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FOOD GROUPS OF THE PICKY EATER

Getting everyone to see eye to eye at the dinner table is all about perspective

BY AUDREY MCDONALD

My name is Audrey, and I am a foodie.

My wines are musty and have mouthfeel. I eat fennel and like it. I wax poetic on poulet rouge and poussin. I know the difference between a Vietnamese bun and one of the hot cross variety. I devour cookbooks as if they were the latest Harlequin romance, and Jamie Oliver can be the Naked Chef in my kitchen any old time he wants.

All of my friends are foodies, too, and many of them, like me, are also parents. Now you might think that our children, who have been exposed to all manner of fantastic fare, would be adventuresome eaters or, at the very least, well-rounded tasters, but, much to my surprise, this isn't always the case.

Because of this, I decided to conduct a highly scientific survey of my fellow mothers who are often stymied, and occasionally driven to extremes, by a picky eater. One afternoon, whilst sharing watercress sandwiches and a nice Vouvray (it was

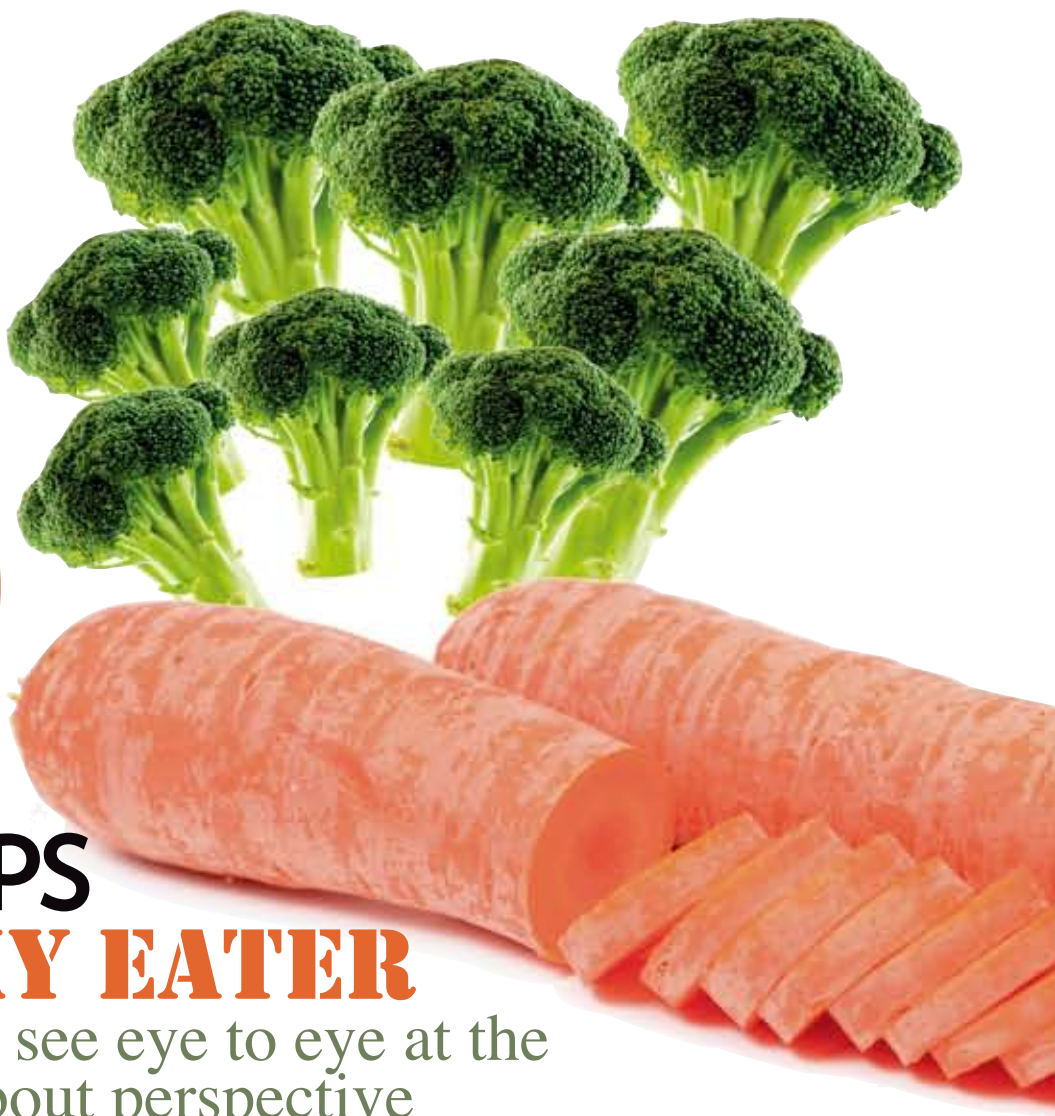
flinty with a honeyed character), my friends and I traded war stories and tricks of the mothering trade.

Here's what I learned: In families with three children there will typically be one child who will, in fact, eat anything that won't eat them first, one who is fairly choosy and one who seems to live by photosynthesis alone. Only children seemed to exhibit inexplicable fussiness — like mine, who will eat a California roll but not a mashed potato, blood sausage but not grits. In families with two siblings, it's a crapshoot. You may get one good eater and one who is not or you might roll two picky eaters. I have yet to run into the fortunate family with two angels who eat everything without question or comment.

The means for coping with this conflict also proved quite interesting. My friend Elspeth (please note that names have been changed to protect the frustrated) admitted to trying everything from

cutting food into interesting shapes to picnics in front of the television to light-up cutlery in order to make food more appealing. In the end, she resorted to cooking two meals every night — one for the kids and one for the parents. At dinner time, Lorene's children travel to the Broccoli Forest on Mashed Tater Mountain via the Yellow Brick Road (of carrots) only to turn up their noses upon arrival. (Even chasing veggies with cookie dough has lost its appeal to these wayward travelers.) Emiline has altogether given up fighting the good fight for nutrition and settled for the greater good of getting her babies to eat something ... anything.

Jocelyn, a nurse, tried the psychological route on her brood of three. She's run the gamut from the "if you don't make it an issue, they won't either" school of permissive parenting to the Joan Crawford "you will sit there until you eat ONE green bean!" dictatorship. (The record is an hour at the table and that same bean found hours later



while tooth brushing). There is also the head in the sand “ketchup is a vegetable, right?” method and my personal favorite, the Dog Whisperer approach — which relies on firm but loving commands, showing them who’s alpha dog and a pinch collar (just kidding about the collar, folks). Each approach has shown a glimmer of success, and she keeps hoping that one of her youngsters will ultimately eat some sauce on the pasta.

As the mother of a boy, I personally, although I am loathe to admit it, resorted to gross-out methods. My son ate gumbo one Halloween because I told him that the okra pieces were cross-sections of bone and the okra seeds were eye of newt. Getting him to eat asparagus was a no-brainer, so I told him that if he thought the effects from that were strange (and you know the effects to which I refer), he should see

what happened when he ate broccoli ... lots and lots of broccoli.

As a group of mothers, we have wheedled, cajoled, ranted, raved, rewarded, deprived, begged and pleaded. “Where did we go wrong?” we cried out over panna cotta with strawberry-vin santo sauce. Later that evening, after a little soul-searching and a small glass of 18-year-old cask-aged single malt Scotch with hints of leather and tobacco, I realized that I wasn’t always the connoisseur I am today. I maintain, therefore, that it is not that we have failed as parents. We have only failed to understand. Once I got my arms up around the child’s idea of a nutritionally well-balanced diet, well friends, life was easy greasy.

Get ready to be enlightened. Children subscribe to five basic food groups: Nugget, Box, Kool-aid, Cheerio and Ito.

Let’s begin with the Nugget. Everything is better if it’s deep fried, and a crust can hide a world of evil, like fish, for instance. Don’t try to feed your children pan fried trout amandine. Give them a fish nugget. If you don’t say the f-word in front of your young’uns (and I mean “fish”) and give them a

dollop of ketchup on the side (which is technically a vegetable, as my nurse friend noted), it will be smooth sailing to the land of the well-balanced meal.

The Box. As much as you love your Granny’s made-from-scratch macaroni and cheese with the eggs and the milk and the hoop cheese all grated by hand, your children want elbow macaroni with Yellow No. 5 cheese powder from the box. But don’t loose heart. Here in the South, macaroni and cheese is a vegetable. Just ask anybody who’s eaten a steam table lunch lately. According to this logic, rice and dressing are also veggies, and the San Francisco Treat and Stove-Top both come in boxes. Who knew cardboard contained such nutrients?

Kool-Aid. Red is now, and always has been, my favorite fruit. Sometimes there is even a picture of a strawberry or a raspberry on the Kool-Aid package and that only adds to the Vitamin C content as far as I’m concerned. You do, in fact, get 10% of your daily dose of C in one serving whether you like it or not. Plus, if you’re raising a wanna-be rocker, Kool-Aid can also be used as hair dye. I love me a multipurpose food.

The Cheerio. Who among us has not, in her lifetime, carried a purseful of Cheerios all zipped up tight in a baggie ready to be doled out at the first pang of hunger? You might not know it, but even with sugar coating, Cheerios are a grain, and the much sought after whole one at that. Splash on a little milk, and watch your little ones lap up a calcium-loaded amber wave of health and wellness.

The Ito. Dorito, Taquito, Cheeto, Crispito, Frito ... it’s all good and good for you. A cross-cultural smorgasbord of grains, dairy and, sometimes even, meat all rolled into one. Just little bites of healthy goodness waiting to fill our bellies and color our fingers.

Once you change your perspective, everybody can eat happily ever after.

“It’s bizarre that the produce manager is more important to my children’s health than the pediatrician.”
-Meryl Streep