

# Culinary disasters leave cook wary of kitchen

"Remember," chef Julia Child once said as she scooped the remains of some unfortunate delicacy from the floor, "you are alone in the kitchen."

Alone, she says. Desolate, more likely. Abandoned would be an even better word.



**Mary Louise Knapp**

After my kitchen exploits of this summer, when I tried, day after day, to produce at least one edible meal, I was, indeed, a very solitary person.

To be blunt, no one would come over for dinner.

At first I couldn't figure out why. With characteristic generosity of spirit, I first blamed my friends' overcrowded schedules.

Upon discovering that they were all either unemployed students or part-time

maintenance workers, I then decided that my dirty house was the problem.

After I cleaned the apartment thoroughly with Pine-Sol and requested the Hari-Kari Exterminating Co. to make a guest appearance, I again issued social invitations. The number of unexpected deaths among my acquaintances' relatives that week will never cease to amaze me.

Something else, I decided, must be wrong. I sat down, did about two and a half hours of calm, rational thinking and finally arrived at the logical conclusion. Yes, Mary Louise, I said to myself, it ain't you they don't like. It's your cooking they can't stand.

I should have seen it coming in early May, when, as a starry-eyed youngster fresh out of the dorms, I went forth upon the exciting adventure known as living on my own. Armed with only an iron spoon and several second-hand pans, I breezed into the world of cooking with enthusiasm.

Without my mommy standing by the stove (ever ready to step in with a firm hand if I got too creative with the family favorites) I felt my liberation was at hand.

No longer would I be confined to boring recipes and authoritarian cooking rules. The cuisine I would develop, without benefit of cookbook, would be exciting, revolutionary . . . and delicious. Visions of elegant dinners for four, eight and 16, complete with the appropriate wine and centerpiece, filled my head.

Not wanting to expend my creative powers too quickly, I started off with a simple tuna casserole. Let's see, how did Mom use to make this, I thought, rummaging through the scantily supplied cupboard. The basic ingredient, tuna, was well-represented, but a thorough search failed to turn up any noodles, onions, mushroom soup, etc.

The closest thing I had to a casserole dish was a beat-up pie plate, into which I spooned the unsavory mixture. I couldn't remember how long the stuff had to be cooked, so I resorted to the age-old technique of peeking in the oven every five minutes.

After approximately an hour, I took it out. The sight was horrible. Half of the casserole had run down the sides of the

dish and burned, while what remained in the pan resembled the aftermath of a very messy auto accident.

rites to the casserole, I tried another approach — the reproduction of my mother's fried chicken.

I knew there was no way I could mess this one up. Had I not, from the moment I was able to take my first tottering steps, helped Mom cook and serve the beloved dish? Full of self-confidence, I fried the bird (it turned out black, but I wasn't worried) and, with housewifely enthusiasm, made gravy, too.

For some mysterious reason, the gravy failed to thicken, and the vast amounts of butter and milk I kept pouring in only made matters worse. I had used up my entire supply of baking soda before I realized that a couple of tablespoons of flour would have helped immensely.

The chicken was too tough to eat, but, unwilling to throw it away, I decided to turn my mistake to my advantage and make yet another family standby, chicken soup. Of this, I don't even like to think.

I now own a cookbook, whose recipes I follow with respect and reverence. My cupboards are also stocked with plenty of prepackaged, fully reliable convenience foods.

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