



JENNY SAYS

Can We Talk About Lunches?

Me: Sid, do you know what a dictator is?

Sid: Of course I do.

Me: Oh, really? What?

Sid: An evil tater tot.

by JENNY MOLLEN

FOR AS LONG as I can remember, food has equaled love for me. A child of divorce with parents who worked days and dated nights, I packed my own lunches for elementary school, typically a haphazard assortment of popcorn, low-fat cheese, and appetizers that I imagine followed my mom home from a night out.

My middle school provided lunch, but it was frowned upon by my fellow students. I'd wait in line for spaghetti as the cafeteria filled up with all the things I didn't have: Lunchables, homemade banana bread, and, of course, handwritten notes. On auspicious days, I'd count the change in my backpack and have enough for a 25-cent milk and Little Debbie Nutty Bars. But even with those victories, there was still

something missing: a sense of being taken care of. As my therapist and hairdresser have both pointed out, it wasn't about the food as much as it was about wanting more attention from my parents.

Now I have the perspective to know that my mom was doing the best she could. I also work too much, get frustrated, and sometimes delete precious family photos if I decide I don't look cute in them. But who we are as mothers is always to some degree a reaction to our own childhood, a chance to do things better, to heal wounds.

When I was a girl, lunch meant something. So when my elder son, Sid, started school, I couldn't send him out the door with a brown bag and an apple. I needed to give him movable feasts.

HIGHLIGHTS
FROM MY
INSTA FEED!



dictatorlunches Dictator down under. @chef_shine came by and taught me a few things about rice molds and gummies. Full Insta episode coming soon! In the interim... (From right: black sesame rice koala on a bed of miso, maple and tahini veggies, spider eggs, turtle swimming in coconut yogurt, homemade healthy gummy worms in carob powder/date dirt and extra tahini for dipping) #dictatorlunches #momsouththerekillingit



dictatorlunches "You know, Sid! The asshole who brought fondue for lunch?" (From right: Swiss fondue cheese, green beans, tomatoes, and peas, Waldorf salad hold the cheese, French baguette from @balthazarny, German black cat volle körne Brot, and homemade candy corn Rice Krispies treat) #dictatorlunches #momsouththerekillingit



dictatorlunches This could be "too inside Hollywood" (From right: chicken breast fajita assortment, struggling actresses waiting in line, corn tortillas, bumper-to-bumper cheddar cars, and half a Tam Tam stollen from your Aussie roommate who's been in town for less than a week and already has a pilot.)

I eased into the insanity slowly, a cookie-cutter sandwich here, a rice-mold animal there. But my aspirations escalated, and before I knew it, I was cutting faces out of sheets of nori and leaving instructions for Sid's teachers to resteam a pork bun. I started an Instagram feed, @dictatorlunches, to chronicle it all.

Sid, or, as I lovingly refer to him, "the dictator," rarely finishes any meal, and that's okay. My goal isn't to stuff him like a foie gras goose, it's just to expose him to things and, truth be told, to entertain him. That is how empires are won and salad eaters are made: brick by brick, seaweed snack by seaweed snack.

Children are blank canvases or, rather, blank palates. They don't know that liver can be polarizing or that avocados are fruits. (Wait, avocados are fruits, right?) I don't think food has to be fancy to be good, but I do believe that the less we dumb food down for kids, the better.

I'm not suggesting you sauté single chicken strips or bake two dime-size cookies because they thematically work with the next day's offerings, like I do. But I hope that seeing some of what I've cobbled together inspires you to think outside your lunch box and breathe life into leftovers instead of tossing them away.

I'm not one of the great bento artists of Instagram, nor am I a professional chef who has the discipline to cook a meal without eating half of it. This isn't about one-upping other parents. My lunches are simply my version of a handwritten note, not just to my son, but to myself. ✖

Jenny Mollen has two sons and is the author of two best-sellers.