

# introduction

## WHY NOW?

On a sunny morning a few Octobers ago, I was crossing Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn on my way to work, when a thought landed in my head as if delivered by lightning bolt: *We need to stop eating so much meat.* The realization was so strong I felt the immediate need to text Andy, my husband, who was on his way to work, too.

**ME:** Should we become vegetarians?

I had no idea how he'd respond. Andy's idea of a perfect dinner has always been an old family recipe for breaded, vinegary pork chops, followed closely by Marcella Hazan's iconic Bolognese (the one where the ground chuck drinks up what must be a gallon of wine, milk, and tomato juice). In the summer, his happiest place is holding a gin and tonic while grilling a fleet of chicken thighs that have been steeping in an herby yogurt marinade all day. We both grew up in houses where dinner was defined as animal protein, starch, and vegetable, and even though we had half-heartedly been discussing cutting back on meat for years for our health and the planet's health, the truth was neither of us could really picture how it would look in our family of four—the two of us and our two teenagers. We had our family dinner routine, we liked our family dinner routine, and our family dinner routine worked. The readers of *Dinner: A Love Story*, the website and cookbook series that I'd been writing for a decade, seemed to be on the same page as us, consistently Instagramming



and sharing my recipes for Red Wine–Braised Short Ribs and Chicken Parm Meatballs and Roast Chicken, and visiting those pages way more frequently than, say, the baked Miso-Butter Tofu. Sure, there were more and more calls for vegetarian dinner ideas as the years went on, but if I am to believe my website’s metrics, meat was still king.

In other words, I expected Andy to reply to my text with something like “Let me know how it goes” or “Good luck getting everyone on board with that one,” but instead this is what he texted back:

**HIM:** Maybe, yeah.

*An opening.*

**HIM:** How would we do it?

**ME:** Maybe we try to cut back on meat during the week?

**HIM:** And eat meat only on weekends?

**ME:** Yeah, and if we go to someone’s house or whatever and they’re serving meat, we obviously eat it.

**HIM:** That sounds doable.

**HIM:** Are we pescatarians or vegetarians?

**ME:** We’re not either yet.

**HIM:** Where does fish fit into this?

**ME:** Let’s see how fast we run out of ideas.

**HIM:** What do we tell the girls?

**ME:** Do we have to tell the girls?

The girls are our daughters, Abby and Phoebe, who were fourteen and sixteen at the time of this exchange. They have their no-fly zones when it comes to certain foods—most notably, eggs (I know!!)—but for the most part, they are adventurous eaters and not the types to question a meal’s legitimacy if it isn’t anchored by a piece of animal protein. We had several meatless meals in our regular rotation already: black bean burritos with pickled onions, butternut squash soup, cold sesame noodles, pasta with caramelized onions and spinach, quesadillas, salad pizza, regular pizza. But those were the exceptions to the rule, single meals that broke up the meat-centric rotation of other favorites like chicken potpie, Uncle Tony’s steak, barbecue chicken sandwiches, pork tacos. We wondered how they would do if the formula was reversed, if dinner as a rule was plant-based and the exception was chicken cutlets or pan-fried pork chops?



On the other hand, they are teenagers and, like most kids, are more game for things than we give them credit for. And though more often than not, the dinnertime conversation can dead-end with the usual flat-toned “fine” and “good” when they are asked about their days, there are nights when you realize they’re teaching you far more than you are teaching them. Like, for instance, that you can use the word *fire* as an adjective. Or that Camus’s philosophy can be distilled to one sentence: “Just because life is meaningless doesn’t mean you can’t give it meaning, and, Mom, there’s too much mustard in this dressing.” Or, this one, learned in earth science: “We could basically save the planet if we stopped eating beef.”

I did know that actually, and I’m not proud of what I’m about to say, but there is something that feels way more urgent about a statistic like that when it comes out of the mouths of my own children, the ones who will be inheriting the planet that I have been complicit in neglecting and, let’s be real, *destroying*. If there is something positive to spin from this, it’s that their generation understands the broader significance of their food choices and is optimistic about making changes in a way that many of their parents are not. They are simultaneously motivated and motivating.

There were other factors that had been pushing us in the plant-based direction for a while now, too. Beyond the environmental implications, there were the personal ones: It has become almost impossible to watch our aging parents and not think about how we can take better care of our

own middle-aged bodies. Using the same weekends-only strategy, we had already dialed back on drinking a few years ago and, just like other walking cliché midlife-crisis sufferers, started going to gym classes with names like “Gladiators” and “Core & More.” Also helping things along was the fact that everywhere we look there seemed to be a big-name chef or cookbook author giving eggplant or Swiss chard or chickpeas the kind of star treatment once reserved for a pork shoulder or a leg of lamb. The “all-day café” trend happened in there somewhere, and lunches for work and with the family were suddenly happening over avocado toasts and smoothie bowls instead of burgers and turkey clubs.

But it’s one thing to know you want to eat in a more plant-based direction and an entirely different thing to know how to execute that pledge night after night at the dinner table, especially if you are not a big-name chef, if you are just someone who is short on time and ideas but wants to do right by family dinnertime.

To complicate things further, I’d spent fifteen years nailing down the exact kinds of dinners my family would not only eat but greet with bona fide high-fives (and chronicling all of it very publicly!). I had found my rhythm and my repertoire—the salmon salad! The steak salad! Dad’s cheeseburgers! Their Great-Great-Grandma Turano’s meatballs, for crying out loud! That’s two “greats” if you’re not paying attention, which brings me to another point: Not only were these easy recipes that I could make on autopilot, they were sentimental family recipes that I figured would forever be associated with warm, happy memories of sitting around their childhood dinner table. One night, about a year and a half into our family’s vegetarian pledge, over a plate of yogurt-y pasta and caramelized onions, my friend Joanna said to my daughters, “You’re so lucky you’re growing up in a house where the food is this good every night” (bless you, Joanna), before asking, “What would you say your parents’ best dishes are?”

I mean, if there was ever a question tailored to make me feel like the greatest parent ever, this was it. Instead, Phoebe kind of shrugged and Abby looked like she was struggling to come up with an answer.

“I guess salmon salad,” she said. “And salad pizza . . . since we’re having a lot of that lately. And, um . . . that’s kind of it.”

I was incredulous. Part of me wanted to blame their responses on being teenagers—refusing to give their mother satisfaction in any way—but another side of me took a step back and thought about it. We had essentially overhauled our dinner table, and the expected answers to that question—pork ragu, turkey chili, sausage stromboli—the dinners that I pictured someday living on yellowed stained index cards in an antique recipe box labeled “Family Heirloom Recipes”—weren’t exactly making a lot of appearances on the dinner

table. And though I had developed many new vegetarian recipes that garnered thumbs-ups from both kids, were they heirloom-worthy the way that our pork ragu, with its own Instagram hashtag, was heirloom-worthy? Were they heirloom-worthy the way our milk-braised pork loin, *hand-painted on the inside of my kitchen cabinet* and one of the first dinners I shared with Andy when we met, was heirloom-worthy?

I’m not implying that a recipe has to have meat in it to be memorable—it’s more that so many of the recipes in our repertoire for the first fifteen years of our children’s lives happened to be meat-based. In other words, it was hard to just . . . move on from those. It felt like that day I decided to pack up the dollhouses cluttering their teenage bedrooms, sealing their childhoods into cardboard boxes while slowly having an emotional breakdown. I’ve never been terribly good at changes in eras, especially as they relate to my children, and this was no different. Which is why it took me so long to make the switch. *Next week, I’d tell myself. Next week would for sure be an entirely no-meat week.*

The day the lightning struck was the day I decided I needed to figure it out once and for all, and I thought the weekday vegetarian strategy would be a reasonable place to begin. Though nothing was written in blood, if I had to spell out the exact pledge it would’ve been something like this:

**PART 1:** We hereby promise to limit our meat consumption to weekends only, with *meat* defined as poultry, beef, and fish, and *weekend* defined as Saturday and Sunday—and the occasional Friday if we have reservations at that place famous for its burgers. If we are invited to someone’s house for dinner, we will eat what we are served.

**PART 2:** For the grown-ups, the weekday vegetarian policy extends to breakfast and lunch; the kids, however, are free to make their own choices when out of the house. On nights when eggs (or anything else deemed equally offensive to kids) are served for dinner, the cook may use his or her discretion to supplement with a peanut butter sandwich, a drumstick slathered in barbecue sauce, a pan-fried sausage link, or any other food that can be easily prepared.

As you can see, we weren’t exactly talking about an intense commitment, but I like to think this is why we were able to stick with it. In the beginning we were roasting a lot of those emergency drumsticks. I got in the habit of making extra turkey Bolognese on the weekend just so I could have it waiting in the wings in the freezer for those nights when someone at the table just couldn’t face another refried bean quesadilla. I also developed a solid rotation

PIZZA WITH  
CHEDDAR,  
CARAMELIZED  
ONION & EGG  
(PAGE 34)



IT'S ONE THING TO KNOW YOU  
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DIFFERENT THING TO EXECUTE THAT  
PLEDGE NIGHT AFTER NIGHT.

of flexitarian dinners that lent themselves to customizing. These meals—mostly multicomponent salads and “bowls”—reminded me of the toddler days when we sought out recipes that could be deconstructed into individual ingredients so everyone could pick and choose what they did and didn’t want on their plates. In fact, that part of the process and those kinds of recipes were both crucial in the transition and the reason why you’ll see notes on how to make recipes flexitarian throughout this book. (Look for the “For the Holdout” tag.) I’d be lying if I said that in the beginning we weren’t regularly relying on those strategies. For the grown-ups as much as for the kids.

When my kids were little, I might’ve whined about this kind of cooking. Every new parent vows he or she is not going to be a short-order cook, catering to their children’s whims and aversions like some kind of personal servant. I might’ve worried that by not forcing them to eat exactly what we were eating, they’d never learn how to eat properly and healthfully. These days, though, my strategic cooking makes me feel like everyone else in the world, whether a parent or not—that is, someone charged with simultaneously feeding carnivores, vegetarians, vegans, gluten-free eaters, Paleo eaters, keto faithfuls, flexitarians, and people who are thinking harder about the effects their choices have in the bigger picture (i.e., for Earth).

The goal of this book, as it has been for most of my food-writing career, is to continue simplifying dinnertime, to make this kind of cooking approachable, and to show that with a little planning and a lot of inspiration, it’s possible to cut back on meat and not eat cornflakes every night. You’ll find all the hallmarks typical of the meals in the *Dinner: A Love Story* orbit: strategic, healthy, creative, and—most important—realistic. When I’m coming up with recipe ideas, I ask myself if they pass the “text test,” that is, is this recipe easy enough to text the basic idea to a friend? (“Sauté your garlic and onion, add red pepper flakes and white beans, puree it, top with pesto or croutons.”) I know by now that we’re not going to win anyone over to our weekday meat-free side with complicated recipes that require cooks to break out an army of small appliances on a Tuesday night. But even simple recipes take some work—it’s still dinner and I’m not letting you off the hook completely here. The one hundred recipes in this book are solid, casual, healthy recipes that I can imagine texting to my friends without too many follow-up questions. They’re the recipes that have convinced my family that plant-based eating is something we can stick with, and feel good about. I hope you’ll pull up a chair and join us at the table.