

# Cooking for Gracie

THE MAKING  
OF A PARENT FROM  
SCRATCH

KEITH DIXON

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For my mother and father

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Special thanks to Ellen Levine,  
who kept going long after others had given up



*Cover*

*Title Page*

*Copyright*

*Dedication*

INTRODUCTION

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*About the Author*



*I am what is classically labeled, in domestic circles, “an accident”—a whoops and oops and lo what the stork brought surprise of the highest order. My parents are altogether upbeat about this. In fact, my father once reminded me that it’s the things that don’t turn out the way you expect that make life worth living. Still, whenever I reflect on my accidental status, I can’t help picturing my mother standing with the phone pressed to her ear, two boys already raging around the apartment, a trembling hand lightly touching her brow as the doctor delivers the results of the pregnancy test.*

Symmetrically, my daughter, Gracie, also didn’t arrive according to plan—or rather, she didn’t arrive according to the plan my wife, Jessica, and I had formulated. Instead, Gracie showed up according to her plan—which is to say that she showed up five weeks early and about half the weight one would expect for a new baby. Her abrupt arrival foretold other unexpected shocks, a chain of surprises involving Gracie’s eating, her teeth, our sleep. I’ve always been a cooking fiend, someone who spends as much of his free time as possible at the chopping block and burner, so it’s no surprise that many of these changes first manifested themselves known in the kitchen. Appropriately, it was the skills I refined in the kitchen as I began to cook for my daughter that helped me meet the challenges that took place outside the kitchen. Some of these skills related to advance planning, but for the most part they were about learning to acclimatize quickly to the unexpected—I learned to adapt in the kitchen, then, by extension, I learned to adapt elsewhere. When I look back on my first year as a parent, everything about it seems to tie in to cooking for Gracie.

(To be sure, not all of the recipes here are what new parents—those marathoners, those Iron Men of the witching hour—want to tackle when they finally have a free moment. Reassured there are plenty of simpler recipes inside—in the November chapter, for example, and the December chapter, which has a recipe with only five ingredients [two of which are salt and pepper] and the September chapter, which has simple grilling recipes—that were engineered to yield the greatest amount of satisfaction with the least amount of effort. If I seem a little naive for offering up a recipe for a three-hour braised short rib, well, I am. For people like me, especially in regard to the kitchen, less is never more. For people like me, only *more* is more. It’s my hope that the tired reader who just wants something to eat, and the less hassle the better, will forgive me these ten-step epics and will instead flip to some of those less demanding recipes.)

A few of the chapters herein were first published in the *New York Times*—as I was writing them I thought they were just simple food pieces offering kitchen tips to other enthusiasts and home cooks struggling against the challenges of cooking with and for a child. But around the time of my daughter’s first birthday, I began to realize that maybe there was a unifying idea to be found there, a singularity that applied to something more wide reaching than a newspaper article.

This book ends with all three principals happy and healthy—which means it’s a success story. But it begins with the narrator in a state of relative crisis, as any responsible book

should. Too, it begins at night, because a real crisis always takes place after nightfall, and the later the better. The narrator has just realized that life no longer operates according to his schedule and that the kitchen may offer clues on how best to adapt.

My past informs this present. For stated reasons, I have a solemn appreciation for the experience to be gained when life sweeps parents away into something that isn't quite what they'd planned. It would be nice if there were more accidents like these up ahead. I believe they'll give me some good stories to tell.

## famished



*Just weeks into* the experience of parenthood, I seem to experience a fresh epiphany about every other day—*moments of clarity*, addicts call them, in which the camera lens of life screwed sharply into focus and the afflicted suddenly realizes what path he must take.

I'm having a moment of clarity now, alone here in my kitchen at night, where I'm spooning and spooning cold cereal. This is dinner these days: standing at the kitchen window with a bowl of breakfast. I'm nettled by problems with sleep, and with timing, and with other things. The hour is late enough that even the pointillist panorama of New York, a city I've called home for fifteen years, seems almost subdued; York Avenue, five stories below, nearly deserted, and taxis streak by only occasionally. Summer is barely hanging on, having exhausted itself with hot September. The scene appears tranquil to the naked eye, but it's really not—if this kitchen were the galley of a Boeing jet, the FASTEN SEAT BELTS sign would be blinking right now, directing all passengers to buckle up and prepare for *terrible turbulence*. I've ruined dinner, blackened it to the pan—the haze hanging below the ceiling is the proof. My wife, Jessica, and I were going to eat six pristine lamb chops an hour ago, but as we sat down at the table our weeks-old daughter, Grace, gave a cry of hunger from her room—and I looked up with the troubled expression of a picnicker who hears distant thunder.

Just weeks in, and I'm already a worried dad. The big questions seek me out after midnight and apprehend me at the moment of sleep. There in the night I face down my fears about Gracie's low birth weight and, one at a time, put them in the proper perspective—the next morning, though, the fears are always somehow revived, renewed, reinvigorated. Our daughter was born light, far too light, and whenever she delivers a cry of hunger we snap to attention. So an hour ago we abandoned dinner, and just now I blackened the chops trying to reheat them. I'd thought this would be a simple process of applying the flame, the necessary heat, but things moved much faster than I expected and quickly evolved into a Larry, Moe, and Curly scene of the highest order. As I heaved the window open, fanning the smoke out into the night, I wondered if it was possible to be mad at a kitchen implement. But no, it's hunger itself that I'm mad at—I was hungry for those chops, and now I'm having a bowl of breakfast instead. There was a time when I thought of hunger as a useful, instructive thing—not just physical hunger but hunger for things like success or romantic love. The idea was that the wanting could teach you things about yourself, about your various prowling appetites, and perhaps I was right in that, because tonight's hunger has propelled me into a *moment of clarity*, with all of its dreadful data about my situation.

Here is what I'm slowly coming to understand: What is broken in the kitchen is broken elsewhere—the problem would appear to be that life no longer moves according to my schedule. If you're a writer or a cook, timing is crucial; if you happen to be both, as I am, you're finished without it. I used to have it, this timing, in the kitchen and on the page, but now it's gone. I'm a beat behind in everything I do—I go around half the time feeling like a



actor who belongs in a drama and finds himself instead in a comedy, where the jokes are at his expense.



I've felt this way for weeks—since September 9, 2007, when I surfaced from a deep sleep around 4 a.m. and found Jessica standing over me in the pale bedside light. Marriage has taught me a few things, among them that you should be worried when your pregnant wife wakes you at 4 a.m. by standing over you with the lights already on.

My confusion resolved itself quickly enough when Jessica told me in no uncertain terms that she hadn't slept one minute all night and added that she was pretty sure our baby was on the way, showing me startling evidence to the same. (I'll not describe it here but rather not that the condition "bloody show" is very well named indeed, and as bracing as two strong cups of coffee to see. Google it.) I slapped around on the floor for about ten minutes searching for my clothes, and we phoned the obstetrician. The baby, if she came today, would be five weeks early. At our latest sonogram we were told that the baby's weight was just north of four pounds. In most cases an obstetrician encourages a couple to remain home until the woman is through early labor, but the fact that we were five weeks early combined with other unusual conditions of the pregnancy, was enough to cause him to tell us to come on in, and right away. There were no cars out so early—we hunted down a cab, and the driver seemed to understand everything with a glance. He thundered through intersection and along crosscut, around hairpin and down avenue. Jessica was in that trance-like state women achieve when the biological imperative asserts itself; that is, she was an arresting example of female can-do. If there'd been any time to stop and think, I suppose I would have panicked, but I was fully occupied by the events unfolding around me, and anyway, I was still shaking off the anesthetic effects of the martini I'd had at dinner the night before. We swept past the sleepy hospital admitting desk and were fired skyward by the express elevator to the birthing floor, where an IV was inserted into the back of Jessica's hand. At this point Jessica's blood pressure swirled upward, and I heard a staffer in attendance use the word *preeclampsia*. A monitor strapped over Jessica's navel, which measured the contractions she was experiencing, began delivering data to a printer beside the bed—this immediately began drawing rolling ocean swells, and for a moment the illusion was complete: I imagined that this was indeed an ocean liner, and here were the heavy seas, with their attendant queasiness. But then the IV began to do its work, Jessica's blood pressure eased, and the printout swells subsided into barely noticeable upticks.

That's it? I asked, and the attending doctor repeated my question in the declarative.

Four brief hours at the hospital, and our fortunes had turned.

During the cab ride home I was electric with the cherry high of someone who has been granted a reprieve—every other block I felt the urge to seize the cabbie by the shoulder and say, "That was a close one, wasn't it?" Now I had time to prepare for this thing I hadn't been prepared for. I helped Jessica into bed, seared a grilled cheese sandwich for her and watched her eat, then pulled the covers up to her chin and drew the curtains. After offering a heartfelt plea that she rest, and rest well, I stepped into the shower.

What a still moment that was, standing blameless beneath the roaring showerhead, nodding to myself, arms crossed, eyes closed, breathing deeply through my nose and reflecting on the

near miss of a five-week-premature birth. Close, Keith, I thought, so close, *too close*, and the hollering Jessica ran into the bathroom and leaped, fully dressed and exultant, into the shower with me.

Her water had broken.

The warning shot had revealed itself to be the report of a starting gun.

We stood in silence for a moment—facing each other, hands clasped, like a couple about to recite a marriage vow. Even the most vivid memories tend to fade with time, but decades from now, when Death appears in my doorway and beckons with a bent finger, this is the image that will burn brightly in my mind's eye—Jessica standing fully dressed in the shower, clothes dripping, wet hair plastered to her face and neck, and the waters that had protected Gracie for the first thirty-five weeks of her life now swirling around my bare ankles.

Here comes the future, at 140 heartbeats per minute.



I have a funny relationship with pain. The experts say that pain is trying to tell us something that it is delivering a distress signal from a body part that is being misused and that we ought to listen to that signal. For that very reason I don't mind small amounts of pain—I'm strongly resistant to taking aspirin, cough medicine, allergy medicine, and other such palliatives for headaches, scrapes, burns, cuts, and so on—but I just can't stomach the bad stuff. When it comes to the big-ticket items—knee operations, cavity fillings, room-spinning migraines—I immediately cave, jettison all principles, and request as much painkiller as possible, and the sooner, and stronger, the better. Were I faced with the prospect of eight or more hours of labor, I would surely arrive at the hospital pretranquilized, all but holding out my arm and slapping the vein to offer the doctor assistance. Jessica, on the other hand, has always been a believer in using aspirin and other painkillers to ease the discomfort of everyday headaches, sore muscles, cramps, and so on—which suggests that she believes in using modern medicine to ease pain. I was surprised, then, to learn that she planned to scale what is considered by many to be the Mount Everest of pain: to push a baby out with a drug-free birth. Upon hearing this news, my first thought, selfishly, was to fear that in this extreme circumstance I would be placed in a position that any husband deeply dreads: that of feeling essentially useless.\* There were a number of logical fallacies we employed to mitigate my (and Jessica's) fear about meeting this challenge. "It's temporary," she would say, referring to the pain, "it's temporary," and I would nod my head and say, "Yes, it's temporary," thinking, But, Jessica, this is a very *long* temporary, lasting hours (or even, God help us, days) instead of moments. Nevertheless, we stuck with this line of logic, to great success. "It's temporary," she would say, and I'd nod my head and repeat the phrase back.

We would discuss this matter of painkillers nightly, sometimes more than once a night, and we even took a weeks-long class on how to survive a drug-free delivery.† Through the early stages of this, there remained an element of unreality about the whole thing, which helped to tamp down the urgency of the discussion. Many first pregnancies, after all, don't begin to show until some time during the second trimester, which means that even as you're having these hard discussions about things like painkillers, the whole enterprise at times seems almost theoretical, as if you were being rooked by a slew of doctors and baby-gear vendors trying to separate you and your wife from your last dollar. The doctors, these men are

women dressed in long white coats, all busily poking columns of blood test results, a table audit's worth of facts about height, weight, bone length, and fetal age, and the occasional sonogram photograph, keep *telling* you that a baby is on the way—but for the first five months you study your wife's belly region and see no obvious evidence that any of this is true.\* I remained silent through much of the drug-free delivery classes, thinking, Well, it's her call isn't it? But I also remained silent because a significant part of me believed that this would all resolve itself when the first wave of contractions hit and Jessica, duly startled by the size of the pain, raised her hand to call for an epidural and perhaps even a martini on the other side to hold her until the anesthesiologist had done her work. I had this opinion because this is the way *I* would have come at the birth—so I was doubly ashamed by my self-assured outlook when Jessica devastated all parties involved by seeing her way through labor without so much as an aspirin to blunt the edge of the contractions, even though near the end of it the pain was so intense and went on for so long that it caused her eyes to roll up until the whites showed and forced her to grip me so tightly about the waist for support that she threw me off my back.†

Seemingly all at once, with the fury of a tornado that had gathered for hours and then suddenly dropped out of clear blue sky, here was the moment of birth, and here was Gracie, born four pounds—her skin alarmingly gray. Just seconds old, the obstetrician held my daughter aloft with a single hand, then carried her over to the heat lamp, where an attending staff member rubbed her dry with a towel, her color rising now, the staff member suddenly sweeping past me, taking Gracie out of the room in a cart, things already moving faster, and Jessica didn't bother to remove her oxygen mask when she lifted her head and said: "Go with her." Then down the hall, through the double doors and into another wing, this one harshly lighted as an interrogation room, Plexiglas isolettes lining the walls, each occupied by a tiny baby, and I thought, Ha ha, very funny, joke's over, the NICU is where Other People's children go.

Isn't it?

But I was now Other People, one of those persons whose misfortunes you talk about in hushed tones, and the joke was on me. The unreality of the moment was scored by a sort of electronic symphony, alarms sounded by individual heart rate and blood-oxygen monitors. Gracie now had one around her foot. The alarms are false, a nurse said, grasping my elbow for effect, no need to worry, it just means the baby is shaking the cuff and the machine isn't getting an accurate reading—but later that night another baby's alarm went off, and this time a pair of nurses seemed to materialize out of thin air at either side of the isolette, one with her hand inside going about some sort of complicated business with a baby the size of her palm. When I got it, when I realized what was happening, it was like being doused with a bucket of cold water: the baby's heart had stopped, or its rate had grown erratic. The nurse was giving it CPR. I watched the nurse bring the baby out of it, my heart in my throat even though it wasn't my kid, and I reflected that if you'd asked me before Gracie had arrived what emotion I thought I would have experienced in such a situation, I probably would have guessed sadness. And I would have guessed wrong. This was something more like waking from a nightmare long after midnight and sensing, with the decisiveness of a hatchet stroke, that someone was in my room and was here to harm me. Except this predatory force wasn't here for me—it was here for my baby, and I could do nothing to protect her.

Three days later I was introduced to a diagnosis known as Failure to Thrive. The parents of its victims may feel inclined to ask why the name must be so literal. Perhaps we should rename hypothermia Failure to Keep Warm. I learned about this condition when my Gracie Failed to Thrive and seemed to waste away before our glazed eyes, her weight sinking below four pounds. First she became too exhausted to eat; then, because she was taking in no nourishment, she became even *more* exhausted, and the situation rapidly deteriorated from there. During the midday feeding she was nearly unresponsive, asleep in her mother's arms while all around us babies were crying out for food. I was paralyzed emotionally. It was like trying to feed a plastic doll. The nurse assigned to us, who had hovered at a distance for a day, now moved in, as if cued by a director with very good timing, and with gratitude I felt control being taken away from us. We were told that Gracie would be fed with a tube that night and we were sent home. The last stage of my grandmother's life began when she was fitted with a feeding tube; I was helpless to avoid drawing parallels. I found myself thinking, *You need to begin dealing with this now. You need to accept what may happen. If you don't, this is going to send you all to pieces. You will not recover.*

My mother: "It'll be OK. Babies are *tough*." But I'm not. At home, seeking comfort, familiar rhythms, I made dinner with ingredients from the cabinet. It didn't help. *She'll come out of it. You'll see.* Sometimes I'd feel all right, almost human for ten or even twenty seconds, and then I'd picture my three-day-old daughter limp in her mother's arms, unresponsive and seeming to sink toward some lower state of consciousness, and all at once I'd feel as if the ground had vanished beneath me. The fear had somehow got into the air and followed me home; it was something you breathed, something you swam through and confronted anew in each room you fled to.

I watched my wife seek assistance from the usual array of Jessica diversions—the book, the laptop, the phone—but this time she was engaging each of these things with tears streaming down her face. She was terrified, she said, that Gracie would be in pain during the process, and she was distraught that she wouldn't be present to offer comfort. It was my duty, as husband, to be of comfort to Jessica, to mitigate *her* pain. But I was no comfort to anyone now, not even myself. My wife had been crying all night long. But then so had I.

This is how I feel when I fly over water at night. Which is to say: out of control, beyond the help of a higher power, and reliant on nothing but faith whistled up out of nowhere.



I push the plate of lamb chops aside and set the bowl of cereal on the counter. I'm no longer hungry, not for food, anyway—it's something else I want, something I'm having a hard time identifying. Gracie is hungry, and I'm hungry. She *did* come out of it, just like everyone said she would. Our daughter is home with us, gaining weight—but in many ways I'm still back there in the NICU, a spirit haunting the waiting room.

I snap off the overhead light, then wrap up the chops for a stew I'll make tomorrow and open the refrigerator door—the fluorescent interior light bathes the kitchen surfaces in soothing lunar shades: ultramarine, cerulean, Bondi Blue. I'm tempted to remain here, where things are being shown, if only for a moment, in the kindest light. In a little while I'll have to come up with something for Jessica to eat—I want her to eat well, which will help Gracie get the nourishment she needs.

A simple syllogism that keeps playing its logic in my head:

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Major premise: *I'm cooking for Jessica.*

Minor premise: *Gracie gets all her nourishment from Jessica.*

Conclusion: *When I cook for Jessica, I'm cooking for Gracie.*

Eventually Gracie is fed, rocked, and gentled off to sleep, and Jessica joins me. We watch a movie that makes us laugh, but my attention is divided. I realize what it is I'm hungry for. It is a lack of reassurance that has left me famished. But reassurance is in short supply these days, and it will be left to me to supply my own. Caring for my daughter—cooking for her—helps me cope. And it's becoming increasingly apparent that when I'm cooking for Gracie, I'm caring for myself.

And I'm doing it poorly. In this situation you don't make delicate lamb chops, not if you're wise to the new timing—you make lamb shanks, or braised veal, or short ribs, or a chickpea stew. You make something that can cook away all night, if need be.

I must adapt, or we'll all do without.

Soon I'll have to learn to cook all over again.



### Lamb Chops “Scottadito”

*Serves 2*

I was tempted to make the recipe for 8 chops, but I'm not the biggest fan of cold lamb and prefer not to have leftovers. I devised this recipe after deciding that my old marinade, which included balsamic vinegar and Dijon mustard, was making the chops too heavy, too rich. To remedy that, I moved in the opposite direction, going for the lightening brightness of lemon zest and coriander and adding a pinch of sugar to help the chops form a browned crust during the brief sear.

The dry-rub technique is also used in the [Rosemary-Smoked Steak](#) in the September chapter. A dry rub that includes salt is rubbed over the chops; the salt pulls moisture to the surface, where it picks up the flavors of the rub before being drawn back into the chops. Works like a charm.

These chops are at their best exactly 2 minutes after they come out of the pan; they are impossible to reheat, as they overcook almost instantly. I recommend making them only when you're sure dinner won't be interrupted.

2 teaspoons freshly ground black pepper

Zest of 1 lemon

2 teaspoons salt

1 garlic clove

½ teaspoon whole coriander seed

Very big pinch of sugar

3 tablespoons peanut oil or olive oil

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6 single-rib lamb chops, the smallest you can get your hands on, untrimmed

1. Combine the pepper, lemon zest, salt, garlic, coriander, and sugar in a spice grinder and grind to a fine paste. (If you don't have a spice grinder, just chop and crack all ingredients as finely as possible and then combine.) Slather the dry rub over all surfaces of the chops, and allow the chops to rest on a plate at room temperature for 60 minutes.

2. After the chops have rested, heat a large iron frying pan over the highest heat possible until the pan is extremely hot. Add the oil to the pan and swirl once to coat the pan. When the oil just begins to smoke, gently lay the chops in the pan. Sear for exactly 90 seconds without moving the chops, flip, sear another 90 seconds undisturbed (if you are indeed cooking in a smoking-hot pan, this cooking time will give you very rare chops—add another 45 seconds to 1 minute searing time in total for chops that are cooked to around medium-rare), then move the chops to a plate. Allow them to rest for exactly 2 minutes, then bring the resting plate to the table, and have both diners eat the chops directly from the plate with their hands.



## Tagliatelle with Braised Veal and Gremolata Pesto

*Serves 2*

Like most braises, this recipe is forgiving when it comes to cooking time—the real enemy here is having the oven temperature too high. If the stock and wine are boiling furiously, the finished meat will be dry. Be sure to keep things at a gentle simmer instead.

If you'd like to save some time, skip making the pasta yourself and use store-bought fresh pasta instead.

5 tablespoons olive oil

2 veal shanks (osso bucco), bone in (2 inches thick)

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

5 garlic cloves, 3 smashed, 2 finely minced

2 stalks celery, diced

1 carrot, diced

½ medium Spanish onion, diced

1½ cups dry white wine

1 bay leaf

One 28-ounce can whole peeled tomatoes, juice discarded, tomatoes coarsely chopped

1 cup chicken stock

¼ cup finely chopped fresh parsley

Zest of 1 large lemon, finely minced

6 ounces tagliatelle or other fresh pasta (see [Fresh Pasta Dough](#)) or store-bought fresh pasta

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Note: If you want to make the recipe ahead, you can prepare the braised veal through step 4—store the veal shanks immersed in the braising liquid overnight or longer. To finish, bring the shanks and braising liquid to a bare simmer in the same pot you used to cook them, then move to step 5.

1. Preheat the oven to 300°F.

2. In a medium braiser or dutch oven, heat 3 tablespoons of the oil over high heat. Season the veal shanks with salt and pepper. When the oil just begins to smoke, lay the veal in the pan and sear until browned on all sides, for 8 to 10 minutes. Remove to a platter.

3. Lower heat to medium. Add 1 tablespoon oil, the 3 smashed garlic cloves, celery, carrot, and onion to the pan. Sauté until soft and transparent, about 4 minutes. Add the wine, raise heat to high, and boil for 5 minutes to concentrate the liquid and boil off the alcohol. Add the bay leaf and tomatoes, then the stock, and again bring to a boil. Nestle the shanks in the sauce. Cover and place in the oven. Check after 15 minutes. If the sauce is boiling furiously, lower the oven temperature by 15°F. If not simmering at all, raise by 15°F. Repeat checking until sauce is just simmering.

4. Cook for about 2½ hours, until the meat is falling off the bone, occasionally turning and basting the veal shanks.

5. While the osso bucco is finishing its braise, bring a large pot of salted water to a boil over high heat. In a small bowl, combine the parsley, lemon zest, remaining 1 tablespoon of the oil, and 2 minced garlic cloves and combine well. Season with salt and pepper.

6. When the osso bucco has finished braising, remove the shanks from the braising liquid and set on a plate. Add the tagliatelle to the boiling water and cook until the pasta is tender but still has some bite—about 5 minutes. Drain the tagliatelle and stir into the braising liquid. Separate the lobes of meat from the bone with your hands or two spoons, discarding any overly fatty pieces and connective tissue, then add the meat to the pasta and combine well. (If dinner is delayed, allow the pasta to cool down in the pan. To reheat, add a splash of stock and a tablespoon of unsalted butter and warm over a low flame, stirring to moisten.) After plating, sprinkle the parsley-zest mixture over pasta. Serve immediately.



## Fresh Pasta Dough

*Serves 3 to 4*

This recipe is included not so much for its ingredient combination, which can be found in a thousand slightly varied iterations from as many sources, but for the information on how to (1) make it in the food processor rather than laboriously knead by hand; (2) roll it out and slice it by hand, which is actually easier than using a pasta machine; and (3) use the freezer to quickly set the pasta before storing it. I've tried letting freshly made pasta dry in the open air, but the results often shatter to pieces before I can safely store them.

If you decide to make a double recipe, do step 1 in two separate batches—most food

processors can't handle the 3½ cups of flour a double batch requires and will conk out on a midrecipe.

All-purpose flour gives fine results here, though when I can get my hands on it I like to use Caputo's red-bag Chef's Flour, a Tipo 00 flour with a gluten content up around 12 percent—yields a terrific bite (you can order it online at [fornobravo.com](http://fornobravo.com)).

1¾ cups all-purpose flour or Tipo 00 flour

3 small to medium eggs

¼ teaspoon extra virgin olive oil

1. Add the flour to a food processor fitted with the dough blade. Lightly beat the eggs and olive oil in a bowl, then add to the food processor. Pulse the dough five or six times until it begins to come together into a ball (it's OK if there's a little loose flour around the edges of the bowl), then turn on the processor to knead the dough for exactly 60 seconds. (During the kneading process, the dough will pick up most of the loose flour around the edges of the bowl and form into a ball. If the dough refuses to form into a ball, add flour 1 tablespoon at a time, restarting the machine each time, until the dough forms a ball. You shouldn't need more than 2 cups total.)

2. Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured surface and knead with your hands until the dough is smooth and elastic, about 30 seconds. Form into a ball, wrap in plastic wrap, and leave at room temperature for 30 minutes.

3. After the dough has rested, halve it. Wrap one of the halves back in the plastic wrap, then roll out the other half as thinly as possible—if you roll it out as thinly as you should, you'll get a 15 × 15-inch irregularly shaped square. When you begin rolling it out, it may first easily spread out, then contract a bit—keep at it, and eventually the dough will relax and roll out. After the dough is rolled out thinly, flour the top of the dough lightly, roll it up as you would roll a rug, and cut the dough into whatever width strand you desire. (To make tagliatelle, for example, slice the roll into ¼-inch ribbons.)

4. After you've sliced the entire roll, pick up a few of the slices and shake them around to open them into a loose, messy handful of strands. Repeat with remaining slices until all are gathered in a loose, messy pile. Place the pile on a lightly floured plate in the freezer. Repeat with remaining plastic-wrapped dough, freezing the resulting pasta after it's been sliced. You can bring this dough directly from the plate in the freezer to the boiling water for cooking. Cut bag up the pasta in a zip-lock bag and leave it in the freezer until it's time to cook.



### **Short Ribs with Carrot-Rosemary Puree** *Serves 2 (including some first-rate leftovers)*

A classic pairing of braised beef with carrots, the carrots assuming a role on the plate usually given to mashed potatoes.

3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil



2½ pounds beef short ribs, bone in, trimmed of excess fat

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Salt and freshly ground black pepper

1 cup each coarsely chopped onion, carrot, celery, mushroom

2 tablespoons tomato paste

1 bottle dry red wine

4 sprigs fresh thyme

3 to 4 cups beef stock

6 medium carrots, sliced into 2-inch lengths (about 2½ cups total)

½ small onion

2 medium sprigs fresh rosemary, woody stem discarded

Note: If you want to make the recipe ahead, you can prepare the short ribs and carrots through step 6. Refrigerate the short ribs immersed in the braising liquid overnight or longer.

1. Preheat the oven to 300°F.

2. Heat the oil in a medium dutch oven or ovenproof stock pot over high heat. Season the short ribs well with salt and pepper. When the oil just begins to smoke, add the short ribs meaty side down. Brown well on all sides, about 10 minutes total. Set the short ribs aside on a plate.

3. Lower the heat to medium. Add the vegetables to the pot and sauté until softened, about 4 minutes, and season with salt and pepper. Add the tomato paste and sauté for an additional minute. Pour in the bottle of wine and add 2 of the thyme sprigs and raise the heat to high. Boil the wine until reduced by half, about 20 minutes.

4. Lay the short ribs in the wine, bone side down, nestling them amid the vegetables, and add just enough stock to cover the ribs—if you've added all the stock and the ribs still aren't submerged, add some water to submerge them. Bring to a boil, cover pot, and slide into oven. Check after 15 minutes. If the sauce is boiling furiously, lower the oven temperature by 15°F. If not simmering at all, raise by 15°F. Continue checking until the sauce is just simmering.

5. After the ribs are in the oven, make the carrot puree: Add the carrots, onion, rosemary, salt and pepper and enough water to cover the carrots and bring to a boil over high heat. Lower the heat and simmer the carrots for 15 minutes. Transfer the carrots, onion, and rosemary and ⅓ cup of the cooking liquid to a blender and puree until smooth. Transfer to a bowl, cover with plastic wrap, and refrigerate.

6. Braise the ribs for 2½ hours, until the meat is tender and falling off the bone. Remove the pot from oven. Move the short ribs with bones to a plate, then gently slice the short ribs meat away from any bones still adhering, cutting away any connective tissue. Discard the bones and connective tissue. Strain the braising liquid, discard the vegetables, and use a fine strainer or a large spoon to defat the surface of the liquid. Return the liquid to the pot. Place the pot over high heat and reduce the braising liquid for 20 minutes at a full boil to thicken the sauce, then turn off the heat. Lay the short ribs back in sauce and cover the pot to keep warm.

7. (If you've refrigerated the short ribs overnight, take the container out of the refrigerator

and skim and discard the fat that has hardened on the surface of the liquid with a spoon. When ready to eat, turn the flame under the short ribs to medium-low and bring the cooking liquid to the barest simmer. (If dinner is delayed, just turn the flame off and reheat when ready.) Pour the carrot puree into a small saucepan and gently warm over low heat. When the carrots and short ribs are warm, place a portion of the carrot puree in the middle of the plate. Rest a short rib or two on top of the puree. Spoon the reduced short rib sauce around. Top the short rib with a thyme sprig for garnish. Repeat with a second plate and serve immediately.



## Chickpea Minestra with Fennel Salad and Chive Oil

*Serves 3 to 4*

If you don't love the licorice flavor of fennel, you could skip the fennel salad altogether—or you could substitute a last-minute swirl of basil puree (see [step 1](#) of *Provençal Soup with Basil Puree*).

### FOR THE CHIVE OIL

½ cup extra virgin olive  
oil Bunch of chives

### FOR THE FENNEL SALAD

1 medium fennel bulb, cored, tough outer stalks peeled and discarded, and finely diced, wispy tops reserved  
1 tablespoon minced chives  
2 tablespoons minced shallot  
2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil  
Salt and freshly ground black pepper

### FOR THE MINESTRA

2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil, plus more for drizzling  
1 slice bacon  
2 stalks celery, diced  
2 medium carrots, diced  
1 large Spanish onion, diced  
1 teaspoon minced fresh rosemary  
4 cups canned chickpeas, rinsed and drained  
1 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes  
2 sprigs fresh parsley 2 bay leaves  
Salt and freshly ground black pepper

½ cup dry white wine

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2 cups chicken stock

Rind of 1 wedge of Parmesan or pecorino cheese

Note: if you want to make this recipe ahead, complete the recipe through step 5, then refrigerate the individual ingredients. To serve, reheat the minestra, then complete step 6.

1. *Make the chive oil:* Place the oil and chives in a blender and puree. Set aside to rest at room temperature.

2. *Make the fennel salad:* Combine the fennel, chives, shallot, wispy fennel tops, and oil in a mixing bowl and stir. Season with salt and pepper and allow to rest at room temperature.

3. *Make the minestra:* Heat 2 tablespoons of oil over medium heat in a large saucepan or medium dutch oven and add the bacon slice. Allow the bacon to crisp and render its fat, turning a few times, 6 to 8 minutes. Discard the bacon slice and add the celery, carrots, and onion and sauté, stirring regularly, until soft, for 5 minutes. Add rosemary, chickpeas, pepper flakes, parsley, and bay leaves and combine well. Season with salt and pepper and then add the wine and stock and enough cold water to cover the chickpeas by 2 inches. Bring to a simmer, add the cheese rind, cover, and lower heat to medium-low. Simmer for 60 minutes to allow the flavors to mingle.

4. Remove the cheese rind, bay leaves, and parsley sprigs from the minestra and discard. Remove 2 cups of the vegetables from the minestra, leaving the liquid behind, and set the vegetables aside in a bowl. Using an immersion blender or regular blender, puree the remaining minestra—if using a regular blender, place a kitchen towel over the lid to make sure hot liquid doesn't splatter, then pour the puree back into the dutch oven. Pour the reserved vegetables back into the minestra—it will be quite thick. Keep warm over medium-low flame.

5. Strain the chive oil through a fine-mesh sieve, saving the olive oil. Discard the chive solids.

6. Ladle the minestra into individual bowls. Stir the fennel salad again with your hands, then gently place a small handful of the fennel salad in the center of each serving of minestra. Spoon a line of the chive oil around the perimeter of the soup and serve.

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\* This turns out to be a position that fathers-to-be find themselves in regularly. Throughout the many weeks of the pregnancy, the father is often, much to his dismay, reduced to following stage directions—and he finds himself, paradoxically, in a key role that has virtually no lines.

† And here I didn't exactly earn votes for the title World's Greatest Husband. This class was important to Jessica, and precisely because it was so important to her, I should have attended cheerfully and without complaint and in fact made a point to tell her that I believed in her and was here to support her—but instead I grumbled about the quasi-new-age aspects of the class, the paltry snacks on offer for pregnant women who were skipping dinner, the hours-long commitment, and so forth. In a nicely symmetrical comeuppance, the class turned out to be of great benefit to me: We had planned to hire a doula to help us through the birth, and when Gracie arrived early, before we'd had a chance to locate a doula, it was exactly the practice learned in this class that allowed me to help Jessica through the delivery.

\* Though I should qualify: Although in the first few months I saw no evidence of the baby in my wife's *belly region*, I did see dramatic evidence that her body was going through remarkable physiological changes, namely, that this author's wife, at t

late first-trimester period of pregnancy, suddenly blossomed into a striking Playboy-bunnyesque build, one sharply arresting in its perfect recollection of many of this author's latent adolescent desires, but enough about that.

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† My pain outlook is surely informed by the fact that I'm the son of a doctor and a trained medical technologist and have a deeply engrained trust in modern medicine and its practitioners.

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## horror show



*November has arrived.* Apparently it brought weather from London along with it. When I look out the window, what do I see? People running to get out of the weather. Below, scissoring suits and trench coats leap over puddles, over torrents of gutters, some using a tented tablecloth as shelter, some wrestling umbrellas that have been inverted by a fugitive updraft of wind. This is a difficult time for everyone here in New York, we who must walk nearly everywhere we go and line up outside while waiting for our seat in the humid locker of the crosstown bus.

Improbably, Jessica and I are the parents of a two-month-old. Somewhere along the line I blinked, and eight weeks whipped by. Despite the quick passage of the past months, a curious time inversion, a time contradiction, has established itself, in which the weeks scroll away behind us but the days lag and fragment. These days a week seems to pass by in about a minute. But every minute seems to drag on for about a week.

This is because of sleep—or rather, it's because of the sleep we want but are no longer getting. Exhaustion tells us that we're *really in this*, that we're really doing this: parenting a baby. I find evidence of this role change every time I approach a mirror, expecting to encounter my own image, and instead meet a vampire in the glass. This impression is helped along by the uniform I wear: dark blues and blacks in the swirling, yielding fabrics of the infirm, clothes that go on and come off easily, especially in the middle of the night, and I keep the hood of my sweatshirt always raised against the cold.

The notion of our long-term commitment is sinking in. If October was a month of adrenaline, of rising every morning to the fated challenges of a big day, November is a month of identifying with a suffering marathoner: one who has about twenty miles to go and already finds his limbs sending up messages of pain. Halloween passed a few days ago, but rain in November provides the true horror show.

In my previous life, sleep was eight uninterrupted hours every night plus one serious sleep-in session per weekend plus a nap smuggled here or there. Good-bye to all that. Good-bye, good-bye. Now sleep is an all-day crash course of twelve-second catnaps and two-minute no-dreams offs and three-hour dreamless comas that never quite meet the collective need. I used to roll and twitch and sleepwalk all night long—I used to exhaust myself with all the effort of sleeping. Now I wake and find I haven't rolled over once or even disturbed the sheets. I'm making the most of what sleep I get, sure. But I'm not quite getting where I need to be. Because she eats every three hours, this kid.

The 9 p.m. feeding's a cakewalk—you're still awake, so you just drop what you're doing and go feed the kid. Midnight's not so bad either, because you're not yet deeply asleep when it arrives. It's all tolerable, at any rate, when compared with the soul-searching depths of 3 a.m., which finds everyone *but* you sunk in deepest dreams. What are they dreaming of, the sleeping people? Of having babies ... It happens this way: After the midnight feeding you

topple bodily into bed and instantly fall unconscious. About a microsecond later, you're shocked awake, responding with your entire body to the redlining, the revving, baby monitor. Impossibly, three hours have passed. You think to yourself: I cannot do it. I cannot do it. But then you get up (because the baby is crying), and you do it, and as with any responsible fright movie, the first shock is really just there to get you all worked up for the second, and the second to get you all worked up for the third. And so on. The situation finds a fresh level of complication when you wake up (because the baby is crying) at 6 a.m. to go to feed the baby with the distinct impression that you already *did* the 6 a.m. feeding—at which point you realize that you were dreaming about feeding the baby in between sessions of feeding the baby. These complications achieve a Borgesian complexity when you fall asleep while feeding the baby and somehow manage to dream about feeding the baby while you're feeding the baby.\*



Jessica and I are night people. Gracie, in her first weeks of life, proves to be a morning person—at eight weeks, in fact, she routinely wakes so early that she threatens to become a night person from the previous night. If she keeps moving in this direction, I can only imagine that she'll begin waking to her day at just around the time we're ready to go to bed—which, I suppose, would at least save us the effort of going to bed and having to wake up again. This means a full-service sleep overhaul, because until just a few years ago I had a job that kept me at work until long after midnight and delayed my bedtime until around the hour I'm now being asked to wake up in the morning. The transition is a slow process, and for a long while I become a sort of sleep apprentice, a morning person in training who occasionally watches the sunrise do its thermonuclear thing over a high-rise building to the southeast (the New York City equivalent of the horizon) and thinks: All right, this isn't terrible. It's not great, but it's not terrible. I can do this. I used to watch the sun explode over a high-rise and think, I guess I'd better head off to bed now. And now I watch that same sunrise on the far side of an abbreviated night's sleep.\* Unfortunately, I haven't yet mastered the ability to go to bed at a morning person's hour. I still go to bed at an evening person's hour, except I encounter a morning person's wake-up on the far side.

What's that like, living an evening person's life in the evening but a morning person's life in the morning? It's as if I'm permanently suspended in the delirium of a second straight all-nighter in college; I feel as if I have televisions for eyes, old televisions broadcasting the two-dimensional fantasy of television-land, where everything and nothing is real. Soon after I enter my sleep apprenticeship I find that I'm making mental errors at work—forgetting people's names, misplacing the name of the day of the week, spacing out on the location of weekly meetings. I cruise through my day and everything is slowed down, drowned in a syrupy languor that makes things flow along at half speed—until suddenly the blatting roar of a bus lets me know that I tried to cross the street against the light. I step back to the curb, heart racing, startled awake but already sinking back into that frowsy cloak of exhaustion. This is sleeplessness.

And then there is extreme sleeplessness. What's *that* like? Being mummified alive, I suppose. Jessica adopts a clear signal—tears—that indicates when she's been pushed past mere sleeplessness and sent hurtling into the void. She isn't a big crier, my wife (who

offered a decision between a good cry or a bracing cup of Barry's, she'll usually go with the tea), and when I see tears, I take notice. The tears always arrive unannounced—I'm sitting innocently beside her when, without warning, a fat droplet darkens the crossword we're solving. I feel a flush of cold and think, OK, my wife has been pushed too far. I think: Tonight I need to get her to bed and take the 3 a.m. feeding myself, which means Jessica will get maybe six hours leading up to the 6 a.m., though I'd better get on the stick and figure out how I can get sleep myself tomorrow or I'm going to be lethally underslept.\* And this is how we become trapped in a recursive cycle of save and recover, in which I try to help Jessica and become overextended, and then Jessica tries to help me and becomes overextended, and cetera.

I developed a number of tricks to steal brief snatches of rest at work during those first months, the best of them locking myself in a conference room and sleeping through an abbreviated lunch hour. (If I hadn't done it, I would have fallen asleep at my desk or passed out on the subway ride home and awakened to find myself hurtling toward Pelham Parkway long after dark.) I work for the *New York Times* and could fairly be characterized as an extremely focused writer—I write 363 days per year, taking off only my wife's birthday and Christmas Day (though the truth is that on that second day "off" I often sneak upstairs and tap out a few paragraphs after the presents have been opened).† By some strange twist of cosmic design, my desk at work is located just steps from the monumentally influential *New York Times Book Review*, and from my desk I could float a paper airplane into those neighboring desks. I suppose I would be less aware of this geographical irony if the late novel I'm working on—my third, the book that spools away behind my sprinting cursor each morning—were working *at all*.

Writing a novel that isn't working is, I think, a lot like being drawn into an endless argument with your cleverest friend. The book always seems to have the last word, and the withering lines you *should* have parried with always come to you too late—on the evening bus home, the next morning in the shower. And what happens when you sit down at the laptop to write, all but *cracking your knuckles* in eagerness to get to it? You clam up. Or worse: You do what I do and just go on and on and on about everything, which is the same as going on about nothing at all—and the book smiles, and turns away, and knows it's beaten you. That's what it feels like, your relationship with each new book: a contentious détente with the threat of utter collapse always hanging in the air between you. These days the word never goes where I want it to, to the point that the book seems to have about twelve heads like a hydra or a terrible executive committee. I think I know what's going on: the paranoia seeded in the NICU has taken noxious root. The subjects that have overrun the new novel include nuclear war, the dangers of air travel, the terrors of pregnancy complications, jealousy, envy, fear, sex, alcoholism, rage, doctors, pharmaceutical addiction, and marital treachery. This is all in the first few pages of the latest work. This is all in chapter 1. Let me revisit that list of subjects: nuclear war, the dangers of air travel, the terrors of pregnancy complications, jealousy, envy, fear, sex, alcoholism, rage, doctors, pharmaceutical addiction, and marital treachery. Now that's quite a list. This is the thematic list of a writer who may be having a difficult time recovering from a frightening experience. What's *happened* to me? Every word I put down seems to have been fed through a prism of suppressed panic, the thought patterns of someone who cannot digest the information coming his way quickly.

enough and must, like an exhausted rower beating against a current, labor and labor merely remain in place. Move on, I think. Write something else. I do just that. I create a new untitled document, and begin writing a new story. And what are the subjects of this new thing I try to write? Nuclear war, the dangers of air travel, the terrors of pregnancy complications, jealousy, envy, fear, sex, alcoholism, rage, doctors, pharmaceutical addiction, and marital treachery. I'm not channeling the material. The material is channeling me.

*The Balkan Error*, the nonworking novel in question, does have a few lighter moments. Nearly all of these occur when the main character reflects on or discusses his two-year-old daughter—who happens, coincidentally, to be named Grace. From page 36 of *The Balkan Error*:

“I don't see retirement being a healthy thing for you, Jay. What will you do with yourself besides drink all day?”

“I'll take Gracie to the park every afternoon.”

“And when she gets older?”

“... She'll take *me* to the park every afternoon.”

I see what I'm trying to do, here. I'm trying to project myself into a happy future, with the aid of a fictional stooge. But these future-tense daydreams are few and far between. The rest of the work reads like a dirge, an epitaph on the present. So there I am—seething on the bus, motionless under the thundering showerhead, and stuck in an endless argument with a book I can't control. Life is doing this to me, making me wish I'd said, wish I'd said, while a terrible logic pattern plays in my head—an apparently self-renewing cycle: I won't be free of this inertia until I finish this book. But I won't finish this book until I'm free of this inertia.

In this way, the writing is both the problem and the solution.

I ask myself, as I type this, is it so surprising that the room I chose most often for those naps at work was a tiny conference room adjacent to the *Book Review*? A room where surely many an accomplished writer has made an impromptu call to his agent or editor or has paused for a moment to scribble out an idea for her next book.

What was funniest about this situation—and sad, in the way that only truly funny things are—was that the editors of the *Book Review* had begun a tradition whereby any famous writers who visited the building to give an interview or record a podcast were asked to sign this very conference room's wall. So every time I locked myself in the room to steal five minutes of rest, the last thing I would see before the narcotic haze overtook me was the inscribed signature of a literary luminary. There on the white wall I'd see the looping cursive or fiercely pointed print of Tom Wolfe, Augusten Burroughs, Richard Price, Jonathan Lethem—other names too, all carved in the author's unique hand. Because we'd moved into the building only months before I began taking these naps, there were just a few names to read. But I could only imagine that had the editors followed this tradition in the old building, and had history carried over from the old building to the new, this wall would have proclaimed the names of the true immortals: Roth, Nabokov, Stone, Trevor, Updike. What was I doing there? Attempting to sleep, yes—but also attempting to acquire some of the aura these writers had left behind. It was there, unmistakably—a benevolent haunting, a muted ambient roar.

It's all wound together for me—the disparate, deeply pessimistic writing, the sleeplessness



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