



# Equipping students to fend for themselves at university

Although it was many years ago now, it feels like only yesterday when I first left home to go to university. It was the first step towards independence. In my second year, I moved in to my first house it was an exciting moment and felt very grown up.

I was fascinated by my other housemates eating habits: one boy only ate frozen French bread pizza; another ate cooked breakfasts all day, which was glued together by the fried eggs; the girl I lived with only ate pasta and when she had friends round it was always sausage and mash, which used to take an inordinate amount of time to cook. We never ate until 10pm. By my third year I shared a house with four boys and, to be fair, most knew the basics of cooking, bar one who very sweetly decided to cook for me one night and put microwave plastic containers in the oven. He opened the door to a puddle of melted plastic and burnt food... I ended up cooking!

For my part, I was lucky enough to have gone to Ballymaloe Cookery School in Ireland during my gap year. My parent's philosophy was that if I learnt at least one practical skill then I would have something to fall back on in life. I have never been more grateful to them and it has stood me in good stead over the years. Having this culinary knowledge meant I knew how to cook balanced meals on a budget, rustle up an impromptu dish from a fridge that looked empty and plan a meal so it was served on time. It also meant that our

house became popular for parties; everyone wants to go to a house where they might get half-decent food. During every university holiday I could use my skills to earn money as a private family cook, enough to cover term time costs and even enough to buy my first car. If you are a parent considering a cookery course for your child before they go to university, or before they start their second year, there are plenty of cookery schools offering key skills classes. It is worth thinking about what students wish to gain from the experience; if it is just the essentials to survive at university a one or two-week course will suffice; if it is to be employed as a cook during university holidays it's worth looking at a course that is no less than four weeks so they really understand cookery skills. Many cookery courses are residential and make for a fun time away which is an added bonus. Some options include: Orchards, Leiths, The Grange, Ballymaloe, The Avenue, Edinburgh New Town Cookery School, Food of Course and Tante Marie.

These days with so many food programmes, social media and cookery books, young people are far more informed about food and the importance of a balanced diet than we may have been at university. It does not mean, however, that they have the skills to execute a dish. It is worth teaching the very basics of cookery at home to ensure your son or daughter doesn't live off frozen pizza and cooked breakfasts. I would recommend the fol-

lowing subjects:

- 1. Egg cookery:** A cheap and useful source of protein, simple eggs such as scrambled, fried or poached are great at any time of the day. While egg dishes such as omelettes, tortillas, quiches and baked eggs with tomatoes will keep students fuelled for the day.
- 2. Basic meat cookery:** Teach students to cook a whole chicken and then how to strip it and use all the parts. A whole chicken is far more economical than buying chicken parts and the options are endless: chicken noodle soup (using stock made from the chicken carcass), chicken pie, chicken jambalaya, chicken mayonnaise in a sandwich or baked potato filler and chicken curry to name but a few. Mince is also very versatile and inexpensive, it can be used to make: cottage pie, spaghetti bolognaise, lasagne, hamburgers, meatballs and much more.
- 3. Sauces and soups:** Essential sauces such as a white sauce (béchamel), a good Italian tomato sauce and pesto can be adapted in so many ways. Likewise, knowing how to make a vegetable stock and a chicken stock can form the base for many dishes, including a healthy soup or casserole. Teaching students how to thicken sauces using flour or eggs is also very useful.
- 4. Vegetable cookery:** This is especially key, as vegetables are far cheaper than meat. Teach essential skills such as

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chopping an onion, cooking potatoes in different ways, as well as peeling and dicing other types of vegetables to turn them into a simple vegetable soup or stew. Try to incorporate pulses into every day meals too e.g. lentils in a lasagne, smoky homemade baked beans (by adding smoked paprika to your beans in a tomato sauce), or chickpeas in a curry are a cheap source of protein and iron which may be lacking if meat is being cut out of diets due to cost.

If there is no time to teach cookery before your young student heads off, then give them a good cookery book and some essential equipment to make sure they at least have the right tools to experiment. Cookery books which have easy step-by-step instructions and a comprehensive overview of all types of cookery are the best as they contain all the basics recipes needed before branching out to more exotic dishes. I would also add a good vegetarian cookery book and a cooking-to-a-budget book to the mix too. Some cookery book suggestions include: *Jamie's Ministry of Food*, *Delia's Complete How to Cook*, *Ballymaloe Cookery Course*, *Leiths How to Cook*, *BOSH! Simple recipes*, *Amazing Food*, *All Plants*, and *A Girl Called Jack: 100 delicious budget recipes*. Students may also like to look at reliable cookery websites such as: BBC Good Food, Jamie Oliver or Cooking on a Bootstrap for inspiration and simple recipes.

Teaching students to be canny with their shopping baskets is also incredibly useful. Send them out to do a weekly shop for you so they understand the cost of food, and teach them how to plan meals so food and money aren't wasted. Encourage students to shop around at markets to find the best deals. Frozen vegetables and fruits preserve nutrients far better than those left in the fridge (plus they don't rot and end up in the bin), frozen meat and fish are cheaper although try to encourage students to opt for less meat but decent quality, (making up for less meat by

eating iron and protein rich vegetables and pulses, local butchers will be able to recommend cheaper cuts of meat and advise on how to cook it.

Finally, if all else fails, rest assured that your student will always return for some delicious home-cooked meals and you can send them back to university laden with dishes of food you have made for them.

Best of luck to all students embarking on their new adventures.

## Cookery equipment list

**Knives:** 1 serrated, 2 small or medium paring knives, 1 large Chef's knife, 1 bread knife

**Saucepans:** set of 4, small to large  
**1 large stock pan**, which can also be used to cook large quantities of pasta or rice when having friends round

**1 medium cast-iron casserole dish**

**1 medium sized frying pan**

**2 or 3 oven proof dishes** e.g. square or oval ceramic dishes in small, medium and large

**1 deep roasting tin**

**1 shallow roasting tin**

**Sieve and colander**

**Measuring cups and/or weighing scales**

**Measuring jug**

**3 Chopping boards:** one for raw meat and fish, one for cooked meats and fish, one for vegetables – to help with this choose colour coded plastic ones, they will also survive the dishwasher unlike wooden ones

**Stick or jug blender**

**Potato peeler**

**Silicon spoon**

**Whisk**

**Spatula**

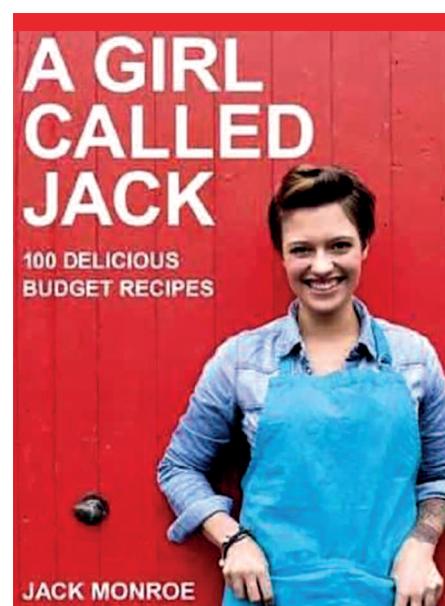
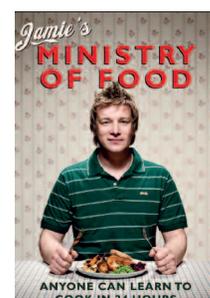
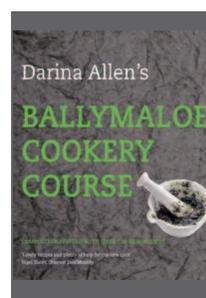
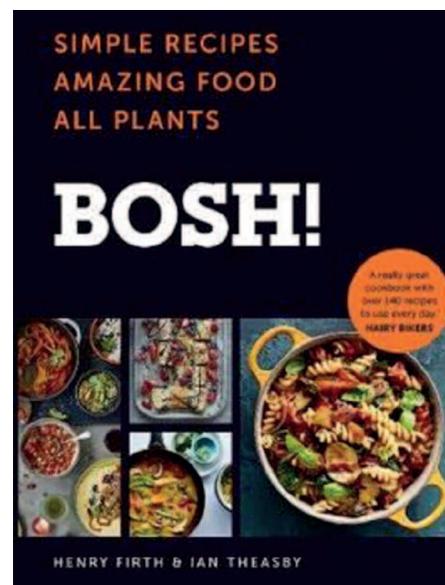
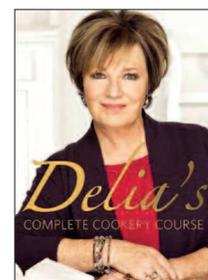
**3 wooden spoons**

**Potato masher**

**Cheese grater**

**Mixing bowls**

**Storage containers** – ideally thick glass ones with plastic lids which can then be put straight in the oven (without the lid!)



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