brainstorming, we came up with a handful of family meals that consisted of simple (five ingredients or fewer) menu items that Christina would eat without arguing. Sure, the veggie choices were sparse and tended to be starchy, but there were a few that surprised me (I didn't realize she liked canned peas better than the ones from our garden). We assembled the book out of sheets of paper with holes punched down one side, all tied together loosely with string (yarn would work too) so that the book would lie flat on the counter while she cooked. Next, Christina filled it with pictures of the food we'd brainstormed. While she sat at the kitchen

table, earnestly drawing pictures of hot dogs (plain with ketchup on the side, of course) and grape jelly sandwiches with no crusts, I realized that this little cookbook project would also help me when it was my turn to cook again.

The dinner Christina chose to attempt for her Guest Chef Night was a carb-laden combo of grilled cheese sandwiches, instant mashed potatoes with butter, and chocolate ice cream — not exactly heart-healthy fare, but not bad either. My younger daughter — sensing a unique opportunity to boss around her big sister — insisted on having gravy on her potatoes, sending our harried Guest Chef scrambling back to the pantry for a jar of their favorite no-lumps kind. "Why can't you just eat what I made?" Christina scolded, then stole a wide-eyed look at me that I understood all too well: she had just experienced that first, horrifying moment when you hear your mother's words coming out of your own mouth. *Finally, progress!* I thought

as I went into the kitchen to help her microwave the gravy.

I wish I could say that after this experience, Christina's eating habits changed back to the way they were when she was omnivorous and easy to please, but that isn't exactly the case. She still doesn't like some foods: "Lettuce is for rabbits and gerbils, Mommy." But now that she's had a taste of what it's like on the other side of the kitchen counter, she's definitely less picky about eating what's on the nightly menu. Plus, Guest Chef Night was such a hit that Christina now dons the chef's toque once every two weeks or so. We have even added a few new things to her cookbook. I credit this to her reg-

ular outings with me to the supermarket, which have sparked her curiosity about different foods and rekindled her willingness to at least try a few bites of interesting-looking things (like butternut squash, portobello mushrooms, and grape tomatoes). Choosing and weighing fruits and vegetables, following recipes, and measuring ingredients have also helped improve her reading and math skills. Most importantly, in our family it's no longer "too many cooks spoil the meal — and Mommy's mood," but "two cooks are better than one."

Lisa Yakomin is a freelance writer based in Bergen County, New Jersey.