

# LIFE

AMERICA'S WEEKEND MAGAZINE

## The Return of **SUNDAY DINNER**

Why families are coming  
back to the table









# America makes room for Sunday Dinner

The result? Good food, quality time, happier kids.

Photographs by Stuart O'Sullivan

It exists in our collective consciousness as something warm and wonderful: the family sitting together at the table, passing around bowls of aromatic food, discussing the events of the day, the weather, nothing at all. The image is informed, perhaps, by Norman Rockwell, or by *Leave It to Beaver*, or by memories of our own youth. In our reverie, we wonder if it ever *really* was as good and true as we envision it, and if it could possibly be replicated in the harried, hurried world that we live in today. Can we bring back Sunday dinner? • We're trying.

Yes, what you may sense is, sadly, true: As a nightly ritual, the family dinner went into decline in the 1980s and '90s and, what with the shifting dynamics of the American workday, will probably never return to its postwar status. But a Columbia University survey of teens indicates a comeback afoot. >



Nearly 30 percent more teenagers reported having dinner with their parents at least five nights a week. The boom in cooking shows and our national obsession with nesting could be one reason we're seeing the return of the dinner hour. And the efforts of child-centric Nick at Nite, which is encouraging parents to designate September 26 a family-dinner night, have undoubtedly warmed kids to the idea.

As for parents, if they're headed back to the table, it's surely because they know intuitively what was concluded in a 2000 report by President Clinton's Council of Economic Advisers. The council found that kids who ate with their parents did better in school and were less likely to be sexually active or to engage in violent behavior. "Meals," notes William J. Doherty, a professor of family social science at the University of Minnesota, "are an opportunity to connect."

So let's connect. To help set the table, this issue of LIFE offers a personal ode to supertime by Martha McPhee and—equally inspirational—four fuss-free slow-cooker recipes from celebrity chefs. But our focus on family dinner doesn't end there: Each week we'll continue to publish our popular "Sunday Dinner" recipes.

Now pass the potatoes. Pass the salt. Tell a joke. Solve the world's problems. Connect. This weekend, and every weekend.



#### EARTH'S ABUNDANCE

The author and her daughter, Livia (top), husk corn for a thick, sweet chowder.

#### JUST HANGING

Livia, brother Jasper, and dad Mark (above) take a break from kitchen duty.

#### TEAMWORK

Mark's the designated vegetable chopper in this household (right).

## Why I Love Sunday Suppers

By Martha McPhee

My favorite dinners take place on Sundays, when my family has time to make a meal together: Jasper, just 1½,

batting away on a bowl with a spatula; Livia, standing on a child's chair beside my husband, her hands deep in egg yolks and flour, mixing the batter for an almond cake; my husband, Mark, and I cooking the food, and

have even more fun because they feel as if they're getting away with something—and so do Mark and I. Besides, the simple gesture of sharing a meal is all that counts. It allows us to turn our attention away from the clutter of life to focus on one another.

But I do like to cook when I have the time, and because of my interest, Mark has become interested, too. When I met him, he was a starving poet and ate only things from a can—sometimes not even warmed. No matter the particulars. It is my hope that because we eat with Jasper and Livia now, we'll eat with them as they grow up, and these dinners will become an inextricable part of their lives.

Nothing defines who we are more than food and the rituals we create surrounding it. Think, if you will, of all the countries in the world, how their different cuisines describe their customs. Families express themselves in the same way—through recipes passed down from mother to daughter, the

then sitting down at a table whimsically set by our daughter.

Five-year-old Livia talks the most, explaining to us big things she's come to understand about the world. "Did you know," she informed us recently with all the conviction of truth, "that the ocean is infinite and bottomless, like the sky?" I might not know this detail about Livia and her ocean if we had not shared that meal. For this reason, and more, I gather my family for dinner, though cooking isn't always easy. We often cheat with a pre-roasted chicken, even Chinese takeout, not to mention pancakes or cereal. In a way, on those nights of breakfast-for-dinner, the children



way in which chicken soup is cooked just so, the rules that come with setting the table and cleaning it up.

I inherited my reverence for the Sunday meal from my grandparents. When I was young, my three older sisters, parents, and I ate our Sunday dinner of pot roast and hickory-nut





cake at their house by Carnegie Lake in New Jersey. We arrived after church in our bonnets and dresses; while dinner cooked, my sisters and I inspected our grandfather's berry bushes and turned cartwheels across the expanse of the yard. With the ring of a bell, we were summoned to dinner, a formal affair with silverware and china. Our grandmother taught us how to cut our meat, to keep our elbows off the table, and to take pleasure around a table heavy with food.

My parents divorced when I was 5, and our family became something different entirely. There were now stepsiblings, a stepfather, a new house on a farm. The one thing that remained the same, however, was the ritual of Sunday dinner, albeit in a new form. Bell-bottoms and T-shirts replaced our bonnets and dresses. Ten children filled the long dining room table. My stepfather, a former Jesuit, opened his home to friends, fellow philosophers, neighbors. The dinners were lively. We learned about the art of debate. The Rolling Stones or the Doors—which was the better band and why?

We all participated in the preparation of the meal—a job list was tacked to the refrigerator. There was chaos; often we ate late. (I learned to cook simply so I could go to bed earlier.)

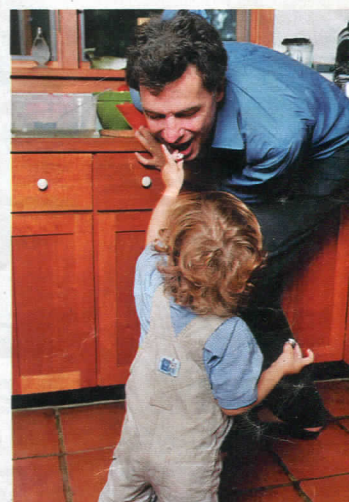


Eventually, some of us went off to college, some stayed, some returned. But the dinners remained constant, and if we were home, we came to the table. Many dishes originated in our garden. Of this my mother was proud, and that made me proud, too.

It was not until I was an exchange student in Italy that I came to fully understand the importance of the family dinner. Back then, in the early '80s, the midday meal shut down the country. Towns were deserted, the metal shutters of storefronts emphatically closed. But inside each home, the dining room was alive with the aromas of food

and with people eating. Each region produced its own pasta shapes, ingeniously designed for particular sauces; it was like entering a communion with an entire part of the country. Dinner reflected where you lived and who you grew up with—an integral part of family life.

I bring all these memories to my Sunday dinner today. And as my family sits down to eat—Mark cutting the food for the children, Livia all chatty and eager for cake, and Jasper clanking away with his spoon and fork—we make a certain music that I hope will shape the rhythm of their days to come. ■



It is my hope that because Mark and I eat with Jasper and Livia now, we'll eat with them as they grow up, and these dinners will become an inextricable part of their lives.



#### OPEN WIDE

Mark and Jasper (top) sample some of the berries Martha and Livia will use to top the cake.

#### SWEET!

Martha scrapes the batter (top left) as Livia gets in a few licks.

#### BAKED

#### TO PERFECTION

The result of a mother-daughter effort (above).

#### DELICIOUS DISH

Savoring moments spent at the table (above left).