

My Guide to Life and Cooking

recipes and stories by Grace Potter

Mary Terzino's Tuna Noodle Casserole

A Recipe Compiled and Commented Upon by Her Bitter Teenage Daughter, Grace Potter

Ingredients:

- One pouch of Chunk Light Tuna in Water. Okay, hold on – is this an actual food? How are the “chunks” “light”? What is the water meant to achieve? Does it just contribute to the smell, or is it integral to the “chunk” preservation? Regardless, tuna is terrible.
- One cup of frozen peas. Once you commit to these, there's no going back. Consider this ingredient carefully.
- A half a cup of milk.
- Three fourths of a cup of breadcrumbs. You know, the kind people only buy at Thanksgiving.
- One can of cream of mushroom soup.
- A night when you “don't feel like cooking” but cringe at the thought of ordering takeout for a third time this week.
- Four ounces of egg noodles, cooked.
- A quarter of a cup of shredded cheese.
- An apathetic husband who will eat whatever you put on the table.

Instructions:

1. Strain the noodles and put them in the big, red bowl that usually resides under the sink. Mix in the shredded cheese. Add a little more for good measure; your kids will thank you.

2. Add the soup and milk. Mix thoroughly with a wooden spoon, noting how beaten up its gotten since your husband yielded to convenience and started putting every wooden utensil in the dishwasher.
3. Fold in the tuna and the peas. Pretend not to gag. Wear a brave smile.
4. Place your mixture in a casserole dish and top with the breadcrumbs. Cook it at 375* for about forty minutes, just until the top starts to brown. Begin to forget about it as you sink into your second glass of Pinot Grigio.
5. Let it cool for however long you see fit. Give your child the portion with the most peas and tell her it's the same as everyone else's.
6. Sigh audibly as your child and husband immediately head for the basement in order to watch the newest episode of *House Hunters* during dinner. Remember the sacredness of dinnertime in your own household, where your father would give everyone equal portions of "city chicken" and vegetables from an antique serving cart he'd wheel around the table. Remember the tension in the room as everyone waited for one another to receive their food before they began to eat. Remember the moments you and your brother shared while washing the dishes together every single night. Then, snap suddenly back to reality. Remind yourself that times have changed. Gather your plate and some utensils and follow your family down the stairs.
7. Endure your child's criticism of the meal. She's never liked tuna noodle casserole.

Mary Terzino's Kitchen Dos and Don'ts

As Observed and Interpreted by Her Daughter, Grace Potter

- **DO:** Offer to help as frequently and as loudly as possible. Mom's been cooking meals ever since you can remember. She shouldn't have to ask someone to open the pantry door or cut up a carrot. Watch carefully. See where needs emerge. Fill them.
- **DON'T:** Leave hair, hair ties, hair brushes or anything else associated with hair on the countertop or dining room table. People *eat* there, for chrissakes.
- **DO:** Set the table *properly*. Throw your home ec teacher's rules for place-setting out the window. The knife faces inward. The fork goes on top of the napkin. (And unless the family's eating outside, put down cloth napkins. They just look nicer.)
- **DON'T:** Retreat to the basement to watch *American Pickers* while Mom is cooking. She's had a long day. Ask her about it. Sit at the counter and bond, like Mom and Grammy used to do when Mom was little.
- **DO:** Compliment the meal. Dad always says, "This is how Mom shows us she loves us. She plans things like trips and meals and gets anxious when things don't turn out well because she wants us to be happy. If she's ever cranky, it's because she cares too much." Smile and say thank you, even if the meal isn't your favorite.
- **DON'T:** Talk when your mouth is full. Notice how Mom is quick to comment every time Dad creates a squirrel-like pouch in his cheek in order to explain, in far too much detail, something he read on the internet that day. You can tease her about her pet peeves, but at the end of the day, *Mom* cooked the meal. Respect her table.
- **DO:** Contribute something to the dinner experience. If you didn't help cook, clear the table. Do the dishes. Do *something*. Otherwise, Mom will start sighing and Dad will start asking too many questions and it'll turn into a whole thing. Stop the chaos before it starts.

Mary Terzino's Cooking Staples

As Told through the Experiences of Her Daughter, Grace Potter

1. **A Cuisinart food processor.** It is impossible to express the number of times Mom has walked into a rental house only to come close to crying due to the kitchen's lack of a food processor. She's taken to traveling with one. Most summers, when we go away for a week or two to a cottage on Lake Michigan, I sit with the Cuisinart at my feet, gripping it tightly with the rubber soles of my shoes so it doesn't bounce around when we hit bumps on the highway. Mom's fond of telling me how long the thing has lasted; it was a wedding present, she says, and it's hasn't failed her since 1992.
2. **A *real* grill.** Even though we bought a new one in 2012, Mom's true love is still our old, beaten-up, charcoal-stained Weber grill. We moved it to our house on the lake, and it sees more action than the newer one we keep at home. The main bragging point about the grill, at least according to Mom, are the flavorizer bars, which are long, thin, triangle-shaped pieces of metal that sit on top of the grill's main cooking surface. "Nothing cooks meat like our old, trustworthy flavorizer bars," Mom likes to sigh as she slaps marinated steaks down to grill. Every piece of meat she cooks always comes out a perfect medium-rare. Mom credits the bars; I credit her.
3. **An automated citrus reamer.** Though we have at least three hand-powered reamers floating around our utility drawers, Mom prefers our old electric juicer. It's pressure activated and has a built-in seed catcher and miniature juice pitcher, making it one hundred percent hassle-free. When I was little and wanted to help cook, Mom would hand me pre-cut lemon halves and set me to work squeezing them. (Every recipe Mom makes involves, without exception, garlic,

lemon juice, some mixture of herbs and at least a tablespoon of butter, so the reamer was in constant use.) I'd press my little hands down on the top of the lemons, pushing them hard into the rotating reamer until just the rind was left. Then, just to make sure I'd gotten all of the juice, I'd push down some more, shoving the spent lemon every which way until Mom would gently pull my hands away from the reamer and say, "I think that one's all set." Now, Mom puts my citrus-reaming talent to use in order to collect lime juice for cocktails.

4. **A tough, machine-washable pair of kitchen scissors.** No package can be opened by hand, no matter what conveniences it offers. Those tear-away strips on packages of shredded cheese and deli meats are useless. They present just as many obstacles as the plastic films on top of microwavable meals and cups of pudding. Everything, regardless of size or shape or presumed convenience, is cut with kitchen scissors. Chicken breasts are trimmed with kitchen scissors. Pizzas are sliced with kitchen scissors. Boxes from Amazon are stabbed repeatedly with kitchen scissors. Mom's pair of black, eternally sharp kitchen scissors aren't just a utility – they're the centerpiece of her entire operation.

Mary and Gracie's Blueberry Galette, circa 2004

A Recipe Fondly Remembered by Her Adult Daughter, Grace Potter

Ingredients:

- A pound of blueberries hand-picked by the whole family on the western coast of Michigan during a much-needed vacation outing.
- Two spoonfuls of cornstarch.

- A spoonful each of lemon juice and zest, produced confidently by the only eight-year-old in the family.
- A pinch of salt.
- A half cup of sugar, plus the little extra that will inevitably spill on the countertop after the aforementioned eight-year-old does her best to divert all of the fallout into the sink.
- A small chunk of butter.
- A lightly beaten egg, whisked using the smallest, most child-sized whisk in the whole kitchen.
- A pie crust hastily bought at Kroger.

Instructions:

1. Stir together blueberries, cornstarch, zest, juice, salt, and sugar in that big red bowl you use for everything. If you're the parent in the room, let your child stir only until her wrist gets tired. Finish the rest of the process hastily so she doesn't get bored.
2. Unwrap the pie dough and place it on a baking sheet. Let your child spoon the mixture into the middle, but make sure there's an inch-wide border around the edge. Let her lick her fingers. Let her figure out how terrible the dry mixture tastes.
3. Teach your child how to whisk an egg. Demonstrate the wrist motion in the air, so she gets to beat the whole egg without any physical help. Let her use the tiny whisk she loves. Watch her carefully. Don't let her lick her fingers this time.
4. Work as a team to fold the crust over the blueberry filling. Give your child the soft pastry brush that reminds her of arts and crafts at school. Have her paint the crust with the egg mixture she made "all by herself." Sprinkle some of the spilled sugar on top.

5. Bake 25 to 30 minutes in a 425* oven. Don't let your child get too close to the oven door; remind her of the time she zealously grabbed at a pan of fresh cinnamon rolls and burned her hand. Let her remember, but don't let her embarrassment sink in. Go get her father. Play a card game at the kitchen table. Laugh together.
6. Pull the galette out of the oven after frantically locating the food-stained oven mitts you forgot you had. Admire your handiwork with your child. Share her smile. Let your dessert cool for about ten minutes, then cut it up and serve it with store-bought French vanilla ice cream.