

by Bette-Jane Raphael

his system immediately, and my husband's voice on the answering machine telling me he'll be even later than usual and that I should not hold dinner for him. It's a rare weekday evening when the four of us sit down to eat a meal together—and an even rarer one when we sit down to eat a meal that I have actually cooked. In this respect, we are like all my friends'

families and all the families on TV.

The fact is that family dinners are simply not the clockwork events they once were. For my brood, they tend to be weekly rather than nightly affairs, consumed mostly on Sunday evenings in one or another humble but cherished neighborhood restaurant, like the Thai place that makes shrimp dumplings Rose can eat by the dozen, or the Mexican joint whose chocolate flan makes Jake weak in the knees.

When we do manage a full family meal at home, the menu tends toward the unpredictable, having more to do with what's in our freezer—or the window of our local take-out place—than what's in any of the cookbooks sitting hopefully on our kitchen shelves.

And some of our most memorable evening meals have found us not precisely arranged around the island in our kitchen but light years from home. Fondly recalled family dinner tables include a split log next to a campfire in Oregon, a Formica counter in the cafeteria of a ferry plying the waters between Vancouver and Vancouver Island, the hood of our car parked outside an open-pit barbecue mecca on the way to the Adirondacks, and a ratty blanket spread out on a lovely stretch of Long Island beachfront.

Surprise! Even in today's hectic times, eating together can be just wonderful.

The Family Meal

Still magic after all these years.

My father came home from work at 6:00 every night when I was growing up, and soon after he arrived my mother served us dinner at the kitchen table. In this respect we were like all my friends' families and all the families on TV.

We always sat in the same seats, my older sister and me across the table from each other, my parents at either end. And as we took our assigned places, a sort of magical transformation occurred. However far and wide the day had scattered us, settling into our seats at dinner immediately transformed us back into the close-knit family that, in fact, we were. As we dug into a predictable, utterly comforting meal—spaghetti and meatballs on Monday, lamb chops and broccoli on Tuesday, fish fillets and french fries on Wednesday, and so on—we'd talk

about our friends and teachers, make plans for upcoming weekends and vacations, tell jokes and stories and argue about how much makeup we girls could wear, all as if we had never left off talking the night before.

Looking back at the four of us sitting in our accustomed places at the same dinner table every evening is like looking at a snapshot from another world, an innocent, orderly place where the comfortable and abiding ritual of dinner was as much a fixture of our daily life as school.

In contrast to those inviolate meals of the past, my own family's dinner-time regimen is a sorry and haphazard business. On most days I race home from work to find Rose, my six-year-old, eating her dessert, Jake, her 17-year-old muscle maniac of a brother, yelling from his room that he will expire if he doesn't get some protein into

PHOTOGRAPHS BY H. ARMSTRONG ROBERTS (TOP), TIME LINE, LEFT TO RIGHT: CORBIS BETTMANN-UP! (3); ARCHIVE PHOTOS

1956

Play-Doh: Bake me a cake as fast as you can.

Salk polio vaccine banishes a dread disease (and the iron lung).



Seat belts are introduced by the Ford Motor Company.

1957

The Cat in the Hat: Is there a Dr. Seuss in the house? *The Cat in the Hat* is first.

1958

Hoopla over the Hula Hoop proves that haste makes waist.



1959

Barbie sashays into young girls' lives, and nothing is the same.

Princess phone: Sleek and pastel, and it lights up too.



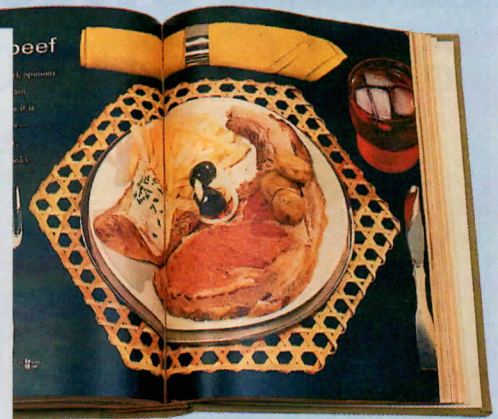
The 1950s Here's the Beef

But however irregular, professionally cooked or far-flung our dinners together may be, the essence of those long-ago nightly meals of my childhood somehow survives its new permutations: There is still something magical about eating together as a family.

It's almost as though our taste buds, once stimulated, set all our juices flowing—not just those in our mouths but those in our minds as well. We have more to say, and we listen better to how other family members respond. Communicating somehow becomes easier when we have spare ribs in hand, as if they are greasing up our jaws as well as our fingers. What passes for teenage wit seems sweet rather than sardonic when filtered through a dollop of whipped cream. A kindergarten's joke seems more hilarious when it comes from lips sporting a milk mustache. We laugh a lot with our mouths full.

And as much as we laugh, we learn. It was over some very messy Southwestern fare, for instance, that Jake, who usually keeps his own counsel as fiercely as the tightest-lipped Arapaho, spontaneously burst forth with the news that his history teacher was an absolute ace, and that he, himself, was thinking about majoring in history when he got to college. It was over those fabled dumplings that we got a lesson in Rose's determination as we sat watching her try over and over again to pick up the squishy little suckers with chopsticks until she was finally able to do so, sort of. And it was on the night that our pasta took 25 minutes to arrive—in a little family-owned Italian restaurant where it appeared as if most of the family had gone back to

Dad came home from the trenches, life was good, and we celebrated with lots of all-American meat! In issue after issue, FC showed how to buy a steak, broil it and make it round; how to roll a rib roast, shape a hamburger, simmer lemon pork chops and smother beef cubes. Entertaining flourished, at tables set with silver bowls, modernistic platters, and newfangled chafing dishes. Dad was back on the job, Mom was back in the kitchen—and if the kitchen was relocating to the suburbs, that was O.K. too. In summertime, cooking could become a family sport! Out came the chef in his apron and cap. Out came the grill with its steaks and burgers. And at holiday time, the roast turkey, roast beef or roast pork—accompanied by golden-glazed sweet potatoes and golden mushroom caps—commemorated a bright and golden age.



Italy for a visit—that we got a lesson in sibling love. As my husband and I sat by slightly amazed, Jake uncomplainingly kept Rose happy for nearly half an hour, playing endless games of tic-tac-toe and I Spy before being rewarded with a plate of homemade ziti and sausage the size of Rhode Island.

My own rewards, though less visible, have been no less substantial. For I've learned wonderful things about

my children while eating dinners with them. I've seen both their developing palates and their developing minds, heard them chewing on ideas as well as on food, watched them sharing pieces of cake with one another, and also pieces of themselves.

So although we don't, as a rule, say grace, when I look around the dinner table—any dinner table—at my family, what I feel above all is graced. ★

TIME LINE, LEFT TO RIGHT: PHOTOGRAPHS BY CORBIS BETTMANN-UPI; PHOTOFEST; ARCHIVE PHOTOS



1960
The **birth-control pill** is approved by the FDA—and don't you forget it!

1962
Pampers: The first disposable diaper hits supermarket shelves.

1964
G.I. Joe doll: One for the boys.

1965
The hills—and movie houses—are alive with **The Sound of Music**.



1967
The first **microwave oven** means leftovers never had it so good.

1968
The **motion picture rating code** debuts, screening screens for objectionable scenes and language.