

Glowing reviews for smokin' recipes

By Esther Baird

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It's been a busy summer at Casa Baird. We packed in grad school, summer camp, babysitters, car trips, birthday parties and beach trips. And through it all, my girls never, not once, tired of asking for snacks and meals.

Regular readers know that I swing more towards the, what I like to call, convenient end of the nutritional spectrum. But at the outset of the summer a friend of mine invited me to a demonstration by a local nutritionist. She was offering her class as a Mommies Night Out. She planned to teach us about organic food that children would actually eat while serving us hor'dourves and wine. Naturally I went.

After a wonderful demonstration and discussion, she produced organic, this-and-that free, fabulous bars that were guaranteed to make our children polite with shiny hair and zero inclinations to ever wipe boogers on their pillows.

I, in turn, learned that if I didn't change my processed ways I might produce toxic girls who glowed in the dark. Because our summer was so hectic, I decided to pick just two, obtainable, nutritional goals: Better veggies and better snacks.

My veggie vision was simple. At the beginning of each week I'd wash and prep fresh vegetables and toss them into one of those new microwaveable steamer bags. Then each evening I could whip out a bag, nuke it for mere minutes and serve.

I decided that my snack plan would take shape after I sent my daughter to her first week of camp. In a perfect convergence of timing and diet, her camp had a cooking theme. The idea was that she'd still play and swim, but instead of dousing construction paper with glue and google-eyes, she'd focus her creative energy into cooking projects. What sort of healthy new snacks would my daughter learn how to make, I wondered?

"Necklaces out of Fruit Loops!!" was the answer I got on the first day.

Fruit Loops: The sugar bomb that even I had not offered my girls.

"Really sweetie? Did you save it so you can eat it after your rest this afternoon?"

"No, I ate it, and guess what else we made!?"

I couldn't guess. I could just tell, from the jittery way her eyes looked like they might shoot out of her head and tango across the room, that it probably hadn't contained anything natural.

"Ice cream sandwiches with cookies!!" she exploded.

So much for the snack plan.

Thankfully I felt I could counteract the sugar with my perfectly steamed carrots for dinner. Such a modern marvel those new steamer bags, so clever, so fast, so . . . apparently flammable. That's right. The steamer bag erupted into actual flames. In my microwave! And, unless my carrots had microscopic pieces of metal in their beta-rich cores, or unless at just that moment an anti-particle chose to materialize in the steamer bag leaving it singed and smoking, then I'd say, those nifty new bags don't exactly produce veggies that are truly heart healthy.

Still, perhaps the second day of cooking camp would bring back some healthy equilibrium — surely the first day had been merely to get the kids comfortable.

"Guess what we made today!" my daughter nearly hyperventilated at pick-up.

"Little celery people with bean sprouts for hair?" I tried.

"Floating Jell-o faces in punch made with real soda!"

The volume pressed me against the wall.

I smiled gamely at the counselors — after all they did have 15 or so 4 year olds. If they needed to toss them bodily into a vat of Jell-o to survive the morning then so be it.

Still, it was with just a bit of grimness that I attempted to steam fresh broccoli that evening. I read the steamer bag instructions again and watched as they cooked in the event of flames. All seemed well. That is until I pulled the broccoli out and cut open a floret to check the interior. There, to my horror, was a blackened, burnt core. More anti-particles coincidentally leaping into existence at the center of my vegetables? More invisible metal fragments? Or perhaps, just perhaps, somebody's zippy little steamer product went to market a bit too early!?

My veggie vision fogged over and we ordered pizza.

I'm not giving up entirely. I made the yummy organic bars and they were a family hit. We also have taken to making homemade chicken nuggets thanks to a truly great recipe on the final day of cooking camp. On the other hand, the electricity goes out with great frequency here on Prospect Hill: Having two girls who glow-in-the-dark might actually come in handy.

Esther Baird is a Beverly writer. Her column appears regularly in the Citizen. Please contact her with suggestions or comments about The Baird Facts at: esther@estherbaird.com, or visit her Web site at: www.estherbaird.com