So just putting this out there, I’m writing these food ideas down fully knowing some kids won’t eat all of these things, I have two wildlings myself. There are lucky as they do get to try new and varied food as I have the opportunity and knowledge to do that for them.

But If do find if they won’t eat something, getting them to make it or help with those changes so they understand how flavours can change helps (sometimes), like if actually you add a little sugar to them tinned toms as they can be a bit bitter, or tossing a teaspoon of garlic mayo into the mushrooms your sauteing can make all the difference. Failing that, lie, my kids still think they don’t like onions!

Its worth mentioning that a digital probe is really useful when cooking new foods or in different ways. I cook hundreds of meals every week (when not in lockdown) and still use a probe. Look at it as the difference between a dry over cooked roast chicken, and a nice moist chicken that is just cooked. When cooking something from raw, cook to 75 degrees Celsius, when reheating something that has already been cooked once it needs to be 85 degrees. Make sure you probe in different parts of the thing you are cooking to get an accurate reading and don’t forget to clean the probe after each use…..if you probe undercooked chicken, your probe has raw chicken on it..

**Some store cupboard essentials I like to have in**

**Aioli** – garlic mayo, there’s a brand morrisons do in a little yellow tub which is awesome! Now, it has much more of a use than to just dip your chips into! Try a dollop into your creamy chicken stew, or toss your roast root vegetables with it, or into almost anything your cooking that you have to Sautee or making like a tomato ragout. I first saw this technique years ago in a French tomato-based fish stew, and adding the ‘rouille’ or in our case, aioli, can really make a difference.

**Stock shots**, chicken, beef or lamb – not the granules, but the liquid shots. May seem expensive, but one can turn water into a soup/broth so they do make up their worth.

**Dark soy sauce** – lasts well and can give a big shot of meaty flavour, try putting some in your mince for your burgers! Game changer!

**Henderson’s relish** – same as the soy sauce, but also great in beef stews/mince and onions. Plus, can cheese on toast be made with anything else?!

**Ginger/garlic paste** – if you’re in a professional kitchen, fresh is best. If your running around trying to just throw some food together because your juggling a million and one plates….life is too short, squeeze some cheap garlic in there!

**Plain natural yoghurt** – really versatile and can use for sweet or savoury.

**Chickpea**s – I love chickpeas, they can bulk out things, make a salad with them, and if you really have enough time, humus is always a winner

**Tinned tomatoes** – throw some onions in a pan, tin of chopped toms, tin of apricots and some of them chickpeas and you’ve pretty much made a cracking ragout that cost less than £2

**Rice, pasta, cous cous**, – cheap and filling….

**Lentils** – now I’m a meat eater but when my wife first made a chili con carne with lentils instead of mince, honestly I was really surprised how tasty it was- think of it less as vegi chili, but more of a spicy tomato lentil stew….. with kidney beans….

Hints tips and flavour changers

Firstly I suppose, knives. A sharp knife is a safe knife, you need to put less force behind the blade, just keep your fingers out of the way, watch a youtube video. Really will speed up meals massively, like massively if you teach yourself good knife skills. There are loads of knives you could get, but a ‘chefs’ knife and a serrated knife for bread are plenty good enough.

So think of food as building blocks – the more you build the higher or greater depth of flavour you will have. So instead of just cooking a tin of chopped toms in a pan, first add some diced onion, some garlic, bay leaf etc etc. also because these are building blocks, some can be taken out or changed, for example, if your youngling isn’t a massive fan of mashed potato, do have sweet potato half normal potato, it changes the colour and gives it a lovely deep sweetness, and what kid doesn’t like sweet stuff? Or add some grated nutmeg to your Yorkshire puddings, or dust your home made chips with paprika….

Don’t be afraid to buy frozen stuff. Random frozen mixed vegetables are life savers, hell, why not put frozen diced onion in there too, if you hate chopping onion, better to have frozen than non at all!

So flavour changers. The biggest one is salt. And yes too much salt isn’t good for you. How ever, there is a balance when using it as it is the best flavour enhancer there is! And you would be shocked at how much salt food can ‘take’ before its at its peak. And yes we are cooking for kids and im sure they aren’t paying you for the privilege, but if you’re really looking to make some thing taste better, a little salt? Try taking some out of your pan, put it in a bowl, add salt to that and taste. If its too salty then at least its just that rather than the whole pan .

So another flavour enhancer is acidity, best one is lemon juice. Think fish and chips, you always get lemon with your fish that been fried to an inch of its life…. That’s not only to cut through the grease, but that it lighten the taste of something heavy, fatty or rich. Making a creamy chicken, whack some lemon juice in. chickpea salad, lemon juice. Cous cous, squeeze a bit in.

Texture is another big thing to think about. Good example is mushrooms, some people hate them, it’s the sometimes-rubbery texture they can have or the sometimes-slimy stereotype. Which is a shame a they have a great flavour. So try changing the texture, throw them in the blender raw and pulse until in small pieces then cook. Done right someone who ‘didn’t like’ mushrooms will probably not realise they are there.

Tomatoes are another good example, cooked and raw. yes, it does change the flavour when you cook them but also the texture. So want to put some in a salad? roast some off and put them in warm.

And the last thing I will mention is ‘mise en place’ or prep. If I had a penny every time, I uttered the phrase in the kitchen mise en place saves your ass! Id be retired by now. And the same goes at home. Veg for Sunday dinner? Blanch it off the day before and put it I the fridge! mashed potato, same, it will keep for 3 days in your fridge. make a big pan of it and eat it on day 1 and 3? Just microwave it! Yorkshire puddings? Make a big ish batch the day before, then you have ready made pancake mix for breakfast then yorki batter for later.

If you know you have faff all time after school run, put the sausages/fish fingers burgers on a baking tray in the fridge prior. Beans open nut covered in a pan on the side. It may not feel like it saves you much time, and will probably only be a matter of minutes, but it’s the stress and pressure it saves you on! Try it!

Out of date food. Well firstly don’t eat it, but if you have some chicken on its date that you didn’t realise, cook it off, and chill it down. Hey pesto (chicken pesto pasta anyone?) you have another 3days (being safe) to eat it. Same with fish, sausages, gammon etc

Resting meat – Sunday dinner can be a lot of things to bring together and a lot of people think everything has to be ready at the same time…. It dosent. The chicken or beef etc can be ready like 30 mins before you need it and will probably be better for the resting time, allowing the meat to relax after cooking, it won’t be as tough as straight from the oven. If cook your meat etc a bit too far in advance and it gets a little too cold for you just pop it back in the oven for 5-10mins before serving it.

**Recipes**

So these aren’t weighed out and some will have to be finished ‘to taste’ as obviously I can’t make and weigh them out as I go along.

It seemed more logical for me to spend more time writing the previous hints and tips than spend too long on recipes some may not like, already know, not want to try. Depending on what people would like I can put up other recipes, more advance or not focussed on price, ones for adults/older kids etc

**Breakfast**

Don’t buy the flavoured porridge sachets, make your own. a bag of basics porridge oats still microwaves just the same. Try adding some brown sugar instead of white. Mix it up a bit with a scoop of Nutella or peanut butter, dried fruit, desiccated coconut?

Just cover with milk and microwave for approx. 1.5min to 2 mins. If too thick add a bit more milk. Or can be made with half milk half water.

Eggs – dippy eggs - time vary a little for egg size, but boil a room temp large egg for 5 to 6mins in boiling water and then leave to stand in the egg cup for 1min before opening

Scrambled egg – 3 eggs is normally one adult portion, whisk up with some salt and microwave if easier, or cook slowly in a pan until desired consistency. Great with smoked salmon, bacon, chorizo, beans, avocado

Poached – boiling water with a cap full of white wine vinegar. The fresher the egg the better, an old egg will separate. Poach for approx. 3mins

**Lunch/dinner**

‘**Mummy’ pasta** – or so the kids call it. Simply cooked pasta mixed with plain yoghurt, grated cheese and what ever else you have, tomatoes, peppers, cucumber, throw it all in…..spoon of aioli? Dead easy and a good clear out dish and to be fair really nice.

**Roasted roots, mozzarella, cous cous**. – throw a load of roots/vegies in a roasting tray, carrots, red onions, squash, broccoli, red peppers? etc. bit of oil, salt paprika and roast at 180 until cooked and a little colour on them, tear a ball of mozzarella or two up and put on the veggies, return to the oven for a quick tickle until the mozz starts to melt. Serve with cous cous, rice or similar. Plain yoghurt can be substituted for the mozzarella.

There are millions of different flavour cous cous you could use, I like to put some dried fruit in, raisins or dried apricots etc and a little spice, like cumin or ras el hanout. Boil some water and pour just enough to just cover the cous cous and leave to stand for a few mins…. Break up with a fork and its done. Simple.

**Roast (large) chicken and chicken soup** – so remove the legs of the chicken, pull the legs away from the body and cut through the skin where it stretches to reveal the leg joint. You can then push the legs further to dislocate the joint allowing you to cut through easier and separate the leg from the body.

The body can be the seasoned and cooked in the oven for meal 1. Best way to cook is low and slow, I cook mine around 140 degrees until done. Then this can either be for a roast dinner, meat for wraps, salad, pasta, sandwiches etc

Get a hot pan (if you want, but not essential) and sear the chicken legs in a little oil to colour nicely, then add some chopped onions and a little garlic and thinly chopped carrot. Sweat (cook with out colour) gently in the pan and cover with water and add some salt and a bay leaf (if you have one) then simmer (hot but not boiling) for approx. 2hrs or until the meat easily falls off the chicken….

Take the chicken out of the pan gently and take off all the meat from the bones. It helps to let it cool slightly and to know the anatomy of the chicken leg to make sure you get rid of all the bones. The lower leg (thigh) is just one bone with bits of cartilage at each end. The upper leg (drumstick) has one large bone and a small one that is the most missed one, plus the cartilage at each end

Now you have a few options. You can keep the veg etc in the soup or strain it off. You can season it now and use it as more of a broth, or you can thicken it up with a roux (equal quantities, mixed together, of melted butter and plain flour, about 100g of each should be enough) bring the liquid up to a gentle boil and put little bits of the roux in while whisking. As this cooks out it will thicken and start to look more like the chicken soup you know. Be careful not to add too much, let it cook out before you add more or you could end up with chicken paste not soup. When at the desired thickness season with salt.

You can either add the chicken meat from the leg back to the soup along with sweetcorn? Or you can save the meat for another meal.

Gnocchi – if you haven’t had before give it a go, its like potato pasta balls… nice and filling and cheap. Depending on the product either just reheat in a frying pan or in boiling water. Try cooking some mushrooms and garlic off in a frying pan (plus your gnocchi if it says to reheat in a pan), add a splash of that white wine your drinking (optional but I know you are!) then you can add cream but don’t have to, maybe some frozen veg or spinach, (add your gnocchi now if you have reheated in boiling water) if its too runny cook on a bit to thicken the cream up, or if not using cream add a spoon of aioli in.

This doesn’t have to be mushrooms. Can be frozen veg roast veg, peppers, or just a bit of a use up. I love putting chopped up salami or chorizo into it that iv left over from a cheese night, the flavour really gives it another depth.

**Lamb mince tagine** – so lamb mince can be a bit expensive so try this recipe iv come up with the make it go a bit further, plus its awesome too!

Cut a butternut squash in half lengthways (carefully). Scoop out the seeds, brush oil over it and add a little salt and ground cumin. Place in the oven and roast at 180 until cooked and soft and squishy. Then place to one side.

Sweat off your lamb mince, onion, garlic, ginger, salt, and add some spices of your choice, I like ground cumin, ras el hanout and nigella seeds. When cooked scoop out the cooked squash from its skin and mix in with the lamb mince and keep heating on a low heat, check the seasoning again.

I then add the mince mixture back into the squash skin but you don’t have to, I serve this with cous cous, pomegranate seeds and a scoop of plain yoghurt over the top.

What I like about this is the spices aren’t ‘spicy’ and are a good starting point for kids and flavours from around the world.

**Baked fish with veg, tomatoes and yoghurt potatoes** – so throw some new potatoes in the oven at 180 degrees, with a little oil, salt and garlic and after 15mins add some tender stem broccoli and continue to cook until the potatoes and broccoli are almost done, maybe another 5-10mins. Then in the same tray put the fish (salmon is always popular with most), and continue to cook for 5mins then add some tomatoes and cook for a further 5-8mins until the fish is cooked.

When cooked, remove the fish and tomatoes from the roasting tray, and toss the potatoes and veg in some yoghurt.

**Cowboy beans and wraps** – basically a chili con carne but just mixed beans with no meat. Add diced onion, garlic to a pan and sweat, then a tin of chopped tomatoes and a tin of mixed beans (you can get a spiced version which is nice). Squirt in a bit of bbq sauce and a table spoon of dark brown sugar and salt. Simmer until nice and thick. Serve with some wraps, grated cheese and yoghurt.

This can be bulked out with pretty much any beans, kidney, black beans, baked beans, butter beans etc etc also nice with rice!

**Chickpea salad** – wash a tin of chickpeas underwater and dry. Toss with feta, walnuts, raisins, chopped apricots, lemon juice, cumin, salt – makes a great lunch or side, not one all kids will like but mine love it.

Afters

**Cheesecake in a cup**

Crush up some biscuits of your choice and some white chocolate. Add some sugar to some soft cream cheese and mix together, keep tasting it until it tastes right, add a bit of lemon juice and vanilla. layer up all the above with dollops of the cheesecake mixture in a cup or glass, fresh fruit is good too, raspberries or strawberries.