

## **TEACHING BILL TO COOK**

After 34 years of marriage and being virtually the sole cook in the family, I had to teach my husband Bill to cook. Like many men of his generation, his mind is liberated as to women's rights and equality between the sexes, but his body really prefers the couch potato method of existence. If someone, namely I, am willing to prepare and serve his meals, why would he possibly object? Of course, there have been the times when I'm not in the mood to cook, and he's perfectly happy to go out for dinner or bring something in, but cook it himself? Oh no, not an option. This is a man who doesn't even barbecue. Except for a stint many years ago as preparer of Shake and Bake meals or heating things already made for the kids while I was in law school, the stove and ovens have been something like foreign territory.

Now, don't get me wrong. He does know his physical way around the kitchen and basically knows where things are located. We negotiated many years ago that he would do the dishes most nights, and consequently he has learned where to put things away from the dishwasher. He can also make sandwiches or heat up leftovers for his own meals when left to his own devices. Thus, he did have a basic working knowledge of the kitchen. Or so I thought.

The precipitating event for this change in duties was a misstep I took in Australia. While on vacation and looking for the rest of our small tour group, I forgot where I was in a hotel lobby, stepped off into space, and bounced down four large marble steps. The result was a dislocated ankle with two broken bones, and a forced sedentary existence for the ensuing seven weeks. We either had to decide to eat all meals via takeout, exist on frozen dinners, starve to death, or have Bill cook our meals with my direction. The latter course seemed like the only reasonable solution to our situation.

The result of our endeavors actually turned out quite well. It proved to be rather a fun event to cook "together", and most of the meals turned out just fine. Bill takes directions well, as long as they are quite specific. I had to think out the steps rather than just multi-tasking and throwing things together. Even though we actually succeeded in our team approach to meal preparation, there were some funny moments that just had to be preserved.

### **THE ELECTRIC CAN OPENER**

That basic kitchen appliance, the electric can opener, presented the first unexpected challenge. We were trying to keep meals relatively simple in preparation, but you still had to open the occasional can. Who would have thought that the man couldn't open a can other than via a church key type opener? You just position the can in front of the opener to the right of the little metal pointy thing, cozy it up to the blade, press down on the lever to puncture and start the can rotating as it opens, lift the lever up to keep the top of the can on the magnet, and then... voilá! – it's open. Okay, maybe not quite so simple if you haven't done it much.

Conquering the opener required quite a few practice sessions. I demonstrated, he tried, I opened. I demonstrated, he tried, I opened. The opener was like a skittish horse sensing the nervous touch of the novice rider - and, like the horse, it wasn't about to cooperate. Finally, he was successful in getting a can or two open. During the course of the following weeks, there often was much swearing and banging, plus the occasional use of the old manual twisting opener. Bill and the opener finally came to a mutual truce and now most things can be opened with a minimum of difficulty. They still don't really trust each other, however.

### **CLOSE THE CABINET DOOR/DRAWER**

Bill wasn't born in a barn, or anywhere close to it, but you'd never know it. He has an innate aversion to locking or closing anything on his own. Given free rein, he'd probably leave all the doors unlocked and every cabinet door and drawer open in the kitchen, just "in case" he needs to get something from inside it again (sometime in the next decade). Other than the obvious aesthetic appeal of having things closed, I, being somewhat forgetful and klutzy, always try to keep my work environment safe. This comes from too many times of running into open drawers and banging temples on corners of open cabinets. Maybe because he's taller and tougher, he doesn't perceive the inherent danger. I found this leave-it-open affliction also applied to microwaves and oven doors. Consequently, every direction to get something from a cabinet/ drawer/anything closed must be followed up with "and close the ...." It has now become sort of a mantra for Bill as he follows directions. He can, on his own, add the phrase "and close the..." Unfortunately, he still has lapses and leaves the occasional item hanging open, just lurking in wait for its oblivious victim.

### **DRIP, DRIP, DRIP**

Not being used to food preparation on a regular basis or for other people, Bill did not have the habit of washing his hands before handling the foodstuffs. Each time he had be reminded, which was okay. The resulting problem was that I had to tell him, in addition, to **dry** his hands. Now, one would think that would be obvious, but no,,,, there he stood, hands dripping on the floor, waiting for the next instruction. Would you think that he would want to do the next step with wet hands? Sometimes yes, mostly no.

The other drip problem was using the colander in the sink to drain things - canned veggies, washed fresh produce, hot pasta, etc. He got the concept of setting the colander firmly in the sink so things wouldn't spill out and could drain, but then what? When he needed the contents, up came the colander to be lifted to another bowl or cutting board, usually at the maximum possible distance away. Naturally, it was still dripping and being carried across the kitchen. This method was also tried with the steamer portion of a pot being lifted off the stove and transported elsewhere while dripping recently boiling water. Common sense to experienced cooks would tell you to put a bowl under it, or bring the pot to the colander in the sink, but we're not talking experience here. Besides, his duties had never been to mop the kitchen floor, either. Perhaps that is the key to not thinking about where those drips go.

## **CLEAN UP AS YOU GO**

The concept of cleaning or clearing the working space as you go was totally alien to my new cook. Perhaps he hadn't realized all of the stuff that I had cleaned and put away all these years before he got to the dishwashing chores. Left on his own, Bill would have left the entirety of the kitchen out before clearing things up. Our kitchen island, the primary place for food preparation, is not particularly large, and is best left to one task at a time rather than trying to become the place of residence for all kitchen implements. Bowls with edges that allowed them to be flipped easily were strewn about, often moved to the edge where they teetered in imminent danger of being knocked off. Knives were balanced precariously on the edge of cutting boards (whether or not the cutting board was still in use), just waiting for the inadvertent nudge to send them slicing through the air. Spatulas were tilted on the edges of pans or pots. Packages of aluminum foil and plastic wrap took up some precious remaining space. Once again, the concept of "but what if I need it/them again?" hung silently between us. Doubting the wisdom of each move, Bill eventually followed the specific instructions to take things out and then put them away to maximize the work space, and eventually learned to do some of it on his own.

## **MAXIMUM ALTITUDE**

Bill is a tall guy. Pots, pans and bowls hit him about waist height. Adding ingredients to a container challenged his ability to work at waist level. Initially, while cooking and obsessing over measuring things precisely, he would carefully hold the measuring spoon, sometimes even over the destination container (although usually not with liquids), and carefully pour out the desired amount. As he became more confident and accepted the fact that approximations were fine in most cooking, his flair for the dramatic burst forth. Gone were the careful, precise movements. In their place appeared a confident, Emeril-like flash as he dashed, dumped, and added things to a pan or bowl. Unfortunately, he performed these actions from the Bill-height rather than from a few inches above the target. The kitchen became dotted with scattered amounts of seasonings, dry pasta that bounced off counters, vegetables that escaped the salad bowl, and a fine dusting of flour when it billowed up rather than streaming down, much to his shock and amazement. Fortunately for him/us, we had employed a cleaning service for the duration of the invalid status, so he did not have to suffer too much as a result of his new-found zest.

## **WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT OF THAT?**

Having semi-conquered basic meal making, we decided to branch out into baking, specifically the making of banana bread from those nasty looking bananas that we never quite got around to eating. This baking endeavor required the use of equipment heretofore unemployed, specifically – the electric mixer. Most bakers accept the premise that dry ingredients are combined together and then added to the wet ingredients a little at a time, requiring the use of multiple bowls. Bill dutifully put out three bowls - one for the mashed bananas, one for the sugar and butter to be creamed together, and one for the dry ingredients. Mashed bananas went okay. Softened butter and sugar were measured into another bowl, Bill finally figuring out that it's better to scoop up ingredients over the container rather than over the countertop. Time for the flour - measured approximately, then promptly dumped into the "wet" bowl rather than the dry "empty" bowl sitting next to it. Too eager, forgot the function of the empty bowl. After all, it had been almost three minutes

since we had put them all out with an explanation of what was to occur. But, that wasn't really a problem. After all, it was just banana bread, and doing things out of sequence was not going to greatly adversely affect the end product.

Bill then had his first use of the electric mixer. Surprisingly enough, he got the beaters into the slots with no difficulty, and tested that they were secure before dipping them into the bowls. But then, he dipped. Up flew the flour, surprising him. This was countered by the comment usual to use of implements - "the %^\$&\* mixer doesn't work!" (It's always the tool, not the user.) Encouraged to settle down to the task and assured that the mixer would, in fact, work, he returned to the batter and got some mixed. Stopping for further instructions to add some more ingredients, he laid the mixer down on the counter. Told to stand it on end and let it drip over the bowl, he proceeded to try to lie it on its rounded side and lean it against the bowl. Let's see -heavy rounded side on lighter rounded bowl - why won't that work? After adding the next ingredients, he picked up the mixer and turned it on. Much to his amazement and consternation, the rotors sent the dripping batter flying around the kitchen and over much of Bill. Why couldn't a man figure out this would happen? After tears of laughter from me and a modest chuckle from him, he realized that putting it in the bowl **before** turning it on might have been a better idea. Physics 101!

### **"IT" DOESN'T WORK RIGHT**

When something doesn't go right for Bill, it's never user error in our house. Rather, it's a malfunction of the equipment, or, in the alternative, "what did YOU do to the...." We saw this principle demonstrated aptly with the can opener, the mixer, the stove, and who knows what else. But a knife? What can go wrong with a knife?

Having limited kitchen exposure, Bill basically knows one knife. It's a nice, ever-sharp serrated 8" knife. It's good as far as it goes, but it doesn't do everything. Maybe in this case, "it doesn't work" really is accurate. But no, Bill didn't ascribe the principle to this, his favorite knife. He struggled and pushed and prodded this knife to do everything from slicing pears to cutting tough stew meat. It was good on the former, not so good on the latter. When he finally was sternly told to use a bigger cutting knife for tougher stuff, he begrudgingly pulled out the bigger knife from the drawer. But — it "didn't work". Perhaps it was the fact that it was not as sharp as it once was, or perhaps it was the fact that he tried to use the very tip of the knife for the tasks, rather than using the heft of the entire blade for leverage. Back to knife instruction, 101.

On another day, Bill tried another use for his beloved knife. While combining some broth and juice for a pot roast, he decided it needed to be stirred. Rather than reaching for a clean spoon, he grabbed his trusty knife as a stirring implement. SPLASH! Guess that wasn't just a good idea after all. Knife instruction, 101.

### **VINDICATION**

It took a few weeks, but it finally happened. Even after all on the nagging about closing doors and drawers and maintaining a safe workspace, there was still the occasional lapse (but I'm still using it...). Bill was unloading the dishwasher, decided to go do something else

before finishing, and left the door open all the way, parallel to the floor. Somewhat later, while returning to the kitchen for some other task, he walked right into the door, rapping his shins sharply on the door edge, and knocking the door somewhat askew. After the swearing, laughing and smirking (the latter two by me), the point was finally conceded. I don't really expect it to totally reform his ways, but at least the object lesson was completed. I rest my case.

### **AFTERMATH**

We've been home post-injury and vacation about 8 weeks now, the ankle has healed, and the kitchen duties are starting to taper off, although lengthy standing by the chief cook cannot yet be accomplished. Bill is now a semi-accomplished launderer, barbecuer, grocery shopper, and follower of verbal instructions for cooking. This bodes well for our future as his ability to cope with domestic adversity has been tried and found worthy, useful should there be some other form of illness or injury. Learning additional tasks at this point has to be better than when we're really old dogs at 90. Now if he would just close those cabinet doors...