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The author's offer to pick up lasagna for a party provoked a huge frown and an emphatic *no*. "All my friends like your cooking," her daughter begged. "Don't pick up."

The last potpie

As her daughter prepares to head off to college, a mother makes a favorite recipe, imbued with memories and love

BY PEGGY WOLFF
Special to Tribune Newspapers

For everything that was about to happen, everything that was coming to light, I needed an old-fashioned potpie with a creamy chicken filling and a rich, flaky crust, the kind that puffed up and baked to a golden buttery crisp.

That's what I cooked when the going got tough. Some moms shopped; some drank; I cooked, and that's what sustained me until the pain passed.

I was about to say goodbye to my youngest who was headed to a big university a thousand miles away, so she hosted a send-off party, the final get-together with her friends after high school graduation. Some were going to the Ivies, a few to the Big Ten, a rest to small colleges scattered all over the place. The one who was a dead ringer for Marilyn Monroe last Halloween was taking a gap year.

I had been feeding these girls for years, and I would badly miss them, at backyard camp-outs, for "House" television marathons, at Fourth of July cookouts on the beach and on snow days when they dragged in sleds, toboggans and discs, and needed constant breaks for grilled cheese panini, and, well, OK, chocolate fondue. In came the dirty plates, and I washed them as if born to it.

It saddened me to see this way of eating, and being, disappearing. My offer to pick up a tray of lasagna for the party provoked a huge frown and an emphatic *no*. "All my friends like your cooking," my daughter begged. "Don't pick up."

Perhaps she was feeling some pain too — that the kitchen she grew up knowing wouldn't be there for her. I knew we'd both miss the steady rhythm of meeting in the kitchen every night, sitting down and sharing a meal. We built our family that way. Avid eaters and home cooks.

As she searched the fridge, I saw her most frantic face when she discovered we were out of homemade guacamole, as in the one from Cook's Illustrated. And we were low on the batch of Rick Bayless' agua de jamaica, hibiscus water we made from scratch in a color that can only be described as a full-bodied pink.

My biggest food critic



The vegetables, each in its turn, are prepped with care, then precooked just until done, before finding their way into the casserole.

was way beyond an entry-level foodie. As soon as she was eating solid food, she knew kiwi, not Pop-Tarts; steamed artichokes, not canned hearts; and she was acquainted with creme caramel before she ever knew what Big Macs were. Good or bad, she was possessed of the most fastidious palate in her group.

So, for the party, I made potpie, sturdy food that gets you through.

Potpie isn't just a term. I got out the pot the night before, simmered a 3-pound chicken with some vegetables and herbs, waited for it to cool and picked the bones clean.

The next day, from my post in the kitchen, I could hear everything in the next room, therefore I, too, was listening to Counting Crows: "If you don't go take a wide-angled turn in your life and try new things, you haven't lived."

There were nine of them, gearing up for a "Dexter" marathon, oblivious to my presence nearby. As I cut the cooked chicken into small pieces, I wondered what my wide-angled turn would be. And then the memories flooded in.

Like the time when I booked a downtown Chicago hotel with my daughter and her best friend for two nights. It was December, they were 10 and I splurged on a late-night horse-and-carriage ride down Michigan Avenue, wrapped in wool blankets, munching on a bag of those divine-tasting nuclear orange Circus Peanuts while gazing at Christ-

mas-y lights. It was 17 degrees. You did what you had to so they could have fun.

I told the girls that General Mills loved those Circus Peanuts so much, they decided to put shavings of them in Lucky Charms. The following morning that's what they asked for, then strategically ate around the cereal.

The memories of our weekend didn't stay in that hotel room. They were right there, at the counter where I was cooking, stirred back and forth into the thickening sauce.

And there were so many other little vignettes, like the times she walked home from grade school with a rock, a ginko leaf, green sea glass, all beautiful to her, all meant as gifts for me.

Making potpie wasn't about culinary imagination, where obsessing over every detail and element enhanced the dish. Potpie was a staple in my kitchen, a family favorite, and because I wasn't feeding field hands or using leftovers to stretch food dollars, I couldn't help but raise it to an aristocratic level by using a free-range chicken grown without antibiotics or hormone shots.

This bird was not denied the pleasure of sunlight, nor had she lived in a scandalously small cage stacked on six or seven others so that she could not do that most natural of hen things — spread her wings, flutter them a bit and relax. Maybe she even had a roost for the night. The very thought made me feel better.

I washed the potatoes carefully, then peeled them and cut them into chunks, wondering if it really mattered if they weren't exactly the same size. I boiled the pieces in lightly salted water, and when they were pretty well done, pulled them out, saving the potato water for a bread recipe from the California commune Tassajara. (Yes, call it obsessive, but leftover hippies like me who came of age in food-centric California can't seem to throw out water that potatoes have boiled in.)

I peeled the carrots and tried to cut them into same-size small chunks all the while having a brief internal debate about whether I could have grown these myself, but then I remembered that my kids and I tried that one summer and only harvested one bunch of thumb-sized carrots.

I found a can of cannellini beans and rinsed off the thick soupy liquid they'd been sitting in.

When the potpie was done, it was served hot, with a loaf of crusty Italian bread for dipping. The rich creamy sauce with hints of nutmeg and freshly cut herbs made the bread's flavor blossom.

Potpie had staying power. Wonderful smells filled the kitchen, and it stood alone on the counter, its beauty not threatened by bags of chips that looked like dorm food.

Then I waited for things to get better.

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Chicken potpie

Prep: 45 minutes Cook: 3 hours Makes: 6 servings

- Broth and chicken:
- 1 broiler-fryer chicken, 2 1/2 to 3 pounds
 - 1 rib celery, with leaves
 - 1 medium carrot, quartered
 - 1/2 parsnip, cut in chunks
 - 3/4 cup coarsely chopped onion
 - 1 bouquet garni of 1 bay leaf, 3 teaspoons fresh thyme (or 1 teaspoon dried), 3 whole peppercorns and 6 parsley sprigs tied in cheesecloth
 - 1 teaspoon salt
- Potpie:
- 1/2 pound frozen puff pastry sheets, thawed according to package directions
 - 2 potatoes, peeled, cut in small chunks
 - 1 carrot, peeled, sliced
 - 1/4 cup butter
 - 1 cup sliced mushrooms
 - 1 leek, chopped
 - 1/2 cup sliced celery
 - 1/2 cup red bell pepper, chopped
 - 1/2 to 3/4 teaspoon salt
 - 1/3 cup flour
 - 1 teaspoon poultry seasoning, or 1 tablespoon mixed chopped fresh herbs (sage, rosemary, thyme) with a few gratings nutmeg
 - Freshly ground pepper
 - 1 cup heavy cream
 - 1/2 cup frozen peas
 - 1/3 cup canned cannellini beans, rinsed
 - 1 beaten egg

1 For the broth and chicken, place chicken in a large stockpot with 5 cups water and remaining ingredients. Heat to a boil; skim foam off surface. Reduce heat to a simmer; simmer, uncovered, 2-3 hours, skimming every half hour.

2 Remove chicken from the stockpot; remove and discard the skin. Pull the meat from the bones, reserving the meat and discarding the bones. Chop meat into 1-inch pieces. Strain stock through a sieve; discard vegetables. Reserve 1 1/2 cups of the broth; freeze any leftover broth for another use.

3 For the potpie, roll out the pastry on a lightly floured surface; cut out a circle 2 inches larger than width of a 1 1/2-quart round casserole. Place the pastry round on a parchment-lined baking sheet; cover with plastic wrap. Freeze. Cook the potatoes in lightly salted water until just done; steam the carrots until tender.

4 Melt the butter in a large saucepan. Add mushrooms, leek, celery and red pepper; season with 1/2 teaspoon salt. Cook until tender, about 3 minutes. Stir in flour, poultry seasoning (or fresh herbs with nutmeg) and pepper to taste. Add the reserved broth and the cream all at once; cook and stir until thick and bubbly. Stir in reserved chicken, adding beans, carrots and potatoes. Taste for seasoning, adding more salt if needed. Pour into a 1 1/2-quart round casserole; cool.

5 Heat oven to 450 degrees. Remove pastry from freezer; lay pastry round on top of baking dish so that it doesn't touch the filling. Brush pastry with egg. Bake, 15 minutes. Reduce heat to 350 degrees; bake until crust is browned and puffed, 20 minutes. Serve immediately.

Nutrition information per serving: 473 calories, 34 g fat, 17 g saturated fat, 106 mg cholesterol, 35 g carbohydrates, 8 g protein, 664 mg sodium, 4 g fiber

