Deborah Madison is the author of nine cookbooks and countless articles on food, cooking, and farming. Currently she blogs for *Gourmet* and *Culinate*. Her books have been honored with two Julia Child Cookbook of the Year awards and four James Beard awards, among others. Deborah is a longtime active leader in slow food and she sits on the board of the Seed Savers Exchange. She lives in Galisteo, New Mexico, with her husband, Patrick McFarlin.

Patrick McFarlin is a journeyman painter and graphic designer. His fine art has been shown in New York, San Francisco, Houston, Scottsdale, and Santa Fe, among other cities. He is the creator of Pat's Downtown Club, featured on CBS Sunday Morning. He has received numerous awards and fellowships for his painting. He works out of his studio in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

"I am hooked on this book. You'll smile knowingly, muse a lot, maybe blush, get hungry and probably end up in the kitchen, enjoying every bite of eating alone. This is another keeper from Deborah Madison."
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—Patrick Oliphant, artist, cartoonist, and card-carrying vegetarian

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What we eat when we eat alone

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What we eat when we eat alone

stories and 100 recipes

Deborah Madison
and Patrick McFarlin

$24.99 U.S.

What do *you* eat when no one is watching? From young college students to spry seniors, from empty-nest mothers to men and women with traveling spouses, from bachelors to the many people between relationships, millions of us dine alone every night. But what do we eat? Is it takeout, a frozen dinner, or our favorite gourmet meal?

In *What We Eat When We Eat Alone,* Deborah Madison and Patrick McFarlin set out to learn what people chew on when there isn't anyone else around. The responses are surprising and far-ranging—food-gone-wild in its most elemental form.

Some solo diners relish the elaborate, while others prefer the bizarre, some eat their favorite foods, some eat what's convenient, and others choose their menus according to their moods.

The book is illustrated with the art of Patrick McFarlin, capturing the flavor of the stories. It also includes great recipes at the end of each chapter for those who dine alone, including tips on making smaller portion meals, and also on using leftovers in different recipes for those who don't want to eat the same dish night after night.

Our relationship with food is one of the defining and intimate relationships of our lives; it says a lot about who we are and how we live. Part cookbook, part memoir, part pure fun, *What We Eat When We Eat Alone* explores the joys and sorrows of eating solo and gives us a glimpse into the lives of everyday people who do.

CHAPTER 4

Getting the Body Fed
with Rough and Ready Foods

"When I'm cooking for myself, it happens like an urge. That is, it probably isn't a regular mealtime. I first notice that I'm hungry and then have a vision of something that is in the fridge or the pantry. Then I dream up a recipe for it."

—Patrick McKelvey, *musician and graphic designer*

ALTHOUGH I WAS HEADING OUT THE DOOR, I had to take a quick kitchen detour and peek in the oven to see what smelled so good. Inside were seven big potatoes baking away. They were almost adorable, the way they were all lined up in a row. But it did seem like a lot of potatoes.

"It saves on propane and besides, there are lots of things I can do with baked potatoes," Patrick explained. Clearly, he's an example of one who doesn't mind eating the same thing over and over again.

So how do men feed themselves when they're home alone? In different ways, of course. Some take time to cook a real meal. A neighbor tells us that he doesn't mind spending two hours to cook his solitary dinner when he's alone. (His wife, on the other hand, happily turns to frozen macaroni and cheese, happy not to think about cooking for a change.) Other men go out to eat on a regular basis. And some happily make do with something they can eat off of for days, like a pot of chili or a ham. Even potatoes.

Men also eat things their wives don't care for, like greasy sausages, brains, or eggs fried in a lake of bacon grease, the hot fat spooned over the yolks. Some dishes are rustled up out of what's around the fridge and in the cupboard—rustic meals that could be made better, but left unimproved, provide a decent feeding. Both members of one couple we spoke with made meals entirely out of what they could buy in liquor stores—jerky, trail mix, pretzels, Ritz crackers with peanut butter—which they dined on whether together or alone. While having a liquor store as my main food source doesn't sound quite right, there is an argument for a dinner consisting of a Scotch and a bowl of peanuts, for there are days when that's a perfect meal—days when lunch lasted too late, or one was stuck in town at a meeting, days when one wants a little soothing sustenance when it's all over, but not much. Whatever the approach, here are some of the simpler dishes made mostly by men on their own. In case you're wondering why there's not a lot of meat here, it's because meat looms larger in the next chapter. This is the "healthy eating" part of men cooking for themselves.

Something both men and women frequently express enthusiasm for is the leftover. With leftovers one can cobble pieces of former meals into new ones without investing a lot of time in the process. In addition, eating leftovers has ecological implications, which we discovered through an article that came over the Internet called *Eat Leftovers, Save the World*. Good title, big message. It came from the UK, but no doubt applies to the US as well. It seems that discarded food accounts for a fifth of the United Kingdom's carbon emissions and decomposing food releases methane, the most potent greenhouse gas. The 6.7 million tons each

year of so-called garbage—so-called because much of that food is edible—creates an even bigger problem than packaging waste, and it represents a third of all food purchased. Amazing!

Knowing this should make us want to eat our leftovers. Or, if we don't like leftovers, it might encourage us to cook less in the first place. And failing that, we might want to compost those foods we don't eat. Patrick, a very reluctant composter, used to laugh at my piles of vegetable peelings rotting in the backyard. But since reading this article, he brings home his bucket of scraps from his studio to add to those heaps of trimmings that will eventually nourish the garden.

"It's one small step for mankind," Patrick announces, as he adds his contribution to the compost pile.

Despite these considerable advantages, we discovered that there are those who openly detest leftover food, those who wouldn't dream of taking home a partially eaten dinner from a restaurant or reheating food left from another meal. But in general we love the foods that remain, depend on leftovers, seek them out and are grateful when we find them. And for reasons other than ease and convenience.

Mas Masamoto, for example, turns to leftovers when he's alone because, he says, "I immediately miss my wife, and leftovers are a way of reliving a meal. I have often wondered how someone eats after a spouse or partner dies. Reliving a meal can be both sad and yet memorable."

For less contemplative men, leftovers are favorites because all you have to do is reheat them, if that. There are some leftovers that started out hot but have been known to go down cold, like frittatas or roast chicken. Even spaghetti. Then there are those that actually develop flavor as they sit, like stews and soups. One remaindered food that works well for some is polenta.

Patrick describes his joy at encountering a bowl of leftover polenta and sliding it into a pan of hot olive oil where it sputtered and hissed before finally falling apart. It really was a little too wet for frying, but no one else would see how messy the final dish would look. Besides, frying had its own special appeal.

After five minutes Patrick managed to turn over what was now a virtual mess of cornmeal mush. Some of it stuck to the pan, but these crispy bits got scraped up and folded into the whole.

"The crisp parts are the good parts, after all," he explained, "but it did look a bit plain and jumbled." To remedy the situation he sliced a ball of fresh mozzarella and stewed it over the polenta.

"I had a lid, but it was too small, so I propped it up against the spatula, which was resting in the pan. It covered everything just enough to melt the cheese. I served it up. Black pepper and red pepper flakes went on top. And when I saw that more of that good crusty stuff was stuck to the pan, I just scraped it out and added it to the plate.

"And if you don't have mozzarella," Patrick adds helpfully, "it would work just as well with Gorgonzola or some leftover crumbs of another blue cheese. Or any cheese, really."

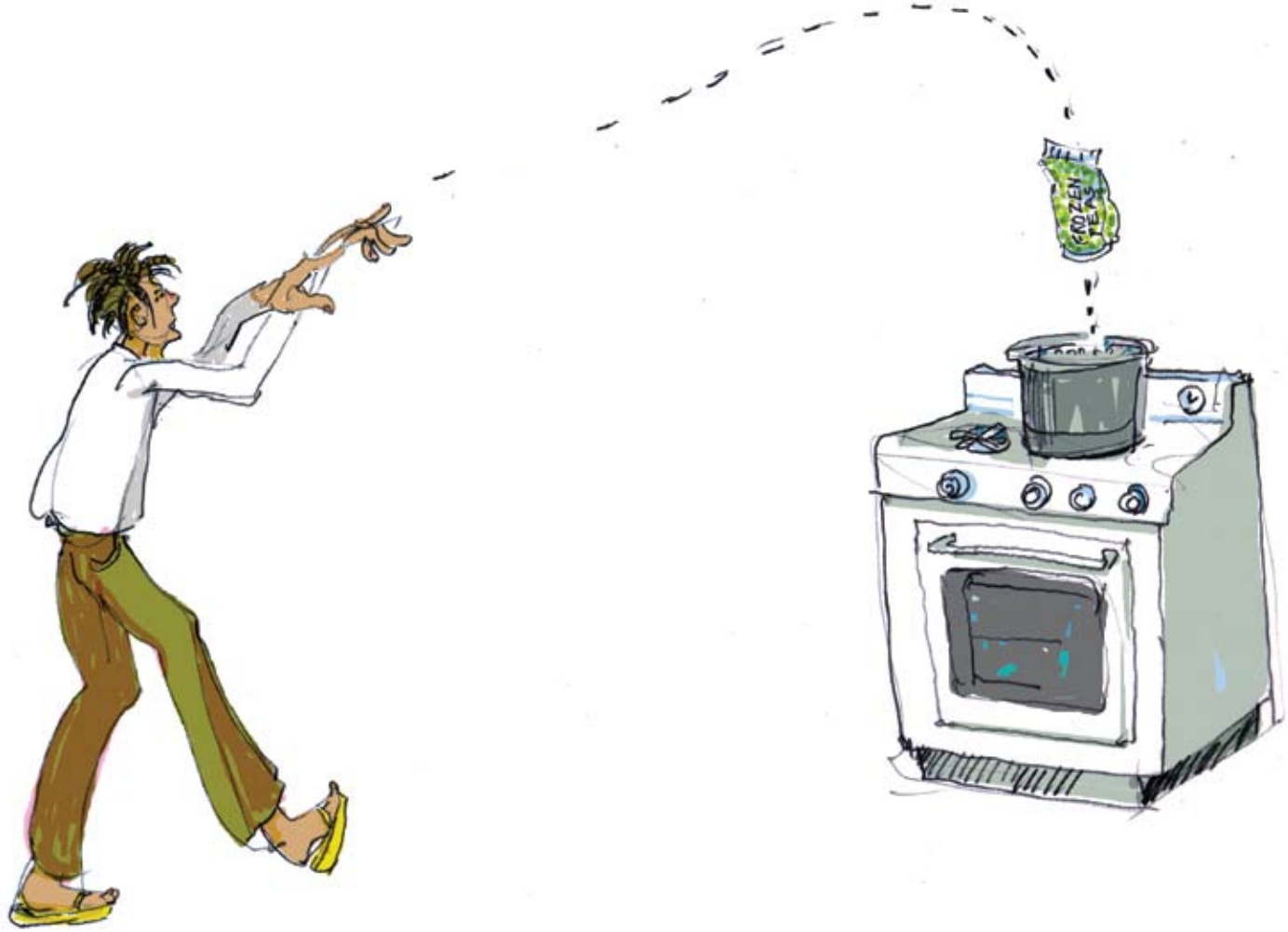
Messy or not, don't you know this would be good? I wished I had been there. If I had, I would have chopped a little fresh thyme for the polenta, made a little salad, and brought out those leftover poached pears that Patrick had apparently overlooked. But that's what happens when another person joins in. What was a perfectly good single-plate, one-pan dinner for a solitary diner suddenly becomes a full-fledged, multidish meal for two.

Polenta is good for another Arkansan, also named Patrick. Because he likes to cook and doesn't mind spending a little time in

front of the stove, it's not surprising that this was easy to make into a shareable recipe. This Patrick seasons his freshly cooked polenta with a pinch of marjoram, then pours it onto a lightly oiled plate. "While it sets up, I slowly sauté until soft a mashed garlic clove and a thinly sliced onion. I wilt a handful of greens in the onion mixture, chop a couple of slices of prosciutto and toss them in for the last few minutes, then let it catch its breath. I pour all of this over the polenta, which I've now sliced up, and grate some Parmesan over that. Pour a glass of red wine and that'll do."

By the way, polenta is not hard to make from scratch and you absolutely do not have to stir it for an hour—or even a half-hour—unless, of course, you want to. You also don't have to let it set, although that takes only a few minutes. You can spoon it warm and soft onto a plate and pile the greens on top.

The Galisteo Inn, which is practically next door to us, had polenta with a vegetable ragoût on the menu one night. It looked



especially tempting to a robust, dreadlock-sporting African American potter named Sam, and a discussion about its possibilities ensued. Sam liked the sound of the dish because it reminded him of what he cooks for himself.

"When I eat alone, which is most of the time," Sam said, "I put on grits and after they've cooked for ten or fifteen minutes, I throw in some vegetables and fresh garlic. I use frozen veggies out of the bag. Peas are good, and so is corn, but any vegetable will do. Then I finish with some grated Parmesan. I have this for breakfast and for lunch. But for dinner I throw the frozen veggies in a skillet with olive oil, add water, sardines from a can or that other fish with a rich taste—anchovies!—or chunks of whatever protein is on sale. I might add chunks of tofu. And I make a salad with olive oil and lemon juice for a dressing."

I was impressed that Sam made the dressing for his salad. Finally, here was someone who wasn't seduced by the false promises of bottled dressings built on dull oils, xanthan gums, and corn syrup. But as a vegetable lover, I was somewhat dismayed by all those frozen veggies. But Sam spoke up for them as others have.

"Frozen vegetables are terribly underrated. There are so many kinds and they don't go bad! You can break off just what you want to use and return the rest to the freezer without worry."

In the end, Sam ordered the salmon because, after all, grits and vegetables is what he cooks every day, and I had the polenta. And in the spirit of compromise, I came up with a dish for Sam that uses both fresh and frozen vegetables over polenta, which might work for someone willing to cook something, but not everything. In other words, Polenta with Peas and Mushrooms is a partial slam-dunk approach.

POLENTA

Polenta is one of those fundamental foods on which you can build entire meals. Many say that 1 cup of polenta cooked in a quart of water will serve four, but it's more likely to feed a hungry man just once or twice.

4 cups water
salt to taste
1 cup polenta
butter or grated cheese, to taste

Bring the water to a boil. Add a teaspoon salt, then gradually the polenta, pouring it into the water in a slow, steady stream while stirring. Lower the heat to medium and cook, still stirring, until the polenta has absorbed enough water to make a more or less even mass, then lower the heat still more, almost as low as it will go. At this point you can leave it pretty much alone, stirring it just every now and then to make sure it isn't sticking. It needs 30 minutes to really be cooked, but the longer it cooks after that, the fuller the flavor will be. Once done, taste for salt and add more if needed. Leave as is, or add butter or freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese. Odds and ends of cheese are good too, such as Fontina, mozzarella, and any crumbs of Gorgonzola or other blues.

Soft Polenta. At this point you can pour the soft polenta onto your plate and add whatever else you're having with it—sautéed mushrooms, braised greens, or Blue Cheese Sauce on page 42.

Firm Polenta. If you prefer discrete pieces, pour the warm polenta into a bowl that you've brushed lightly with olive oil, let it stand for 10 minutes while you cook your topping, then turn it out. Now you can slice it and put wedges of polenta on the plate, or you can slice it and fry the pieces in olive oil and/or butter before serving.

USING LEFTOVER POLENTA

This much polenta will probably produce leftovers. (It's easier to make this much than half the amount.) Leftover polenta will already be firm when you take it from the refrigerator. Slice it, then brown it in butter or olive oil. If you like it better soft, put it in a saucepan, add water to thin it out, whisk to make it smooth, and reheat. (Polenta, by the way, makes a delicious breakfast cereal: flavor soft polenta with a little vanilla, add honey or sugar, a pat of butter, and milk.) Here are some other things you can do with leftover polenta:

- Soften, then pour the polenta in a soup bowl. Cover it with slices or crumbles of Gorgonzola cheese, grate over a little Parmesan, and add toasted breadcrumbs (see page 59) and chopped parsley mixed with some fresh marjoram. This is comforting in its goodness and simplicity.

- To make a straightforward gratin, cut firm polenta into planks about ¾ inch thick, top with tomato sauce, and add cheese, such as Gorgonzola with Parmesan, fresh or smoked mozzarella, or a mixture of all three. Meat eaters might want to add sausage. Bake in a 375° F oven until bubbly and hot, for about 20 minutes.

- More simply, fry the firm polenta in one pan and heat the tomato sauce in another. Spoon the sauce over the polenta and add grated cheese.

- Take reheated firm or soft polenta and serve with the Sautéed Mushrooms on page 119, to which you've added some diced tomato, fresh or canned.

POLENTA SMOTHERED WITH BRAISED GREENS

Patrick McKelvey finishes his version of polenta by strewing pieces of prosciutto over all at the end. Leave it out and you have a good vegetarian dinner. Greens always cook down so much that you might as well use an entire bunch of whatever kind you're including. If there is any left over, use it to make Patrick's Green Panino.

polenta, page 30
1 tablespoon olive oil
1 small onion, thinly sliced
2 cloves garlic, finely chopped or pressed
3 or 4 big handfuls chard, kale, or other cooking greens, leaves removed from the stems, rinsed and torn
salt
⅓ cup water or chicken broth
a few drops red wine vinegar
3 slices prosciutto, cut into strips (optional)
a chunk of Asiago or Parmesan cheese for grating

1. Make the polenta and pour it into a lightly oiled bowl to set.

2. Meanwhile, heat the olive oil in a 10-inch cast-iron skillet over medium heat. When hot, add the onion. Give it a stir and cook until the onion is wilted, about 8 minutes, adding the garlic halfway through. Add the greens, sprinkle them with a teaspoon salt and pour in the water or chicken stock. Cover and cook until the greens are wilted and tender, from 8 to 15 minutes, depending on the type of green used. Sprinkle on the vinegar and add the prosciutto, if using, and let rest while you turn the polenta out, cut it into slices, and arrange them on your plate. Cover the polenta with the greens and grate the cheese over all.

PATRICK'S GREEN PANINO WITH ROASTED PEPPERS AND GRUYÈRE CHEESE

"I have tried frozen, but fresh is best," declares Patrick about spinach. And if you're going to use fresh spinach, you might as well look further to more pungent greens like broccoli rabe, mustard, or turnip greens. "They're even better if you break them down Southern style, that is, cook them until they're really tender."

Mustard greens, we finally concluded, are a great choice, not only because they have more punch than spinach, but also because a bunch yields easily twice as much volume as spinach, giving you enough for two or three hefty sandwiches. If you're wary about them, know that mustard greens, when cooked until tender (truly a matter of very few minutes) are as mild and delicious as can be.

1 bunch mustard greens, leaves cut off the stems and washed but not dried
salt
a few pinches red pepper flakes
1 garlic clove, pressed or minced
pepper sauce or red wine vinegar
2 pieces ciabatta or your favorite rustic bread
olive oil
grated Gruyère or Fontina cheese
wide strips of roasted bell pepper
Dijon mustard

1. Put the mustard greens in a pot over high heat with the water that clings to the leaves plus ½ cup. Sprinkle with a teaspoon salt, the pepper flakes, and cover. Once the leaves have collapsed, reduce the heat to medium and cook, covered, until they're tender when you taste one, about 7 minutes. Drain, then squeeze the excess water out of the greens. Put them in a bowl and season with additional salt, if needed, additional pepper, the garlic, and pepper sauce or vinegar to taste.

(continued)