

Book Review *Feeding the Family*

REVIEWED BY HEATHER HEWETT



The Cassoulet Saved Our Marriage: True Tales of Food, Family, & How We Learn to Eat, Ed. Caroline M. Grant and Lisa Catherine Harper (Roost Books, 2013)

Feeding Eden: The Trials and Triumphs of a Food Allergy Family, by Susan Weissman (Sterling, 2012)

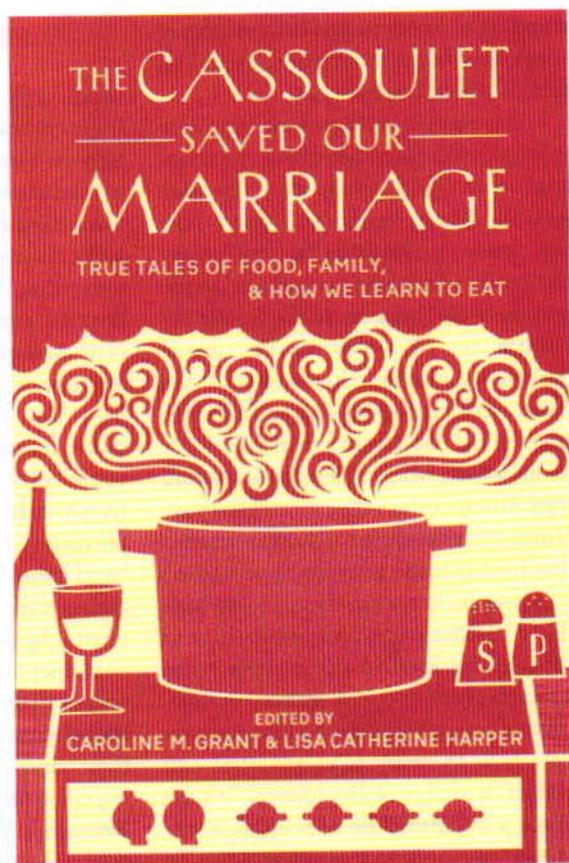
French Kids Eat Everything: how our family moved to france, cured picky eating, banned snacking, and discovered 10 simple rules for raising happy, healthy eaters, by Karen Le Billon (William Morrow, 2012)

The work of feeding our kids has become infinitely more complicated than a generation ago. Consider some of the issues that parents today face: The ready availability of prepackaged “kid food,” the chicken nuggets and gummy fruits and yogurt drinks that make parents’ lives easier but get attacked by slow foodies, locavores, and children’s health advocates. According to the CDC, the rates of obesity have more than doubled in children and tripled in adolescents in the past 30 years. The rising cost of food, combined with the lingering impact of the Great Recession, has resulted in nearly 17 million children living in households characterized by “food insecurity” in 2011. The politics for and against organics, genetic modification, agribusiness, and big food is increasingly prominent, and Whole Foods, fair trade, foodies, vegetarianism, veganism,

peanut-free schools, and government-mandated healthy school lunches are part of the everyday vernacular. As writer Neal Pollack observes in his essay for the new anthology, *The Cassoulet Saved Our Marriage: True Tales of Food, Family, & How We Learn to Eat*, “No parenting topic is more divisive than food.”

It is enough to exhaust the most energetic parent even before she or he has turned on the stove.

The editors of *The Cassoulet Saved Our Marriage* take a reflective stance towards the topic of food and family. They assemble a collection of unique essays that provide twenty-nine different perspectives on what food means to families. Not surprisingly, it turns out that food is never just about what we eat; it “reflects where we live and how we arrived there; it expresses how we’ve been raised, how we treat



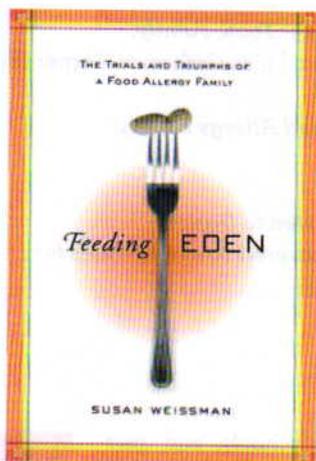
others, what we remember, and even what we find funny." The surprises emerge in the memorable details of these idiosyncratic stories and their culminating insight: food not only brings us together but also tears us apart.

In "A Case for Soul Food," Deesha Philyaw reflects on her decision to feed her children more healthfully than the "soul food" she ate as a child in the 1970s—the food that may have been partly responsible for her parents' and grandparents' fatal bouts with cancer, diabetes, and stroke. She wonders about what's lost in this shift of lifestyle, the "cultural touchstones and family lore" that go out with the fried chicken, gravy, candied yams, and cornbread. How will her children feel connected with her "mama's people"? Philyaw's reflections on the connections between culture, history, and food lead her to a deeper understanding of freedom and the creation of some new family traditions, including monthly Soul Food Nights.

Other writers recount how they confronted their own disordered relationship with food when they became parents. Karen Valby remembers how she "grew up starving for the family harmony advertised in instant waffle commercials" because of the family dynamics set into play by her manic depressive mother. "I was needy," she writes, and her neediness translates into "mooching" food from her friends. Only as an adult, when she adopts a child from Ethiopia, does she let go of the past. Other essays explore the various worries that plague many parents: encouraging picky eaters to try new foods, to eat anything besides pasta and potatoes, or to eat anything at all. In an essay that takes a broader look at contemporary middle-class U.S. families, Edward Lewine wonders how so many food anxieties can persist in an age of abundance. "It's the anxiety of plenty," he concludes, a distorted view of food that reflects the ills

and illnesses of a wealthy nation.

Lewine does not consider the anxieties associated with parenting a food-allergic child, something my family has dealt with since my daughter was born. So I was thrilled to read Susan Weissman's memoir *Feeding Eden: The Trials and Triumphs of a Food Allergy Family*,

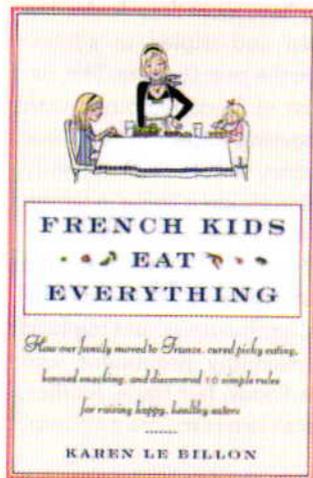


which explores the first few years of raising a child with life-threatening food allergies. Weissman captures the feelings of confusion and disempowerment that characterize the quest to diagnose a very sick child—in her case, a son who vomits everything from his bottle, lands in the hospital emergency room with anaphylaxis, and eventually turns out to be allergic to dairy, soy, eggs, legumes, seeds, fish, nuts, peanuts, shellfish, avocado, garlic, and stone fruits. "Our meals became confounding," she writes, as she tries to feed a family of four with multiple dietary restrictions. She and her husband begin "cheating" on each other by eating taboo foods in secret: "bread crusts dipped straight into the butter container and a few honey-roasted nuts tossed down our throats late at night" before rinsing their mouths and washing their hands. This erratic, disordered eating ruins their appetite for family meals. Eventually Weissman realizes that their eating is propelled by shame, and she re-

solves to re-learn how to eat. She starts with baking: "Could I find or make a food that tasted as good as our love"? she wonders. The answer is yes.

Weissman's story provides an excellent window into one family's experience with food allergies. She writes honestly about the challenges of dealing with multiple medical issues (in her son's case, asthma, atopic dermatitis, and sensory issues); disastrous failures of the mainstream medical system and her exploration of alternative medical techniques, such as osteopathy; feelings of resentment towards mothers who don't understand or who worry about food issues that seem like luxuries to her (such as being concerned about hydrogenated oils); her son's painful struggles with food envy. "I know how life is when food makes you feel crazy," Weissman writes, but *Feeding Eden* isn't crazy at all. It's a love story in the deepest sense, a revelation of how much some parents labor in order to feed their children.

Because of my family's extensive dietary restrictions (in addition to multiple life-threatening food allergies, my daughter has Celiac disease), I've resisted reading *French Kids Eat Everything: how our family moved to France, cured picky eating, banned snacking, and discovered 10 simple rules for raising happy, healthy eaters*. After all, French



cuisine involves plenty of butter, cheese, and baguettes—all taboo items in my family's cooking. My thinking basically went like this: *There is no way this book can possibly help us.* Turns out I was totally, absolutely wrong.

Despite the use of "rules" in the title, Karen Le Billon avoids any finger wagging in her whimsical story of her family's move to a small town in France. Instead, she offers plenty of fascinating insights into how culture affects our relationship to food. The author quickly realizes that she has to do *something* to address her young daughters' North American habits (constant snacking, picky eating, strong veggie aversions) if they are to attend school, make friends, and spend time with her in-laws without starving during a year in Brittany. French children have no choice when it comes to food. Consider the typical lunch scenario: if they do not go home, they must eat the one menu at the school

cantine, prepared from scratch by a chef, and characterized by an utter absence of kid food: country pâté, Alaskan hake, radishes with sea salt, and blue cheese. (Yes, this is public school.) Imagine children eating with relish and without complaint (and with proper table manners). Her children must learn to do this, and do so quickly.

Le Billon soon realizes that the challenge involves more than getting her kids to eat vegetables; she must change her entire family's "psychological and emotional relationship to both cooking and eating." Food in France equals community and citizenship, not individual autonomy or choice; it signifies pleasure and taste, not nutrition or guilt. "Food is social," she concludes in "French Food Rule #4." "Eat family meals together at the table, with no distraction." Her epiphany comes when she realizes that she "resented spending time in the kitchen" but would happily spend hours

driving her daughter to music lessons and insisting on daily practice. "Success" comes higher on her list than teaching her children to eat well, the latter of which is so highly valued in France that it is institutionalized into school curricula and governmental policy.

My epiphany came from reflecting on Rule #10: "Eating is joyful, not stressful." I've spent so much time focused on what we *can't* eat, in my family, and I've expended so much energy worrying about how food can harm my daughter, that I'd lost touch with pleasure at the dinner table. Reading *French Kids Eat Everything* made me realize how much we have when we share food together. Even a limited number of foods, when carefully and creatively prepared, can nourish and sustain us. ■

Heather Hewett is a writer and a professor. She lives and cooks in the lower Hudson Valley, New York, with her husband and two children.

JOIN JUMPSTART'S READ FOR THE RECORD®, PRESENTED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE PEARSON FOUNDATION, ON OCTOBER 3 AND PUT CHILDREN FIRST.

On October 3, 2013, millions of adults and children across the country will read *Otis* by Loren Long, in support of Jumpstart's mission to work toward the day every child in America enters kindergarten prepared to succeed.

jstart.org/readfortherecord

Jumpstart

PEARSON
FOUNDATION

Read for the Record®

