



Cooking for One VIP

Raleigh News & Observer / April 21, 2004 / Susan Houston

Cooking for one? You're not alone. For the first time, single-person households (26 percent) outnumber married-with-children households (24 percent) in America, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

"This trend has implications for government, employment, business and something as simple as shopping and cooking," said Thomas Coleman, executive director of the nonprofit American Association for Single People, based in California.

Whether a student living on her own for the first time, a divorced middle-age man or an elderly widow, these singles have one thing in common -- they have to eat.

And as the thrill of going out to eat fades or takeout becomes too expensive, they will eventually start to cook for themselves. But singles have more than a few hurdles to overcome in the kitchen and the grocery aisle.

Family-size staples -- especially produce, eggs, milk and bread -- go bad or get stale before a single cook can use them all. Recipes always seem to be written to serve at least four people. And leftovers can be boring. For some singles, that's not a problem.

"I'm a creature of habit. I tend to eat the same thing all the time," said Daryl Bowman, a professor of crop science at N.C. State University, who has been single for the past five years. His daily regimen includes oatmeal for breakfast, rotisserie chicken for lunch and salad for supper. "I don't need a list when I go to the grocery store."

But for Mary Esther Baker, who cooked a variety of dishes for a family of five until her husband died and her children moved out in the next few years, the problems of being a single cook hit acutely. She longed to make comfort foods like meatloaf and mashed potatoes, but didn't want to eat them for a whole week.

When she was unable to find a single-serving cookbook she liked, Baker began paring down the recipes of a lifetime so they made just enough for one. And after several years, she had put together 50 recipes that she self-published last year in a spiral-bound cookbook called "Simply Cooking for One" (\$14.95, available at Quail Ridge Books or by calling 510-7547).

Along the way, she discovered tricks and tools to make cooking solo easier. She bought frozen egg substitute instead of a dozen eggs and raisins in snack-size instead of 1-pound boxes. Individual rolls replaced loaves of bread at sandwich time. Instead of a bag of celery in the produce aisle, she went to the grocery store's salad bar for diced celery -- just enough for her next recipe.

"It is more expensive," she conceded, "but you're not going to have any of it spoiling in your refrigerator. It sort of balances out."

Baker began to look at kitchen tools in a new light, too. Instead of a measuring cup, she turned to the "chef's shot," a shot glass used to measure teaspoons, tablespoons and ounces. And she traded in family-size cookware for smaller models. "Ramekins became wonderful casseroles," she said.

In addition to the cookbook, Baker has taught cooking classes through the singles ministry of two Raleigh churches, White Memorial Presbyterian and Sacred Heart Cathedral.

Cristin Ruggles acted as host to the Sacred Heart class in her Oakwood apartment. She had always liked to cook, but didn't want to make big batches of chili or stir-fry.

"I'd find myself having a baked potato or a can of soup because I didn't have recipes geared to one person, and I just didn't like leftovers." She liked Baker's recipes for salads and a single-serving brownie. "I don't need a lot of fancy stuff."

Planned Leftovers

A single-serving cookbook may be the answer for some solo cooks, but it's not the only strategy. In her popular cooking classes in the Baltimore area, caterer L. Joan Allen shares recipes for "carefree cooking."

These easy recipes are usually prepared with a few ingredients in one pot and yield enough for four. One portion you eat right away and the other can be heated up later in the week. "Freeze the other two portions or have a party!" said Allen, who sometimes dresses in a silver-sequined gown for her classes.

A co-author of "Celebrating Single and Getting Love Right" (Capital Books, 2002), Allen had many practical tips for her students. They should make use of packaged salads, scoop small amounts of items like pine nuts from bulk bins instead of purchasing them pre-packed and fearlessly ask the butcher for smaller packages of meat. But her attitude underscored the other major tip she had for single cooks.

"My philosophy is that everyone needs to treat themselves like a VIP," she said. "Instead of eating Chinese carry-out over the sink, put out the china and silver a couple of times a week. Light a candle or put a rose in a cup."

As the single household trend becomes more pronounced, retailers have begun offering more products geared to the single consumer.

"One of the things that I think has helped some singles is the places like Costco selling bulk in small packages," Coleman said. "With the new packaging, you can buy a dozen cans of tuna or other commodities and save money."

He pointed to new, smaller watermelons as another promising development for singles. "Somebody's got their eye on the demographic trend."

So did Baker when she conceived her cookbook. But she has left the ranks of singledom, having married a professor at N.C. State in 2000. "I'm cooking for two," she said, smiling, "and I often have leftovers now."