

On Parenting

I'm a food writer and a mom and I'm here to tell you: food writers lie

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Summary



Food writers — they're just like us. (Debbie Koenig)

By Debbie Koenig

Food writers are lying to you.

In our quest to inspire people to cook, we offer images of glorious plates of food, dramatically lit, propped with carefully-chosen cloth napkins and color-coordinated dishes, with the most adorable little trail of crumbs to suggest that someone's actually eating this slice of perfection.

My dinner plate never looks like that anywhere but the computer screen, on a really good day. In real life it's chipped, with maybe some sauce spilling over an edge onto the crumpled paper napkin.

Most people edit their lives, to show only the corners they like to the world—think about how you decide what to share on Facebook. Food writers leave out the grimy spot near the toaster, the overstuffed, disorganized fridge that's barely chugging along. I don't think we're ashamed of these parts of our lives, necessarily, just that in order to capture attention, we chase a notion of unrealistic beauty. That leads to cookbooks and food blogs as staged and Photoshopped as the models in Vogue.

The picture above is my kitchen, this morning. Those battered cabinets, in that weird mauvey shade, were painstakingly painted by my husband and me before Harry was born. I couldn't stand the dingy, 1970s almond laminate, and somehow imagined that coating it in pink would fix things. It didn't, but the process of removing all the cabinet doors, priming, painting, and reattaching them, was so exhausting I just couldn't see doing it all again. Especially with a kid around. We've lived with them for almost a decade now, and I still don't like them.

My food processor dates to 1993, a wedding present from my first marriage. The non-functioning hood over the stove (an appliance my landlady replaced last year, after the 40-year-old predecessor finally kicked the bucket) has been scrubbed so many times the paint's worn off. A sheet of plastic tarp funneled into a bucket hangs in front of the window, since there's a mystery leak the handyman has never been able to locate, which floods the area during major rainstorms.

So yeah, my kitchen is imperfect. Just like my cooking.

That's where food writers really let down our readers: Too often, we gloss over mistakes or talk about how easy a recipe is, when in fact it failed miserably the first three times we tried it, and sometimes even now, when it's "perfect," it just doesn't come out as good as we remember. We give time estimates based on how long it takes us to prepare something, neglecting the fact that many, if not most, people don't work as fast as we can, don't share our confidence in the kitchen. We urge people to cook for their families. and preach about how crucial

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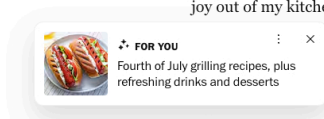


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it is to the well-being of our children and heck, the entire world. Whether we intend to or not, we suggest that if someone doesn't cook—or doesn't like to cook—that person isn't doing it right.

That person is usually a woman. And given the whole mantra of “family dinners are THE answer” to obesity, drug use, juvenile delinquency, and general shiftlessness, that woman is usually a mom. Case in point: [Virginia Heffernan's essay in this week's New York Times Magazine](#), in which she confesses that she doesn't like cooking, and that family-oriented cookbooks only make her feel bad about herself.

Here's my confession: Lately, I hate cooking. The frustrations and challenges of coming up with creative, appealing, and easily reproduced meals that my insanely picky kid might deign to eat have sucked all the joy out of my kitchen. I'm tired, and I don't have much to crow about. I



that I've failed as a mother—and I know I haven't at many of my fellow family-food writers smugly isn't omnivorous. (I'm looking at you, Mark Bittman.)

When I wrote my cookbook, my goal was simple: To reassure frazzled new parents that yes, they'd get their mojo back, and yes, they'd learn to make dinner again someday, and then to help them do it. From the feedback I've received since it came out, I think I succeeded. I think I managed to write a family cookbook that doesn't make parents feel bad about themselves. And you know what? Sales are meh. When it comes to laying down money, I suspect most people want pretty; they want promises of perfection, of problems solved. They don't want to be told that this period of your life is challenging, but you'll get through it.

So when people ask about my next cookbook, I shrug and mumble into my shoulder. The obvious subject would be feeding your picky eater, but since I struggle with that myself multiple times every day, with two giant leaps back for every baby step forward, it seems disingenuous to suggest I might have any answers. Or that my answers will work for any family other than my own. Lord knows nobody else's have worked for mine.

Maybe my next book should be about the Imperfect Family Kitchen. The one with a leaky window, chipped plates, and a kid who won't eat. The one where the UPS guy comes just when the timer's about to go off, where the whining of the 8-year-old as he sets the table makes you wish you'd just set the table yourself. The one with a mom who moans at least twice a week, “I have to make dinner again?”

But who wants to read that?

Debbie Koenig is the author of [Parents Need to Eat Too: Nap-Friendly Recipes, One-Handed Meals and Time-Saving Kitchen Tricks for New Parents](#). She is the mother to one picky eater and lives in Brooklyn. Follow her on Twitter [@DebbieHarry](#) and on Facebook. A version of this essay first appeared on her blog.

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