

# Food and Covid-19: the Ups and Downs of Pandemic Cooking

written by Guest Contributor | May 12, 2021



(or, How a Year with Covid-19 Shaped My Czech American Family, One Meal at a Time)

It's 7 a.m. on Tuesday morning; I'm sautéing onions and fresh spinach while calling upstairs in (I hope) a pleasant voice. "Time for breakfast, guys!" No one appears. In my heart, I bemoan the start of yet another pandemic day. For me, in addition to work responsibilities and facilitating my children's distance learning, this means oodles of time in the kitchen.

For the past year, with a few rare exceptions for take-out meals purchased at a local pub's *okénko* (window), we have cooked everything ourselves. We have eaten our meals as a family, seated around a long wooden table that doubles as my older son's desk and is where I teach in-person English lessons when pandemic conditions permit. During dinner, we take turns telling something good and something bad about our days. Sometimes we stay at the table and play a board game like Clue, listen to Oliver strum his guitar or watch Sam do a magic trick. Sometimes, our eldest, Anna, lingers after the boys to weigh in on my husband and my adult conversations.

Eating meal after meal together is a significant change for my family of five. During the previous four years, my children grabbed breakfast on the run and ate lunch at school. Weeknight dinners meant dishing out food for one child in between shuttling another to or from an evening sport practice. During the week, my husband Radek traveled internationally for work, and I rarely had the time (or the motivation) to cook elaborate meals when I knew the children were just as happy with scrambled eggs. Weekends found us, as often as not, eating in a restaurant or cooking communal meals with Czech friends in mountain cottages.

All that changed last March.

In the past 365 days, I have spent more time wiping counters, brainstorming new recipes and dissecting my family's table manners than I have ever before. *Don't eat standing up. Keep your mouth closed while chewing. Please, please, leave enough milk for your brother's cereal. Do you think the crumbs are going to wipe themselves up—get a rag!*

Even when my children were babes and, per Czech custom, I prepared warm soups for lunch and pureed my own baby food, I didn't spend as many hours a day thinking about what I was going to put on their plates. Neither did my children.

In order to keep my sanity, I have enlisted/coerced/bribed/pleaded with my teens and pre-teen to participate in every aspect of our family's food preparation. From menu planning to chopping vegetables; from ordering groceries online to setting the table and unloading the dishwasher; from watering windowsill herbs that I can't seem to keep alive to picking cherries from our garden for a homemade cobbler. My children, and their six hands, are the cogs in our pandemic meal wheel.

They have their own preferences. At 16, Anna would skip meat for dessert any day while 13-year-old Oliver craves mussels, squid and anything he can dissect. 10-year-old Sam likes chicken wings and baked beans.

Some tasks—like making caramel popcorn from scratch, gutting a fish or decorating, yet another, pandemic birthday cake with marzipan figures and fondant—they have embraced willingly. Others—usually those involved with the cleanup—are a harder sell. I have never owned so many newly chipped dishes. Nor have I ever felt so claustrophobic in the kitchen, a space I used to occupy alone.

I know we are lucky. During this year which has seen many families around the world struggling to put food on the table, our family has had the financial resources and the time (theoretically) to prepare healthy, nourishing meals.

It is not fair to pretend that my children and I are the only cooks in the family. My Czech husband is a skilled and adventurous chef. His pandemic experiments vary from grilled octopus to *baba ghanoush*, an Eastern Mediterranean dip from roasted eggplant. Together, we've perfected spicy Thai curries and vegan cauliflower soup with tofu croutons. Still, when you ask Radek what's the hardest part about quarantine days, he'll say he misses eating in restaurants. And draft beer.

In our old, pre-pandemic lives, we spent weekends trying new restaurants in foreign cities. We once spent an hour (bellies growling) walking through Lisbon, trying to sniff out the best spot for an impromptu Easter morning brunch. *Come on guys, just one more street*, Radek urged as I peered into café windows while Radek read Google restaurant reviews and the children groaned.

Just before the pandemic hit Europe last February, we were in Thailand eating Pad Thai from street vendors and fried meat from markets stands. One night,

Oliver begged for (and ate) a fried scorpion. Another night, we sampled crispy banana Roti, a traditional crepe-like snack drizzled with sweet, condensed milk, cut into nine bites and served with long toothpicks. It was so delicious; the children went back and bought three more.

Weekends at home meant long bike rides followed by neighborhood barbeques where we roasted *buřty* (sausages) and shared my chocolate chip cookies. Once a month, we visited my Czech in-laws for traditional meals like *řízek* (schnitzel), *švičková* (roast beef with dumplings topped in a creamy vegetable sauce) or my children's favorite, *rajská omáčka* (a rich tomato-based sauce served with beef and noodles).

Food grounded us and it stretched us (and not just our stomachs).

I miss these food-related connections. And conversations. I miss the flavors of a new dish and the familiarity of eating *babička's* still-warm, yeasty *buchtý s mákem* (poppy seed cakes).

At the moment, standing in the kitchen in my pajamas, trying to get this quiche, which is supposed to be tonight's dinner, into the oven before I teach my first online English lesson, I don't feel nostalgic about what our new pandemic food rituals have brought or what's been taken away. I just feel rushed.

In my haste, I sprinkle cheese over the side of the bowl; a few onions tumble out of the frying pan. I yell again; this time less pleasantly, "Come on, guys. Get up, now, or you'll miss breakfast and be late for class!" No one appears. I tuck the quiche in the oven and go to shower.

Upon my return to the kitchen, milk and bits of chocolate muesli dot the kitchen counter. When I open the fridge, the handle is sticky, and the yogurt container has been put back with its lid half torn off. I turn to get a rag; my feet crunch a forgotten Cinnamon Toast square. The kitchen is empty, save for dirty dishes piled beside the sink. My children and my husband are already logged into their respective devices.

I wonder, briefly, *Can I escape?*

The answer is no. Not only can I not escape. I can't even drive from our village suburb into Prague's city limits without a written declaration stating the purpose I have left my home. Shopping at my regular grocery store in Prague is not a valid reason. In a quirk of the government mandated lockdown, I could, perhaps, fly to Italy or Spain, assuming I could find flights and accommodation. But those countries are experiencing their own pandemic hardships and as attractive as it seems to escape reality for authentic risotto, today, at least, I am not going anywhere.

Tonight, I am having spinach quiche with my children and my husband. Chez Prucha. Someone is going to say, *Quiche, again?* Another will say, *Does it always have these purple things on the top?* (Nope, I ran out of regular onions and had to use a red one.) Even though we've had quiche at least 20 times in the past year, I can almost bet, one of my boys is going to try to

eat it with his hands.

Without my children, I wouldn't have the need to cook so much. I wouldn't have chapped hands from washing dishes. On the flip side, nor would I have the pleasure of sitting after a meal, even for just for ten minutes, while someone else loads the dishwasher. (It is considerably easier to ignore the sound of cracking porcelain while enjoying a glass of wine.)

I wouldn't hear my family's favorite food-related question, uttered as soon as the first plate is cleared from the table: *Is there any dessert tonight?*

As the pandemic enters its second year, I have come to realize as much as I gripe and complain about daily food preparation, it is my family's communal meals that give rhythm and structure to our pandemic days. Of course, things would be better if we could also share a meal with our loved ones. Or, if we could visit a restaurant every now and then. But I have faith we'll get there.

One meal at a time.



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