



# LIFE FROM SCRATCH

Family Traditions That Start with You

*Vanessa Lachey*  
WITH DINA GACHMAN



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If you don't have the time to make food for everyone, turning the party into a potluck is always a good option. I used to feel pressured to make everything, but I've learned that my friends want to help out, and they take pride in their dishes, too. It's always good to make a specific spreadsheet or list of items so you don't end up with five plates of deviled eggs or all desserts and no veggies or sides. I basically send out an email like the one below so people can sign their names next to the dishes they want to bring.

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>HAM:</b> Vanessa   |  |
|   |  |
| <b>MAC AND CHEESE:</b> Vanessa (2 kinds)                        |  |
|   |  |
| <b>VEGGIES/SIDES:</b>   |  |
|   |  |
| <b>SALADS:</b>  |  |
|   |  |
| <b>APPETIZERS:</b> Vanessa (charcuterie board and deviled eggs) |  |
|   |  |
| <b>FINGER FOODS:</b>  |  |
|   |  |
| <b>DESSERTS:</b>  |  |
|   |  |
| <b>ROLLS:</b>   |  |
|   |  |



## Easter Cocktail Ideas

**MIMOSA STATION:** I love throwing parties, but I also love enjoying the party, so I try to make things as simple as I can. Creating drink stations frees you from having to spend all your time behind the bar mixing cocktails, and since our Easter parties take place during the day, I set up a DIY Champagne-



and-cocktail station so people can make drinks whenever they want. You can put a few bottles of Champagne in a pretty ice bucket surrounded by orange juice, peach juice, Aperol, and/or sparkling water. I like to add a platter of fresh strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, and orange slices. It looks pretty and is super low maintenance. Just make sure you have plenty of chilled Champagne on hand.

**SPIKED ICED TEA STATION:** You can also put out a large pitcher of plain and/or flavored iced tea (peach and hibiscus are springlike and delicious) and let people add their own rum. Or you can mix in the rum yourself right in the pitcher. Include colorful garnishes such as lemon and orange slices, mint sprigs, and berries.

**SPIKED LEMONADE STATION:** I have Nick make the lemonade in the morning, and I put it in a serving jug with a spout. Yes, he just uses a mix, but when we run out during the party I can say, lovingly, “Hey, babe, can you make some more lemonade, please?” Anything to make it easier for me while I’m juggling the food. I add sliced lemons to make it look pretty. Then I set up a table with a few vodka bottles; nice glassware, including nonbreakable options; plus lemon slices, ice, and a stirrer.

**BUNNY MOCKTAILS:** It’s easy to throw together a festive drink for the kids on Easter. Mix colorful juices like cranberry and orange juice with some sparkling water, grenadine, maraschino cherries, and an Easter-themed garnish for a Shirley Temple-esque drink that’s not too sugary but looks pretty in pictures. Or if your kids are like Camden and drink only water or milk, fun cups can make it festive and personal. I like giving the kids their own cups, and I always give them their drink stations—with easy kid snacks, too, so they feel like the grown-ups.





## Vanessa's Gardening Tips

Gardening can be therapeutic, but it can also be stressful until you get the hang of it. Here are a few tips I learned along the way that might help.

1. **LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION:** Don't just plop a garden down anywhere. Most veggies need at least six hours of sun daily, and you don't want too much wind or a lot of foot traffic. Make sure the plot is easy for you to get to and maneuver around. You don't want to stomp on your kale while you're trying to pick your tomatoes.
2. **MAKE A FRAME:** Create a moist and well-drained space. If you don't have one, you can easily make a frame with some rocks and wood. This is the most strenuous step, but it's necessary for a successful garden.
3. **PLANT WHAT YOU EAT:** If you *hate* squash, that's probably not the vegetable for you. Also think about perennials (which return each year) versus annuals (which need to be replanted each year). Most veggies are annuals. My favorites are bell peppers, cucumbers, garlic, and tomatoes. My favorite fruits are raspberries and strawberries.
4. **ORDER:** When all else fails, there are tons of starter kits for those of us with no green thumbs, or pinkies, or index fingers. These kits are a great way to get started and get you motivated in the kitchen. Plus, some have cute planters. Make it fun! Not a chore.

# Summer Party Tips

- I always place extra towels out by the pool, because inevitably someone will forget a towel or two. This way no one needs to run into your house dripping wet! If you want to make sure your towels don't go missing, write your name on the tag with a Sharpie. It may sound silly, but with three kids, we label everything they own for school and camp, so if someone sees a towel that says LACHEY at their house, they can return it.
- Leave out buckets of ice with bottled water, plus some extra sunscreen for guests. If you aren't into the plastic, just set up some sort of station for hydration. A jug with flavored water always elevates things. Or set out lemonade and juice boxes. Again, nothing fancy, just a place where people can hydrate. The last thing you want is for a guest to get heatstroke—talk about ruining the party!
- If you don't have a pool, you can set up sprinkler games or a Slip 'N Slide course. You could also have a water balloon party, which is a nightmare to clean up afterward, but it's a blast for the kids. You could also set up a "bike course" with cones so the kids can ride their bikes or scooters around the obstacles. Or maybe you could host an ice-cream-sundae party or a sidewalk-chalk party.
- I like to put out a bunch of toys for the kids, so they can just grab what they want without having to ask you to go inside every five seconds to get a new toy to play with. They'll probably still ask, but at least this way you can point them in the direction of the toy pile. Throw in some goggles and dive toys to keep them occupied for a while.
- If you're having a pool party, hire a lifeguard! This has helped tremendously when we have people over to swim. I know what you're thinking: "I'm not paying to have someone watch my kids while we have a casual backyard BBQ!" Let me tell you, this is my most valuable tip. If you don't want to

spend a lot of money, then hire only one lifeguard. Enlist a kid from the local youth center or a college kid who wants some extra cash (but make sure he or she is a certified lifeguard, of course). If you want to get fancy, hire two lifeguards, and they can play games and actually swim with the kids. Lifeguard babysitting! It's around twenty-five to fifty dollars an hour, and if you pay for two or three hours, it helps the parents relax a little bit, knowing that someone is keeping an eye on the little ones. If you ask me, you can't put a price on pool safety. At one party we had, there were kids jumping off the rocks into the pool, and the lifeguard asked the kids to stop, and I didn't have to be the bad guy or go to the emergency room for stitches!

## Vanessa's Summer BBQ Playlist

The best way to set the mood for your summer BBQ is to create a great playlist, and I could share hundreds of songs I love, but following are just a few to get the party going.

- "Gypsy" by Fleetwood Mac
- "Carry On Wayward Son" by Kansas
- "More Than a Feeling" by Boston
- "Don't You (Forget About Me)" by Simple Minds
- "Any Way You Want It" by Journey
- "Dream On" by Aerosmith
- "Keep On Loving You" by REO Speedwagon
- "Love Is a Battlefield" by Pat Benatar
- "Sweet Home Alabama" by Lynyrd Skynyrd
- "Take Me Home Tonight" by Eddie Money
- "Livin' on a Prayer" by Bon Jovi
- "Lyn' Eyes" by the Eagles



## *Girls'-Night-In Playlist*

Spending quality time with female friends is a must for me. It rejuvenates me; it allows me to let go and unwind and have some fun without my husband and kids. If I have some friends over for wine, food, and bonding, there are a few songs I like to have on hand to keep the energy going.

**"Let's Hear It for the Boy" by Deniece Williams**

**"True Blue" by Madonna**

**"1999" by Prince**

**"I Can't Wait" by Nu Shooz**

**"I Wanna Dance with Somebody" by Whitney Houston**

**"Straight Up" by Paula Abdul**

**"Everything She Wants" by Wham!**

**"Bust a Move" by Young MC**

**"Into the Groove" by Madonna**

**"Tell It to My Heart" by Taylor Dayne**

**"Push It" by Salt-N-Pepa**

**"Girls Just Want to Have Fun" by Cyndi Lauper**

**"It Takes Two" by Rob Base and DJ E-Z Rock**

**"I Think We're Alone Now" by Tiffany**

**"Shoop" by Salt-N-Pepa**

**"Any Man of Mine" by Shania Twain**

## *How to Make a Santa Mailbox*

- Paint a medium-size Amazon box or shoebox silver or white (or cover it in gray or silver paper). Write “North Pole” on the box with a red Sharpie or paint.
- Cut a small slot in the box so the kids can drop their letters inside.
- If you’re ambitious, glue on a little red mailbox flag (available at hardware stores).
- Let the kids decorate the box and add their own touches.





## *Sample Valentine's Day Playlist*

**My love for music has no bounds, so I can go on and on . . . but below is a starter list.**

**"This Woman's Work" and/or "Fortunate" by Maxwell**

**"By Your Side" by Sade**

**"If I Ain't Got You" by Alicia Keys**

**"Water Runs Dry" by Boys II Men**

**"Lover" by Taylor Swift**

**"Nothing's Gonna Hurt You Baby" by Cigarettes After Sex**

**"No Woman No Cry" or "Is This Love" by Bob Marley**

**"Don't Know Why" by Norah Jones**

**"Tennessee Whiskey" by Chris Stapleton**

**"Kiss Me" by Ed Sheeran**

**"Purple Rain" by Prince**

**"He Loves Me" and/or "The Way" by Jill Scott**

**"Let It Be Me" by Ray LaMontagne**

PART 5

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# Recipes





## VANESSA'S CHICKEN ADOBO

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Before you start cooking, please understand that mine is *not* the true Filipino way to make this dish! Trust me—I should know. I’ve gotten called out on social media several times. It took me several years and many iterations to come up with this version. Along the way a supportive (and always hungry) Nick would say, “Damn, baby!!! This is delicious! This is the one!” I’ve changed a few things over time to get to the current version. Like, I now use boneless, skinless chicken breasts along with the more traditional drumsticks and thighs. Also, I only use ground pepper because when I made the original recipe we were biting into cracked peppercorns that were so strong our eyes crossed. The point of this book, and of my sharing this recipe, is to inspire you to create your own traditions, whether they start with chicken adobo or homemade meatballs like your grandma made (but with your own special touch). Over time, this dish has become a vital part of our family traditions, and it was a huge inspiration for this book.

So to all the chicken adobo purists out there who might say this isn’t the real deal: that’s kind of the point. This recipe is *something* like the one my mother cooked, which made me feel warm and loved as we would sit together and eat it late at night. It has evolved into a dish that I cook for my husband and our three children as a way for us to sit together and have a meal (albeit not late at night).

I explain to my kids that it’s a Filipino dish and tell them that I am (and they are) part Filipino. It’s hard to tell if what I’m saying is sinking in or if they’re just really into the food. I can’t wait to see what dish my kids will think of when they think of home, but if I had to pick, I’d hope it would be this one.

I hope you love this recipe as much as I do, and I hope you make your own version and share it with a friend. If you come up with an amazing twist, share it with me on Instagram or Twitter with the hashtag #LifeFromScratchBook. Remember, this is all about creating your own traditions and memories, and I’d love to hear what you come up with.

## INGREDIENTS

**2 tablespoons canola oil**

**4 bone-in, skin-on chicken thighs**

**4 bone-in, skin-on chicken drumsticks**

**2 large boneless, skinless chicken breasts**

**1 onion, cut into quarters and sliced**

**2 garlic cloves, minced**

**1 cup distilled white vinegar, or more if desired**

**1 cup low-sodium soy sauce, or more if desired**

**1 cup water, or more if desired**

**¼ to ½ teaspoon ground black pepper, or more if desired**

**3 bay leaves**

**Cooked white rice for serving**

## MAKING IT FROM SCRATCH . . .

Heat the oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Add the chicken and cook until browned on both sides. FYI: This is a messy process with *lots* of grease splatter. As Nick's granny would say, "Wear a shirt when you're frying bacon!" Translation: *Don't cook naked*. It's solid advice, especially for this recipe. (I really wish I had the chance to cook with her in the kitchen. Fully clothed, of course.)

With your shirt still on, add the onion and garlic and cook for three or four minutes to release the flavors. Then add the vinegar, soy sauce, and water. Depending on how much chicken you have, you may need to add more of each. Add the black pepper (more if you like a kick) and bay leaves. Bring to a boil, reduce heat, and let simmer for 45 minutes to an hour.

I love that I can walk away and leave this on the stove so I can deal with three kids and a husband—who sometimes acts like a little kid himself (love you, honey!). I'll head back into the kitchen and turn over the chicken pieces once or twice, just so they soak in all the delicious flavors. Once the chicken is cooked through, serve it over rice.



Spring







## VANESSA'S FAMOUS CHICKEN PASTA SALAD

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My stepmom, Donna, didn't love cooking, but she had an arsenal of easy, quick side dishes to bring to a weekend BBQ. This one was always a favorite, and over the years I've changed a few ingredients here and there to personalize it.

I make it for BBQs and small get-togethers, and it's delicious the next day. You can make it ahead of time, which is key when you're trying to wrangle kids.

### INGREDIENTS

**1 pound medium pasta shells**

**1 12-ounce bottle Marie's  
Coleslaw Dressing (usually  
available in the produce aisle)**

**10 ounces canned all-white-  
meat chicken breast, drained**

**1 8-ounce block mild or sharp  
cheddar cheese, cubed**

**Salt and ground black pepper  
to taste**

**Fresh parsley for garnish  
(optional)**

### MAKING IT FROM SCRATCH . . .

Cook the shells according to package directions. Drain and allow to cool, then transfer to a serving bowl.

Add the dressing, chicken, cheese, and salt and pepper. Top with chopped parsley if you like. (My kids like it without. For parties a little color is a nice touch.)

Eat and enjoy!

## EASTER DEVILED EGGS (AKA LACHEGGS)

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This appetizer is a major hit in our family, and it's perfect for Easter or any spring event. Each year, my friends bring their own versions to our party, mainly because they know how much Nick adores them. Some friends pretty them up with food coloring. Others use creamy piped filling, but I've played around with my own recipe and come up with my favorite technique. Somehow, every Easter, our entire table of eggs gets eaten, and I think Nick is probably responsible for inhaling most of them.

Deviled eggs start with the perfect hard-boiled egg. I used to boil the egg, then spin it on the counter to test it—the old-school way. If it spun in place, it was ready. The problem was that I would always wonder why there were green bits in the egg and why the consistency was off. When I was on *Top Chef Junior*, the judges always taught the basics, and when they got into hard-boiled eggs, you better believe I was riveted. The key is the ice bath at the end. Who knew? Apparently, many people! It stops the cooking process so you get the perfect egg. You can boil the eggs for anywhere between four and twelve minutes, and after much experimentation I am a proud eleven-minute girl! I want them *done*.

### MAKING THE PERFECT HARD-BOILED EGG

Place your eggs in the bottom of a saucepan. Be sure not to crowd them in the pan. They should fit comfortably.

Add cold water until it reaches an inch or so above the eggs.

Over high heat, bring the water to a boil, then cover the pan.

This is so important: remove from the heat and let the eggs sit in the hot water with the lid on. As I mentioned above, I leave mine for eleven minutes, resulting in the perfect consistency for my deviled eggs.

While the eggs are cooking, fill a large bowl with ice and add water. This ice bath will give you those perfect deviled eggs.





When the eggs are ready and your timer goes off, use tongs to remove the eggs from the hot water and place them gently into the ice bath. Don't drop them in and break them! Let them sit for about ten minutes.

Peel away the shells! I like doing this under running water to help get the tiny bits off.

Now you're ready to devil the eggs!

#### INGREDIENTS

**6 hard-boiled eggs**

**1 tablespoon sweet pickle relish**

**3 tablespoons mayonnaise**

**1 teaspoon Dijon mustard**

**Salt and ground black pepper  
to taste**

**Thinly sliced sweet gherkin  
pickles for garnish**

**Paprika for garnish**

#### MAKING IT FROM SCRATCH . . .

Cut the eggs in half lengthwise. Scoop out the yolks and place them in a medium mixing bowl. Add the relish, mayonnaise, mustard, and salt and pepper.

Spoon the yolk mixture into the whites (use a piping bag and pretty tip if you want that extra special touch), garnish some of the halves with one or two gherkin slices, and sprinkle all with paprika.

Pro tip: I like making the yolk mixture the day before and storing it in an airtight container. Then I fill and garnish right before guests arrive. I'm careful not to do this *too* early because Nick will eat them all before anyone else has a chance.





## Mexican Fiesta

One of our favorite large-group spring meals is a fiesta, perfect for Cinco de Mayo or anytime you're in the mood for delicious Mexican flavors. You'll want guacamole, chips and salsa, an enchilada casserole, *all the fixin's*, and of course some margaritas and palomas or even just Coronas with lime. When you're entertaining, you don't want to be stuck stewing tomatoes for a sauce, so remember—canned goods are your friend!







## GUACAMOLE

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I know this is one of those “everyone knows how to make it” recipes, but here is how I prepare my simple and yummy six-ingredient guacamole, in case you want to mix it up (pun intended).

**2 large ripe avocados:** Smoosh the flesh in a medium-size bowl, then add the ingredients below.

**1 cup small cherry tomatoes:** These are a Lachey favorite. I quarter them with a serrated knife, since they are squishy and small. There’s nothing worse than squirting tomatoes all over your kitchen.

**Chopped cilantro:** I know—some people think cilantro tastes like soap. If you hate it, leave it out, *but* I think it’s necessary, so add as much (or as little) as you like. I use 1 tablespoon.

**Chopped red onion:** This is key for the crunch and punch of flavor. I add  $\frac{1}{4}$  to  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup. It varies depending on the size of the avocados you use. But start with  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup, and you can always add more.

**Fresh lime juice:** I cut a lime in half and squeeze all the goodness from both halves into the guacamole.

**Salt to taste:** I like to use coarse sea salt or kosher salt.



## LACHEY LAYER DIP

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After years of trying different versions of this beloved appetizer, we decided that this is our favorite. So many friends have emailed me asking for this particular recipe. It's just so yummy!

### INGREDIENTS

**1 16-ounce can refried beans**

**1 1-ounce package taco seasoning**

**8 ounces sour cream**

**4 ounces cream cheese, at room temperature**

**1 16-ounce jar prepared salsa**

**1 cup quartered cherry tomatoes or diced Roma tomatoes**

**¼ cup sliced scallions (optional)**

**1 8-ounce bag shredded lettuce**

**1 8-ounce bag shredded Mexican cheese blend**

**Sliced canned or jarred black olives for garnish**

### MAKING IT FROM SCRATCH . . .

In a small bowl, combine the beans and the taco seasoning. Spread into a 9 x 13-inch serving dish.

Combine the sour cream and softened cream cheese—I use half an 8-ounce block. If you need to put the cream cheese in the microwave to soften because you're making the dip at the last minute, don't put it in for too long. Just make it soft enough to blend.

Spread the sour cream mixture over the refried beans mixture as evenly as you can without combining the two layers in one big mush. At this point, you can let the dip sit in the refrigerator overnight. You don't want to add the lettuce and other layers this early because they'll get soggy. Also, if you're making the dip the day you're serving it, just let it chill in the fridge for 30 minutes to an hour so the flavors of the beans and taco seasoning can meld.

Next, add a layer of salsa. The whole jar! Then top with the tomatoes.

Sprinkle with the chopped scallions (I went through a no-scallions phase, and the dip was still yummy, but it's definitely better with them in there), followed by the shredded lettuce (yes, the whole bag), followed by the shredded cheese (yes, the whole bag).

Finally, add a pretty layer of sliced olives. You can get creative here with placement, but don't use too many, because they'll overwhelm the other flavors.



# ENCHILADA CASSEROLE

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I have always loved chicken-and-cheese enchiladas, but making them at home can be challenging. Maybe that's why I love casseroles! You can make them in advance *and* they're always consistent, since everything is combined in one big dish. Because of my desire to make enchiladas the easy way, my enchilada casserole was born. I always enlist Nick to help me shred the chicken while I assemble everything else, which gives us time together in the kitchen.

## INGREDIENTS

**4 boneless, skinless chicken breasts**

**1 tablespoon olive oil**

**1 cup chopped white onion**

**2 or 3 garlic cloves, minced, or 1/4 teaspoon garlic powder if you're not up for mincing**

**1 10.5-ounce can condensed cream of celery soup**

**1 10.5-ounce can condensed cream of chicken soup**

**1 19-ounce can red enchilada sauce (we like mild, but you can get spicy!)**

**1 10-ounce can diced tomatoes with green chilies (hello, RO\*TEL!), drained**

**1 4-ounce can diced green chilies, drained**

**1/2 teaspoon chili powder**

**16 mini yellow corn tortillas**

**1 16-ounce bag shredded Mexican cheese blend**



### MAKING IT FROM SCRATCH . . .

Steam or boil the chicken breasts for about 18 minutes, then shred the meat with two forks. You want to make sure the chicken is feathery at the thickest part. I always cut into it and check. Sometimes I put it back in the water or steamer if it's not cooked enough.

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

Heat the oil in a skillet over medium-low heat. Cook the onions and garlic until the onions are soft and the flavors are combined, about 5 minutes. You don't want to overcook or brown the onions, just soften them.

In a large bowl, combine the soups, red enchilada sauce, tomatoes with green chilies, diced green chilies, cooked onions and garlic, and chili powder. (No chicken yet!) Spread 1 cup of the mixture in the bottom of a nonreactive 9 x 13-inch baking dish. Add the shredded chicken to the remaining liquid mixture in the bowl.

Layer 8 tortillas in the bottom of the dish. Top with half the chicken mixture, then half the cheese (about 2 cups).

Repeat the layers: 8 tortillas, the remaining chicken mixture, then the rest of the cheese.

Bake for 45 minutes to an hour, until the cheese is melted all over and the sides are bubbly. Cover with foil and let stand for 10 minutes before serving. Slice and enjoy!

## PALOMAS

---

What's a Mexican fiesta without a paloma?

### INGREDIENTS

**½ cup blanco tequila**

**1 cup grapefruit juice (preferably freshly squeezed, but store-bought is yummy, too)**

**1 ounce freshly squeezed lime juice**

**¼ cup club soda or sparkling water**

**1 or 2 dashes simple syrup (don't overdo it if you use store-bought grapefruit juice!)**

**Lime slices for garnish**

Mix all ingredients in a pitcher. Stir, pour over ice, garnish, and enjoy.

This is enough for me and Nick on fiesta night, but for a crowd, you can use the quantities below.

### INGREDIENTS FOR PARTY PITCHER

**2 cups blanco tequila**

**4 cups grapefruit juice**

**½ cup freshly squeezed lime juice**

**1 cup club soda or sparkling water**

**Simple syrup to taste (start with two or three drops, then go from there)**









Summer

## PULLED PORK

---

I registered for a Dutch oven when Nick and I got married, and I am obsessed with it. I use it often, and it makes such a difference. I guess you can say that Dutch-oven meals have become a tradition in our house. One weekend I wanted to try something new, so I found a pulled-pork recipe online and started playing around with it. I will say, since I didn't have a mother to teach me how to cook, the internet has saved me! One of my favorite things to do is read the comments sections in online recipes so I can see what other people think of a dish and how they'd modify it for their families. It's like the ultimate mom advice: tons of people have already made the recipe, and they share their mistakes and fixes with you. Plus, they're all regular kitchen cooks like me (as opposed to gourmet chefs), so the advice is always simple.

The Dutch oven does pretty much all the work in this recipe, so it's a win-win. You just prep it and let it cook. I make the rub and season the meat the day before. Then I put it in the oven in the morning, and by lunchtime it's ready to go.

### INGREDIENTS

**2 tablespoons salt**

**2 tablespoons ground black pepper**

**2 tablespoons dark brown sugar, firmly packed**

**2 tablespoons paprika**

**½ tablespoon cayenne pepper**

**4 pounds pork shoulder**

**2 cups apple juice**

**1 cup cider vinegar**

**2 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce**

**½ tablespoon liquid smoke (so important—I never knew it existed until I found this recipe!)**

**½ tablespoon garlic powder**

**Butter and brioche buns for serving**







### MAKING IT FROM SCRATCH . . .

In a small bowl, combine the salt, pepper, brown sugar, paprika, and cayenne pepper. Rub the mixture all over the pork, gently pressing it into the meat. Cover and refrigerate for at least 2 hours or overnight.

In a medium bowl, combine the apple juice, vinegar, Worcestershire sauce, liquid smoke, and garlic powder. Pour the mixture into a Dutch oven, then add the pork and cover with foil. Roast for about 4 hours, until the pork pulls apart easily. Be sure to baste the pork with the liquid every hour or so.

Remove the roast from the oven and shred the pork with two forks or tongs.

Melt some butter in a skillet over medium heat. Slice the buns horizontally and place them in the skillet cut side down for a few minutes, until they're lightly toasted and golden.

Serve the pork on the buns with toppings of your choice!

## CITRUS BEEF STIR-FRY

---

Nick loves Chinese food, and we ordered it all the time when he'd come visit me in New York (I was working on *Total Request Live* for MTV in those days). Some of my favorite memories are of us eating out of take-out boxes and sharing chopsticks—silly stuff that you think is so special and sexy when you're newly dating.

Fun fact: Nick's first job in LA when he was just starting out with 98 Degrees was delivering Chinese food in Burbank, California. One night in New York when we ordered food together, I wore sexy pajamas, plus full hair and makeup (I came from set on *TRL*). I went to answer the door, and he said, "I delivered Chinese food for years just waiting for someone to answer the door like that! This guy isn't getting it!" He made me go back to the room while he answered my door.

We moved into our first home together a month after our wedding, in August of 2011. Whenever I cooked, I loved making recipes "ours" by changing ingredients or celebrating things that were special to us. We had bought a wok together, and I wanted to make the first meal in our new home memorable, so I paid tribute to our Chinese takeout days by making this recipe from a Williams Sonoma cookbook we received as a wedding gift. Instead of tangerines, I used oranges, since they are always available and easy to get.

Nick loves this dish. If we're ever on a show like *The Newlywed Game*, I know what Nick will say when the host asks him, "Out of all the dishes Vanessa cooks for you, which one is your favorite?" There's a lot of work that goes into the prep, but it only takes a few minutes to cook, and it's so worth it. The original recipe called for minced fresh ginger, and I used to love making it, but now I just buy ginger paste to save a bit of time. I hope you try this recipe and love it as much as we do. I use 1 tablespoon regular soy sauce and 1 tablespoon dark soy sauce. If you can't find a Fresno chili pepper, substitute red bell peppers. It will be just as yummy!



## INGREDIENTS

**1½ pounds flank steak**  
**¾ teaspoon granulated sugar, divided**  
**¼ teaspoon baking soda**  
**Salt to taste**  
**1 teaspoon grated orange or tangerine zest**  
**½ cup freshly squeezed orange or tangerine juice**  
**1 tablespoon rice wine vinegar**  
**1 tablespoon hoisin sauce**  
**2 tablespoons soy sauce**  
**1 teaspoon chili bean paste**  
**1 teaspoon ginger paste**  
**½ teaspoon sesame oil**  
**¼ teaspoon cornstarch**  
**4 tablespoons canola oil, divided**  
**1 green bell pepper, seeded and thinly sliced**  
**1 yellow onion, thinly sliced**  
**1 Fresno chili pepper, seeded and thinly sliced**  
**2 garlic cloves, minced**  
**Rice, cooked according to package instructions**

## MAKING IT FROM SCRATCH . . .

Cut the flank steak into slices that are about ⅛ inch thick. Place the slices in a bowl and toss with ½ teaspoon sugar, baking soda, and salt. Let sit for at least half an hour at room temperature.

To make the sauce (this is the time-consuming part!), whisk the citrus zest and juice, rice wine, hoisin sauce, soy sauce, chili bean paste, ginger paste, sesame oil, remaining ¼ teaspoon sugar, and cornstarch together in a small bowl. When the sugar and cornstarch dissolve, you're ready for the next step.

Gently pat the beef dry with a paper towel. In a wok or large skillet, heat 2 tablespoons of the canola oil over high heat. Add a layer of beef, searing it on one side for about a minute. Flip the meat and sear it on the other side for about 30 seconds. Put the beef in a colander to drain and repeat the process with the remaining beef.

Quickly wipe out the wok with a paper towel, then heat the remaining 2 tablespoons of canola oil over high heat. Stir-fry the bell pepper and onion for about 3 minutes, then stir in the chili pepper and garlic. Stir-fry for about one minute. By this point, your house will smell *a-mazing*! Next, pour in the reserved sauce, then add the beef, cooking until the sauce thickens, 1 to 2 minutes. Place all that yumminess on a serving plate along with rice and enjoy.



## LACHEY LOBSTER ROLLS

---

It was an ordinary day on *Top Chef Junior*, and I was in the kitchen watching a bunch of young kids cook lobster. I couldn't help but think two things: one, what an amazing opportunity we're giving these kids who love cooking. And two, if a kid can cook lobster, damn it, I can, too.

I will never forget when one of our young chefs said she had never felt more normal and welcomed by other people than she did on our set. She always felt like an outcast at home because most girls her age were into other things, and all she wanted to do was cook. She said she finally felt like she had peers her age who were also into spices, umami flavors, and learning how to sous-vide a duck and that she didn't feel so "weird." I completely melted. I was so happy to see this little girl find her way and meet other kids who shared her love of cooking. Some people see cooking as a chore, but others discover joy in it. So as I watched these kids make the most amazing dishes, I got inspired.

There was a lot of lobster left over after that shoot because the task for that day was to humanely cook one. Who knew you could do it humanely, with no screams? I immediately asked Jamie, the head of the culinary department at the show, what I could do with the lobster, and she suggested lobster rolls. You just add some onion, celery, lemon juice and zest, mayo, and crème fraîche to bind. Of course I panicked and asked her for measurements and cooking time. That's the thing about chefs—they usually wing it and leave measurements to the non-pros. For them, cooking is an art, and you can ditch the measurements and just *feel it*, if you will. So I went home, lobster tails and other ingredients in hand.

The next day, Nick had some friends over to watch sports, and I decided to surprise them with my "kids-can-do-it-and-so-can-I" dish. There were four guys, so I thought, okay, four tails equals four sandwiches. I literally used a handful of this and a handful of that, a dash of this and a dash of that. I prayed it would turn out okay. But if there's anything I've learned on *Top Chef Junior*, other than to clean my cooking station, it's to *taste* as you cook! And lemme tell you, it tasted delicious.

I toasted the buns, served them up, and I have never had a quicker positive reaction. That was years ago, and to this day an ongoing joke with Nick's friends is that if I love you, I

will make you my lobster rolls. There is a good amount of prep involved, but the results are so worth it! As I was putting this book together, Nick and his friends piped in with, “V, the lobster rolls *have* to be in there!”

So here you go. This is something special that has become a Lachey staple. And don’t panic: I *am* giving you measurements. You can also play with the ingredients yourself. Want more crunch? Add more celery. Want more citrus? Add more zest. Make it your own! ‘Cause this one is mine, and I love that I can share it with you!

#### INGREDIENTS

**4 frozen lobster tails (about 4 ounces each)**

**Mayonnaise to taste**

**2 tablespoons crème fraîche**

**1 tablespoon chopped chives**

**1 teaspoon chopped fresh tarragon or ¼ teaspoon dried tarragon**

**¼ cup finely chopped red onion**

**¼ cup finely chopped celery**

**Zest of 1 lemon (really elevates flavor!)**

**1 tablespoon freshly squeezed lemon juice (maybe less; you don’t want it runny)**

**½ teaspoon Old Bay Seasoning**

**Salt and ground black pepper to taste**

**Ghee or butter**

**4 brioche buns**

**Chopped flat-leaf parsley for garnish**

#### MAKING IT FROM SCRATCH . . .

Steam the lobster tails for 6 to 12 minutes. Immediately plunge them into an ice bath to stop the cooking. Allow the lobster tails to cool, then drain, remove the shells, chop the meat, and set aside.

In a large bowl, combine the mayonnaise, crème fraîche, chives, tarragon, onion, celery, lemon zest and juice, Old Bay Seasoning, and salt and pepper. Add the lobster, mix well, and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes.

Melt the ghee in a large skillet. Place the buns in the skillet cut side down for a few minutes, until they’re lightly toasted and golden. If you want you can hollow out a roll as shown (or if your local store doesn’t have the bread you need), but my favorite way is a toasted brioche bun.

Spoon the lobster mixture into the buns, top with parsley, and serve with chips and a cold beer!







## NICKY'S NECTAR

---

One of my favorite things to do when I plan a party with my girl Corrie is think of a specialty drink with our go-to guy John. I always think about the guest of honor or occasion and go from there. This one was created for Nick on Father's Day. I wanted something refreshing but also with a "Nick kick."

### INGREDIENTS

**1 ounce Rittenhouse rye**

**1 ounce Cynar**

**½ ounce freshly squeezed  
lemon juice**

**½ ounce ginger simple syrup  
(available online)**

**1 ounce India pale ale**

### MAKING IT FROM SCRATCH . . .

In a cocktail shaker, combine the rye, Cynar, lemon juice, ginger syrup, and ale. Shake vigorously for 5 to 10 seconds *without* ice. Hold the shaker tightly closed, because the contents will be under pressure from the IPA. The shaking creates foam and mimics the effect of an egg white. Open the shaker and add a scoop of ice. Close the shaker and shake vigorously for 5 to 10 seconds to chill. Then strain the contents into the other side of the shaker and discard the ice. Now that the contents are cold, shake again *without* ice for another 5 to 10 seconds. Strain into a rocks glass or coupe. The cocktail will be cloudy and will separate in the glass.

Enjoy!

## FLANK STEAK

---

In chapter 10, I talked about Nick's grilling skills (love you, babe). But I will say that one thing he does *not* mess up is our flank steak. Here's how he does it.

### INGREDIENTS

**1/3 cup olive oil**  
**2 garlic cloves, minced**  
**2 tablespoons red wine vinegar**  
**1/3 cup soy sauce**  
**1/4 cup honey**  
**1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper**  
**2 to 3 pounds flank steak**

### MAKING IT FROM SCRATCH . . .

In a large nonreactive bowl, combine the olive oil, garlic, vinegar, soy sauce, honey, and pepper. Add the flank steak and cover with clear plastic wrap. Refrigerate at least 1 hour or, even better, overnight. Turn the meat once if you can. You can also put the meat and marinade in a large ziplock bag so all the juices get soaked up. Just put the bag in a bowl or on a plate in case it leaks.

When you're ready to cook, take the bowl out of the refrigerator and let sit at room temperature for about 30 minutes.

Heat the grill to 400 degrees.

Remove the meat from the marinade and grill it over direct heat for 3 minutes per side. Then move the meat off the direct heat and grill it for 4 minutes per side.

Take the steak off the grill, cover with foil, and let it rest for 5 minutes. Don't cut into it right away! Then thinly slice the meat against the grain. I like the ends, which are a little more done, and Nick likes the middle.



## JALAPEÑO POPPER SPREAD

---

Nick is the king of saying, “Hey, babe? I have some friends coming over. In an hour.” Not gonna lie: I may roll my eyes at times, but in the end I always love entertaining. I want our house to be the house where my kids and their friends want to hang out, which means I always need to have snacks on hand.

Over the years I’ve kicked up my dips a notch, and this one is Nick’s favorite. When he springs get-togethers on me, I’m always armed with a dip. Also, you can halve the recipe if you want to make it for a smaller occasion, like a double-date night.

### INGREDIENTS

**2 8-ounce packages cream cheese, softened**

**1 cup mayonnaise**

**½ cup shredded Monterey Jack cheese**

**1 4-ounce can diced jalapeño peppers, drained**

**1 4-ounce can diced green chilies, drained**

**1 5-ounce can all-white-meat chicken breast, drained (optional)**

**1 cup shredded Parmesan cheese**

**½ cup panko**

### MAKING IT FROM SCRATCH . . .

Preheat the oven to 400°F.

Place the cream cheese in a microwave-safe bowl and heat it for 15 to 20 seconds on medium power. Take it out and stir so the middle gets as warm as the outer edges. Repeat the process if necessary until the cream cheese melts. Stir in the mayonnaise, Monterey Jack, jalapeños, green chilies, and chicken (if using). Spread the mixture evenly into a 9 x 13-inch baking dish. Top with the Parmesan, then with the panko.

Bake for 25 to 30 minutes. Cool and serve with crackers, bagel chips, or tortilla chips.





## MINNILLO BEANS

---

As I said, my stepmom, Donna, didn't like to cook. We joked that she was the queen of the microwave. But one day out of nowhere she made these amazing non-microwave beans. She later told me that she got the recipe from one of my dad's air force friends who made them for a party in Charleston.

I have so much respect for my dad's time in the military. The camaraderie he shared with his fellow airmen ran deep: they worked together and played together, and there was a party or event almost every weekend. If you didn't go to a party, you *had* to host the next one. And they had a funny way of telling you: you would come home one day after the party you missed, and your yard would be full of pink plastic flamingos. I guess that's military party etiquette—or at least it was among my dad's buddies. I remember coming home one day from school and being mortified to see dozens of plastic flamingos in our yard. In retrospect, I got an amazing recipe out of the fiasco, so it was worth a little teen angst!

This was my first glimpse into the practice of sharing recipes and spreading the love as opposed to hoarding them like a mean old-school grandmother who doesn't tell you all the ingredients on purpose—or who develops “recipe amnesia” when you ask her how to make something. These beans are great for a crowd, so when Nick and I were getting ready to host our first summer BBQ, I asked Donna for her recipe. I can't believe I never made them earlier in life. I guess I was too busy trying to find my place in the world rather than hosting parties! It's so simple, and because I was a novice cook at the time, it was the perfect way to wow the crowd without a lot of effort. That little burst of confidence was all I needed to keep on cooking . . .







## INGREDIENTS

**1 28-ounce can baked beans**

**1 16-ounce can kidney beans,  
drained**

**1 16-ounce can lima beans,  
drained**

**1 ¼ pounds lean ground turkey,  
browned and drained**

**10 slices turkey bacon, cooked  
and chopped into bite-size  
pieces**

**½ cup ketchup**

**2 tablespoons white vinegar**

**¾ cup brown sugar, firmly  
packed**

**1 cup chopped white onion**

## MAKING IT FROM SCRATCH . . .

Preheat the oven to 325°F.

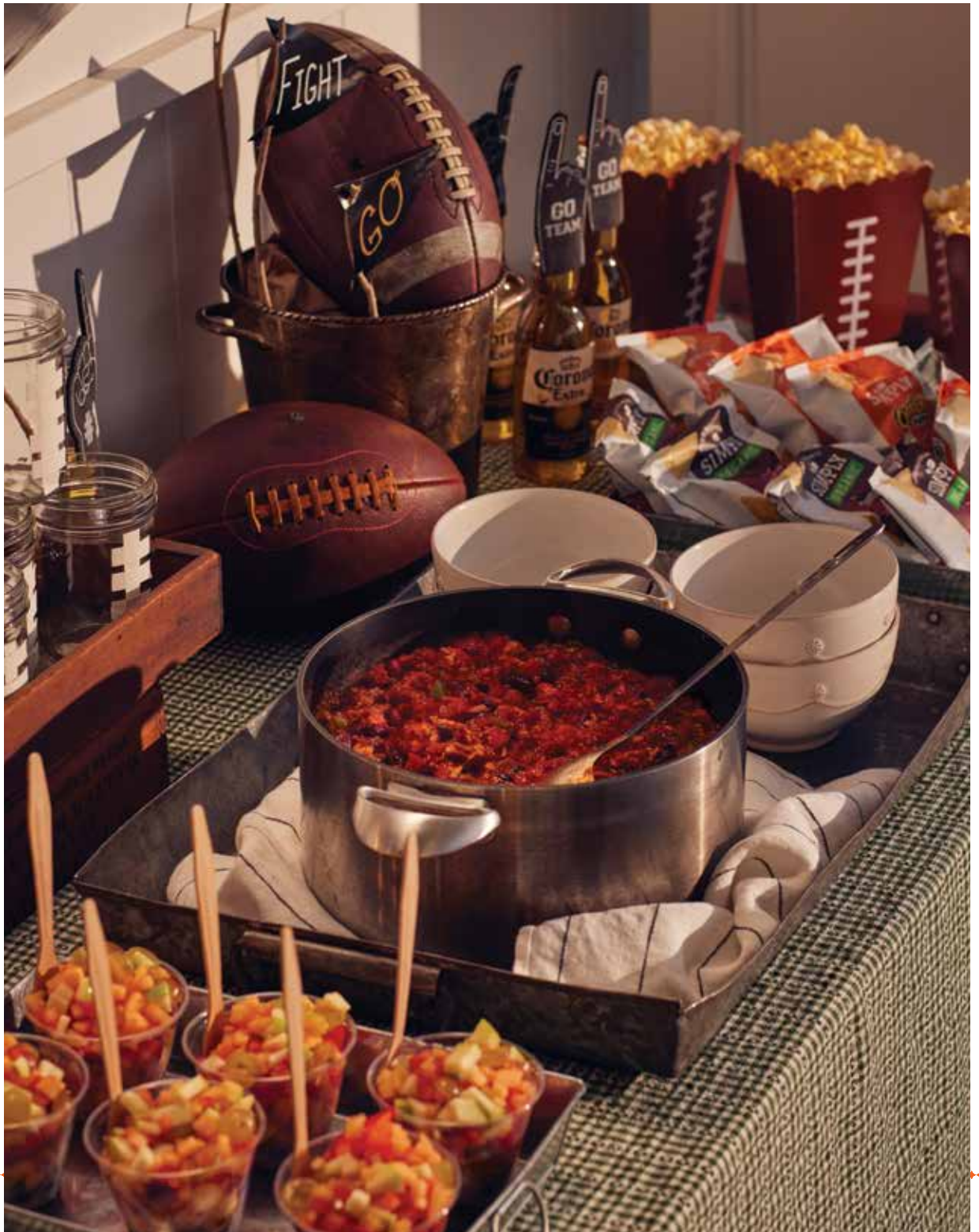
In a large bowl, combine all ingredients. Pour into a casserole dish and bake for two hours. Alternatively, transfer to a slow cooker and cook for four hours on low.

Over the years I have tweaked the recipe a bit and made it my own. Donna's recipe called for ground beef, for example, but I substituted turkey. I made these for Nick's grandmother for her eightieth birthday party, and *that* was when she started to warm up to me. It wasn't until she tried the Minnillo beans that our relationship truly began. Food can help solve any issue! That and a good bottle of wine.

I always assemble these beans the night before and just pop them in the oven the next day if it's a sit-down meal. I use the slow cooker if it's a BBQ-and-pool kind of day so that people can graze for hours. It's a great summer dish *and* a great way to win over a skeptical grandma.



Fall





## V'S GAME-DAY CHILI

---

This is one of my go-to fall recipes because it pairs perfectly with . . . football season. On Sundays, Nick is pretty much out of commission and glued to not one but several TVs, watching games with his friends (the Bengals are his team, but he watches them all). When we were younger, we would go to bars and watch games all day, but as we got older, we started a tradition of having his buddies over to the house. As I mentioned earlier, his friends know they can come over any Sunday during the fall for football and chili and beer. Honestly, it's pretty good prep for having teenage boys in the house one day.

This chili is a staple because it can sit in a slow cooker all day and stay warm, whether people want to eat it during kickoff, at halftime, or after the game to celebrate (or forget that their team just lost).

### INGREDIENTS FOR THE CHILI

**2 pounds lean ground turkey, browned in canola oil and drained**

**1 white onion, chopped**

**1 red bell pepper, seeded and chopped**

**1 green bell pepper, seeded and chopped**

**Salt and ground black pepper to taste**

**1 16-ounce can kidney beans, drained**

**1 16-ounce can black beans, drained**

**1 28-ounce can crushed tomatoes**

**1 15-ounce can petite diced tomatoes, with liquid**

**1 6-ounce can tomato paste**

**1 teaspoon ground cumin**

**1 teaspoon dried oregano**

**1 teaspoon paprika**

**1 teaspoon chili powder**

**½ teaspoon cayenne pepper**

## INGREDIENTS FOR SERVING

**Shredded cheese, diced onion or sliced scallions, and sour cream**

## MAKING IT FROM SCRATCH . . .

Combine the chili ingredients in a slow cooker and cook on high for 4 hours, stirring occasionally.

I usually put this together in the morning, so that by noon, when our guests are hungry, it's ready to go. By late afternoon it's still good if you leave it in the slow cooker on warm.

Serve with shredded cheese, some diced onion or sliced scallions, and a dollop of sour cream on top.

## COZY BEEF STEW

---

Like most people, Nick is a sucker for a cozy home-cooked meal. And I am all about comfort food. I definitely think that we need to make healthy choices when it comes to eating and exercising, but for me, “cheat days” and cozy comfort meals here and there are 100 percent worth it. The first time I made this beef stew for Nick was during March Madness one year when the Cincinnati Bearcats were in the Sweet 16. (If you’re not a sports fanatic like my husband, I’m talking about college basketball.) He loved it so much that he told me to save the recipe, and it’s become one of our favorite fall dishes to make. It’s perfect on a cool or cold night. My kids are huge fans now, too.

This one takes time, but that’s also one of my favorite things about it. I’m all for keeping things quick and simple, but sometimes it’s nice to savor the experience of cooking. The kids want to be in the kitchen, and Nick sneaks in and steals bites of meat while I cook. I get to hang with the family and enjoy some music and wine while prepping. I start this early because it needs to cook for a long time. I’ve changed a few things over the years to make it ours.

### INGREDIENTS

**3 to 4 pounds boneless beef chuck, cubed (I buy it precut for ease)**

**Salt and ground black pepper to taste**

**2 tablespoons canola oil**

**6 to 8 slices thick-cut bacon, chopped (this is important because the grease from the bacon is what you cook with)**

**1 cup chopped onion**

**1 cup chopped carrots (I like to use sliced or diced baby carrots)**

**1 cup chopped celery**

**2 garlic cloves, minced**

**2 tablespoons unsalted butter**

**6 tablespoons all-purpose flour**

**4 cups (1 32-ounce box) beef stock or beef broth**

**2 tablespoons tomato paste**

**1 tablespoon chopped flat-leaf parsley**

**1 teaspoon fresh thyme leaves (fresh herbs kick up the flavor)**

**1 teaspoon fresh rosemary leaves**

**1 bay leaf**

**1 ½ pounds small unpeeled red-skinned potatoes, quartered (I buy the tiny ones in a bag)**

**Cooked rice for serving**

### **MAKING IT FROM SCRATCH . . .**

Position a rack in the lower third of the oven. Preheat to 325°F.

Lay the cut beef on a cookie sheet and generously season with salt and pepper. Set aside.

In a large Dutch oven, heat the oil over medium heat. Add the chopped bacon, stirring occasionally until browned, about 7 minutes. Using tongs, transfer the bacon to a paper-towel-lined plate and set aside.

Drain the bacon grease into a glass bowl or measuring cup. Return 2 tablespoons of the grease to the pot and heat over medium-high heat. Add just enough beef to cover the bottom of the pot (this might take a few batches). You want each piece touching the bottom. Cook for 5 to 7 minutes, turning the meat to make sure all sides get browned. Transfer to a rack set over a cookie sheet to drain while you brown the rest of the beef.

Once all the beef is browned, pour another 2 tablespoons of bacon fat into the Dutch oven and heat over medium heat. Add the onion, carrot, celery, and garlic. Cook for 5 minutes, stirring constantly. Add the butter and stir. Once the butter is melted, add the flour. Keep stirring. (This part goes quickly, so it's wise to have everything prepped before cooking.) Gradually stir in the stock, about a cup at a time. Mix until combined and pasty, and keep adding and mixing. Once it's all mixed in, stir in the tomato paste, then add the parsley, thyme, rosemary, and bay leaf. Return the beef to the pot and bring to a slow boil. Cover tightly, transfer to the oven, and cook for 90 minutes.





Remove the stew from the oven and place the pot on the stove over medium heat. Add the potatoes. (The potatoes should not be too large, because if they are, they won't cook fully.) Replace the lid and simmer for 45 minutes.

Serve over rice, sprinkling the reserved bacon pieces on top. We usually have to grab our bacon quickly, because Brooklyn has become a bacon bandit. She steals it and eats it before we can even reach for it!

## GROWN-UP MAC & CHEESE

---

There are so many varieties of this classic dish now. There's creamy mac, made with a roux base, and bricklike mac that reminds me of being a kid. There's mac with meat, veggie mac, lobster mac, and French onion mac. Over the years I've played with this recipe, trying different cheeses, adding ham and bell peppers, and sometimes using a different base. I always come back to the fact that a roux is the ultimate base for creamy mac and cheese. And trust me—I've tried them all.

Fun fact: the first time I made this I had to google "roux." The recipe just said to make your own roux, and being a newbie cook I had no clue what that meant. Basically, roux is a butter-and-flour mixture used as a base for sauces. For this recipe, I make it before adding the milk. You have to either use warm milk or add it slowly, otherwise you will end up with big clumps of flour. Yuck. Make sure you let the butter-and-flour mixture cook for a few minutes, too, to prevent your mac and cheese from tasting like chalk (the flour taste has to burn off).

### INGREDIENTS

**Kosher salt**

**1 pound elbow macaroni**

**4 cups whole milk**

**6 tablespoons unsalted butter**

**½ cup all-purpose flour**

**½ teaspoon ground black pepper**

**1 4-ounce can diced jalapeño peppers, drained**

**12 ounces grated Gruyère cheese**

**8 ounces grated pepper Jack cheese**

### MAKING IT FROM SCRATCH . . .

Preheat the oven to 375°F.

Bring a large pot of water to a boil over high heat. Add a generous amount of kosher salt. I mean, salt it! It should taste like the ocean in there. Add the macaroni and cook according to package directions. Drain, rinse quickly, and set aside.

Warm the milk in a saucepan over medium-low heat, but do not boil. This makes it easier to blend with the roux. Cold milk won't work.

Melt the butter in large stainless steel pot (one that won't scratch—I don't want you to hate me afterward). This will be the pot in which your mac and cheese comes together in the end. Add the flour and cook, whisking constantly, for two minutes.

While whisking, gradually add the warm milk, a cup or less at a time. As it thickens up, add more, whisking constantly. Important! Don't add all of the milk at once.

Remove the pan from the heat, then add the pepper and jalapeños and stir. Add the cheeses and stir again. (I like to use a silicone spatula spoon, not a whisk.) Add the macaroni and stir again.

Pour the mixture into a greased 9 x 13-inch baking dish and bake for 30 to 35 minutes, until bubbly. Enjoy!













Winter

# LACHEY LASAGNA

---

This is my favorite thing to make for a large crowd or to give to a new mama, because when you're going on two hours of sleep after feeding, changing, and burping a newborn, you can barely remember the word for lasagna, let alone how to make it. During any season, this recipe is always a crowd pleaser, but it's an especially good way to warm up after a cold winter day. Bonus: you can save the leftover sauce to make another dish later. The unpredictable chaos that is life with young kids has led me to love simple recipes like this. Plus, even though it's easy to cook, it makes you *feel* like a chef, since you can say, "Hey, I'm cooking with fennel seeds and basil."

## INGREDIENTS

**1 pound sweet Italian turkey sausage, casings removed**

**1 pound lean ground turkey (I use the 1-pound Jennie-O packs)**

**½ cup chopped or minced white onion**

**2 garlic cloves, crushed or minced**

**1 28-ounce can crushed tomatoes**

**1 12-ounce can tomato paste**

**1 15-ounce can tomato sauce**

**½ cup water**

**2 tablespoons granulated sugar**

**1½ teaspoons dried basil**

**½ teaspoon fennel seeds**

**1 teaspoon Italian seasoning**

**1 tablespoon salt, plus more as needed**

**¼ teaspoon ground black pepper**

**4 tablespoons chopped flat-leaf parsley, divided**

**12 lasagna noodles, or more or fewer to taste**

**1 15-ounce tub ricotta cheese**

**1 egg**

**¾ pound presliced low-moisture mozzarella cheese, divided**

**¾ cup grated Parmesan cheese, divided**



### MAKING IT FROM SCRATCH . . .

In a large dry Dutch oven, brown the sausage over medium heat, breaking it up into a crumble as you go. When it's almost brown, add the ground turkey. When the meat is fully cooked, add the onion and garlic and sauté until the onion is translucent. Then add the crushed tomatoes, tomato paste, and tomato sauce. Add the water and mix well. Next, add the sugar, basil, fennel, Italian seasoning, salt, pepper, and 2 tablespoons of the parsley.

Simmer, covered, for 90 minutes (or more). I like this because it doesn't require an exact time, so if I'm cooking and Camden throws a ball in the house that hits a vase and makes water spill all over Brooklyn's dress while Phoenix simultaneously needs a diaper change, the lasagna doesn't get ruined. When you have kids, the romantic process of cooking at a leisurely pace while sipping wine isn't always realistic, so "simple and easy" is my go-to style. This sauce requires only that you simmer it and occasionally stir and taste.

Cheat trick: at this point, if I'm too busy, or if I just don't feel like assembling the lasagna, I'll put some of this sauce over spaghetti, and *boom!* Dinner is served. I save the rest of the sauce and assemble the lasagna the next day.

You can also freeze a small portion of the sauce, and when you're in a pinch, put that frozen chunk in a pot on the stove over low heat. It works for all sorts of pastas, and it will warm up nicely and no one will know it's not fresh!

Okay, back to the lasagna . . .

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Cook the lasagna noodles according to the package directions. Then drain the noodles and rinse under cold water. At this point, I lay them out on a cookie sheet so I can easily grab them as I'm assembling.

In a medium bowl, mix the ricotta with the egg. Add the remaining 2 tablespoons of parsley and salt to taste.

Preheat oven to 375°F.

Spread 1½ cups of the meat sauce on the bottom of a 9 x 13-inch casserole dish. Place half the noodles on top of the sauce in an overlapping layer. (I use six of them in this step.) Spread with half the ricotta cheese mixture. Then top with half the mozzarella cheese



slices in an even layer (cut the slices to fit if you have to). Next, add another 1½ cups of the meat sauce, then sprinkle with ¼ cup of the Parmesan.

Repeat the layers, starting with the noodles, then the ricotta mixture, then the mozzarella. Top with 1½ cups sauce and the remaining ½ cup Parmesan cheese. If you have sauce leftover, save it for another use.

Cover the dish tightly with foil and bake for 25 minutes. Remove the foil, then bake for an additional 25 minutes.

I like bringing this to families along with a ready-to-assemble Caesar salad. I just put precut bagged lettuce, croutons, Caesar dressing, and cheese in a bag. Add a box of frozen garlic bread, and bring some dessert, like cookies from a local bakery (or you can bring homemade cookies if you're a magical unicorn with lots of free time). You can also bring fruit for the kids. A nice bottle of red wine is the cherry on top. This is the most thoughtful thing you can give a family with a new baby or a person who's going through a crazy or stressful time—the gift of a home-cooked meal. I know we can all order out, but sometimes you just want comfort food made with love.

#### LIFE FROM SCRATCH IN ACTION

### *What Is Mise en Place?*

**On *Top Chef Junior* I learned the term *mise en place*, which is a French cooking term that means “putting in place.” Once I heard it, I realized I was already kind of doing it. It’s all about preparation—it means getting everything measured and prepped and ready so that the actual cooking process can be stress-free. My lasagna recipe is one that definitely benefits from a little *mise en place*.**

## CHEESY HASH BROWNS

---

If you've ever taken a road trip across the country, especially through the South, then you've pulled over and had cheesy *something*! You can get bacon, eggs, cheesy hash browns, and a stack of pancakes on the side.

One of my favorite meals to eat out is breakfast because it's savory and sweet—it's meat and potatoes and veggies and, yes, cheese! But with three kiddos, eating out for breakfast isn't as fun, plus I'm usually still in my robe and haven't brushed my hair or teeth until the kids have eaten. So I created this recipe for southern "road-trip-inspired" cheesy hash browns because I wanted a yummy breakfast spread for my family—something that, on weekends, can bring us together at the table (just not at a roadside diner).

I take the time to cook the onions in the butter before I combine them with the rest of the ingredients because the kids are very into texture, and they don't like the crunch of an onion in their cheesy potatoes. Yes, there are all kinds of ways people have re-created hash browns, but this is our favorite!

### INGREDIENTS

**½ cup (1 stick) unsalted butter**

**½ cup chopped white onion**

**1 10.5-ounce can condensed cream of chicken soup**

**16 ounces sour cream**

**¼ teaspoon ground black pepper**

**1 30-ounce bag frozen hash brown potatoes**

**2 cups shredded Colby Jack cheese, divided**

### MAKING IT FROM SCRATCH . . .

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

Melt the butter in a pan set over medium to medium-low heat. You don't want to burn the butter or overcook the onions. This is just to soften them for the dish.

Add the onion and cook, stirring constantly, for 5 minutes. Make sure they don't brown. Turn the heat down if you need to. A nice frothy bubbling in the pan is perfect. Remove from the heat and set aside.

In a large bowl, combine the soup, sour cream, and pepper. Add the hash browns. Right from the freezer is fine! I throw the bag on the counter a few times to loosen the potatoes.



Add the onion mixture and mix well. I use a spatula to scrape the sides while mixing so nothing is wasted or left in the bowl. Add 1½ cups Colby Jack and mix again.

Pour the mixture into a greased 9 x 13-inch baking dish. Top with the remaining ½ cup Colby Jack.

Bake, uncovered, for 45 minutes. Let cool and enjoy! The leftovers are yummy the next day, too.





# MONKEY BREAD

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Monkey bread is a kid favorite in our household, but it's also a Nick favorite! When a friend realized I was making biscuits and pancakes and cutting them into small pieces, she said, "You should try monkey bread! The kids will love the pieces." I had never heard of it. I thought it must have been bite-size banana bread or something. Nope—*better*! It's cinnamon-and-sugar biscuits baked in a cake pan with a butter-and-brown-sugar glaze. To eat them, you just pull them apart. Pure deliciousness. It's a great sweet option next to savory casseroles when you have a large brunch get-together. I started with a Pillsbury recipe and then played with the ingredients to make it my own.

## INGREDIENTS

**½ cup granulated sugar**  
**1 teaspoon ground cinnamon**  
**2 16.3-ounce cans Pillsbury Grands! Flaky Layers Original Biscuits, chilled**  
**½ cup raisins**  
**1 cup brown sugar, firmly packed**  
**¾ cup (1 ½ sticks) melted butter**

## MAKING IT FROM SCRATCH . . .

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

Grease a 12-cup Bundt pan with cooking spray. In a large (gallon-size) ziplock bag, mix the granulated sugar and cinnamon.

Separate the dough into 16 biscuits; cut each into quarters. Shake the biscuits in the bag to coat with the sugar mixture. Arrange the biscuits in the pan, distributing the raisins evenly among the biscuit pieces. Sprinkle any remaining sugar mixture over the biscuits.

In small bowl, mix the brown sugar and butter, then pour the mixture over the biscuit pieces.

Bake for 30 to 40 minutes, or until the bread is golden brown and no longer doughy in the center. Gently loosen the bread away from the edges of the pan with a spatula. Cool 5 minutes, then turn the pan upside down onto a serving plate. If any biscuit pieces or caramel remain in the pan, replace them on the bread. Serve warm.

## BROOKLYN'S BRUNCH CASSEROLE

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I have made the same breakfast casserole for Christmas morning ever since Nick and I spent our first winter holiday together. We started dating during the summer of 2006, and that December it was just the two of us at his house in California. It was actually the first Christmas I'd spent with a significant other, and I wanted to make something special for Christmas morning—something that didn't require a ton of work so we could relax and snuggle in bed and I wouldn't be stressed out trying to make something crazy like a soufflé! That's how the tradition started (basically, with me wanting to snuggle), and it has evolved over time. I change the bottom layer each year—sometimes it's biscuits; sometimes it's potatoes; sometimes it's crescent rolls—but it's always delicious and easy. Instead of slaving away over homemade biscuits, I started using store-bought, and that way Brooklyn can help me cook by laying out the biscuits, as I mentioned earlier. It makes her feel so proud, and she's now part of the tradition, which I love.

Brooklyn is a girl after my own heart. She loves cooking, entertaining, and taking care of everyone. She also loves her sweet tea and biscuits! When I lived in Charleston, South Carolina, as a child, I learned to love southern staples like these. It's so special for me to be able to introduce these little culinary memories to my kids.

### INGREDIENTS

**1 pound breakfast sausage patties or links**

**½ white onion, chopped**

**1 16.3-ounce can Pillsbury Grands! Southern Homestyle Buttermilk Biscuits**

**6 eggs, well beaten**

**¼ to ½ cup whole milk**

**Salt and ground black pepper to taste**

**8 ounces shredded cheese blend of your choice**









### MAKING IT FROM SCRATCH . . .

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

In a large dry skillet, brown the sausage over medium heat, breaking it up into a crumble as you go. Do not drain.

Add the onion and sauté until translucent, about 5 minutes. (You can prepare the recipe up to this point the night before if you want to save time in the morning.)

Separate the dough into 8 biscuits; cut each into quarters. Arrange the pieces in a greased 9 x 13-inch baking dish. Bake for 8 minutes. (The biscuits won't be fully cooked at this point.) Remove from the oven and sprinkle the sausage-and-onion mixture over the top.

In a medium bowl, combine the eggs, milk, and salt and pepper, then pour the mixture over the entire dish. Bake for 15 minutes.

Remove the dish from the oven, sprinkle the cheese on top, then cook an additional 5 minutes. Let cool for 5 minutes before serving.

This will definitely warm you up during the winter months, and it's just as good the next day or as a late-night snack with ketchup. (Yes, ketchup!)