

FRENCH KIDS



EAT



EVERYTHING

*How our family moved to France,
cured picky eating, banned snacking,
and discovered 10 simple rules
for raising happy, healthy eaters*

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KAREN LE BILLON

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A hardcover edition of this book was published in 2012 by William Morrow, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.

FIRST WILLIAM MORROW PAPERBACK EDITION PUBLISHED 2014.

Designed by Diahann Sturge

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

ISBN 978-0-06-210330-7

14 15 16 17 18 OV/RRD 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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French Recipes for Kids: Fast, Simple, Healthy, and Tasty

The simplicity of these recipes may surprise you. Most French families don't eat Cordon Bleu cooking every night and don't spend hours slaving over the stove. Ordinary French families make dishes that are tasty and healthy while still being simple to make, which I very much appreciate as a full-time working mom with no help at home. So these recipes are quick and easy, with an average of four main ingredients per dish.

There is another advantage to simple recipes: they awaken children's interest in food without overpowering their taste buds. So when making meals for their children, French families don't overseason. They typically use just a small number of seasonings, like butter, fresh herbs, and lemon juice. The natural tastes of foods are the focus. In fact, this is one of the central principles of French cuisine: the preservation of natural flavors and textures.

There is also a practical reason for this simplicity: because most children eat their largest meal of the day at school, and a majority of French mothers work outside the home and have relatively little time to cook in the evenings, they choose recipes that are quick to prepare and that are light rather than heavy. The classic sauces that made French cuisine famous, for example, are rather rich and time-intensive, so they aren't suitable for everyday evening meals. In its use of fresh ingredients, and its simplicity, French family cooking is closer to *nouvelle cuisine* than the heavy, sauce-rich *haute cuisine* for which French chefs gained a global reputation in the past.

The French are also minimalist when it comes to equipment. You won't need any fancy utensils or machines. Steaming is the cooking method of choice for vegetables, either with a pressure-cooker (*cocotte-minute*) or a simple steamer that is placed inside an ordinary pot. A handheld blender ("wand") to puree soups and vegetables is convenient, but a countertop blender will work just as well. I still swear by the BabyCook, which steams and blends in one unit. Every French family we knew had one.

Since so much emphasis is on the taste of the foods themselves, seeking out high-quality, fresh ingredients is worth your while. According to the Harvard Center for Health and the Global Environment, foods that have been locally grown tend to have higher nutritional value. Local producers also tend to select varieties for taste rather than for production value or durability for transport. This is why the French continue to seek out local markets for their vegetables, fruits, and even meats.

A comment about butter is necessary, given that it appears in many of the recipes in this book. Those so inclined should feel free to substitute vegetable oils. But my personal preference is still to use butter. The French have never really believed that butter is bad for you. In fact, it's relatively rare to find French families who eat margarine, as they tend to reject the artificial taste and are wary of anything that has been overly processed. The French have always believed what nutritional science has now confirmed: a small amount of fat is nutritionally essential even for adults and is critical for the proper development of growing children. However, as with any fat-rich foods, the French are judicious in their use of butter. So use it sparingly, and enjoy!

Similarly, salt is optional in all of the recipes. Traditional nutrition advice for young babies emphasizes the dangers of habituating them to too much salt too early. So I never salt my baby purees or vegetable soups. For older children and adults, I find that a small dab of salted butter on top works wonders—the salt is noticeably tasty, but I've used a minimal quantity. This, in fact, is my general philosophy for children's food. If I salt it at all, I sprinkle the smallest bit of

salt on the dish when it is already served, just before eating. You'll be using less salt, for better taste results. I use fine sea salt, as it dissolves more slowly and has a rounder, fuller taste.

Finally, a word about presentation. The French know that *how* food looks influences our desire to eat it. Small portions are usually more attractive to children; I find that it is better to serve a small amount and allow a child to ask for a second helping than to serve a large amount that is off-putting. Try using small ramekins or small bowls to encourage reluctant kids. If you don't have these, try using other small containers—like egg cups or custard cups (small Pyrex dishes)—in which vegetables, dips, and purees can be individually served; some children find that this makes eating more fun. And remember to serve something your children like at most meals, which will tend to reassure them and make them more willing to try new things. Most important, try to enjoy eating yourself; in eating, as in so many things, our children often do as we do, rather than as we say.

Bon appétit!

Soups and Purees

Sophie's Spinach Surprise

Preparation: 2 minutes

Cooking: 3 minutes

Servings: 6 to 8 "baby jar"—size servings, or four children's servings

We devised this simple recipe in order to encourage our daughters to get used to eating green-colored food. Both of them still love this dish, even though they both eventually graduated to other green vegetables.

This dish is mild and incredibly smooth and is an easy way to introduce your children to green vegetables. The zucchini provides a light, almost fluffy, melt-in-your-mouth texture, so that the spinach tastes airy and almost sweet. If you think the dish is still bitter (although I never do), add a tiny bit of honey before serving (or reduce the proportion of spinach to zucchini).

Serve in a small bowl; I find that a little goes a long way with this puree. Top it with tiny dabs of butter in the form of a happy face; your children will love to watch them melt.

- 1 medium-to-large zucchini, peeled and chopped (2 cups)
- 1 cup water
- 2 or 3 big handfuls of baby spinach leaves (about 1 cup, tightly packed)
- Optional: 1 teaspoon butter and, if the spinach is slightly bitter, a small spoonful of honey

1. Place the zucchini in the bottom of a pot with 1 cup of water (not too much!). Bring to a boil over high heat, lower the heat, and simmer until the zucchini becomes transparent, about 2 minutes. Immediately add the spinach leaves, letting them wilt for a minute or so. Don't overcook the spinach! Drain the vegetables, saving the cooking water.

2. Remove the pot from the heat and blend until perfectly smooth, using as much cooking water as necessary to achieve the desired consistency.

Tip: This dish freezes wonderfully well and reheats quickly. But you may want to add a little water when reheating, as it tends to thicken slightly after being frozen.

Baby's Vichyssoise (White Leek Soup)

Preparation: 5 minutes

Cooking: 7 to 8 minutes

Servings: 4 "baby jar"—size servings, or two children's servings

Leeks are traditionally introduced to French children at a young age. Mild yet savory, young white leek tips (the only kind you should use for this soup) are more digestible than their older, greener versions. For older children, increase the amount of potato and decrease the amount of pear, creating a potato-leek soup that is similar in spirit to the classic French vichyssoise.

This soup has become comfort food for us, and we often serve it on cold winter evenings. In the summer, it can be eaten at room temperature or even chilled.

- 1 small potato, peeled and diced small (about ½ cup)
- 2 small (or 1 large) leeks, washed carefully, peeled, and sliced (use white stems only) (about 1 cup)
- 1 pear, peeled, cored, and chopped
- 1 teaspoon honey or maple syrup
- Optional: pinch of fine sea salt

1. Steam (if you have a pressure-cooker) or simmer the potato and leek in water to cover (about 1½ cups) until tender (6 to 7 minutes), adding the pear in the last 2 to 3 minutes. Drain, saving the cooking water (you'll need between ¾ and 1 cup).

2. Blend the vegetables with honey (or maple syrup), adding cooking water until the desired consistency is achieved.

Note: For younger babies, you can eliminate the potato. They will love the pear-leek combination all by itself (it has the consistency of applesauce).

Tip: Too much potato will overpower this soup, making it bland. Big chunks of potato may lead to a "gluey" mixture, so chop finely and don't overcook.

Claire's Beet Puree

Preparation: 5 minutes

Cooking: 10 minutes

Servings: 8 "baby jar"—size servings, or 4 children's servings

This recipe gently introduces your baby to beets, which are a favorite vegetable of French kids. The first time we encountered beet puree was at Claire's day care, where it was served perched on top of puff pastry (and where one of my first French food faux pas was to mistake it for a sophisticated adult hors d'oeuvre). Beet puree became a favorite item on the day-care menu, although it was usually served warm in little bowls. I also began serving this at home, and it became one of our family's favorite dishes.

As French children grow older, they graduate to eating cooked beets, which are regularly served at home and in schools, eaten in small chunks as part of a cold salad, topped with chopped parsley and a classic homemade vinaigrette dressing (see page 10).

This recipe has a mild flavor, and babies love the bright pink color. The zucchini lends a light, airy taste. This helps make the beets more palatable and digestible. Over time, you can reduce the proportion of zucchini and increase the proportion of beets. But don't serve this to babies younger than twelve months, as beets (like other root vegetables) can occasionally be high in soil compounds such as nitrates that only older tummies can handle.

- 1 medium beet, peeled and diced (about 1 cup)
- 2 medium zucchini, peeled and chopped, seeds intact (about 3 cups)
- 1 tablespoon butter

1. Place the beets in a small pot with water to cover and simmer over medium heat until tender, adding the zucchini in the last 3 or 4 minutes. Simmer until the zucchini is transparent. Drain, and set the cooking water aside. Blend until velvety smooth, adding enough cooking water to obtain the desired texture.

2. Top with a dab of butter and serve warm. The puree freezes well.

Tip: Beet stains are hard to remove, so make sure to have bibs and wipes at the ready!

False Alarm Alert: Beets can turn kids' pee (and even poo) pinky-red, so don't be alarmed. In fact, this effect might encourage some kids!

Lentil Apricot Soup

Preparation: 5 minutes

Cooking: 40 minutes

Servings: 8 to 10 adult servings

Okay, this recipe is not actually French. But it is very much in the French spirit: simple and quick to make, and the perfect combination of two foods that taste heavenly together.

Served as suggested, it makes a lovely puree (for babies twelve months or older). Diluted slightly with water, it is a perfect soup for a winter evening. The nutty taste of the lentils is offset by the darkly sweet flavor of the unsulfured apricots (which are much tastier than the conventional kind, so it is worth splurging). Make sure to blend it a long time—this soup should be so creamy that it is almost frothy.

This soup freezes well and is one of our homemade “fast foods.” I freeze it in small portions (yes, I still sometimes use baby ice-cube trays) and then simply pull out what I need and reheat.

- 2 cups dried red lentils
- 7 to 8 cups water
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup unsulfured apricots, whole (they’ll be dark brown rather than orange)
- Optional: 1 tablespoon canola or olive oil

1. Wash and rinse the lentils twice (if not pre-rinsed), or until the water runs clear. Put the lentils in a pot with 7 to 8 cups of water (don’t reuse the lentil rinse water!), depending on how thick you want the soup. Top with the apricots.

2. Bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce the heat to low and simmer for about 40 minutes, or until the lentils and apricots are tender, stirring every few minutes.

3. Blend until frothily smooth. Optional: adding a little canola oil will make the soup slightly richer and creamier (plus, it is a good source of omega-3s).

Tip: Don’t put the apricots on the bottom of the pot, and be sure to stir regularly; otherwise the apricots will sink and stick to the bottom of your pot.

Variation: For a slightly more complex, grown-up taste, add chopped onions and paprika. Sauté the onions in a skillet over a low heat in a little vegetable oil. When the onions are golden, add the paprika and stir. Add to the lentil mixture, and proceed with the rest of the recipe.

Salads and Main Courses

Endive and Kiwi Salad

Preparation: 5 minutes

Servings: 4 small adult “side salad” servings

French families eat a lot of endive, both raw and cooked, and it is one of the vegetables that many French children seem to like. Chopped finely, endive has the texture of lettuce hearts, but is just slightly tangier. Some children may initially find endive to be a bit bitter until they get used to the taste. So in this recipe, vinaigrette and sweet-tart kiwi are used to offset any bitterness, while providing a little acidity to keep the leaves looking fresh.

This dish makes a lovely summer salad, or “starter” for a meal any time of year, and keeps well in the fridge for a day.

If you don’t have kiwi, use any type of fresh fruit that your children like.

- 4 endive heads, sliced crosswise (the thinner the better), hard ends removed
- 4 tablespoons vinaigrette (see page 10)
- Optional: minced fresh chives
- 2 kiwis, peeled, sliced, and quartered

In a large bowl, combine the endive and vinaigrette. If you like, sprinkle the salad with minced chives. Lay the pieces of kiwi on top.

Tip: Serve the vinaigrette on the side as a dip if this is a new flavor for your family.

Vinaigrette **(Classic French Salad Dressing)**

Preparation: 2 minutes

Servings: Makes a little less than 1 cup, to serve a family-size salad

Vinaigrette captures the spirit of French cooking: easy to make, healthy, inexpensive, and tasty. French children get used to the taste of vinegar at a very early age (and often use it where North American children would prefer ketchup). To accommodate palates slightly less used to acidic dressing, I have modified this recipe just slightly, with a Canadian twist.

This dressing stores well for at least a week in the fridge.

- ½ cup extra virgin olive oil (or canola oil)
- ¼ cup red or white wine vinegar
- 1½ teaspoons Dijon-style mustard
- Optional: 1 tablespoon maple syrup
- Optional: 1 tablespoon finely minced shallot, scallion, or onion

1. Put the ingredients together in a jar with a lid, close the jar, and shake vigorously.
2. Taste before serving, and adjust quantities according to your preference (my mother-in-law prefers a more acidic vinaigrette, whereas I prefer my slightly sweeter, gentler version).

Tip: Kids love using this as a dip. Before the main evening meal, I serve the vinaigrette in little individual bowls along with crudités (raw vegetables) like carrots and cucumber sticks. This vinaigrette can also be used as a dressing for cooked vegetables (like beets) or grated carrot salad (another French kids' favorite, often served at school lunches).

Crêpes **(Savory and Sweet Pancakes)**

Preparation: 5 minutes

Standing: 1 hour (optional)

Cooking: 2 minutes per crêpe

Servings: Makes 8 to 10 large crêpes

Brittany is famous for its crêpes (thin pancakes), and *crêperies* can be found all over the region. Stuffed with savories like ham, spinach, or egg, crêpes make a filling meal (think of them as a French version of tortillas). Our children love “crêpes night.” The anticipation of the sweet dessert crêpes puts them in a good mood, and I find that they’re more willing to try the new fillings in the savory dinner crêpes served first.

Once you get the trick of crêpes, they are fast, easy, and fun to make. The batter is usually foolproof, but the art of cooking the thin crêpes (with the right flick of the wrist at the right time) is something you learn with practice; I’d recommend watching an online video or two first, if this is your first time.

Batter

- 3 eggs, lightly beaten
- 2 cups all-purpose flour (pre-sifted if possible)
- 3 cups milk (whole or 2 percent, but not skim), plus ½ cup water
- 2 tablespoons melted butter (or vegetable oil)
- Optional: 1 pinch salt
- Butter or vegetable oil for cooking
- For dessert crêpes: 2 tablespoons sugar, 1 teaspoon vanilla extract

1. Place the flour in a large bowl, make a well, and add the eggs. Slowly pour in the milk, and then the water, stirring gently but constantly. Don’t overmix. The batter should be the consistency of heavy cream (if not, add more milk to thin the mixture). If you can, let the batter sit for at least 1 hour on the counter or, preferably, overnight in the fridge (your crêpes will have a nice smooth texture).

2. In a separate bowl, set aside some of the batter (approximately one-third to one-half) for the dessert crêpes; into this dessert mixture, stir the sugar and vanilla.

Cooking the crêpes

The trick is to cook the crêpe in the right way, so that the filling can heat up and the crêpe can be crispy without being burnt. Here’s the method I use, taught to me by my mother-in-law.

1. Preheat a medium nonstick skillet to a medium-high temperature (just hot enough to make a drop of water “sputter”). Melt the butter (or vegetable oil) smoothly over the cooking surface (I use a bit of paper towel to spread it evenly). Pour in the batter (approximately ¼ to ⅓ cup per crêpe, depending on how thick you like them), while moving your wrist in a circular motion so

that the batter forms a large circle (covering the entire surface of the frying pan). Do this quickly (as the batter dries almost instantly), using something from which it is easy to pour. The crêpe should be thin, so it will become crispy at the edges when cooked.

2. The crêpe should start turning golden around the edges within 30 to 40 seconds. When browned on the bottom, carefully loosen and lift the edges with a spatula, and flip. While the second side is browning, place the filling in half of the crêpe, smoothing it out evenly. By the time the underside is done, the filling should be perfectly warm. Fold in half over the filling, and serve immediately by sliding the crêpe onto a plate (or a warming pan placed in the oven).

Suggested savory spinach filling

The traditional filling in Brittany is fairly rich: a slice of ham, one egg (like a sunny-side-up egg, inside the crêpe), and grated cheese. But I like this lighter alternative:

- 2 cups baby spinach leaves
- 2 tablespoons butter
- Optional: a pinch of salt, a pinch of nutmeg, ½ cup grated hard white cheese

To prepare the spinach filling, gently wash the baby spinach, then place in a small pot (no added water!), and stir over high heat until wilted and tender (a minute or less). Stir in the butter and sprinkle with salt and nutmeg, if desired. Spoon the spinach mixture in a line down the middle of each crêpe, roll it up, and tuck the ends underneath like a wrap. Repeat with the rest of the crêpes. Pop the crêpes into a baking dish. Sprinkle with grated cheese (optional), broil for 2 to 4 minutes, and serve hot.

Note: To save time, you can use the spinach puree listed on page 5 as a filling.

Suggested dessert fillings

Now that you have enjoyed your dinner crêpes, it's time for dessert! The classic filling for dessert crêpes is beurre-sucre: a teaspoon of butter and a sprinkling of sugar. Here are some classic French fillings:

Lemon-honey: A spoonful of honey, a squeeze of lemon juice.

Chocolate: Melt a square of dark chocolate over the crêpe surface.

Berries: Fresh blueberries, raspberries, or blackberries.

Jam: Any kind will do, but we love blackberry jam the best.

Note: If you want to serve everyone at the same time, place crêpes on a plate in the oven to keep warm while you prepare the rest. Repeat until you have the desired number of crêpes (usually one per child or two per adult as a main dish, plus one per person for dessert).

Tip: For some reason known only to the gods of French cooking, the first crêpe is almost always a disaster. Set it aside, add a little butter if you need grease on your cooking surface, and just keep going!

Quick No-Pastry Quiche

Preparation: 5 to 7 minutes

Cooking: 30 to 40 minutes

Servings: 4 to 6 small adult servings

Note: This recipe, designed for busy parents, deliberately leaves out the pastry; the result is just as tasty.

Easy and quick to make, quiche is a classic French recipe that pleases adults and children alike. Quiche is also one of the most versatile recipes in the French household, as it can be eaten hot or cold, for lunch or for dinner, and works well with any combination of vegetables that you can think of. French families often make it in advance, as it lasts well for a couple of days in the fridge (or even for a few hours in the cupboard—my mother-in-law tries to avoid refrigerating her quiche, arguing that it changes the texture). In a pinch, I find that quiche freezes fairly well, although most French people don't do this.

The recipe presented here is the children's version, which uses a higher proportion of milk and a smaller number of eggs than a quiche intended for adults. The resulting dish is fluffier, less dense, and less eggy, and so more likely to please young palates. For older children or adults, reduce the milk by half a cup, and add one more egg (or play with the ratio of eggs and milk until you find the texture that your family prefers).

Most French cooks have their personal twist on this dish. For a while, my favorite recipe was a ratatouille-style quiche, with eggplant and tomatoes. A quick survey of our extended family turned up as many recipes as there were cooks: zucchini, broccoli, carrots—almost any vegetable you can think of. Chopped or grated finely, most vegetables don't even need to be cooked in advance.

- 8 large eggs
- 1½ cups milk (or ¾ cup milk and ¾ cup cream)
- Salt and pepper, if desired
- 1 cup flour

Filling suggestions (these are some of our favorites, but feel free to make up your own)

Quiche lorraine: 1 cup cubed or sliced ham and 1 cup grated cheese (Gruyère works best, but Cheddar will also do)

Quiche aux légumes: one small onion, finely diced, ½ cup thinly sliced greens (I use spinach or chard, but not kale, which is too chewy), ½ cup finely chopped red pepper

Quiche provençale: 1 cup ratatouille (this is a great way to use leftovers)

Optional: dried herbs such as parsley or oregano

1. Preheat the oven to 325°F. In a large bowl, beat the eggs; add the milk (or milk and cream) and mix well. Add a pinch of salt and pepper, if desired. Stirring constantly with a fork or whisk

(to avoid lumps), add the flour a little at a time. Mix in the cheese, followed by the fillings you are using.

2. Pour the mixture into a greased 9- or 12-inch pie plate and bake for 30 minutes, or until the quiche puffs and starts to brown on top. Cool 5 minutes before serving (the quiche will settle, and you'll be able to cut it more neatly).

Tip: Changing your quiche ingredients is also a great way to introduce new vegetables: the reassuringly familiar look of the dish may entice even the wariest of eaters.

Note: Take care not to overfill your pie plate, as the quiche will puff up as it bakes. I place mine on a baking sheet in the oven, in case of spills. The quiche will deflate after you remove it from the oven: this is normal! Kids like watching this soufflé effect.

Tomates farcies (Stuffed Tomatoes)

Preparation: 10 minutes

Cooking: 20 minutes

Servings: 4 small adult (or older child) servings

This is one of our family's favorite recipes. *Tomates farcies* (stuffed tomatoes) are both filling and fun. The tomatoes are hollowed out and stuffed (in this case, with a savory ground beef mixture), and then baked to perfection. The *farce* peeks out of the tomatoes in a *coquettish* sort of way, and children love lifting up the tomato "hats" to see what lies underneath. Served with something that can absorb the delicious juices (rice and couscous are our favorites), this is a complete and easy tasty meal.

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 small onion, minced
- ½ pound ground beef
- 4 large tomatoes
- ¼ cup bread crumbs
- ¼ cup grated Parmesan
- Optional: 1 minced red or yellow pepper, 2 teaspoons dried parsley and/or oregano, salt, pepper

1. Preheat the oven to 375°F.

2. In a large skillet, heat the olive oil over low heat. Add the onion and sauté until golden brown, about 5 minutes. Increase the heat to medium-high, quickly add the ground beef (to "seize" the meat), stir vigorously for 1 minute, and lower the heat to medium-low. Simmer the meat until thoroughly cooked, about 6 to 8 minutes.

3. Meanwhile, prepare the tomatoes: slice off the tops and set them aside, then hollow out the insides of the tomatoes with a small spoon, removing the flesh and pulp to a bowl. (The result will look like little bowls.) Turn the tomatoes upside down on a plate to allow the juices to drain. Chop the tomato insides and add them to the simmering beef mixture. (Optional: add diced red or yellow pepper along with the tomatoes.)

4. Combine the bread crumbs, herbs, and spices in a mixing bowl. (I use a little parsley and oregano, salt and pepper, but my sister-in-law uses paprika. Get creative!)

5. Add the bread-crumb mixture to the meat in the skillet and stir thoroughly. Spoon the resulting mixture (the "*farce*") into the tomato "bowls." Sprinkle with Parmesan. Put the tops back on the tomatoes like little "hats."

6. Place the tomatoes in a baking dish, and bake for 20 to 25 minutes, or until they are deliciously melt-in-your-mouth (*fondant*). Cool for 5 minutes before serving.

Tip: this dish can easily be prepared in advance and stored in the fridge until ready to bake. If you put the tomatoes straight into the oven from the fridge, you'll need to increase the baking time to 25 or 30 minutes.

Gratin de chou-fleur
(Cauliflower Casserole)

Preparation: 10 minutes

Baking: 10 minutes

Servings: 4 adult servings

This dish is tastier than it sounds, I promise!

I have to admit that cauliflower is not one of my favorite vegetables, but I love this dish, in which cauliflower is baked in a classic French béchamel (white) sauce. The classic French *gratin* is usually made with potatoes (and called *gratin dauphinois*), but you can make a gratin with almost any vegetable.

- 1 cauliflower, chopped in bite-size pieces
- 4 tablespoons butter
- 3 tablespoons flour
- 2 cups milk
- ½ cup bread crumbs
- ½ cup grated Parmesan
- Optional: salt, pepper, and a pinch of nutmeg or cinnamon

1. Put a pot of water to boil on the stove, preheat your oven to 350°F, and butter a medium casserole dish.

2. Meanwhile, chop the cauliflower into bite-size pieces. Add it to pot when water is at a rolling boil. Reduce the heat slightly and cook for 5 minutes while making the white sauce.

3. To make the white sauce, melt the butter in a medium pot over medium heat. Sprinkle in the flour, stir well (until the flour is absorbed), raise the heat to high, and stir for 30 seconds. Add the milk and stir constantly until the mixture has thickened, about 3 to 4 minutes. Stir in salt, pepper, and nutmeg or cinnamon (if desired). Set aside.

4. To make the topping, mix the bread crumbs and Parmesan in a small bowl.

5. To make the gratin, drain the cauliflower (which will be soft but not floppy) and place it in the dish. Pour the white sauce on top, sprinkle with bread-crumb mixture, and bake for 10 minutes, or until the top is golden-brown and crunchy.

Five-Minute Fish *en Papillote*

Preparation: 5 minutes

Cooking: 10 minutes

Servings: 1 adult, 2 children, or 4 toddlers per fillet

Many of the families we got to know in France had two working parents. So I was always amazed when we got dinner invitations and saw what these busy couples (okay, usually the mom) had managed to whip together. Part of the secret is that they had figured out how to streamline their cooking. This fish dish is an excellent example of how a tasty and elegant dish can be prepared quickly.

Cooking *en papillote* means tightly wrapping something (usually fish) in parchment paper and baking it in the oven. The dish steams in its own juices, and the flavors are wonderfully concentrated.

This dish is also fun to serve. *Papillon* is the French word for butterfly, which is a lovely metaphor for the visual effect of this dish. Bring the baking dish to the table, and watch everyone's faces as you unfold the wrapping to release the savory steam.

- 1 tablespoon olive or canola oil
- 1 fillet of fish per person (salmon, sole, and halibut are our favorites)
- 1 medium zucchini (for every 2 fillets), sliced thin (but not peeled)
- Juice of 1 lemon
- ½ cup plain yogurt (or mayonnaise or *crème fraîche*, if you have it)
- ½ cup fresh minced chives
- Optional: salt and pepper

1. Preheat the oven to 375°F.

2. Choose a baking dish that's just big enough to hold the fish in a single layer. On a work surface, spread out a sheet of parchment paper or aluminum foil that's twice as big as the dish. Spread the oil over half of the sheet and lay the fish on the oil (skin-side down, if appropriate).

3. Layer the zucchini slices on top of the fish.

4. Mix the lemon juice, yogurt (or *crème fraîche*), chives (and salt and pepper, if desired), and pour the mixture on top of the fish.

5. Fold and close the paper *tightly* so that no steam can escape (I usually make two or three folds with the two edges, then tuck the ends under). Bake for 10 minutes per inch measured at the thickest part of the fish (no peeking!). You'll know it's done when it flakes easily when a fork is inserted gently.

Tip: Kids love helping to prepare this meal: wrapping the fish in its “cocoon” before it heads into the oven feels festive, like preparing a lovely present.

Bouillabaisse for Babies
(Soupe de poisson de Madame Georges)

Preparation: 15 minutes

Cooking: 20 to 30 minutes

Servings: 4 to 6 small adult servings

The best-known version of France's famous seafood soup—bouillabaisse—comes from Provence, in the south of the country. But Provence also has its own smooth, creamy version of fish soup, which happens to be much more suitable for babies and young children. Traditionally, this soup was made by fishermen's wives. As the boats came in, they would carefully separate the catch. The "noble" fish would be taken to market, and the rest—typically smaller fish of less value—would be cooked at home. My brother-in-law's parents, who live just outside of Aix-en-Provence, make this soup with the fish they catch themselves in the Mediterranean. Madame Georges's recipe is adapted from the oldest French cookbook in continuous print (for well over a century): *La cuisinière provençale*.

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 medium onions
- 1 garlic clove, crushed
- 6 large tomatoes, chopped
- ½ pound boneless white fish
- 2 bay leaves
- 3 fennel stalks, whole
- 1 piece of orange peel (unwaxed)
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 1 teaspoon saffron

1. In a large skillet over medium-low heat, sauté the onions in the olive oil. When the onions start to turn golden, after about 3 minutes, add the garlic. Wait one more minute, and then add the tomatoes. Raise heat, and simmer for 2 minutes.

2. Next, add the fish, the bay leaves, the fennel, and the orange peel. Cook at medium-high heat for 5 to 10 minutes, and then add 2 liters of boiling water, as well as (if desired) a dash of salt and pepper. Add saffron, and simmer (close to a rolling boil) for 20 minutes.

3. Remove the bay leaves, fennel, and orange peel. Blend the soup with a hand blender (any remaining bones should be so small as to simply dissolve).

Tip: If serving to very young children, you may wish to slowly pour the soup through a fine sieve before blending (in order to check for bones). Most of the fish meat should have dissolved, and will pass easily through the sieve.

Note: The onion is important for reducing the acidity of the tomatoes; it makes the soup more creamy. Trust me: don't leave it out!

Tip: Purists argue that the soup's distinctive flavor requires fish heads, but I don't use them myself. Traditionally, French families use a mix of white fish and small fish with an intense taste, like sardines. I simply suggest that you use a mix of fish that suits your family's tastes. Ask at your local fish store for whatever is in stock: my local fishmonger often has smoked salmon scraps, as well as bits of sole and other white fish. Ask for pieces without bones, but note that cooking will soften the small bones sufficiently that they will dissolve into the soup.

Snacks and Desserts

Zesty Orange Salad

Preparation: 5 minutes

Servings: 4 adult servings (or 8 child-size servings)

This dessert salad is a great way to introduce a new flavor to children. The sweetness of the orange offsets the bitterness of the orange zest. Children will be reassured by the familiar (the pieces of orange) and so hopefully will be more willing to try something new: the thin, almost playful curlicues of sweetened orange rind.

Have your children watch you prepare this dish, and let them sample if they are curious. When serving, remember that eating can sometimes be about encountering new tastes rather than consuming large quantities.

Serve this dish in a quiet moment when you have the time to sit and discuss the ingredients with your child. Questions are usually helpful (and helpfully distracting): How does the orange “zest” taste? Does it taste orange-y at all? How does it taste when you nibble a tiny bit? Place a tiny piece on your tongue? What does it smell like? If your child doesn’t want to eat any, that’s fine too, but try to encourage them to taste it.

Our daughters graduated from this to eating grapefruit, which they now enjoy as a breakfast “treat.” Claire, our younger one, will purse her lips and say: “*Ooohhh, Maman, c’est amer* (it’s bitter)!” And then continue eating with delight.

- 4 seedless oranges
- 4 tablespoons sugar

1. To make the zest, wash 1 orange, dry it, and use a paring knife to carefully peel the outer layer, taking only the very outside of the rind and avoiding any of the white pith underneath. Slice the zest into very thin strips.

2. Make a *sirop* (syrup) by mixing ½ cup water with the sugar in a small saucepan and cooking it over medium heat just until it bubbles. Add the zest, and cook for 10 minutes, or until the zest is tender and the *sirop* is golden but not brown or caramelized.

3. Peel the remaining oranges, removing the zest and pith so that you have just the fruit itself left. Slice the oranges crosswise and place them in little salad bowls. Pour the zest and *sirop* on top. Serve immediately!

Tip: Because of its sweetness, the French would serve this as a dessert, even though it is called a “salad.”

Pain d'épices (Spice Bread)

Preparation: 10 to 15 minutes

Cooking: 50 minutes

Servings: 1 loaf

This “spice bread” (which tastes more like cake) is a French favorite for after-school snacks. Adults eat it too, but for *l'aperitif*, toasted and topped with thin slices of *foie gras*. This sweet treat is so beloved by the French that there is even a museum dedicated solely to the *pain d'épices* in Alsace (northern France). The Breton version has a high proportion of honey (sometimes half of the cake by weight!) and was sold freshly made every week at the honey stall at our local market. The honey also helps to preserve the loaf (which can last for weeks if well wrapped and frozen). Traditionally, *pain d'épices* is made with rye flour and dark buckwheat honey, giving the loaf a rich, nutty taste.

- 1½ cups all-purpose flour
- 1½ cups whole wheat flour (or dark rye or buckwheat flour)
- 2½ teaspoons baking soda
- 1½ teaspoons ground cinnamon
- Optional: ¼ teaspoon nutmeg, ¼ teaspoon ground cloves, 1 teaspoon anise seeds, ¼ teaspoon ginger
- 1½ cups honey (use an aromatic, dark honey or use 1 cup honey plus ½ cup molasses)
- 3 tablespoons salted butter, at room temperature (or use unsalted butter, but add a pinch of salt)
- 1 tablespoon finely grated orange zest
- 1½ cups milk (water with 1 tablespoon vegetable oil can be substituted)

1. Preheat the oven to 325°F. Butter a 9-inch (23cm) loaf pan and dust it with flour.
2. In a large bowl, sift together the flour, baking soda, and spices.
3. In a medium pot, gently heat and combine the honey, milk, butter, and orange zest. Remove from the heat. Add half the flour mixture. Stir gently, then add the remaining dry ingredients and stir until just combined. Do not overmix.
4. Pour the batter into the loaf pan and bake for 50 to 60 minutes, or until a knife inserted into the center comes out clean. The top will be dark brown.
5. Cool 10 minutes, then turn the cake onto a cooling rack. Let cool completely before slicing.

Tip: This cake is often left to sit several hours before serving: it becomes more tasty and moist, and slices better.

Storage: *Pain d'épices* can be wrapped in plastic and stored for at least a week, during which time the flavors will meld and it will get denser. It can also be frozen, and is delicious toasted, topped with savory or sweet spreads.

Les pommes au four
(Spiced Baked Apples)

Preparation: 10 to 15 minutes

Cooking: 25 minutes

Servings: 1 apple per person

This dish is a real time-saver, and one of our favorite wintertime desserts. The first thing I do when I get home from work is preheat the oven and pop the apples inside. By the time the meal is ready to serve, the smell of the apples fills the house, beckoning the children to the table (at least, that's the theory!). Usually, I take advantage of the hot oven to bake something for dinner (Five-Minute Fish *en Papillote*, page 18, or *Gratin de chou-fleur*, page 17).

In Brittany, we use sweet and crunchy Dalinette apples. In Vancouver, I tend to use the Fuji or Gala variety (McIntosh, Delicious, and Granny Smith aren't as tasty once cooked).

To avoid drying out the apples, just put a little water in the bottom of the baking dish. I drizzle a little maple syrup over each apple just before serving, but they're just as lovely on their own.

- 1 apple per person, washed, skin pricked with a fork, stemmed and cored
- 1 teaspoon maple syrup per apple (or 1 tablespoon sugar and 1 tablespoon butter)
- Optional: ground cinnamon

1. Preheat the oven to 350°F.

2. Place the apples in a baking dish after pricking with a fork. Drizzle maple syrup into the hole in each apple, or do as the French do and use sugar and butter instead. Dust with cinnamon if you like.

3. Bake the apples for about 25 minutes, or until they have reached your desired consistency.

Warning: Be sure to remove the apples from the oven at least 5 minutes before you plan to eat them. They stay piping hot inside, and can burn little tongues. Don't rely on the heat of the outside of the apple to judge whether it's safe to serve; the flesh inside will remain much hotter than the outside surface, which will cool down quite quickly. We cut the apples for our children, and let the pieces cool on plates on the counter before bringing them to the table.

Tip: This recipe can be used to help transition babies to more solid food. Baked long enough, the texture of the apple is as creamy as applesauce. Reduce the baking time, and the consistency gets progressively more solid.

Mamie's Chocolate-Stuffed Baguette

Preparation: 2 minutes

Servings: 4 per baguette

Long before prepackaged snack foods appeared on the shelves, French families were making delicious homemade treats for their children. This one is still a favorite when our children visit their grandmother. They hover around the table as she slices and prepares their treat, savoring the smells of chocolate and fresh bread.

Although it seems decadent, this snack is relatively healthy, especially if you limit the butter on the baguette. Chocolate provides essential elements like copper, magnesium, and iron. Butter provides vitamin D and fat—both essential for children's growth. The bread provides carbohydrates necessary for kids' active lives—but without any preservatives or additives.

- 3 to 4 squares of dark chocolate (70 percent cocoa or higher)
- 1 fresh baguette, unsliced, but cut into four equal pieces
- Butter

1. Make a relatively shallow slit lengthwise in each piece of baguette (along the side, not the top). Pry the baguette open about halfway (but not completely open!). Slide your buttered knife inside, and butter the bread.

2. Split the squares of chocolate into pieces that will fit inside the slit. Stuff the baguette with the rectangles of chocolate placed parallel to the length of the baguette. That way, your child gets some chocolate—but not too much—with every bite.

Mousse au chocolat
(Chocolate Mousse)

Preparation: 10 to 15 minutes

Waiting: 2 to 3 hours

Cooking: None

Servings: 6

Mousse (whether lemon, chocolate, or any other kind) is amazingly quick to make. My French relatives need only about 5 minutes, but I've been generous with the time allowance here. The ratio of time spent to pleasure derived is probably the best of any dessert recipe I've encountered.

There are as many recipes for mousse as there are members of the family. Use this recipe as your point of departure. There are lots of little innovations you can try: serve with a bit of whipped cream if you like, or adjust the amount of sugar to suit your taste. But I like the minimalist version served below: dark and delicious.

The French are not, by the way, as fearful of raw eggs as are North Americans. I still can't shake that slight paranoia, so I make sure to buy my eggs from a reliable source to avoid any chance of salmonella poisoning.

- ½ pound semi-sweet Baker's chocolate
- 4 teaspoons butter
- 6 eggs, whites and yolks separated
- Zest of half an orange
- Pinch of salt

1. Melt the chocolate and butter in a *bain-marie* (double boiler). (Quick alternative: In the microwave, melt the chocolate in a fairly large bowl; I put a tiny bit of milk in the bottom to keep the chocolate from sticking.) *Allow the chocolate to cool!* Otherwise, you risk cooking the eggs. When the chocolate is melted (but not too hot), add in the egg yolks and the orange zest, and stir well.

2. In a standing mixer (or in a large bowl with a whisk or mixer), beat the egg whites until they reach stiff peaks (adding a pinch of salt at the start will help them stiffen).

3. *Gently* fold one-third of the egg whites into the chocolate mixture. Mix gently, then fold in the other half, mixing very gently. Spoon the mousse into little serving dishes and chill for 2 to 3 hours, or until firm. Serve with berries or crisp little cookies on the side.

Tip: Served in a big bowl, this makes a big impression. But it will be tidier and more elegant (and the mousse will likely remain more firm) if prepared and served in little individual bowls (plus, no fighting about who got more!).

Clafoutis (Sweet Cherry Soufflé)

Preparation: 10 minutes

Cooking: 40 to 43 minutes

Servings: 6 generous pieces

Clafoutis is a version of the French flan that is traditionally made with cherries (or other moist fruit such as plums, prunes, raspberries, or blackberries), enveloped by a simple cake batter. The fruit is polka-dotted in the cake, giving it a playful look that children love. Even the name is fun to say: kla-foo-TEE. Traditionally, this dish is cooked with the pits left inside the cherries (purists believe that this intensifies the flavor of the dish). I pit the cherries (or, when I'm in a rush, use small plums instead, which are easier to pit).

Our source for the cherries is an old tree at Philippe's aunt's house. Tante Odette's tree is the most productive I've ever encountered; the branches, weighed down with cherries, hang down almost to the ground. In late June, the extended family is mobilized for cherry picking, cherry jam making, and (of course) cherry eating. *Clafoutis* is my daughters' favorite recipe from this time of year.

- 2 cups pitted cherries or plums (or other moist fruit)
- $\frac{1}{3}$ cup granulated sugar
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup flour
- Pinch of salt
- 3 eggs
- $1\frac{1}{4}$ cups milk
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 tablespoon confectioners' sugar (or brown sugar—I like muscovado)

1. Place the fruit in a bowl with half the granulated sugar, stir well, and set aside.
2. Preheat the oven to 350°F. Grease a 9-inch baking dish.
3. In a large bowl, sift the flour with the salt and remaining sugar. In a medium bowl, beat the eggs and milk to combine. Add the vanilla. Add the egg mixture to the flour mixture and combine well. Spread the fruit evenly in the baking dish and pour the batter on top. The cherries may float to the surface now (or later, during baking).
4. Bake for 40 to 45 minutes, or until the top is firm and golden brown. Cool, then sprinkle with confectioners' sugar. Serve immediately.

Note: Julia Child recommends baking this twice (briefly baking a thin layer in the bottom of the dish, then adding the fruit topped with the remaining batter and baking until done). But the French parents I know use this “express” method, with wonderful results!

Tip: Serve the *clafoutis* in the baking dish, as it is quite “wobbly” and won't transfer well. Fresh out of the oven, the cake is puffed up and golden. It will settle and sag a little bit, but that's exactly what it is supposed to do.