

# A Paean to the Power of the Family Dinner

*"What should I make for dinner tonight?"*  
In their gorgeous new cookbook, the Pollan family answers this question (and many more).

by Susan Tomchin

In a world of restaurant meals, carry-out food, and eating on the run, with eyes flitting to the screens of iPhones, the Pollan Family offers a tantalizing alternative.

Thanks to mom, Corky, healthy, flavorful and inventive family meals were the cornerstone of growing up for this family of four siblings: Michael, food activist and bestselling author; Tracy, Emmy-nominated actress, who serves on the board of the foundation created by her husband – the Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research; Dana, co-founder of the Pollan-Austen Fitness Center and producer of a series of exercise videos; and Lori, a certified Life Coach with a focus on health and wellness and co-founder of the Pollan-Austen Center. The siblings have each continued the tradition of making family dinners in their own homes.

Now, the four dynamic Pollan women have joyfully collaborated to write a cookbook, *The Pollan Family Table – The Very Best Recipes and Kitchen Wisdom for Delicious Family Meals*, due out in October from Scribner. In this attractive and personal book, loaded with photographs of family members cooking, eating and enjoying being together, they offer

"real life answers to the age old question, 'What should I make for dinner tonight?'" as well as a compelling case for cultivating "kitchen traditions where they may have lapsed under the pressures of modern life or were never established to begin with."



**"Never in history  
has it been easier,  
or more tempting,  
not to cook."**

– Michael Pollan

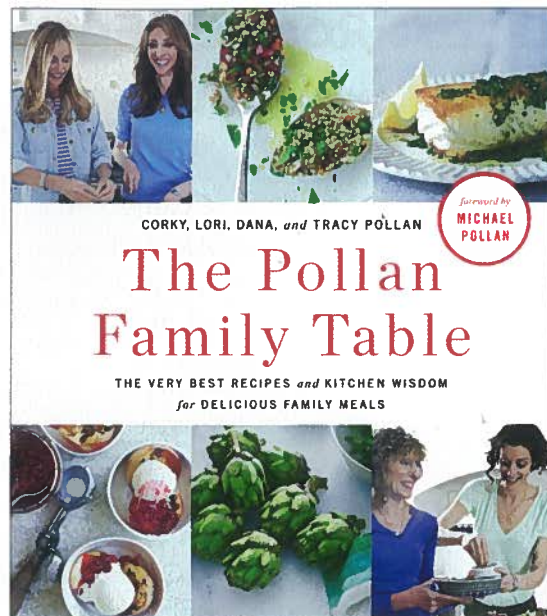
As Michael Pollan points out in his superb forward to the book, "my mother and sisters are not professional cooks." But therein is a source of the book's appeal. The ingredients are readily available (and in fact are clearly presented in a shopping list that accompanies each recipe) and the preparation time is short – most recipes in the book can be put on

the table in an hour or less, even a Roast Chicken Dinner that Corky says is great for Jewish holidays.

Sophisticated cooking skills are not required, even though the featured dishes are anything but mundane. Among the 100 or so recipes are Citrus Roasted Chicken with Grand Marnier; Beer Battered Fish Tacos with Mango Salsa; Quick Chicken Thighs Provencal; Orecchiette (a kind of pasta) with Sautéed Artichoke Hearts, Broccoli, and Sun-Dried Tomatoes; and Maple-Balsamic Root Vegetable "Fries."

Making food at home can be a healthier way of eating, Corky says, since much of carry-out and restaurant food tends to be heavy on sugar and fat. In their recipes, the Pollans emphasize seasonal vegetables, whole grains and beans, and downplay processed ingredients. They prefer sustainably raised chicken and eggs and wild-caught or sustainably-raised fish. Not averse to using butter, cheese or a splash of cream, moderation is their watchword.

The ease with which the Pollans approach the concept of family dinners is infectious. "You don't have to do it every



night of the week; just get started with one or two nights cooking something that you love to eat," says the delightfully down-to-earth Corky in a phone interview. "Concentrate on one element of the meal and, if necessary, go to a carry-out to get your salad or vegetable. And you can add almost anything to a soup or pasta; it's still going to taste wonderful."

The goal is for families to enjoy preparing and eating together "from a common pot," rather than everyone going their separate ways at dinnertime. "It was a wonderful time to sit around the table and talk about what had happened during the day," Corky says of her family dinners. "If there had been problems during the day, that was when the kids felt relaxed enough to talk about them."

There were often "a few extra kids at the table," her children's friends whose mothers worked full-time. They showed up at the Pollan home, drawn by the promise of a home-cooked meal. Corky went back to work when her youngest was ten, and for 17 years wrote "Best Bets," a popular column in *New York Magazine*, and then became style director for *Gourmet*. The family dinner tradition, however, never waned.

Her daughters, in interviews by email, expressed a similar commitment and en-

thusiasm for family dinners. "I think that having discussions around the dinner table teaches you how to not only share interesting stories and ideas but also to listen and empathize with others," says Tracy. "It also gives you a sense of who you are and where you come from."

Adds Dana: "Sitting together for a family meal is not only about the shared meal and eating together: it's about conversation and taking turns, and expressing opinions. I think by being in a family you learn to make your voice heard, but also learn to be receptive to other people's opinions and ideas. My brother Michael explains it beautifully in the forward to our book when he states: 'The family meal is the nursery of democracy.'"

The Pollans dedicate their cookbook to Corky's mom – Grandma Mary, "where it all began." According to her daughter, Corky, Mary was "an inventive cook," who wasn't afraid to use vegetables such as artichokes, kohlrabi and eggplant, at a time when they weren't a regular part of the American diet.

"My children often cooked with her," Corky says. "If you observe someone cooking, you sort of pick it up. It's almost by osmosis; you learn how to do things like slice an onion. It also eliminates the fear of cooking. I find that a lot of people

are so fearful. It's not rocket science; it's just getting some food on the table."

Lori remembers her grandmother as an amazing baker. "I loved everything she made – mandelbrot, nut cake, zucchini bread and blueberry bread," Lori recalls. "When I was a teenager I asked her if she would teach me how to make them – so I followed her around for a day, scrambling to write everything down because she didn't really follow recipes. She would literally say, 'Add flour until it's not too moist but not too dry' – and I just had to figure it out. It's a wonderful close, connecting experience to cook with other generations – it just bridges the age differences in such a wonderful way." Two of Grandma Mary's recipes – Mandelbrot and Grand Marnier Orange Cake, her sophisticated version of the traditional Jewish nut cake – are included in the cookbook.

The Pollans continue to gather for family dinners, especially on the holidays, including Rosh Hashanah and Passover, when Corky often makes the traditional dishes she grew up with such as brisket, chicken soup and matzoh balls and roast chicken. Corky's grandchildren, who range in age from 10 to 24, are often right there in the kitchen with her, and several have shown a flair for baking. Recipes that they developed are included in the book as well.

"Cooking with my grandkids has always been such fun," she says. "Almost all of them, especially the guys, have loved being in the kitchen. I think if a parent starts, kids may not start immediately, but as they get older, it brushes off on them too."

Susan Tomchin is editor of *Jewish Woman* magazine.

**FYI:** Go to [jwi.org/pollanfamily](http://jwi.org/pollanfamily) to find a recipe for *Perfect Roast Chicken Dinner in One Hour*

