

FOOD & DRINK

Reviving the family mealtime

Family dinners are an important time for developing children's social skills and self esteem

Between work and school commitments, car-pooling to various lessons and enjoying weekend winter fun, Canadian families are always on the go.

We're so busy, in fact, that getting together for family meals has become more of a special occasion than part of a routine.

"The reality is that seven out of 10 two-parent families in Canada have both parents working," said Dr. Robert Glossop, sociologist and executive director of programs for The Vanier Institute of the Family.

"That means family time is a premium, so dinnertime is one of the few natural opportunities to bring busy families together.

"Family mealtime is an important development time for children. It is when they learn to develop valuable social and communication skills and when parents can teach values, tell family stories, form traditions and encourage and nurture their children's self-esteem. When a parent listens to a child at dinner, they're saying 'You're important and I want to hear what you have to say.'"

The number of families frequently eating together has declined 20 per cent since the 1970s, but the percentage believing family mealtime is very important (90 per cent) remains as strong as ever, according to a U.S. study.

Retailers who can help get dinner on the table by offering meal solutions — food that require little preparation time — are the answer for today's bustling households.

"In the past, the perception seemed to be that a lot of fuss and preparation needed to take place before family sat down, perhaps as it was in our mothers' time," said Lois Ferguson, a Toronto-based home economist and dietitian.

"But in the reality of the '90s, no one has time to fuss in the kitchen. Mothers, as the principal meal preparers, are simply too busy."

Wally Hengartner, director of purchasing and new product development at M&M

Meat Shops, agrees.

"Today's families accept and appreciate the help they get by using the large variety of high-quality frozen foods available today. Getting a wholesome meal on the table can be done in a flash, so that more time can be spent with the family."

Interestingly, a 1996 study by the Canadian Foundation for Dietetic Research, Dietician of Canada and Kraft Canada found that women are indeed buying more complete meals than ingredients.

"The advantage to using frozen food is that it frees us from tedious preparation and clean-up chores," Ferguson said.

"Wholesome, nutritious meals can be prepared in just minutes by using some previously-prepared and packaged frozen ingredients," she said. "And the variety of foods available, from homestyle lasagnas to restaurant-quality Chateaubriand or chicken Kiev, can satisfy even the more discriminating taste buds."

"In the time it takes to boil some rice, for example, you can microwave lemon herbed chicken breasts. A bag of frozen mixed vegetables, microwaved for three to five minutes, rounds out the meal."

"Dinner is on the table in 15 minutes, during which time the kids can help out by setting the table and telling you about their day."

M&M Meat Shops also offers the following suggestions for making family dinner time special.

- Try to bring the entire family together at regular intervals for a common meal, even if it's once a week.

- Make a date with the rest of the family and see that it's kept.

- Get everyone involved to make the entire mealtime a shared experience. Let your eight-year-old stir the pot while your five-year-old sets the table. Even asking a four-year-old to fetch ingredients makes them feel important as you've singled them out with a special task.

- Most children don't like to be put on the

spot with questions like, "What did you learn in school today?" Just talking in a relaxed way about your own day makes them want to join in. Or begin by asking questions that can't be answered in brief, "What's something funny that happened today?" or "What's the best thing and the worst thing that happened today?"

- With older children, show respect for their point of view, and make attempts to elicit opinions.

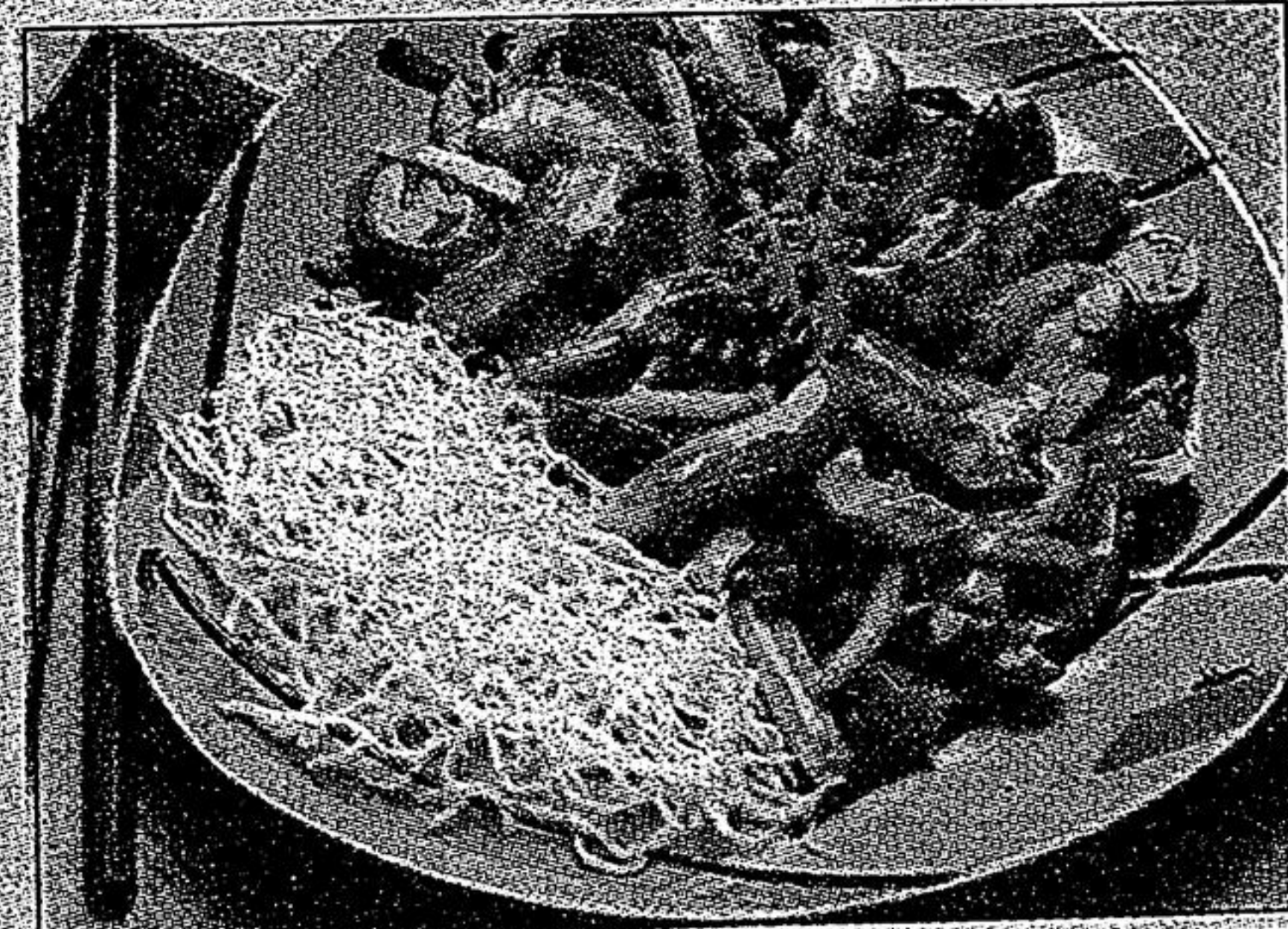
- Dinnertime shouldn't be a time for confrontations or lectures on manners — no one can digest food when angry or upset.

- Everyone can help clean up — put on some cheery music and dance and sing.

Lucky Szechuan chicken stir fry

Makes: Six servings

- 1/4 cup vegetable oil
- 2 cloves garlic minced
- 2 boneless, skinless, whole chicken breasts, cut into thin strips
- 1/4 cup soy sauce
- 2 tbsp dry sherry
- 1 tsp sugar
- 1 tsp cornstarch
- 3/4 tsp ground ginger
- 1 tsp Tabasco brand pepper sauce
- 1 cup carrots, cut into rounds
- 1/2 red pepper, cut into strips
- 1/2 lb fresh snow peas, washed and trimmed
- cooked rice



PHOTO/TABASCO PEPPER SAUCE

- ▼ In a wok or large skillet heat oil over high heat. Add garlic; saute one minute. Add chicken and stir-fry until pieces turn white.

- ▼ Combine soy sauce, sherry, sugar, cornstarch, ginger and Tabasco pepper sauce.

- ▼ Add to skillet along with carrots and red pepper. Stir-fry two to three minutes. Add snow peas; stir-fry two minutes longer.

- ▼ Serve hot, with cooked rice. If desired, sprinkle with additional Tabasco pepper sauce.

Nutritional analysis

Per serving: 163 calories, 11g protein, 9.7g fat, 7g carbohydrates and an excellent source of Vitamin A and Niacin

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(*see recipe below)

"Mario's Recipe"

CHICKEN WITH MUSHROOMS
6 pieces - Boneless Chicken Breast (medium size)
1/2 cup white wine
2 tsp salt
dash oregano
dash parsley
1/2 onion, finely chopped
4 pieces garlic cloves, finely chopped
1 lb. white mushrooms
2 tbsp olive oil

COOKING INSTRUCTIONS: In a wok, sautee onions and garlic in wine and oil for 3 minutes. Add chicken on low heat for 25 minutes. Add mushrooms for 10 more minutes. Delicious served on a bed of rice.