

Cooking Lessons

SOMEONE'S IN THE KITCHEN WITH KAREN

by Karen Ackland

"SAUTÉ ONIONS before your husband gets home," a friend of my mother's told me at my sister's bridal shower. "Regardless of what else you are having, it will make the house smell like you have been cooking for hours."

At the time I didn't have a husband and, although I enjoyed a plate of sautéed onions, I felt slightly superior to the duplicity of this advice and to the roomful of cheerful, friendly women who had been constants in my childhood. I expected that somehow my life would be bigger, elsewhere. I think of these things sometimes as I cook with my stepdaughters.



When we started cooking together, Alexis and Jennie were eleven and twelve. I was used to cooking alone and the addition of two chattering children who wanted to measure, pour, and stir, but disliked chopping or peeling, demanded a new level of concentration. I called them my *sous chefs*, but I was the one that pulled out pans and assembled ingredients for them.

I had previously found cooking relaxing, like an improvised dance, but with the girls I felt promoted to

a management role. My timing was off and I forgot key ingredients, which seemed to confirm the girls' impression that they were training me.

If Larry tried to enter the kitchen, Alexis would block the doorway, saying, "Girls only. No men allowed." I tried to correct the idea that cooking and kitchens are just for girls, but Larry only reinforced their opinion. He put away pans we had not yet used, created lessons out of minor mishaps, and generally made us all nervous.

I enjoyed cooking with my stepdaughters. If I kept the instructions about rolling boils and level teaspoons to a minimum, I found that they told me things that they would never say face-to-face at the dinner table. In the kitchen, the relationship was between the three of us.

Once in the middle of cutting vegetables for a stir-fry, the girls asked, "Why are you marrying our Dad? You're patient and he's not." I stumbled through a serious answer and added, "Well, he's kind of cute, don't you think?"

"Karen, he's our Dad," they replied in unison, drawing out the short "a" to emphasize my impropriety.

Larry's relationship to the girls was clear—he was the Dad. But who was I? Stepmother is such an unattractive word, usually paired with wicked. I hoped to achieve something friendlier—more like a favorite aunt or older sister.

If we went out to dinner together, I was identified as the mother. I was amused, even pleased, by this, but it didn't feel real. I was only the pretend, part-time Mom and I didn't know what I was doing.

When my inexperience got in the way, the girls were prepared to educate me. One Saturday Jennie wanted me to buy her a new bathing suit. I mentioned I liked one I'd seen her wear before. "Karen," she explained, "I'm a kid. I grow."

I had missed even the obvious.

Since my relationship with my stepdaughters started so well, I assumed that we would just keep going. Now, three years later, when Alexis and Jennie arrive for a weekend, they usually have a cell phone attached to their ear. They stand in front of the open refrigerator, talking to their friends and me at the same time.

"Chris says hello. We need Pepsi, tortilla chips, salsa in a jar—that's the only kind I'll eat—and get some French bread."

I feel like a telethon volunteer, standing by to take their calls. Still, I miss them when they're not around, so when Jennie and a friend visited recently, I agreed to help them bake a chocolate cake. We went shopping for bittersweet chocolate, whipping cream, macadamia nuts, and butter. I added a chicken, pork chops, cilantro, and rice noodles to the shopping cart.

"What are you making?" Jennie asked suspiciously.

I wanted to try a Thai recipe called *Kaeng Chud Mu Kai*. "Chicken noodle soup," I replied.

For the next several hours we cooked. I made the soup and supervised the cake production. Jennie occasionally supervised me. "Leave out the fish sauce and mushrooms. Jennie doesn't eat mushrooms," she requested after reading through the recipe. She has started speaking about herself in the third person.

Jennie remembered the trick her grandmother had taught her about how to fold parchment paper into a thin triangle and cut it to fit the cake pan. I didn't have parchment paper and she used a grocery bag. The cake came out of the pan without a problem. The rich chocolate glaze was applied cooperatively. The girls imitated the photograph in the cookbook and studded the edges with macadamia nuts. We had the pots soaking in the sink by the time Larry came to check on us.

It was one of those meals where everything worked. The dinner table held steaming bowls of soup (with the essential mushrooms and fish sauce), a platter of Pad Thai noodles, and marinated cucumbers. There was a brief skirmish when Jennie tried to plop the mushrooms from her soup into Heather's bowl, but then she silently set them aside on her plate.

As we were cleaning up afterwards, Larry read the label on the bottle of fish sauce. "Did you know this is made from anchovies?" I glared at him and the girls looked like they might throw up on the kitchen floor.

"I thought I could go my whole life without eating an anchovy," sighed Heather.

Sometimes, if I listen and don't ask questions, my stepdaughters tell me about pregnant classmates or cars crashing off bridges. I'm not sure if they are trying to shock me, or if they are worried themselves. Probably both. Where I had once hoped to encourage their independence, I now find myself wanting to restrict their activities.

More often, as I watch them hurry through their homework, I wonder if they will have the skills to succeed as adults. At work I know younger women more focused than I am, and I imagine that their assurance and ambition will soon outpace my experience. On a twist from the usual wanting more for your children, I want Alexis and Jennie not necessarily to have more than I have, but to be more than I am.

I make mental lists of things I think they should know. Learn to manage money. Make exercise a habit. Study a foreign language. Spelling and grammar do matter. Don't always choose the easiest thing, just to get it over with. I tell them to expect to support themselves, and then wonder what kind of message that is, coming from their father's wife.

Despite my concerns for their worldly success, I suspect that what my stepdaughters will learn from me is how to cook. I recognize the irony in this. Because the advice I would give them about cooking is similar to the advice I once received about sautéing onions.

Take care of the people that you love, and you don't need to explain everything.

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When I married—and became a stepmother—I found a new voice as a writer, moving away from the bullet points of corporate writing to tell stories about my new family. Still, I had spent too many years as a single woman to comfortably identify with mothers. In writing this piece I realized that the staccato, achievement-based success that I wished for my stepdaughters—and that I expected for myself—was different from the softer, less self-important language of home cooking.