

## What's for Dinner

Described in a book, even the simplest food—Frances's bread and jam or Sal's blueberries—sounds more delectable than what's usually on the table.



## Feed Me a Story

She's hungry for what Laura Ingalls Wilder ate—so dish it up. **BY ANN HODGMAN**

Have you noticed how book food always sounds more delicious than real food? And it has a strange way of staying lodged in the memory long after the details of a story plot have faded. As a kindergartener, I worshipped an anthology called *Let's Hear a Story*. Two tales in particular I asked to be read to me over and over. The first, by Betty Van Witsen, was about a little boy who ate only cheese, peas, and chocolate pudding. One day, when he was playing puppy under the table,

his brother dropped a piece of hamburger into his mouth. Instead of choking or getting yelled at for crawling around under the table (as you might have expected), the boy chewed wonderingly and said, "That's not cheese. And it isn't peas. And it couldn't be chocolate pudding." I had never been big on hamburgers until I heard that story. Instantly, they seemed luscious. Even boring old peas were more interesting with the Power of Literature behind them.

Then there was dumb Mrs. Goose—the 1950s creation of Miriam Clark Potter—who was always getting confused. In "The Hatbox Cake," she made a cake for a holiday fair, put it into a hatbox, and then accidentally threw the hatbox onto a shelf in her closet, mashing the cake into a sort of pudding "all swoozed together." Drying her goosey tears, she went ahead and served it with ice cream, and of course all her animal friends loved it.

A couple of years passed, and I started reading (to myself,

mainly) *Little House* books and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Here too I drooled over the food. I realize now that Laura Ingalls Wilder, like most pioneer kids, spent much of her childhood longing for mealtimes, and that C. S. Lewis wrote the *Narnia* books during the height of food rationing in England. Their appetites found their way into the stories, and I longed to taste every dish they described.

Short of eating a book itself, eating the food in its pages is the only way you can literally turn the story into part of you. Think of the six buns poor, starving Sara Crewe buys in *A Little Princess*—and then gives five of them away to a beggar child. The potatoes Mary Lennox roasts in the earth in *The Secret Garden*. The lemon meringue pie that's the only thing Amelia Bedelia knows how to do right. The fried apples 'n' onions in *Farmer Boy*. The chocolate "fooj" (a.k.a. fudge) in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. And what about Wilbur's delectable slops in *Charlotte's Web*? "Skim milk, crusts, middlings, bits of doughnut, wheat cakes with drops of maple syrup sticking to them, potato skins . . ." If I had been able to find a recipe for slops when I was little, I would have rushed to the kitchen.

Well, now that I'm a grown-up I can do something about it. I can find a recipe, make it for my kids, and bring their favorite stories to life in a new way. My younger sister is the one who

inspired me here. As soon as her kids were old enough to appreciate Mrs. Goose, she baked and frosted a cake, put it into a Tupperware container (her stock of hatboxes being low), and let the children take turns throwing the box into the front hall closet. Why didn't I think of this? But never mind. It's a great idea, and at least I can pass it along.

## RECIPES

The recipes here are tie-ins to a couple of my children's own favorite stories. I hope you'll use them as the starting point for more bookish cooking adventures with your kids.

## Fried Apples 'n' Onions

(Adapted from *The Little House Cookbook* by Barbara M. Walker)

Serves 6 (as a side dish)

"He asked Royal, 'What would you like best to eat?' They talked about spareribs, turkey with dressing, baked beans, crackling cornbread, and other good things. But Almanzo said that what he liked most in the world was fried apples 'n' onions."

—*The Little House Cookbook*

**¼ lb. bacon**

**½ lb. yellow onions, chopped**

**1 lb. apples (Granny Smith, Golden Delicious, or Gala), cored, peeled if desired, and cut into 1-inch cubes**

**1 tbsp. packed light-brown sugar**

In a large skillet, cook the bacon over medium heat until crisp, about 8 minutes. Remove the slices and cool, then crumble bacon into a bowl.

Pour off all but 1 tablespoon of grease from the skillet, then add the onions and cook over medium-high heat, stirring, until translucent and beginning to brown, about 4 minutes. Add the apple and cook, stirring, until soft, 8 to 10 minutes.

Sprinkle the brown sugar over the onion-apple mixture and cook, stirring constantly, for 1 minute. Stir in the crumbled bacon and salt and pepper to taste, and serve immediately.

*continued on page 140*

## WHAT'S GOOD FOR YOU

Fiber is as important for little kids as it is for adults, and apples are a great source of it. Soluble fiber helps keep blood cholesterol in check and insoluble fiber aids in digestion.



There's often mealtime inspiration where you least expect it—upon close reading, Wilbur's "slops" are worth sniffing out.

Ann Hodgman knows a thing or two about working food into a story: In addition to her cookbooks, she has written more than 40 children's books, including the juvenile series "Lunchroom," with titles like *Rubberband Stew* and *Frog Punch*.

## Hatbox Cake

"But where was the cake? . . . She had put the cake into her hatbox instead! Then she remembered something else. She had thrown the hatbox up on the shelf with a terrific wham . . . Perhaps the cake was all right. But how could it be—when it was such a soft cake and she had given it such a wham. She tried not to think about it."

—"The Hatbox Cake"

- 1 cake of your choosing  
(homemade, from a mix, or store-bought)
- 2 cups frosting (as above)  
Chopped nuts (optional)
- 1 pt. ice cream

Frost the cake and sprinkle with the nuts. Put the cake into an appropriate-sized plastic container (you may want to cut the cake into pieces to fit, or use 2 containers). Tape the lid on securely with packing or duct

tape. Now let your kids throw it around and drop it until the cake and frosting are "swoozed together." Serve the "pudding" topped with ice cream.

### WHAT'S GOOD FOR YOU

It's not the occasional piece of cake that overloads kids on sugar. It's more likely to be hidden sugars (like high-fructose corn syrup), found in everything from ketchup to granola bars, that can make kids' diets unhealthy. <sup>1</sup>