



# A CUP OF WHITE SPACE

Joy and Fun Are Essential Spices in the Kitchen

BY YASMINE MCGRANE • PHOTOS BY CLAY MCLACHLAN

**W**hite Space. It's hard to define, but something we all need a little more of. What I call White Space is about enjoying the moment. Creating breathing space within the day to be creative. Taking time for ourselves. Putting aside the To Do lists and smart phones so we can go back to being human beings rather than human doers.

If you read this magazine, I imagine you can relate.

A great place to find White Space? Start with what you eat and how you eat it.

In many cultures, taking time to fully enjoy the flavors and textures of food is the cultural norm. Having free time in the day to engage in spontaneous conversation with neighbors at a local café is part of the daily ritual. The value of breaking bread together as a family around the dinner table is ingrained in children. Enjoying the non-guilty pleasure that comes from decorating a table with beautiful linen napkins and raising children who crave diverse flavors in food is part of the fabric of life.

My siblings and I grew up with these values in Montréal, Canada. They were taught to us by our Swiss-French mother, as it was just her way of being. As an adult, though, actually living that way in today's fast-paced American culture has proved challenging.

When I was pregnant with my first child, Finnegan, I had a clear vision for how my family would eat. We'd encourage our kids to try different cuisines while still in diapers (secretly hoping their first word would be something decadent like "chocolate!"). We'd explore local farms as soon as they could walk and cook together as soon as it was safe. We'd host casual dinners where friends arrived while we were still cooking—vibrant conversation would simmer around us.

I'd bike with my kids to the local farmers' markets—like my Maman, who pulled me and my two siblings on a red toboggan over snow banks to the butcher and baker—and show them how to select seasonal ingredients. They would have a great cafeteria at school with healthy lunches and plenty of time to eat.

Once I was a mom, however, I noticed a gap growing between my vision and reality. I recall an early *aha!* moment at a friend's house with a bunch of moms and their kids. While the moms were enjoying wine, the hostess was cooking some amazing Caribbean-style dishes. The aroma of exotic spices filled the room. I thought, how wonderful for my kids to try these. Then I noticed other moms helping prepare "the kids' plates": hot dogs, mac-n-cheese and some plain peas.

I was a comparatively new mom, so naively asked why not serve the main dish to the little ones, as it truly looked

amazing. The response was a puzzled "Oh, this'll be much easier, believe us. And there's some 'green' on there." I arrogantly thought, "Well, not my kids." I was sure their eyes would light up at the more interesting dishes and they'd refuse the dogs in a bun.

All the children came running to the table. Plates of rolling peas and hot dogs were spread before them. I could see hesitation on the faces of my Finnegan and Delphine. I could tell they wanted to try the exotic dishes, but their new friends were loving their dogs. To my dismay, they ultimately chose the kids' plates. I tried to incent them with an over exuberant "Doesn't this smell amazing?!" while my head hovered over a pot of stewed chicken with coconut dumplings. I was left feeling embarrassed and defeated.

After that, I found myself putting my vision on hold for a year. I was a busy mom with an all-consuming home furnishing store to run. Making everything "easier," including meals, was a sound option. To my surprise, I found they even had kids' menus at all the restaurants—how I never knew that before I had kids is beyond me even today. And my kids gobbled it up, no problem. I justified to myself that it wasn't like I was serving processed meals, just "basic" dishes. But, in truth, there was no White Space in how we cooked, or ate, our food.

One rainy Sunday in October it hit me. A secret White Space indulgence of mine is to sip hot tea while watching a cooking show. Seeing Julia Child and Jacques Pépin slowly poach an egg is for some reason as relaxing to me as getting a massage. And cheaper. So that day, while watching a Food Network show called "Pioneer Woman"—a mom with four kids who lives on a rural cattle ranch in Oklahoma and loves to cook—my kids came into the room, snuggled up on the couch and started watching with me.

I saw how fascinated they were seeing her kids pick vegetables, roll dough for desserts after ranch chores and set the table. Did I have to live on a farm to live this way?

I seriously contemplated the idea as I headed to the kitchen to refill my tea. Then, right there, the answer came to me. Hanging on a wall in my kitchen, amid all the To Do lists, what I call my Vision Board was staring down at me. You've probably seen them before: a big sheet of cardboard you cover with photos and clips from magazines. I had made it about a year prior, filling it with pictures of happy moms cooking with kids. Skillet of fresh seasonal vegetables. Colorful farm eggs in a basket. All I had to do was recommit to my vision of cooking with one simple ingredient: White Space.

So I did.



Initially, it was a shock to the system weaning the family off quickly cooked and consumed meals. For all of us. But my Vision Board, hung prominently in the kitchen, was my guide. Soon I realized it wasn't as hard as I thought.

I decided to start with my eldest son, Finnegan, who was 5 at the time. He's a kid who loves sports and all things "boy." Would he find cooking at all interesting? When in doubt, head to the farmers' market. Rather than the typical scenario

of trying to grab what I can while keeping him from running off too far, I reversed my approach. I asked him what ingredients *he* found interesting. What would *he* want to cook with for dinner? What looked fresh, fun, tasty?

He bit, he jumped in, he became hooked. Getting him involved in the process from the beginning was key to growing his love for food.

Next stop: Mémé's kitchen. I knew their French grand-



mother, an amazing self-taught home cook, would inspire them. So while spending a few weeks at my parents' house that summer, I asked her to make her delicious plum tarts, Indian curries (did I mention my father is from Pakistan?), boeuf bourguignon and Sicilian pie pizzas. While Finnegan showed off his new garlic-chopping skills, she taught him how to make dough from scratch. All while humming French nursery rhymes together. The kids ate it up.

Of course, White Space isn't limited to the kitchen. Their Mémé had more in store and whisked them off to the fabric shop. She loves to sew, so she offered to make aprons for her budding young chefs. Having your kids pick out their favorite fabric and sew some simple aprons is genius.

To my surprise, Finnegan passed over baseballs and trains to select a pattern with sparrows in honor of our house we call The Sparrow House. Delphine picked out her favorite purple

fabric with polka dots—she knows what she wants. I fell in love with a colorful orange pattern because I read somewhere orange inspired change. And I was a girl on a mission to bring change to my kitchen. We brought our aprons home that summer and now wear them every night.

An important thing I learned is the value of building confidence in your kids in playful ways. Right out of the cooking shows, I call them Chef Finnegan and Chef Delphine, and they have fun answering me with a curt and hearty “Yes, Chef!” I teach them the steps to being a chef:

- Rule number one: Always wash hands.
  - Rule number two: Clean up your workspace as you go. ...
- “Yes, Chef!”

We hung a Swiss cowbell on our front porch and every night the kids take turns ringing it while yelling the French call-to-dinner “à table!”

For the next step in our White Space recipe, I thought, why not really take my kids back to their roots, and plant a vegetable garden. We got out tools and in one afternoon built a 4- by 8-foot raised bed. In goes the organic soil, then lines of kale, mâche lettuce and strawberries. It’s great fun watching the kids go out with their colanders and snip off greens to make a big salad by themselves. And when I go to the grocery store, I spend significantly less time buying produce because we have our own petit farm now!

For Christmas that year, Finnegan got *Pretend Soup—A Cookbook for Preschoolers & Up* by Mollie Katzen from his Godmother. The book’s recipes are broken down in fun pictures and easy steps, offering simple ways for even young children to start creating real dishes on their own (with your guidance, of course). Talk about empowering.

I knew I was on to something when friends came to dinner parties and were mesmerized watching Finnegan meticulously chop onions and taste-test sauces with his pinkie finger only to remark, “It’s a bit too sweet, Mommy, maybe a little ... um ... lemon or cardamom?” Then watch him get a plastic bag out, fill it with almonds and start hammering away with a rolling pin for the crushed nuts to top the fruit galette we were serving.

Comments flowed: “Wow, is he just a natural cook or what? I wish my children loved to cook. I can barely get them to eat anything; butter on pasta is considered five star for us.”

I could relate, for it reminded me of how I felt that year without White Space, back when I had to bribe Finnegan with an extra bedtime story just to finish dinner.

So I wondered: Was Finn just a kid who naturally liked to cook? Or were these the ingredients that could inspire more petit home chefs. I decided to test the same techniques on my then 4 year-old, Delphine. She was put in charge

of creating the name for the imaginary restaurant we were cooking in each night. She could choose either to be the sous-chef to Finnegan, or the customer in our restaurant who tasted what we cooked. After a few months, she was deciding on recipes and running the show. She even asked Santa for her own kitchen utensil set.

Here’s another fun thing: Some nights we have our own MasterChef competition. Just like on TV, when the timer buzzes, hands go up and you have to stop plating your dish. The chef who made each dish stands at the head of our dining table, telling the rest of the family the name of the dish, ingredients and inspiration behind it. My husband and I also have to get up and present what we have made. No one is safe. After each presentation, the others talk quietly and decide if you can “move on” in the competition. I pretend to cry if I get “sent home,” then thank them for the opportunity. Everyone bursts out in laughter.

My little guys are not just cooking, they are using their imaginations to come up with names for their dishes, learning presentation skills, practicing public speaking, gaining confidence in their abilities and experiencing the importance of sharing.

I knew I had handed over the spatula when one night I was so tired all I wanted to do was heat up leftovers. Finnegan would have none of it.

“Mommy, let’s get those baby shrimp out, bake up puff pastries and make Mémé’s shrimp curry *vol-au-vent* recipe you love. Now what about a mango lassi to go with it? It will be fun!”

Seriously? I’m exhausted, and “not tonight” was the first thought that came to mind. But, after catching my Vision Board eyeing me, I quickly found myself peeling ginger and humming in the kitchen.

My kids now remind me when it’s time to start dinner. Cooking on my own is just not an option. Between the two of them, they decide who is making the main and side dishes, while the other does the smoothie or dessert. I won’t pretend it’s not messy with flour spilled on the floor or fights over who gets to whisk the vinaigrette. But it’s actually “easier” than before. It was tiring when I used to negotiate how many vegetables they had to eat on their plate. Having them help make dinner, clean up their workspaces as they go and fight over who gets to decorate the table actually takes a lot of things off my To Do list.

When I think back to how it was before and where we are today I am thankful for one thing: White Space.

And a good Vision Board.

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