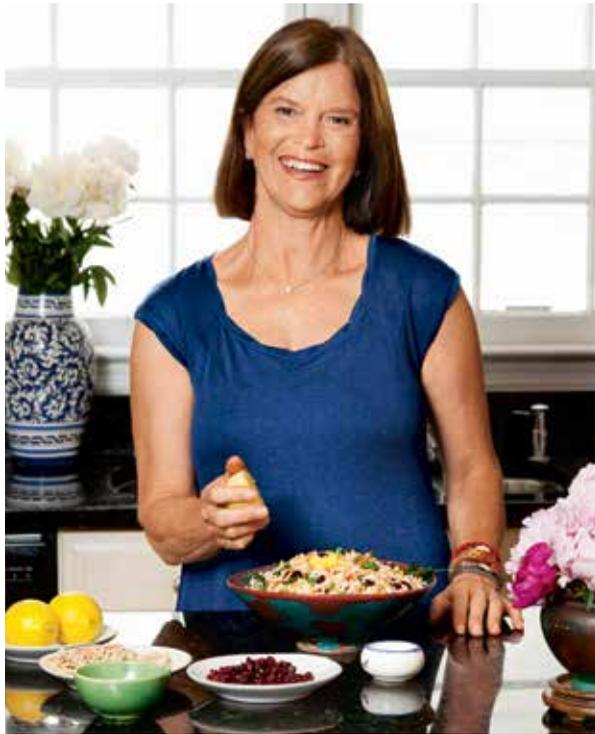


Meals With Meaning



When most people lose a job, they look to the future. This woman turned to the past

BY **ELINOR GRIFFITH**, Chappaqua, New York

I wandered into the kitchen. For the first time in my adult life I didn't have a job to go to. After 31 years as a senior editor at a national magazine I'd been let go. "What do I do now?" I wondered aloud.

In the back of my mind I could hear my father's voice. "Elinor, all you have to do is open two packets of yeast and put them in your mixing bowl." I remembered the day I'd first heard that advice. Another time when I'd felt lost.

I was 12 and had come home from school to find Dad in the kitchen. He was an art professor at the University of North Carolina, but that day he didn't have afternoon classes. So he took over our family's bread making. "How are things?" he asked.

I told him how the boy I liked wouldn't call me. How I couldn't understand my French teacher with her heavy accent. The world seemed like such a difficult and confusing place.

Dad nodded, then handed me two packets of yeast. "All you have to do is open these and put them in your mixing bowl." I did as he said. Next we stirred in flour, water, sugar, salt and some leftover oatmeal.

Once the dough rose we shaped it into five loaves. Soon the kitchen was filled with the most irresistible aroma. When the bread came out of the oven, Dad cut two thick slices and slathered on butter. *Mmmmm!* My worries? All gone.

"Can you clean up?" Dad said. "I need to go somewhere." He picked

up one loaf and some sketches he'd done and headed out. I watched as he tramped through the woods behind our house. What was he up to?

Two hours later he was back. "Your bread was a huge hit," he said. "The neighbors asked me to pass along their compliments."

We started giving out friendship bread all over Chapel Hill. A special delivery for the birth of a new baby, a sick neighbor, a promotion, or just because. "God loves a cheerful giver," I'd heard in church. It was true. It seemed like we always came home with something good. Fresh butter beans from someone's garden. A jar of pickled okra. The satisfaction of bringing joy to others.

Home-cooked meals were part of the fabric of our family. Part of my being. I didn't realize how much until I spent my sophomore year of college studying abroad in Lyon, France. I was terribly homesick. It didn't help that my landlady, Madame Loir, was standoffish.

One rainy fall day I was in my room studying. The room was so dark it felt like night. I glanced up at the chandelier. No wonder. Madame Loir had removed two of the lightbulbs.

I went down the hall to find a vocabulary book. When I returned, there she was. "Turn off the light!" she scolded. "Electricity is costly." Why didn't she just come out and say that she didn't want me there? I burst out sobbing.

Madame Loir looked alarmed.

RECIPE OF THE DAY Elinor puts the finishing touches on her cranberry couscous salad.

PHOTOS BY SCOTT JONES

“Would you like to eat something?” she asked. “With me?”

I turned off the light and followed her to the kitchen. From a stockpot she dished out two bowls of potato-leek soup. It smelled heavenly. We sat across from each other. For the first time in the six weeks I’d lived in her house, we had a real conversation in French. She carefully enunciated each word so I could understand. Her husband had been a successful silk merchant, she said, until synthetic fibers became all the rage. That probably explained her frugality.

“He is away on business,” she said, gazing down at her bowl. Something in

her expression told me that the truth was, her husband was having an affair. Maybe she was even lonelier than I was.

The next time she made a pot of soup, I worked beside her, peeling potatoes and carrots. That was the first of many meals that Madame Loir and I cooked together. My French improved tremendously by the end of the year, but really we’d found a common language—empathy.

I got married and had children. I tried to instill in them the values I’d grown up with. Life was so hectic sometimes I wondered if I was teaching them anything. Like the time I was

invited to a friend’s birthday lunch. I volunteered to bring coconut cake. The scrumptious frosting was guaranteed to hide the fact that the cake itself came from a mix.

The morning of the party my teenage son Alex called me at the office. “I’m sorry, Mom. I just wanted to taste the frosting,” he said, “but the cake slipped out of the fridge. Only one side got smushed.”

I was about to light into him for his carelessness when it struck me. He was being honest. Just as I’d taught him. “I appreciate you telling me what happened,” I said. “Put it back in the fridge.”

No time to buy a replacement. I showed up at my friend’s door with my smushed cake. Everyone stared. How was I going to explain this? How about the truth? “My son wanted a little bit of frosting....” By the time I finished the story my friends were in stitches. And the cake? Devoured.

Now, in my kitchen, feeling a bit lost, I suddenly knew what to do, what Dad had taught me was the cure for any spiritual malaise. I turned on the oven, grabbed a mixing bowl and dumped in two packets of yeast. Friendliness. Generosity. Empathy. Honesty. Faith. Virtues I’d learned through cooking and sharing what I’d made. Virtues cooking, as I came to call it, had guided me all my life and would guide me through this rough patch. **G**

For more on this story, see FAMILY ROOM

Cranberry Couscous Salad

- 1¼ cups water
- 1 cup large pearl couscous
- ½ cup dried cranberries
- 2 tablespoons flat-leaf parsley, chopped
- 1 tablespoon lemon zest
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- 4 tablespoons good olive oil
- 1 teaspoon sea salt
- ¼ cup slivered almonds, toasted

In a small saucepan, bring water to boil and add couscous. Cover and simmer on low for 8 minutes (grains should be firm, not mushy). Cool and mix in cranberries, parsley,



lemon zest and juice, olive oil and salt. Place in a serving bowl and top with almonds. **Serves 4.**

Note: For a super-healthy variant, make quinoa salad. This ancient wonder food is packed with protein. Substitute 1 cup quinoa for the couscous and cook in 2 cups water. Just cook a little longer, about 15 minutes.



FAMILY ROOM

MEET THE PEOPLE IN OUR PAGES

I needed to reinvent myself after losing my job and I knew I wanted to combine my three passions: France, food and travel,” says **Elinor Griffith** (*Meals With Meaning*, page 64). Her daughter, Kathleen, suggested she organize culinary tours. Elinor looked for cooking schools to host them and discovered a program at Julia Child’s former home near Nice, France, just as her

son, Alex, announced he was going to study in Paris. “The head chef’s name sealed the deal—Kathie Alex, like my kids!” Griffith Gourmet, Elinor’s tour business, now also ventures to Italy. Elinor’s first book, *The Virtues of Cooking*, came out in July. It’s a family affair—Kathleen wrote the foreword and Elinor’s dad drew the illustrations. Visit thevirtuesofcooking.com for more info.

