

Working in Others People's Shoes (2017)

In Mel's Shoes: One Dish at a Time

I used to be a bit of an overachiever. I planned, scheduled, and arranged my life according to lists, then beat myself up when deadlines were not met, promises were broken, or pie crusts did not turn out exactly the way I wanted. I often obsessed over what I could have done differently and rarely gave myself any credit for at least trying my best. I treated life like a sprint, racing from one point to the next with sips of water in between, always hoping to finish first.

I entered my mid-30s and knew I needed to slow down. Around the same time, I developed a love/hate relationship with my kitchen. I enjoyed cooking meals for families and friends, but spent too much time in the kitchen and not enough time engaging with my guests. Celebrity chefs always made cooking and entertaining so simple, effortless even. I'd forget that behind every great television personality there's a team of assistants ready to help with all the hard work. Regular folks don't have that luxury. If I wanted to make beef bourguignon on a Monday, I needed to do all the chopping and seasoning myself. It became too labor intensive for me.

I now cook for my family almost every single day, an astonishing accomplishment for me according to nearly everyone I know. I'm often asked where I find the time to feed my loved ones while juggling a full-time job, part-time blog and parental responsibilities. Years ago, my friends started calling me the Dominican Martha Stewart, a nickname I have yet to accept, but have learned to embrace. I tell them that I'm not an expert at what I do. I simply figured out what works best for me and at some point learned to live life one day at a time, even in the kitchen.

Over the years, I have come to realize that overly complicated recipes do not fit my lifestyle. I prefer to keep my meals simple, particularly on holidays and weekends. I don't think I've ever prepared an entire Thanksgiving dinner on my own. Year after year, I'm asked to make my homemade herb stuffing, apple and pear pie, and [bourbon sweet potatoes](#), but leave the rest to a cousin who makes an incredibly delicious cranberry sauce. He's also put in charge of the turkey, which he brines a few days before the grand feast. Truth be told, I prefer to collaborate with him. Sharing the cooking responsibilities with someone else takes the pressure off and allows plenty of time for a shower before guests start to arrive.

During the workweek, I plan meals ahead and create lists that fit my schedule and my family's needs. The list usually consists of two hearty meals with light fare in between. I check for social media trends or flip through food magazines for inspiration. Most of the time, I cook whatever is in season. Taco Tuesday can occur on any given day, particularly when I'm able to get a hold of ripe avocados. I've also discovered a way to be happy in my kitchen. Short cuts like premade pizza dough and canned chickpeas are just two of the versatile items on my must-have list. More importantly, I make time to step away from the kitchen.

I no longer have the time or energy to prepare elaborate meals, nor do I want to. I don't aspire to become the next Julia Child, though I enjoy watching segments of her show on YouTube. I watch lots of online tutorials, helpful when learning how to [shuck an oyster](#) or make a proper [omelet](#).

While I am completely obsessed with female chefs like Ana Roš, Grace Ramirez, and Barbara Lynch, I am acutely aware of the reality. I am a working mom who loves to cook and entertain, not a professional chef running a Michelin star restaurant. Cooking is not a race to be won, but a special moment to share with my crew. I've learned that food tastes so much better when it's been prepared with love, not angst. Realizing this has made me a happier cook and a better hostess.