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The Dinner Habit: The Recipe For Change



By: Greg Vetter

The scenario is similar in most homes: You're juggling work, kids, extracurricular activities, events, laundry, grocery shopping, walking the dog and other to-do's on a never-ending list. But somewhere in the last few decades, one of the most important items on the list has fallen to the wayside: family dinner.

Only 30 percent of American families share dinner every night, according to a [2013 Harris poll](#). We get it—it can seem daunting. "I'm too busy to make dinner every night." "I'm a horrible cook." "My kids are picky eaters." The list of reasons goes on, with the idea that family dinners are an unrealistic goal, reserved for those who have endless time, money and privilege.

But guess what? It's not true! Family dinners *can* become a habit and we're going to show you how all month long. In celebration of [National Family Meals Month](#)—which aims to bring families back to the table for one more meal at home per week—we're running a special series of tips and recipe suggestions to make family meals easy, accessible and engaging.

WELCOME TO THE DINNER HABIT

This is a mantra we live and breathe ourselves at [Tessemæ's](#). Every night, no matter what chaos we're living in, my family sits down to eat dinner together. Sure, it started out as an excuse to eat good food and engage with my four young kids, but it's since turned into a tradition that aligns with the core mission of Tessemæ's: create real, better-for-you foods that build community around the dinner table. We're all about the nourished life, from the foods we eat to the people we share it with.

But how large of an impact can dinner really make? In a nutshell—a lot. Study after study shows that children and teenagers who participated in family meals were more likely to [excel in school](#), develop [better relationships](#) with parents, exhibit positive behaviors like [sharing and fairness](#), maintain [healthy weight](#), and are at [lower risk](#) of using drugs, drinking or smoking. The numbers go on, but the takeaway is the same: Having dinner together as a family is one of the most significant building blocks for positive change and creating a healthier generation.

HOW TO MAKE IT HAPPEN

When those nagging thoughts creep in—not enough time, no cooking skills, you name it—just remember that there's no wrong way to start. You don't have to cook *Top Chef*-caliber meals or attempt recipes with dozens of hard-to-pronounce ingredients. Start small, start simple and even if that means the menu is pre-prepared items, the idea is to get back to the table, eat together and engage with your loved ones. Small effort creates big impact.

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With the start of the school year, there's no better time to take a seat at the table. We're getting back into our routines, nourishing both our bodies and brains, learning more about what's going on in each other's lives now that work and school is in full swing, and of course, digging into delicious, satisfying meals while doing it.

Join us in pledging one more family meal each week—and stay tuned for our ideas, recipes and more to help make it happen. When in doubt, just remember our clean, healthy, back-to-basics philosophy at Tessemae's: Simplify food so you can amplify life.

And if you're hungry for more, check out my [TED Talk, "The Dinner Habit: The Recipe for Change"](#) where I dig into the staggering statistics, share how my working parents made dinner happen when I was a kid and reveal why the skills used in preparing meals together double as life's biggest lessons:



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7 Creative Ways To Get Kids Involved At Dinnertime



School is back in session and schedules are getting hectic again, but that doesn't mean you have to skip on family dinners. In fact, you have an extra set of hands! Including children in meal prep, cooking and conversation at the table can reap plenty of benefits, from helping them practice math skills and exploring their creativity to giving them a first-hand lesson on teamwork. As part of our Dinner Habit blog series in partnership with National Family Meals Month, we're sharing seven tips for looping in the little ones at mealtime:

KEEP KID-FRIENDLY TOOLS ON HAND

Your child wants to help with dinner — success! Now you have to make sure they can actually do it. Stock your kitchen with tools and supplies that will encourage them to be a part of the action, like step stools for reaching cabinets, low tables so they can chop and safe tools like spatulas, small graters and a colorful chopping board. And don't forget the apron! Dressing the part is half the fun.

LET THEM PICK SOME INGREDIENTS

To help them better understand where their food comes from, bring your little ones to the grocery store, market or farm to select vegetables, fruits, grains and whatever else you need for your meal. It's a way to demonstrate seasonality — they'll learn why certain foods taste better in the fall versus other times of the year — and what farm to table means.

OPT FOR FROZEN VEGGIES

While fresh produce is considered best, most frozen options offer [the same, if not more nutrients](#). We love incorporating them into family cooking sessions because the pre-cut veggies mean your little ones don't have to handle knives. They can simply open the bag and get to it.

PRE-MEASURE INGREDIENTS

While we might not rely on younger kids to precisely measure all tablespoons, cups and pints, when you prep ingredients in separate containers, you can task your little ones with the mixing. Pre-pour [Tessemæ's](#) dressings, marinades or condiments into cups — ones with handles are easiest — for them to mix into stir fry, salads, pastas and more. All of our products are chock full of clean, healthy, organic ingredients, including our new [shelf-stable Pantry Line](#), so we encourage them to lick the spoon!

SPARK MEANINGFUL CONVERSATION

Once the food has been cooked and the table has been set, it's time to eat. And while it's easy to get stuck in the rut of "how was your day" dinner talk, we're all about more in-depth questions that can get the conversation flowing. [Table Topics](#) is packed with fun, engaging questions like "What's our favorite thing to do at recess?" or "What's your best family vacation memory?" They even have a Family Mealtime-themed box. Or DIY your own fish bowl of ice

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breakers and let each child pick the questions.

PLAY RESTAURANT

Sometimes you have to switch things up. Pretending mealtimes is dinner out at a restaurant can be a fun, imaginative exercise for the kids. Set out a fancy tablecloth and arm your child with a notepad to take orders from each family member. With a few days' notice, they can even think of a restaurant name and write out a menu.

MAKE CHORES FUN

Clearing the table, wiping the counter, washing dishes — these post-dinner tasks may sound like a drag, but it's all about how you frame it. Children working on numbers can count plates, bowls and utensils out loud while clearing the table. For cleaning countertops, give your little ones their own stash of colorful washcloths so they can have ownership of their task. Washing dishes could be the most playful of all chores — keep a sink full of warm water filled with soap and the bubbles will keep them plenty occupied.

Remember, getting your kids involved isn't about cooking a five-star meal or prepping in a spotless kitchen. There might be messes, accidents and distractions, but that's part of the process. By joining you in the kitchen, they're learning the value of teamwork, collaboration and problem solving. A little spill here, a dropped spatula there — don't stress. After all, food should be fun.

And if you're looking for inspiration, check out the approachable, healthy and tasty recipes on [our Tessemae's blog](#) and stay tuned for our next Dinner Habit-themed post, all about the easiest dishes to make with your family. Get ready — we're cooking up something special.



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10 Recipes To Kick-Start Your Dinner Habit



You've committed to [The Dinner Habit](#) — Tessemæ's initiative with National Family Meals Month to eat more dinners at home together as a family — and you've read [our tips](#) for creative ways to get kids involved in the kitchen. Now, it's time to get cooking!

With the little ones [back in school](#) and schedules more hectic than ever, we understand the need for meal ideas that are healthy, fun, *and* efficient. That's why we've rounded up 10 easy, fall-primed recipes to add to your repertoire. There's something for everyone, from a slow-cooker dish and quick salads to vegetarian options and a platter that's a cinch to pull together. Let's dig in:

1. [Sausage Stuffed Zucchini](#)

The beauty in this warm, stomach-satisfying dinner is it doesn't require 100% precision. Task your kids with scooping out the zucchini flesh, while you saute the sausage. They can jump in again when it's time to fill the zucchini "boats" and drizzle with [Tessemæ's Organic Creamy Ranch](#).

2. [Classic Italian Pasta Salad](#)

Nothing says "quickie dinner" like a dish you've prepped the night before. That's why we love this salad that combines pasta, tomatoes, cucumbers, salami, and [Tessemæ's Pantry Organic Classic Italian dressing](#). Not a fan of olives? Swap in something cheesy like an umami-rich Parmesan. Keep in mind this dish is best enjoyed after the flavors have marinated in the fridge for up to 24 hours.

3. [Orecchiette, Broccoli, & Chickpeas](#)

This pasta recipe is perfect for a Meatless Monday. Using canned chickpeas and dry pasta means everything comes together quickly, ideal when you decide on what to make for dinner at 4 p.m. Dress the dish in our flavorful [Organic Lemon Garlic](#) dressing, and your kids won't even realize you didn't use tomato sauce.

4. [Ginger & Lemon Turkey Meatballs](#)

It's an unscientifically proven fact that kids love meatballs. Please their palettes while giving them a leaner option with this savory turkey version. Kids can grate the zucchini — make sure to hand them [the appropriate sized tool](#) — and mix the meatball mixture. As we say, hands work best! Top the 'balls on salad greens for a light meal or pair with our Greek Lemon Soup (below) for a warm, filling dinner.

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5. [Greek Lemon Soup with Quinoa Orzo](#)

This is our version of chicken soup for the soul, made in less than 30 minutes! It's filled with nourishing ingredients like protein-packed quinoa and egg yolks, plus a twist of lemon and [Tessemae's Organic Lemon Garlic](#) dressing. Once the chicken has cooled (if you cooked it yourself), your littles can shred the meat to save you time.

6. [Everything Ranch Breakfast Bowls with Bacon & Eggs](#)

Breakfast, it's what's for dinner! These bowls aren't just keto-friendly and Whole30-approved, they're easy to make, too. Have your kids drizzle [Tessemae's Organic Lemon Garlic](#) dressing over the tomatoes (or butternut squash for a fall-centric ingredient) then pop them in the oven alongside bacon strips. Once the rest of the ingredients cook, all you have to do is assemble and top with our [Organic Everything Bagel Ranch](#) dressing.

7. [Grilled Butterflied Lemon Garlic Chicken](#)

Meet your new favorite five-ingredient dish — chicken, salt and pepper, greens, lemon, and [Tessemae's Organic Lemon Garlic](#) dressing. That's it! Have the littles ones toss the salad with a ¼ cup of the dressing while you tend to the chicken, which takes max 30 minutes to brown. The best part? Leftover chicken can be used the next night for tacos, [grain bowls](#), and more.

8. [Slow Cooker Pork with Sauerkraut, Apples & Dijon](#)

Tender pork, crisp apples, tangy sauerkraut—this dish is fall on a plate. All you need is 20 minutes to prep ingredients before work, then leave it in the slow cooker for 6 hours (or more). Once the kids set the table in the evening, dinner's ready to be served with [Tessemae's Organic Dijon Mustard](#).

9. [Fig & Goat Cheese Pizza with Slow Roasted Garlic](#)

We're firm believers that at least one night a week should be pizza night. But you can ditch greasy, calorie-laden takeout pies in favor of this easy make-at-home version. For the dough, you can opt for store-bought, homemade, or one of our favorite methods, buy some from your favorite local pizzeria. The kids will love stretching out the dough into a thin pie and layering [Tessemae's Organic Slow Roasted Garlic](#) spread, gouda, and goat cheese. If you'd rather keep this vegetarian, simply omit the post-bake Prosciutto.

10. [Grilled Sausage & Veggie Platter](#)

The grandparents just called — they're coming over for dinner. And they're bringing the aunts and uncles, too. Now's the time for a DIY dinner buffet, which is perfect for groups. Once you heat up the grill, this sausage and veggie number cooks quickly. Arrange the roasted veggies, potatoes and meat on a pretty platter and pair with a zesty sauce, like [Tessemae's Organic Yellow Mustard](#) or [Organic BBQ Sauce](#). A full extended family is a happy extended family.

Looking for More Tasty Ideas?

Check out our [Tessemae's blog](#), where we're sharing [back-to-school lunches](#), [Whole30 recipes](#) and other tips on how to maximize family mealtime so you can reap the benefits of happier, healthier kids. Remember, small effort creates big impact.



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