

## Deborah Madison on Eating Alone



*Deborah was the founding chef of Greens Restaurant in San Francisco, California, and is the author of many books on vegetarian cooking. In 2009, she coauthored the book *What We Eat When We Eat Alone* (Gibbs Smith) with her husband, artist Patrick McFarlin.*

### What did you discover about how people cook when it's just themselves?

We interviewed lots of people and began to see that people fell into categories. A woman who's got small kids and a husband and finds herself home alone may make a bowl of oatmeal and eat it in the bathtub while listening to music. That's very different from somebody who is eating alone day after day and makes something that's healthful, delicious, and works for them. There's a difference between people who are older, widowers or widows, compared to someone in school who's simply tired of sandwiches. Then there are people who like to cook, who value good food and the experience of cooking. They have a whole other set of thoughts about cooking for themselves. Men are

different from women a lot of times. Men tend to make a big thing and eat it all week long. This one bartender we talked to made a flank steak rolled with cheese and bacon. He was very proud of it and gave us the recipe. It served a lot of folks and that was his eat-alone food, so when he made it, he ate it all week.

I do have to say peanut butter was the most frequently mentioned eat-alone food. Peanut butter in all kinds of ways, many of them gross. A peanut butter sandwich with mayonnaise and fried onions and potato chips in it—you know, just crazy things. But people found their own taste. One woman made the most delicious plate of asparagus with torn bread and good olive oil and sharp vinegar. It's a recipe I've used a lot and really like.

### It sounds like some people get really creative when no one's looking.

People come up with what they like to eat alone. I think some are very proud of it, even the gross bits, and it works for them. They're getting themselves fed. Others feel guilty that they don't do more. People have very different values around cooking for themselves. One man talked about going into the kitchen and making lunch: "I look for vegetables and I always use the old, tired vegetables first," because he felt sorry for them. He takes these old, tired vegetables and something else and makes a sandwich. That was his routine and it didn't sound like it varied a lot, but it worked for him. He was satisfied. He wanted to use up those vegetables; it was important to him.

### What things about cooking alone surprised you?

What really delighted me was some of the young people we talked with. They were quite serious about cooking and they came to it for various reasons. This one medical student said he just couldn't look at another Subway meatball sandwich. He went in for cooking lessons from his mother every Sunday. And then he was thrilled because he had the power to give a dinner party, and you can't do that with a Subway sandwich. He said, "You know, it's a lot like working in a lab. There are lots of things you're paying attention to at once," so he really enjoyed it. He loved being able to cook for his friends.

Another young person we talked to started to cook because he didn't like the way his parents cooked. He wanted to be in charge. As he started to cook he found he could make those choices, which I thought was kind of sweet and amusing, and also effective because he learned to cook.

One woman said that when her kids were teenagers, but before they got super busy, she had them cook a meal one day a week. They had to do it all. She let them make mistakes, like not starting the brown rice until 15 minutes before dinner, so things didn't come out at the same time. But she said they really learned that way and for her it was wonderful to come home at the end of a long workday and smell food cooking in the house. She said it was a great experience and when they finally grew up and left home, they had some basic survival skills. They could cook something.