

MY DADDY COOKS

Stay-at-home dad **Nick Coffe**r turned to cooking and blogging as a way to nurture his creative side while caring for his son, Archie, now 3. Together the two whip up culinary delights like plum clafoutis and ramen noodle soup while getting in some serious bonding time.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF HODDER & STOUGHTON LIMITED

Q & A

WITH MY DADDY COOKS AUTHOR **Nick Coffe**r

Coffe'r's blog, MyDaddyCooks.com, was such a huge hit it spawned a cookbook. Get inspired to bring your own children into the kitchen.

How old was your son when you first brought him into the kitchen? And how do you involve him in cooking?

A) I remember Archie being barely 6 months old and hanging off my hip in the kitchen. We live in a very small house so where I went, he went too. I think he started to help in the kitchen a little after he was old enough to stand, probably at around 13 or 14 months old. We bought him a stand called a FunPod (it's a safer way than a stool or a chair of a toddler standing in a kitchen) and he quickly made it his own domain.

In those early days, I would not go so far as to say he was actually helping. It was just about hanging out together, spending quality time together. And for him it was, and remains, about play.

Obviously toddlers are naturally curious and the kitchen is a great place for them to satisfy their curiosity. As he grew older and was close to 2 years old, he became much more actively involved in what I was doing. He particularly loved being part of anything which made a mess. And if you are going to have kids in the kitchen, you really have to leave your mess inhibitions at the door.

Now he's nearly 4 and, in truth, there is very little I would not allow him to do in the kitchen. Obviously I always supervise him very carefully but for us, the kitchen remains a fun place where he can display his creativity.

What are the benefits of bringing kids into the kitchen?

A) In both of my books, the primary benefit is it's lots of fun. It's real quality time spent together. Instead of sitting a young kid in front of the TV while preparing the supper, it turns the preparation time into something engaging and interesting for them.

It is also fair to say that cooking covers so many things relating to early learning. It involves math (counting ingredients), science (if you put something with something else, something happens), and even geography. Not to mention all the behavioral and developmental benefits. The kitchen is an excellent place to learn to follow instructions.



I think that being involved in preparation also helps kids build a healthy relationship with food. Seeing where food comes from goes a long way to demystifying it. Also, in the kitchen, kids learn that food is something fun, rather than something to draw battle lines over.

More often than not, when Archie has been directly involved in preparing the food, he will eat it too. After all, no self-respecting sous-chef will not eat something he has cooked.

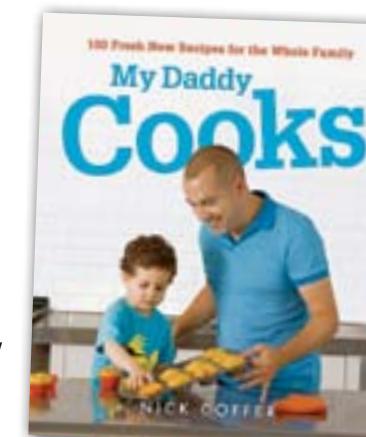
Is your son a foodie? Or do you still deal with the occasional pickiness? Any tips for other parents on handling picky eaters?

A) Archie is a toddler. Toddlers are picky by definition. I don't know why we think it would be any different with food. He is at an age of asserting his will and his choices. It is logical he is going to do that around food too. And of course there are things he loves and things he hates. But that just makes him a normal human being.

I guess I am an advocate for a more relaxed approach around food. It becomes a battleground too often. Don't get me wrong, Archie has his phases just like any other kid ("I am not into that at the moment, Daddy!") but we choose not to make it into a battle at the table.

Archie certainly likes nice food, although I am not sure if that makes him a foodie per se. He definitely has an eye and a nose for what works.

Recently I made a salmon pasta with red peppers and he said, "Daddy, red peppers and salmon don't go together." More than anything, he is curious about cooking and this will hopefully go a long way in his building a healthy relationship with food.



EASY RAMEN NOODLE SOUP

When I moved back home in 2000 after living in France for 10 years, one of the first novelties I discovered (well, a novelty for me at least) was Japanese food, and more specifically noodle soups in large canteen-style restaurants. I loved the simple flavors of the soups, and the obligatory slurping suited me well. It's hard to imagine a more complete balanced meal in a bowl—or an easier one to prepare.

This noodle soup is very flexible, as you can make it with chicken, salmon, and tofu. You can easily substitute ingredients in and out of the recipe and the dish will still work brilliantly. — Nick Coffey

MAKES
4
SERVINGS

PREP TIME:
10 MINUTES

COOK TIME:
10 TO 15
MINUTES



ingredients

SOUP BASE:

½ lb. of ramen noodles (you can also use soba, udon, or classic Chinese noodles)
6 cups good-quality chicken or vegetable stock
Vegetable oil
1 garlic clove, chopped
1-in. cube of fresh ginger, grated
1 stalk lemon grass, chopped
Soy sauce

SOUP (CHICKEN, SALMON, OR TOFU OPTIONS):

2 large chicken breast fillets, cut into thin strips
3 salmon fillets, skin and flesh removed, cubed

¾ pound tofu, cubed

GARNISH:

2 carrots, grated
½ pound mangetout (or sugar snap peas), very finely sliced

1 Cook noodles according to the instructions on the packet, then drain and cool them under cold water and drizzle some oil throughout so they don't stick together.

2 Bring your stock to boil. At the same time, heat a wok or deep frying pan. Add a good drizzle of vegetable oil and cook the garlic, ginger, and lemon grass for no more than a minute. Make sure you stir

vigorously, or else the garlic will burn.

3 Add the chicken, salmon, or tofu and cook for three to four minutes. If you are cooking the salmon, stir gently or the cubes will disintegrate. Throw in a dash of soy sauce and remove wok from the heat.

4 Pile a handful of noodles at the bottom of four large deep bowls. Shake out the wok mix equally on top of each pile of noodles, sprinkle the carrot and mange tout (baby snap peas) over the mix, and then pour in enough boiling stock to barely cover the pile. The stock will cook the carrot and peas in the few minutes it will take to serve the bowls. Drizzle extra soy sauce or chili oil to taste.

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CHICKEN, LEEK, AND TARRAGON PIE WITH ROSTI TOPPING

I once had an old oven that just didn't like baking pastry. It always managed to burn the pastry on the top of a pie. This led me to look for an alternative. This rosti topping works particularly well, and it really does turn the pie into an all-in-one dish. The other thing I am avoiding here is making a white sauce, because I think there is already enough cooking needed for this pie. Throwing in a pot of half-fat creme fraiche works perfectly.

MAKES
4
SERVINGS

PREP TIME:
10 MINUTES

COOK TIME:
50 MINUTES

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ingredients

1 ½ lbs. potatoes
1 onion, halved and thinly sliced
2 leeks, trimmed and thickly sliced
1 garlic clove, crushed
4 chicken breasts, cut into good-sized chunks
2 tsp. whole grain mustard
1 ¼ cup half-fat creme fraiche
1 T tarragon, chopped
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
3 T butter
Olive oil

1 Heat your oven to 400 degrees. Boil the potatoes for 11 minutes, skin on, in a large covered pan of boiling water. You want the potatoes to be about three-quarters cooked. Take them out of the water and let them cool.

2 Pour 2 or 3 tablespoons of olive oil into a pan on a medium heat and cook the onion for three to four minutes. Add the leek and garlic and cook for another two to three minutes. Then, throw in the chicken and stir for one more minute.

3 Stir in the mustard, then pour in the creme fraiche and simmer gently for a few minutes. Mix in

the tarragon, season well with salt and pepper, and take the sauce off the heat.

4 Peel the potatoes and grate them coarsely. Melt the butter in a non-metallic bowl in the microwave for 45 seconds and mix it well into the grated potatoes so they get a good covering. You may want to season the potatoes at this stage with salt and pepper.

5 Pour the pie mixture into a 3 ½-pint pie or baking dish and sprinkle the grated potato on top.

6 Bake for about 35 minutes, until the pie topping is nice and golden, and serve immediately.

PLUM CLAFOUTIS

This is my kind of dessert: elaborate-sounding name, unbelievably easy to make, and absolutely delicious. Clafoutis originate from Normandy and basically are fruits baked in a pancake-type batter. The most traditional version uses cherries, but I find it very fiddly to eat while picking out the stones. This clafoutis uses plums, but you can use any similar stone fruit. Be sure not to overpack the dish, as the plums let out a lot of juice and the clafoutis can become soggy.

Some people prefer to use more sugar, but I like letting a little tartness come through. If it is not sweet enough for your taste, sprinkle it with a little extra sugar later.

MAKES

4-6

SERVINGS

PREP TIME:
10 MINUTES

COOK TIME:
30 TO 40
MINUTES



ingredients

3 large eggs
1/3 cup caster (very fine) sugar
1/2 cup plain flour
1 1/4 cup milk
1/2 tsp. vanilla extract
5 or 6 ripe plums, pitted and cut in half
Confectioner's sugar for dusting

1 Heat your oven to 350 degrees. Grease an 8-inch round pie dish or baking dish with butter.

2 In a mixing bowl, whisk together the eggs and sugar. Add the flour, and whisk again. Then, whisk in the milk and vanilla extract until you get a really smooth batter.

3 Bake for 30 to 40 minutes. The clafoutis is cooked when it has risen, looks golden on the top,

and has set in the middle. Do not take it out of the oven while it is cooking or it will collapse.

4 Remove the clafoutis from the oven and let it cool a little and sink back down. Dust the clafoutis with confectioner's sugar, and serve it warm or at room temperature. ■

All recipes taken from *My Daddy Cooks* by Nick Coffey, published by Hodder & Stoughton.

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