

Savoring the School Lunch

BACK-TO-SCHOOL inspiration strikes every September with the crisp freshness of new notebooks — or sliced vegetables. Three-ring binders and sharpened pencils, three-cheese tortellini and shaved Parmesan.

Standards are high for everyone that first week of school.

On the lunchbox side, I'd like to be that mom who keeps it going year-round, smiling over adorable bento boxes full of animal-shaped nibbles. (I am never that mom.) I'd like to tuck loving notes or poems inside insulated tote bags every weekday through June. (This is just to say/I have eaten the plums that were in the icebox/Because soft fruits get squashed in lunchbags/and leak goo.)

In reality, the lunches get prosaic fast, just as the fresh new backpacks start sagging with wrinkled papers and pencil stubs. By October, instead of cutting lavash-bread pinwheels or trying to build layered shaker-salads, I'd settle for finding a Thermos that seals firmly enough that soup won't leak, yet loosely enough for a third-grader to wrestle open. (If you've found the magic brand, please contact me at the email below.)

Though we usually love spending time in the kitchen, school lunches rely on ease and speed, on both the preparation side and the eating side. Most days after Week One, that means PB&J or cheese with mayo, trail mix or fig bars, sliced apple or peeled orange.

I've come to believe the low bar makes kids appreciate the occasional high points: the days they discover a homemade chocolate-cherry cookie in their bag, or a little spread of good cheese and crackers, dried fruit and Marcona almonds. My youngest is still dazzled by the priceless day last year when she bit into her sandwich and found I had swapped in Nutella for the peanut butter.

The routine does get tedious, and every year I think about turning the job over to the kids. At ages 8 to 16, they now, in age order, can blend smoothies and cook omelets and bake sourdough bread from scratch; there's no reason they couldn't throw together a daily brown-bag. They might even like it.

And yet, I keep lunches as part of my own year-round grind. It might be tedious, but the flip side of tedium is constancy.

I like keeping that connection to them during our separate days, with all of us now at different schools and offices. I don't slip love notes inside the brown bags, but I write their names

in big black letters outside. I used to circle the names on all three bags with hearts, then the oldest said he was too old for that, then the middle child said he was, too.

Maybe I keep packing lunch because I've seen how this goes. Once we had three kids who loved bedtime stories, then two, then one, and now they all speed through stacks of thick library books on their own. Three kids once needed buckling into five-point car seats; now one is old enough to drive. We no longer have to hide the stash of Sacagawea silver dollars that only the Tooth Fairy used as currency.

I think I'll hang on to these brown bags before my job drops to two lunches, then one, then September stops feeling different to me than any other month.

At that point, I hope the kids will visit often, and we can eat lunch together. 📧



Sure; PB&Js (and the packing routine itself) quickly grow tiresome, but even the simplest brown bag holds a connection worth keeping



One of my few “fancy” lunchbox meals came courtesy of caterer-to-the-stars Lisa Dupar, who made this portable junior caprese salad for her own children’s lunches. They’re well-balanced snacks: easy to eat, and easy to make — I’m almost embarrassed to call it a recipe. If you’re feeling fancy, add cubes of seasoned French bread to the mix, or include a little cup of vinaigrette for dipping — I don’t do that, because in my household, it would leak everywhere, and the backpacks would smell like oil and vinegar.

Junior Lunchbox Caprese

Makes 3 skewers

- 9 cherry tomatoes
- 6 “bocconcini” mozzarella balls
- 6 basil leaves
- 3 wooden skewers

1. Thread a cherry tomato onto each skewer, then follow it up with a mozzarella ball and a basil leaf. Repeat. Top each skewer off with a final cherry tomato.

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