

A Boy Called Dad

Will ravioli-making with a trio of mini sous chefs prove a recipe for disaster? Cambridge's coast-walking dad and adventurer Chris Howard reports from a flour-bombed kitchen...

This weekend we've decided to make pasta; not exactly a family favourite - in fact we've never done it before - and as we set ourselves up for the great culinary adventure I glance at my knowing wife. She understands exactly what I've let myself in for!

However, I do think that cooking with children is about the most excitement anyone can have in the kitchen. Making pasta is basically the original messy play, and the knowledge that I'm helping them learn a life skill and how to survive is not only important to me, but I feel it's a sacred duty. I can show them how to make fire and build a den in a forest so I should be able to teach them how to feed themselves and their friends.

We love to eat as a family and we pretty much live in the kitchen. Our dining table will forever be a testament to our daughters' childhood; it's covered in pen, paint, glitter and bits that have been glued to it over the past 10 years or so. We do homework at the table, we do arts and crafts and push aside piles of laundry to bash out pizza dough. It is our meeting point as a family and where we feel most at home together.

The excitement levels are high as the hunt through the cupboards for ingredients gets underway. 'Okay, so we need to read the recipe to figure out what we require,' I advise calmly.

Thing One shouts 'Ingredients!' as if conquering an empire. 'Yes, but what, and how much?' I ask, but before I can finish, Youngest Thing exclaims 'a lot!'. 'Ravioli' a cry comes from behind a cupboard door. 'Oh, thank goodness! A tin,' I think to myself. But no such luck, as I'm not sure our daughters will ever know the delight of tinned ravioli, macaroni and hoops from a childhood long forgotten. Meanwhile Thing Two diligently recites from the book: 'Three hundred grams of Oh Oh flour and two eggs and yolks.' For those of you wondering why the surprise around the flour, I think she means 00 flour, but strong flour will do. 'Can I mix?' Youngest Thing grins, presenting two large white eggs. Suddenly a flash of my immediate future creeps into my mind's eye and it's covered in gloop. Wife is now looking on smugly, whilst holding a gin and tonic.



“ Flour clouds kick up from every surface, egg shell and gloop slide off the worktop, the boiling pan raises the temper bar higher ”

For the filling we have to improvise, so the delicious sounding spinach and ricotta with lemon zest and basil oil becomes tomato, cheese and dried oregano. I console myself with the thought that at least they are Italian flavours, which is far better than Youngest Thing's suggestion of white chocolate sauce and Turkish delight! 'We need a bowl for 10 to 15 minutes, Daddy' Thing Two says. 'Ahem, do we need a bowl or knead in a bowl?' I cough. The penny drops and I take the opportunity to commandeer the G&T. We roll out the dough, dollop the filling onto the pasta sheets equidistance apart and fold over before pressing, crimping and flouring ready for the pan.

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higher and we eagerly wait just moments to realise the tiny parcels of pasta have split, leaked and curled, rendering them inedible. 'Oh well, we only spent three hours making the mess,' I say. A loud clatter of cutlery and plates hits the table as the ever-hopeful chefs prepare to serve.

'Wow! What's for dinner then?' asks my wife. 'Dinner of dreams, it'll be five to 10 minutes,' I reply, as all three girls gasp with excitement. We all sit down to beans on toast topped with cheese, leading to satisfied grins and contented bellies. The moral of the story is it doesn't matter if what you cook doesn't turn out quite right, it doesn't matter if you haven't got the best ingredients or most expensive foods. The adventure and experience of it all is the key. Sitting down together, eating together and just being together is no small thing. It is in fact the biggest thing. Perhaps not quite as big as the ball of pasta sat on the side right now though. . .

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Read more about Chris's adventures at thecoastwalker.com