

Done and Done

How do we know *when* it's done? The intuition we use when cooking is a symphony of cues our senses have gathered. We operate on levels more subtle than we know, most of our instruments fine-tuned through experience. So maybe I say that intuition tells me that my pasta is al dente and it's time to hurry on over to the stove to strain it, but really it's my own little internal clock, so familiar is it with that pasta-cooking rhythm. I think it's the same for all of us. So, tune in: Did you hear those green beans pop lightly just now, when the boiling water plumped them up to bursting? See how bright their color is too—it's time to lift them out of the water, and stop their descent from lively to lackluster.

Your sixth sense says it's time to check the granola. When you arrive in the kitchen that honey-rich, *toasted* smell says it is browned, but you knew that; a whisper in the air, a wafting scent told you so before your eyes did. Do you hear your *sofrito* sticking to the pan? Look closely and see the oil begin to separate. Don't go too far away—the browning is about to begin. But, really, you already know it's time to give that pot a good stir, don't you? Smell those onions caramelizing. Yes, they do smell yummy, but go a step too far, and no question about it, the acrid smell of burnt nut oils lingering in the air is telling you just how bitter they will taste. Yes, you can trust your senses when you bake too, but double check. Look at the edges of that cake, and if they're pulling back from the sides of the pan, it's a clue. But before you can rest assured, poke a little stick into the center of the cake's taut surface, and discover that its slight sheen is telling you the truth: all its ingredients have been blended and baked into a sweet, harmonic *doneness*. ANNA KOVEL

rites of passage

When my parents were growing up, food was sustenance and tradition, not an indulgence, and certainly not a whim. Mum is from Ireland, the land of porridge, bread and butter, meat-and-two-veg, and, as Catholic tradition dictates, fish on Friday. I don't think she ate a pineapple until well into her twenties. Dad grew up in Iraq where food is labored over daily by the household matriarch. It was a multifarious feast: salads, olives, dips, cheese, jams, flatbread, kebab, stew, rice, stuffed things...and this wasn't just for special occasions, this was quotidian. As children, my mother observed Lent, my father Ramadan, traditions no longer practiced but not forgotten. Food was as sacred as it was life-sustaining. And so, despite being a child of the junk food-centric '90s, I was brought up on three solid, home-cooked meals a day, always eaten at the table. I eventually wore my parents down on a few pre-made treats, like Cinnamon Toast Crunch, Neapolitan ice cream (only allowed on Sundays), and the occasional chicken nugget. But for the most part my industrious mama made her own bread and yogurt and fresh-squeezed orange juice. Dad cooked traditional Middle Eastern dishes. I didn't know how lucky I was. I ate everything that was put in front of me and licked my plate clean, a habit I maintain. Mealtime is mealtime—so the idea of eating intuitively seemed a blasphemous yet perversely intriguing concept. Many of my friends eat like this...maybe it's nothing all day if they're busy or don't have an appetite, then a pizza slice at 4pm followed by late-night Seamless. Cake for breakfast. Granola for dinner. Or to hell with dinner because they grazed all day. The longer I spend in my body, the harder its cues are to ignore. Some days I'm ravenous only a couple of hours after a big breakfast, or not hungry for dinner, yet craving fries at 1am if I've stayed at the bar too long. I sometimes wonder if I might benefit from replacing square meals with a more lackadaisical approach. Living in New York with all its conveniences makes eating a little like online dating...pick and choose what you want when you want it. Get *really* into something one minute and sick of it the next. Don't commit to mealtimes or food groups. And while I fiercely follow my intuition in every other facet of life, when it comes to eating, I always return to the rhythm of those three wholesome meals a day—my still point in this turning world. Home, wherever I am. NATALIE SHUKUR

