

It's graduation season. Politicians, celebrities and the wisest among us take to podiums and blather on about one thing or another. In most cases, they offer some kind of advice. These important people extol the virtues of goal setting and hard work. They like to use phrases like dream big, dare to fail and never give up. They hope to inspire the next generation to climb mountains, reach for the stars and seek the truth ... or some such thing.

My advice is simpler, much simpler. Learn to cook. In an age of fast food and microwave dinners, it's tempting to give the kitchen a pass. Don't. Cooking is both creative and calming. As you gain knowledge and confidence, you will delight in combining ingredients in new and different ways. Plus, the rhythmic stirring and chopping will calm you after a busy day. Knowing how to cook will feed your stomach and your soul. (It will also help you save money to pay off those student loans.)



When I look at life and work, cooking stands out for one particular reason. It can bring almost instant gratification. For so much of what we do, progress is not measured in hours but in weeks, months or years. A book can take years to write, rewrite and write again. A teacher will work for months hoping for a breakthrough with reluctant students. Complicated business projects take weeks or months to complete. As for raising kids, tending a garden, building and maintain strong and happy relationships – these are never-ending works in progress.

But cooking – even Thanksgiving, the biggest of all holiday feasts is prepped, cooked and served in a couple of days. With a little planning, a weekend dinner party can be tossed together in an afternoon and an any-day-of-the-week meal is done in an hour. As for the reward – you will taste it immediately. Better yet, you will see it in the smiles and hear it in the animated chatter and laughter around the table. A good meal with people you love will make your heart sing.

Which brings me to my next point – invite friends and family to eat with you. Food is more than sustenance; eating is a communal rite. A meal is meant to be shared. Food tastes better when served with a side of stimulating conversation, harmless banter and silly jokes.

Perhaps a dinner party, even the idea, scares the bejeebers out of you. Don't let it. In the words of Julia Child, "No matter what happens in the kitchen, never apologize," So what if the soup is a little spicy or the dog steals the turkey? If anyone remembers, it will be another great story to tell and retell. Sure, you'll look back at some of your mishaps with a grimace but, more important, you'll also look back with a giggle.

To close, I have two utterly practical suggestions. First, get a big bowl. Only the most timid of cooks can make do with one of those nesting sets of three. You won't use that giant bowl every day but you'll be happy to have it. I have a couple, a big one at eight quarts and a really big one at fourteen. Cooking requires a lot of tossing and mixing – give yourself plenty of room to do it with gusto.

Second, start every party with an empty dishwasher. Like it or not, even the loveliest of evenings do come to an end. Eventually, you must clear the table. Cleanup is faster and easier if you can immediately stack all those dishes in the dishwasher. Oh, and yes, I know many first (even second) apartments don't have dishwashers. This rule also applies to the sink. It should be empty of dirty dishes when your guests arrive.

Have a wonderful life filled with happy friends around table. Bon appétit!

Strawberries in Cointreau

Sometimes the simplest of desserts can be the most delicious – especially when local strawberries are coming into season. Enjoy!

Serves 8

2 pounds strawberries, hulled and quartered or halved, depending on size

About 2 ounces Cointreau

Zest of 1 orange

Brown sugar to taste

Whipped cream or vanilla ice cream (optional)

Place the strawberries in a bowl large enough for tossing. Drizzle with Cointreau, sprinkle with orange zest and gently toss. If necessary, add a little brown sugar and toss again.

Let the strawberries sit for about 10 minutes while you put the dinner dishes in the sink to soak or fill the dishwasher.

Toss again and serve the strawberries with a spoonful of whipped cream or ice cream.

