

Family Kitchen

# A Change in Course

Dietary constraints present challenges in the kitchen, but they don't have to affect a child's love of food.

BY STEPHANIE R. CONNER

**NO PEANUTS. NO NUTS. NO EGGS. NO DAIRY. NO SOY.** When my son, Conner Clegg, was 10 months old, his food allergies meant that five of the eight most common allergens were off the table (literally). I was breastfeeding, so I avoided all his allergens, too. We were in this together.

Because restaurants use a lot of soy and often couldn't assure me of the ingredients in their dishes, I cooked a lot. I learned to embrace the challenge presented by our new restrictions in a few easy ways.



**Become a student.** Savoring my newfound food education helped. I thought most bread recipes contained egg (no). I thought vinaigrettes were automatically safe (wrong again). Having a child with allergies meant making sure I knew every ingredient in everything we ate. I studied up and expanded my own horizons.

**Learn the substitutes.** The good news is a lot of simple substitutes are available. For example, egg replacers like chia seeds, aquafaba (that starchy liquid in a can of chickpeas) and good old applesauce are invaluable in an allergy-friendly kitchen. And while we're at it, so is patience,



Stephanie's son, Conner, started helping in the kitchen before he was 2.

because substitutes work in different dishes with varying levels of success.

**Accept simplicity—and repetition.** I always fancied finding new recipes. But when you remove so many foods, far fewer recipes work. I found it saved my sanity to accept simpler foods—roasted veggies, grilled meats, or soups or stews with few ingredients. It turns out that simple is pretty tasty.

**Pass on a love for cooking.** There are certainly days I don't feel like cooking, but I'll never tell my son that. He is nearly 5 years old and has been in the kitchen with me regularly since he was 18 months. While he's outgrown many of his allergies, I believed early on that if any of them continued, he would need a bevy of skills—the ability to ask questions in a restaurant and the confidence to cook his own food. Today, he regularly seasons chicken and steak, preps rainbow chard for the saute pan and asks to make his own roasted yams. He can also whisk and mix like a pro.

Sure, food allergies present restrictions, but they

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don't have to restrict a child's love of food. By bringing my son into the kitchen at a young age, I'm optimistic that a few basic

culinary skills and confidence in the kitchen will be ingrained—laying the groundwork for a healthy relationship with food, no matter which foods he can't have. ●

PHOTOS: ABBY OATES (2)