

25 Chefs Share Their Favorite Cooking Lessons From Dad

While many chefs credit their [mothers](#) as the inspiration for pursuing a culinary career, for others it was their fathers that took charge of the home kitchen and taught them invaluable lessons that continue to influence their cooking styles and approach to hospitality. In honor of Father's Day weekend, I asked chefs from across the U.S. to share their favorite cooking lessons they learned from their dads. Here's what they had to say:

Matt Griffin, executive chef and managing partner of [Simon & The Whale](#)

“My dad taught me to improvise in the kitchen. My dad's favorite dish is linguini with clams and he would attempt a recipe from a celebrated cookbook author. The recipe required the pasta and fresh clams to be placed together in a foil-wrapped pan and baked and I remember it working once. I also remember an occasion where some of the clams hadn't opened and the pasta was fully cooked. Adjustments needed to be made, so dad riffed off the recipe by using canned clam juice to open the fresh clams separately. A recipe can help guide the culinary process and provide a framework for a dish, but it can also be looked at as a jumping off point. Trust your culinary instincts and don't be afraid to shake things up. I'm still putting this lesson to practice in the professional kitchen.”

Jason Hall, executive chef of [Legasea Seafood Brasserie](#)

“My father Mark is a self-proclaimed spaghetti carbonara master. Growing up it was the dish he made most Sundays. His trick is to temper the raw egg yolks with the hot pasta water that he saved—this would ensure the cream, egg and Parmesan mixture was the same temperature as the hot pasta so the carbonara sauce wouldn't curdle. To this day I still think of him every time I nail it!”

Drew Dzejak, executive chef of [Caliza Restaurant](#)

“The best cooking lesson my father has ever taught me, and his fondest memory, was teaching me to cook breakfast: scrambled eggs, hash browns and bacon. Nothing fancy, but more about teaching the first life lesson in cooking and taking care of myself past a bowl of dry cereal. And as a father now, I can say this is the same that I taught my children. It starts with cracking and mixing eggs, cooking and cutting potatoes, frying them in a pan, laying out the bacon, and putting it in and taking it out of the oven.”

Noam Grossman, co-founder of [Upside Pizza](#)

“My dad was very humble in the kitchen and didn't take himself, or our dinner, too seriously. We ate a lot of hot dogs. As I got older and learned to appreciate depth and innovation in the culinary world, the spirit of my dad's low-key and casual approach still always influenced me. There's nothing wrong with the nostalgic dishes and grocery store ingredients we grew up with.

Sometimes those memories can be just as meaningful as a \$100 tasting menu. I think that's why I decided to open a pizza shop: to combine my love of the everyman's New York slice (another one of my dad's favorite dinner strategies) with my appreciation for culinary technique and quality ingredients, and make the best possible version of it that I could."

Simone Tong, chef/owner of [Little Tong](#)

"Before I moved to the United States for college, my dad taught me how to make a classic Chinese dish – 西红柿炒鸡蛋 – stir-fried tomato and egg. It was his way of saying, 'If you are hungry and miss home, you can be nourished and get a taste of home at the same time while overseas.' It's his favorite dish, and you can eat it with rice or noodles, or on its own. One day soon, I'll serve a version of this dish with noodles at Little Tong."

Matt Aita, executive chef of [The Little Beet Table](#)

"My father was an adventurous cook. I remember him trying to replicate an authentic Peking duck in our house when I was very young and remember he wasn't afraid to try new things or techniques. He was having fun. I would have to say the one lesson my father taught me was to never be afraid of trying new things or failing when we do. The process is one of the best parts of the experience of cooking."

Mike Khuu, executive chef/owner of [PhoBar](#)

"My father taught me to not take shortcuts. It is easy to buy store-bought, off-the-shelf sauces, but my father made sauce from scratch so he could tweak it to his liking, and it always came out better than store-bought. I especially remember his curry, which had many ingredients and was pretty tedious to make. The end result showed me the difference between store-bought and homemade."

Maggie Miele, owner of [Di Fara Pizza](#)

"My father, Dom DeMarco, has always said, 'You gotta go with your heart — if you don't like it, don't do it — that's it,' which I have always followed throughout the years. We have cooked many dishes together, but one of my favorites has to be his scungilli in a fra diavolo sauce, I just can't get enough! While I'm searching for ingredients and ideas for my next creation, he's always told me to use the best ingredients that I can find, even if they are more expensive than others!"

Zack Wangeman, chef and founder of Comadre Cocina at [Folksbier](#)

"Everyone in Oaxaca, Mexico cooked their fish when making ceviche, but my father couldn't stand that style. He taught me how to make ceviche properly, by marinating the fish in lime juice, chilis and enough garlic to keep my friends away in school. He taught me that the foundation of Mexican cooking is built around simplicity, along with a variety of spices and ingredients that maintain the acidity of the dish. I think of this lesson every day."

Marc Vetri, chef/owner of [Vetri Cucina](#)

“The best cooking lesson I learned from my dad was to actually cook. My house was known by all the neighbors down the shore as the place to be on Sundays because my pop always made spaghetti and crabs. It soon became a gathering place filled with food, family and friends. He taught me that it’s not about what you cook, just cook and people will come.”

Rob Levitt, head butcher and chef of [Publican Quality Meats](#)

“My dad was never much of a cook, but one thing he loved making was a burger. As a kid, he often had to make himself dinner after school and burgers became his specialty. He used cast iron, but the real innovation was that he packed a cold pat of butter in the middle of the patty to keep it from overcooking while getting a deep sear on the outside. I have adapted this technique with burgers we sell in the case at Publican Quality Meats, making herb, garlic or other flavored butters and often substituting bone marrow or even foie gras in place of butter. Not only does it help keep the burger juicy and pink in the middle, it adds a ton of flavor.”

Sal Scognamillo, chef/owner of [Patsy’s Italian Restaurant](#)

“My father was chef of Patsy’s before me, and the best chef I’ve ever met. The most important lesson he taught me was that what you put into a dish is what you get out of it. When you cook with high-quality ingredients, you get a better tasting end result. Once you have the ingredients, you must finish the dish like making sure the cheese on top of the chicken Parmesan is perfectly melted and making sure the breadcrumbs are perfectly brown on the clams oreganata before leaving the kitchen. When you put that much love into a dish, it’s going to taste better and diners are going to feel the love you put into it in return.”

Gavin Fine, owner of [Fine Dining restaurant group](#) and co-founder of [Roadhouse Brewing Co.](#)

“My dad always encouraged me to try all the best foods whether it was Chicago hot dogs in my hometown, pizza in NYC, pomme frites in Paris, ethnic street foods and of course a fine dining experience or two. The lesson was to try everything with an open mind and palate, and take what you learned from those experiences into our own kitchen to experiment with different dishes. His enthusiasm for food was contagious, and those experiences taught me the instincts I have today, experimenting with global flavors and creating flavor combinations with confidence.”

Matthew Hyland, chef and co-founder of [Emily](#) and [Emmy Squared](#)

"A great cooking lesson I learned from my dad was grilling with indirect heat. I would always want to put all the food over the hottest part of the grill and I would end up burning it. He showed me how to build the coals on one side so I could move food over to cook through. Another [lesson] was to try new flavor combinations. As a Wisconsin native, cheese was a big

part of his cultural heritage and a slice of apple pie always had melted orange cheddar on it. When I was very young, I found that odd and my father would encourage me to try it. When I finally did I loved it and I haven't stopped experimenting with fun flavor combinations. Maybe it's why I melt cheese for a living."

Felipe Riccio, chef and partner of [Goodnight Hospitality](#)

"Growing up, it was my dad who cooked for the family. Both my parents worked, but he always took time to prepare a homemade meal. It was always important that we sit around the table and have dinner as a family. Occasionally my sisters and I would find it annoying, but looking back at it I am so thankful that my dad instilled in me the importance of having a meal surrounded by the people that you love. A major cooking lesson I learned from him: always taste your food. He would constantly taste and adjust seasoning or take a piece of spaghetti to check for doneness (always al dente!)"

Dave Anoaia, chef/owner of [DiAnoaia's Eatery](#)

"One of my favorite lessons from my dad growing up involved cooking pasta. First off, when you're cooking pasta you always want to be stirring it. Letting the pasta sit in the water without being stirred will make it easier for the pasta to stick together. He always had a two-minute rule, when the pasta was close to being done you would yell 'two minutes!' and everyone knew to come to the table for dinner. The other lesson is the same but with tomato sauce. You always want to stir the sauce because if you don't, it will stick to the bottom and eventually burn. Have you ever ruined a fresh batch of tomato sauce that your dad made? The consequences are not friendly."

Jeffrey Rhodes, executive chef of [Liberty Common](#) and [Butchertown Hall](#)

"My dad taught me that cooking is always more fun and fulfilling when the family is involved. Getting together with family, spending the day in the kitchen and chatting about what has happened since the last time we saw each other. The times between cooking in the kitchen and putting the finishing touches on the grill are times that I will always cherish most, not to mention the amazing food that I have had over the years. So, I guess what I am saying is that he taught me to slow down and enjoy the whole process."

Nick Korbee, executive chef of [Egg Shop](#)

"The biggest cooking lesson that I learned from my dad was the efficiency of menu planning. He would make a menu for the week on Saturday morning and get all of the grocery shopping and prepping done over the weekend. By Sunday night, our fridge would be full of casseroles, sauces, soups [and] anything else that he deemed fridge-stable for a few days."

Alvin Cailan, head chef of [The Usual](#)

"My dad is the cook of our family and pretty much taught me all of the fundamentals of Filipino cooking. When I was a kid my job was cooking the rice for the entire family. For years my dad

would show me how to perfect rice. I'll always remember the time I messed up the rice. My dad had just come home from work and I could tell how disappointed he was. He didn't get mad, he didn't say a word, but the look on his face affected me so much that every time I cook rice I make it with my dad in mind. He was so passionate about cooking. It was his way of showing us how much he loved us. I take his mentality and apply it to my restaurant. I put so much on my menu because I want my customers to have an amazing experience."

Claudia Sidoti, principal chef of [HelloFresh](#)

"My dad is Italian-American and Italian cuisine played a big role in my house growing up. In addition to making traditional Sunday sauce fully loaded with meatballs, sausage, lamb necks and braciolo, my father taught me how to perfect simple pasta dishes like pasta carbonara and pasta lenticchie. One of his secrets to making delicious dishes was to always hand grate your Parmesan or pecorino for fresher flavor and that blending the two cheeses is not only easier on the wallet but also adds another layer of flavor."

Tony Mantuano, chef and partner of [Maddon's Post](#)

"My father cooked only one thing: steaks on the grill. His technique was flawless, he had it down to a science. He'd light the charcoal, pour himself a gin martini, and when the coals were red hot, or about the time the martini was finished, he'd put the steaks on the grill and cover. Then he would time it. Seven minutes, then flip over and cook another seven minutes. Perfect medium rare every time. We referred to the cooking technique as the 7-minute steak."

Chris Borges, executive chef of [Josephine Estelle](#)

"My father didn't cook that much, but when he did, it was always centered around seafood. Being a third generation wholesale seafood distributor, he clearly had an inclination to cook what he was familiar with. He was particularly famous (at least amongst the family and his circle of friends) for his 'unfunktorious breakfast', which was a kitchen sink-type scramble including all manners of local shellfish.

What I most remember is the reverence with which he handled his ingredients. To him, the bounty of local seafood is what provided for himself and his family, and it deserved our ultimate respect. Thus, preparing this seafood in a less than perfect manner was unacceptable, insulting and downright disrespectful. Putting the shrimp in any of these dishes so that it just cooks through and is not rubbery was his mantra, and a philosophy I always apply in my cooking, despite the contrary advice and instructions in many a cookbook. I always take the trouble to slowly create rich shrimp stocks so that I can still infuse intense shellfish flavor in my dishes without simmering the shrimp for hours on end, which always results in a less than satisfying texture."

Marc Therrien, executive chef of [Keeneland Race Course](#)

“One of my father’s favorite things to make when I was a boy was his BBQ chicken on the grill; it’s still some of the best BBQ chicken I’ve had to this day. His technique on this old standard was to simply parboil the fresh bone in chicken for 8-10 minutes in salted water and go straight to a preheated seasoned grill. He would brush the sauce on [at the] last second to keep the grill clean, resulting in a juicy, flavorful chicken every time. I still do my BBQ chicken this way today albeit I have added a few tweaks to the process: I replace the water with beer, garlic, fresh thyme and onion, giving a deeper flavor profile to the chicken.”

Jorge Ramos, executive chef of [Conrad Fort Lauderdale Beach](#)

“My fondest cooking memories as a child always stem back to my time in Puerto Rico. I will always remember when my dad taught me how to prepare a typical Puerto Rican dish, sancocho: a root vegetable stew with braised beef. From digging up the root veggies, prepping, cooking and waiting for the stew to be ready, my dad and I did everything together, step by step. Memories like this with my father have influenced me as a chef; it’s kept me interested in where ingredients come from, taught me that cooking from the heart takes time, and that being in touch with your roots and culture is [key] to becoming a successful chef with a sense of identity.”

Oliver Lange, corporate executive chef of [Zuma](#) (U.S. locations)

“When I think about our family dinners, it was usually my mother who took care of the entire process, from grocery shopping to cooking. This changed when my parents divorced when I was 13 and I stayed with my father. He basically had to teach himself how to cook. In the early stages it was stressful as emotions were high anyway, plus he needed to learn to feed us on a daily basis. The first dinners were huge dramas with pans flying through the kitchen, but my dad never gave up and really wanted me to have the same standard as with my mother — food made with quality products and love.

I think at that time, he knew they had made a choice that changed my life and he wanted to keep that one thing constant. It’s a longer story but my dad and I kind of bonded during this difficult time, and I learned the most important lesson when it comes to cooking: patience and being able to multitask. Making good food at home takes time and you shouldn’t try to juggle too many things at once when you’re learning. I chose to be a chef because I always admired how much work and love my mother put into preparing meals and entertaining, and I had even more respect for my dad when he had to take on that role.”

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/abigailabesamis/2019/06/13/25-chefs-share-their-favorite-cooking-lessons-from-dad/#63305ac63d12>