



## *The Lazy Gourmet: Magnificent Meals Made Easy*

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### **Introduction**

From the day the two of us met—as college students moving into a big drafty Victorian in Santa Cruz, California—we bonded over food. There were seven women living in the house, including science majors, banjo players, artists, and athletes. We were all very different, but the one thing we agreed on was food. We each contributed a set amount of cash to the food fund each week, and we took turns shopping and cooking dinner. Of course, we were barely out of our teens, and on student budgets, so the food was anything but fancy, but it was good enough to bring the seven of us—and a nightly assortment of friends, boyfriends, classmates, and random hangerson— together around the dining room table most nights. There were, of course, plenty of frozen gnocchi and burritos, but there was also “homemade” calzone using store-bought pizza dough; a legendary rich, cream-based corn and tomato soup adapted from a recipe in *The Moosewood Cookbook*; and one July evening, when turkeys were inexplicably on sale for an irresistible price, an entire Thanksgiving feast, complete with bread stuffing, green bean casserole, and pumpkin pie. At best, there were homemade pierogies from someone’s grandmother’s recipe. At worst there was a terribly misguided sauté of nopales (Mexican cactus) that, to our dismay, even half a bottle of soy sauce couldn’t save.

While we shared food costs and cooking duties—and a love of eating—our culinary knowledge was anything but equal, with the two of us at opposite ends of the spectrum. Robin, on the one hand, grew up in a food-obsessed family where the primary topic of dinner table conversation was where and what the next meal would be. Having grown up watching (and helping) her mother, a professional restaurant critic and accomplished cook, prepare dinner each night, cooking came naturally to her; she was simply comfortable in the kitchen, not intimidated by complicated recipes or exotic ingredients.

While Robin inherited her mother’s kitchen prowess, Juliana, in contrast, cruised through childhood blissfully delighted when meals magically appeared in front of her. While she did master the Toll House cookie at a tender young age, she was generally more interested in eating than cooking. Pringles, candy bars, and four-star meals were all welcomed with equal enthusiasm. Frankly, she never gave cooking much thought until early adulthood, when she was ready to start preparing meals for herself and others. She was beginning to develop an appreciation for good food, but chalked the gourmet cooking abilities of others up to innate magical powers that she simply wasn’t lucky enough to possess. She watched with bemusement as friends like Robin took seemingly random piles of meat and produce, mysterious powders, and liquids and transformed them into feasts that caused awestruck guests to burst into spontaneous applause. She wanted to be able to impress friends with dinner party spreads they

would still be talking about months later, but she was resigned to the belief that she wasn't cut out to be a cooking whiz.

After college, Robin worked at a series of day jobs in the book publishing industry, and devoted the majority of her spare time to indulging her foodie urges. She devoured food magazines and television cooking shows, took cooking classes, and mastered complicated techniques. Both zealous and disciplined, she became known for her willingness to spend an entire week before a dinner party infusing oils, brining meats, and scouring markets throughout the San Francisco Bay Area in search of just the right ingredients. Eventually, she justified this devotion (read: obsession) by becoming a professional food writer, finally getting paid to ferret out delightfully minute culinary details for magazine and newspaper articles and develop recipes for her own cookbooks.

Juliana became a graphic designer and continued to passively enjoy the stellar culinary offerings of the Bay Area. While part of her always coveted her friends' cooking know-how, she couldn't imagine putting in the time, energy, and training she thought would be required for her to learn to cook great food. Eventually, though, it began to dawn on her that some of the most elegant, beautiful, and memorable meals she encountered—those that made foodies swoon, squeal, and beg for recipes—were also some of the simplest. A surprising combination of unlikely ingredients, the use of fresh herbs, or a dash of a special vinegar or infused oil was often the thing that elevated a meal from decent to stunning. After years of befuddlement and self-doubt, Juliana had finally discovered a startling concept that changed the way she approached the kitchen: cooking great food can be really easy.

Over the years, the two of us frequently crammed ourselves into one or the other of our tiny, ill-equipped San Francisco apartment kitchens to cook and eat. As our lives became increasingly complicated and busy, more and more we both found ourselves looking for kitchen shortcuts that wouldn't oblige us to skimp on flavor. We'd make excited phone calls or send urgent late-night emails to share new recipes for super-delicious dishes, recipes that were "so easy!" Some of those recipes became legendary for us, like the ridiculously simple balsamic syrup that could transform the most mundane ingredients into culinary nirvana on a plate, or the egg and asparagus sandwich that earned one of us such a reputation at her workplace that we now refer to it as "THE sandwich."

We wrote *The Lazy Gourmet* for anyone who dreams of dazzling guests with fabulous homecooked fare but fears that such a feat would require Thomas Keller's talent, Martha Stewart's ingenuity, Gandhi's patience, and Charles Manson's free time. Our goal is to conquer the misguided belief that preparing an elegant meal requires spending hours—or days—in the kitchen. With the help of our volunteer testers—regular people with no culinary training—we've developed this collection of recipes that can be prepared using readily available ingredients and common kitchen appliances, and without any previous cooking experience or training. With our recipes, we're confident that anyone can prepare delicious and sophisticated yet surprisingly simple dishes that will impress fussy in-laws, placate implacable bosses, and seduce sexy strangers through the proven method of knocking their socks off at the dinner table.

As we like to say, "Cooking a great meal can be just as easy as cooking a crappy meal!" So relax! Stop fretting over elaborate recipes and cumbersome techniques and start cooking the Lazy Gourmet way.