



Eat Well, Waste Nothing

Lessons Learned in a
Pandemic Kitchen

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
MY PANDEMIC COOKING EXPERIENCE	4
APPRECIATING FOOD	9
Lesson #1 Food is Much More than Sustenance	9
Lesson #2 Food is Forgiving	11
Lesson #3 Imagination is the Most Important Ingredient	11
Lesson #4 The Internet is the World's Greatest Cookbook	12
Lesson #5 Leftovers are a Home Cook's Best Friend	13
MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR OWN PANDEMIC COOKING	15
Strategy #1 Plan Ahead for Leftovers	15
Strategy #2 Store Leftovers Properly	16
Strategy #3 Organize for Leftovers	17
Strategy #4 Warm Up Leftovers the Same Way They Were Cooked	18
Strategy #5 Add an Element of "New"	18
Strategy #6 Learn New Recipes for Transforming Leftovers	18
Strategy #7 Keep Leftover-Friendly Ingredients on Hand	20
Strategy #8 Start a New Tradition	21
GOING FORWARD INTO THE "NEW NORMAL"	23
Celebrate Food	23
Dignify Your Dining Experience	23
Teach Your Kids to Cook	23
Share Your Tips with Others	24
Share Your Food with Others	25
Tell The Story of Your Own Food	26
NOTES	26
RESOURCES	27
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	28
OTHER BOOKS BY JACQUELYN A. OTTMAN	29
ABOUT THIS BOOK	30

INTRODUCTION

I didn't know for how long I would be sheltering in place on Shelter Island, New York during the Covid-19 pandemic. All I knew when fleeing my Manhattan apartment to the presumed safety of a friend's home is that I would take on the self-appointed task of shepherding the cooking. Little did I know the experience would change the way I viewed food, forever.

Faced with the prospect of managing a kitchen on a tiny island where food shortages were already occurring and prices were already high, I quickly realized I could use my quarantine time positively: to experiment with ways to transform leftovers into great new meals. Coincidentally, I had already begun to research the topic for a book I was writing with the goal of inspiring solutions for reducing food waste. Over the course of the next sixty days, I would learn something even more valuable: the important role, beyond nutrition, that food plays in our lives emotionally and spiritually.

I am not alone. During the pandemic, many home cooks around the world woke up to the value of their own food. They figured out how to better stretch their food resources and taught their kids the basics. They discovered the joys of enjoying a meal with family and helped to ensure that others in their community were fed.

How much we all have learned! What an opportunity we now have to create a new, more respectful food culture, one that can enhance our lives and make our long-awaited "new normal" more sustainable and enjoyable. Now, let's take some time to reflect on what we've learned, and magnify our enlightened food practices within our communities by sharing what we've learned.

This is the reason why I'm sharing my story with you. The following pages contain the lessons I learned in my own pandemic kitchen that I think could be useful to others. Included within are many of the "tips and tricks" and resources I relied on to make the most of my cooking. I've added some strategies, and even wishes for the future, that I think can help lead to a more sustainable food system for all.

Ideally, you'll find much in here that will help you savor more bites and use up more morsels. I hope my ideas and vision will help inspire you, in turn, to share your own story with others. It all can begin with your very next meal.

Jacquelyn A. Ottman
New York City
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MY PANDEMIC COOKING EXPERIENCE

I spent the 60 days from March 17 - May 21, 2020 spearheading the mealmaking at the Shelter Island home of friend Karen Kiaer, an artist and longtime Island resident. Cooking during this tumultuous time not only gave me a sense of purpose that kept us both nourished, but perhaps more importantly, it kept us emotionally resilient by providing us with a source of continuity with our pre-pandemic lives, and a daily source of joy. Intellectually, Karen's kitchen became my intentional laboratory for experimenting with an approach to cooking that was convenient, healthful, and economical as well as delightful — and wound up giving me more of an appreciation for food than I thought was possible.

Quite coincidentally, when the pandemic broke out in early 2020, I had already started a book project with the goal of delineating ways to encourage us Americans to eat up more of our leftovers. My quest: insights and ideas for new policies, programs and consumer habits that can inspire us — like we did so well in our past — to stop wasting food by eating up every edible morsel. I was motivated by a lifelong interest in cooking and a deep aversion to waste.

I grew up in a food family. Between 1859 - 1985, my family owned and operated Ottman & Company, a meat-purveying business in New York City's now famous meatpacking district. As described on its late 19th century invoices, the firm supplied "hotels, steamships and private families" with top quality steaks, chops and roasts.

Starting as a little girl in the 1960s, I was taken to many of our firm's customers, some of New York's best restaurants. My father, who loved to eat good food, would encourage me to try the specialties of the house because I "wouldn't find them anywhere else." It was advice I followed for decades after while traveling for business and pleasure. In 2017, I published a history of our business titled, [*Ottman & Company: One Daughter Remembers*](#). I was especially proud of our firm's role in pioneering vacuum-packaged, frozen portion controlled meat, with its benefits of helping to enhance shelf life, ease meal prep, control costs, and cut down on waste.



Karen's Shelter Island home

I love to cook. Growing up, I admired how my mother would arrive in the kitchen every afternoon at 4:30 to make our family a wholesome dinner. While setting the table, and helping out with the prep, I would notice with awe, my mother’s ability to improvise her way to elegant meals for family holidays and formal dinner parties. To this day, cooking with others, and sitting around a table, is a favorite pastime.

I hate to see things go to waste. You, too? I swear it’s in the genes, or so many of us wouldn’t be so passionate about hating to waste. I much have inherited the gene from my father. As a little girl, I’d marvel at how he would staple little pieces of paper together to make notepads, and jot down reminders for himself with pencils he would sharpen down to the nub. In my own tiny NYC kitchens, I have always enjoyed cooking up “Chicken Compost” and other crazy-sounding but delicious concoctions from whatever I had around.

Dad and I are not alone. People everywhere hate to see things go to waste — especially food. At WeHateToWaste.com, the website I founded, food tops the list of what visitors hate to see get stashed in the trash. So, why do so many Americans waste so much food, and leftovers in particular?

The Natural Resources Defense Council estimates that leftovers represent nearly a third of all edible food thrown away by Americans each year (1). You know leftovers — that half burger left on the plate, the dollop of spinach sitting at the bottom of the CorningWare, the slice of pizza still in the carton. With Americans throwing away an estimated \$1800 worth of groceries each year (2), ditching one’s leftovers is like pitching \$600 straight into the trash.

Statistics abound about how many mouths we can feed with our leftovers, and how much water and land it takes to produce that food. The stat that comes as a surprise to many, is that in a landfill, that seemingly innocuous hot dog with the bite in it degrades into methane, a greenhouse gas 86 times more deadly than carbon dioxide. (3)

I’m on the trail for answers! Do people care about the changing climate? The ability to feed

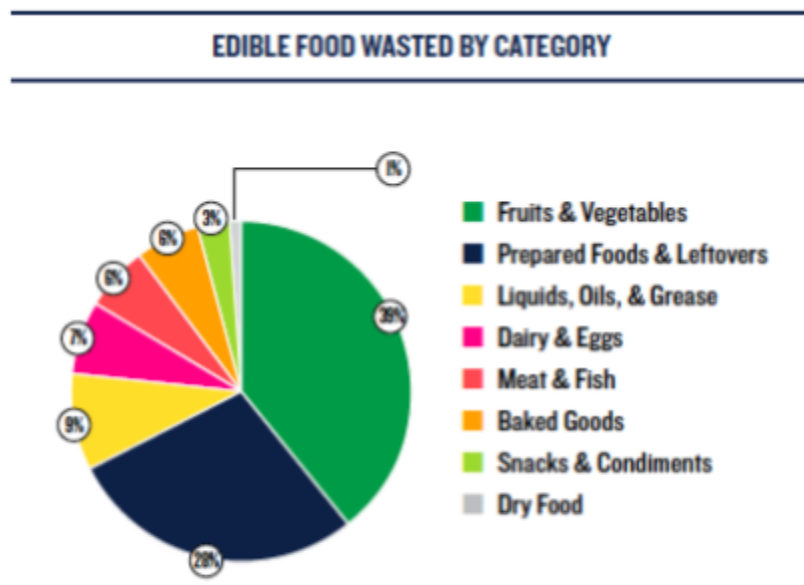


Chart: Natural Resources Defense Council, 2017, Permission Pending

hungry people? Why do so many Americans turn their nose up at the thought of leftovers, the very food that saved the day during Wars and Depression when food was scarce? Maybe we're just losing our cooking skills? How many of us have attempted to revive day-old pizza in a microwave oven, only to learn the hard way, it turns into mush? Is food way too cheap?

I figured a book could help. I started my research by delving into history: what did they do during the Middle Ages with all the food left over from those sumptuous banquets? How did thrifty New Englanders survive the winters? How did we feed hungry families during the Depression and World Wars? What could I learn about how leftovers are viewed by food cultures around the world? In January 2020, I decided to supplement my own leftover adventures by talking to professional chefs, and signed up to take an introduction to culinary arts course at New York City's premier cooking school, the Institute of Culinary Education (ICE for short.) Timingwise, the course ended just days before I headed east from Manhattan to Shelter Island.

Unique among my classmates — mostly passionate amateur cooks looking to up their culinary game — In addition to an open mind, and paper and pen for taking copious notes, on January I brought with me on the first day of class some very pointed questions:

What could I learn about ways to transform leftovers into something new and special? What is the best way to inspire others to see leftovers, like I did, as the quintessential convenience meal, a creative outlet, a source of joy? Hey, did anyone responsible for teaching the next generation of chefs *even think* about these things? Or did I have to tease such learnings out of lessons on how to prepare beef bourguignon and coq au vin? Hey, what *is* the best way to reheat pizza?



Author Jacquie Ottman and classmate in cooking class

Fast forward to Shelter Island, mid-March. A passionate home cook, and a retiree fresh out of cooking class with plenty of quarantine time on my hands, I could now discover what it takes to “plan ahead,” “cook just enough” and “use every scrap.” Without the temptation of last minute restaurant invites, I now had seven uninterrupted days per week in which I could practice, like early New England cooks, “rolling” what was left from one meal into the next. I could try to become as efficient as the French by never letting stale bread go to waste. I might even see what it was like to keep an endless “pot au feu” going on the stove.

I went online for additional inspiration. Most afternoons I would stretch out on the couch with a cup of hot tea in one hand and my MacBook Air perched on my lap. With the help of “Google Alerts” I tracked trends on “leftovers,” “food waste” and “pandemic cooking.”

Prompted by the latest articles in newspapers and food blogs, I was gratified to learn that many homecooks sheltering in place were no longer leaving their leftovers behind. All over the world, they were discovering how to make the most of their food prep and resources. Tips on saving scraps for stock appeared in local papers. English and Indian cooks were coached on ways to convert leftovers into beloved savory pies and curries. Such Facebook pages as “Eating Through the Pandemic” attracted pandemic cooks looking for community and a chance to boast.

Collaborative cooking.

Meanwhile, within our own quarantine kitchen, cooking became a collaborative act. A daily rhythm took hold. Breakfast was usually on our own, typically cereal and fruit. Some mornings, though, Karen, an experienced home cook and breakfast-food lover, would whip up her family’s favorite pancakes topped with fresh fruit, or scrambled or poached eggs, often with a side of bacon — and sometimes some sauteed tidbits of leftover beef or beet greens.



Jacquie Ottman & Karen Kiaer in their pandemic kitchen

Lunches were up to me, typically homemade soups made from my own stock and whatever I found in the fridge, served with a half sandwich or salad. A few hours later, I’d usually be the one to start dinner; but whomever volunteered to cook that evening, the type of dish du jour was usually similar — a one-pot meat, chicken or pasta and vegetable entree, often complemented by a green salad (like my mother often insisted, for “ruffage”), and sometimes, a fruity treat or ice cream for dessert.

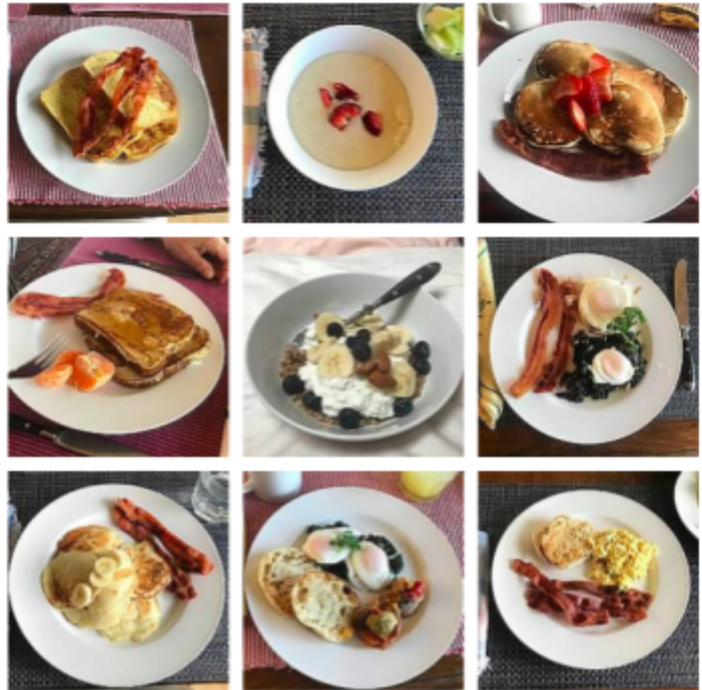
The importance of plating. In addition to descriptors like “tasty” and “nutritious,” “pretty” fast became a priority for our meals. Colorful plate and bowl sets livened up lunchtimes. We

lit candles at dinner. Karen picked flowers from garden to grace our table. We even rotated our places just to keep things fresh.

Before we brought our just-cooked food to the table, we'd spend an extra minute or two artfully "plating" what we had whipped up. We'd drape eggs with bacon strips, and sprinkle chopped parsley or paprika over a bowl of soup. We added "architectural appeal" to entrees by piling them atop a mound of potatoes or polenta. Our designs were so appealing, and our pride of accomplishment so overflowing, we felt compelled to take pictures of each plate. Without planning it, sixty days later, we had amassed a near complete collection of images of all of our meals.

What a collection it is! Sparked by a call from the Shelter Island Historical Society, the images of almost every meal are now in full four-color display in a book entitled, [*"Connecting from a Quarantine Kitchen: My Shelter Island Pandemic Story."*](#) with brief descriptions of each meal's menu. (See below for more details.)

As pictured throughout this e-book, most of our leftovers are virtually indistinguishable from their "origin" meal — proof that with a little TLC, it's possible to cook well and create joy while stretching the budget.



Breakfast can be beautiful, too

The sumptuousness look of our meals belie their ease of preparation.

Neither Karen nor I are gourmet cooks; at best, we are solid home cooks who care. In preparing our meals, we used easy-to-follow recipes published in The New York Times or the internet, or (often in Karen's case), recipes and techniques committed to memory long ago. We used herbs and spices found in typical home pantries — nothing exotic! — and ingredients that were readily available at the local IGA, or occasionally, at fancy food shops off island. Unabashedly, many of our meals were simple transformations of what was *intentionally* left over.

Echoing some insights I'd picked up from my research, the better the primary meal, the higher quality of the leftovers; and you can taste the love that goes into food. The TLC we put into our food, — and what we gained from our experience — made it a joy to attempt to eat up every morsel.

APPRECIATING FOOD

Lesson #1 Food is Much More than Sustenance

We all have to eat, and while sheltering in place, eating a healthy diet proved to be good preventive medicine. Neither of us got sick. Neither of us gained the “Quarantine 16” or anything close. (Daily walks on the beach helped out, too.) Our meals were so satisfying, we didn’t feel the urge to snack. However, as nutritious as our meals were, we learned, in retrospect, that they were providing us with much more than sustenance.

Inside Karen’s home over- looking Gardiners Bay, we found a locus of uplift as well as solace within the kitchen.

Looking back, those thrice- daily meals anchored us during an uncertain period. The activities of inventorying the fridge and pantry, planning meals for the week, shopping, cooking, and then consciously re-fashioning leftovers into satisfying new meals before turning scraps into stock or compost, gave us a focus, and helped beat a steady rhythm and momentum across the weeks.



View of Gardiners Bay from Karen's deck

Food Inspires Awe

In early Spring, the azaleas in Karen’s garden burst into bright pink, the hydrangeas into blue. Just for fun, I took pictures of the daily growth of the snap peas and lettuces we planted using seeds from the Shelter Island Public Library’s Seed Exchange.

On a trip to the Agway in May, Karen bought me a one-pot herb garden that I embraced like a pet. Seeing nature sprouting so, I couldn’t help thinking that goodness would prevail. Things might evolve into a “new normal,” but some form of normal would eventually return.

Food is Fun Whipping up buttermilk pancakes festooned with slices of fresh strawberries in the middle of the week, savoring a soft shell crab from the local Commander Cody’s fish place for a special Saturday night supper (pictured below), or simply topping Easter lamb chops with a sprig of parsley — it’s how we created joy during a tough time.

As I witnessed my mother do when I was growing up, I looked forward to heading into Karen’s kitchen every afternoon. My own routine started by grabbing a brightly colored apron from behind the pantry door, and asking Alexa to play Schubert in the background. Getting lost in the flow of chopping and dicing, consulting recipes and double-checking my measures, I’d look up frequently to glance at the sun setting over the Bay. My focus shifted from the scary headlines and televised Covid-19 updates to more immediate questions.

Opening the fridge door, I would first consult my designated “Must Go” (or ‘Eat Me First’) shelf: What couldn’t wait another day? What would be just fun to cook? Could I intentionally make extras that I could warm-up or transform into something else later in the week?

Without a wide social circle to connect with, and without restaurants, museums and other entertainment besides Netflix, to help keep things fun, we challenged ourselves to find an element of joy in every meal.

We tried to mix things up, try new recipes — and to never make the same meal twice. Some mornings, instead of frying or scrambling the eggs that we found at the local Sylvester Manor CSA, we dared ourselves to make “a perfect poach” up to the standard of Chef Ingrid, my instructor at ICE.



Soft shell crab, yellow rice and asparagus

We didn’t jump on the sourdough bandwagon — We’re not big bakers — but we did try to bring something special to our meals with a warm slice of homemade corn or banana bread, or at least a piece of store-bought garlic naan or pita. As a fun way to use up super-ripe fruit, I delighted in gently frying up a banana and serving it with ice cream, and, on another occasion, baking two ripe apples, topped with a cinnamon stick and a dollop of yogurt.

Food is Ritual Eating brought Karen and I around her dining table three times each day. Each meal provided an opportunity to connect, update each other on our respective projects, and just enjoy a nice meal together. After the picture-taking and big smiles, each meal would begin with me saying the grace I learned in childhood. We then broke into conversation about recipes, ingredients and techniques. Sharing our respective cooking experiences was fun, and helped us to up our respective cooking games, and better appreciate our meal.

Lesson #2 Food is Forgiving

Food is eminently versatile, adaptable. The local supermarket can run out of certain items, and fresh produce comes and goes with the seasons, but we humans need never run out of ideas. Shortages of some ingredients challenged me to keep an open mind and to improvise with what was within reach, discover something new, to make a dish my own. Should I have been so surprised to learn that recipe substitutes can result in dishes that are equally as good if not better?

No chicken breast at the IGA? Tenders work great in a chicken and rice casserole made with coconut milk. No chicken thighs either?

Tenders, too, can be baked in a luscious dijon mustard and tarragon sauce. No lamb roast in the cooler? An opportunity to experiment with a boneless pork loin — and discover a new favorite cut. No orecchiette in the cupboard? Bowtie pasta mixed with rotini, Italian sausage and broccoli rabe tastes incredible too. An article written by Melissa Clark in *The New York Times* on April 3, 2020 made me laugh: *“Everything is Negotiable In This Asparagus Salad... You Could Even Lose The Asparagus.”*



Bowties & rotini substitute for oriecciette

Lesson #3 Imagination is the Most Important Ingredient

ICE’s Chef Ingrid impressed upon me the difference a sprig or two of fresh thyme can add to any savory dish. She underscored the value of “chiffonading” some parsley and throwing in the (even more flavorful) stems as well as the leaves. She stressed the “crime” of crushing garlic under the weight of a kitchen knife and “leaving flavor behind” on a cutting board. But the most important lesson is the one I learned from my mother: it takes imagination and a willingness to improvise to make a dish into something truly special. The trick is to find your culinary muse.

Keep your mind open to culinary adventure The foreign cuisines I enjoyed when travelling abroad inspire me. Fondly remembering the experience of tasting a first bowl of congee in the Hong Kong airport thirty years ago, I packed extra flavor and nutrition into our own Farina by making it with chicken stock. I enjoyed making ramen noodles “beefed up” with chunks of leftover chicken and a handful of fresh spinach, and for added texture and nutrition, I’d carefully drop a raw egg into the steaming broth, and top it with scallions.

Improvise When Easter Saturday arrived and we had no coloring kit, I improvised with turmeric to dye three golden eggs that graced our table the next morning. (They wound up in a delicious egg salad for that Wednesday’s lunch.) Late one afternoon, with no rolling pin in sight, I rolled out some odds and ends of pastry dough with a pop bottle, and then tucked into each one a dollop of leftover creamed spinach and a cube of feta cheese. Voila! Four pieces of spanakopita — a perfect hot hors d’oeuvres for two.

Lesson #4 The Internet is the World’s Greatest Cookbook

I didn’t have my “go-to” Fanny Farmer cookbook with me. No worries! I was able to Google my on-hand ingredients and find plenty of good meal prompts (including a recipe for natural Easter egg dyes).

One day I located a recipe for ham croquettes that allowed me to not only use up my leftover ham, but some cheese, onions and breadcrumbs, too.

Finding an opportunity to finally make sweet potato toasts, (I was ribbed by my cooking classmates for only *recently* discovering them), one afternoon, I googled recipes — and got 68,500,000 results. I only



Spanakopita with leftover creamed spinach, pastry, feta

needed a few to gently pile some leftover tomato, avocado and scallions onto the twelve thin planks I had cut from two sweet potatoes; tired-looking when raw, those toasts looked amazing when they emerged from a hot oven minutes later.

Get private cooking lessons on YouTube Sir Gordon Ramsay showed me how to make a princely meal from a modest cut of beef short ribs. Jacques Pepin demonstrated the difference between a “country” and a real French omelet. And, had I not overlooked it while still on Shelter Island, I would likely have made Alison Roman’s recipe for caramelized shallots and pasta with anchovies, first printed in *The New York Times* in February 2020 and demonstrated in this [YouTube video](#), more than once.

Subscribe to NYTimes Cooking Included among the small wad of recipes I thought to bring with me while hurriedly packing for a prolonged stay on Shelter Island, was a special pullout section from *The New York Times* that also ran in February 2020, called “[One Pot, Pan, Skillet](#)”. That supplement provided us with a number of meals that were tasty,

elegant and surprisingly simple to prepare with readily available ingredients; among our favorites: Shrimp Scampi with Orzo, Chicken with Shallots and Grapes, and Olive Oil-Roasted Chicken with Caramelized Carrots. Find these recipes and so many more online at <https://cooking.nytimes.com/> All you have to do is “Subscribe.”

Lesson #5 Leftovers are a Home Cook’s Best Friend

Throughout history, wherever and whenever there was food, there was likely to be leftovers. In the Middle Ages, leftovers from sumptuous banquets were given to the help or handed to beggars at the castle door. Thrifty New Englanders “rolled” the remains of Saturday’s night’s cod-fish into fish balls for Sunday breakfast. To this day, French home cooks and chefs, ever reverential of their miraculous breads, transform their day-old loaves into croutons and bread crumbs, or bake slices doused with cheese into a bowl of onion soup.

Since time immemorial, leftovers have been revered for their ability to extend precious food supplies, feed the hungry, save money, and enable anyone who eats the ability to enjoy the remains of a great meal on another day.

Today, of course, one can add planet- and resource-saving reasons to the list. Happily, during the Covid-19 pandemic, home cooks all over the world discovered that using up what’s on hand can help save time and money. The remains of yesterday’s chili are already sitting in the fridge. No ordering out, no extra trips to the store. And they have already been paid for.

Then there’s taste. As was often demonstrated in my own lockdown kitchen — and is corroborated by scientists — thanks to the magic of marination, many leftovers actually taste better the next day. Of course, some kinds of foods make for better leftovers than others — and care needs to be taken to ensure that cooked foods are properly stored and reheated — during my 60 days in Shelter Island, I found that the best candidates include the pastas (rigatoni with meat sauce and spaghetti and meatballs), meatloaf, all of the one-pot chicken dishes, and soups. Perhaps most of all, leftovers represent an opportunity to express creativity. The delight of many home cooks and chefs, re-inventing leftovers lets one improvise and create something new. (As my sister says, “A piece of art!”)



Sweet potato toasts made with leftover avocado, tomato

In our own quarantine kitchen, each attempt at re-imagining yesterday's dinner presented an opportunity to strengthen our own improvisation muscles and exercise our creativity. No deep well of your own personal improvisation experience? No worries. It's never too late to start. Some of the ideas that propelled us follow in the next section.



Luscious leftovers, all

MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR OWN PANDEMIC COOKING

The idiosyncrasy of one’s own tastes, preferences and food customs represent myriad opportunities to create and enjoy dishes that have never been made before. Who can resist? What a great time to get started during this pandemic, when resources may be tight, your cooking might need an infusion of new ideas, and you just might have little extra time to take advantage of an opportunity to prepare some family favorites, and learn something new.

Strategy #1 Plan Ahead for Leftovers

At the top of every Home Economist’s list of tips to cut down on wasted food is this: “Plan meals through- out an entire week, not just through the next meal.”

A great tactic when looking ahead to the week: plan for what is called “*intentional leftovers*.”

Intentional leftovers happen when home cooks buy an extra large turkey with the idea of enjoying post-Thanksgiving sandwiches. Intentional leftovers materialize when you make an extra batch of

spaghetti and turkey meatballs, so you can freeze half for a future meal. (It was such a “gift from the past” that saved us from having to cook during our first evening on Shelter Island.) Throughout the pandemic, many take-out orders are being intentionally doubled up to help amortize delivery fees and ensure a tasty meal on a consecutive day.

As Karen demonstrated to me when shopping during our joint quarantine, food can be planned to “cascade” through the week. I was impressed how she would spot an opportunity to buy a whole chicken that could be roasted, then cascaded into salads and sandwiches. We could buy a flank steak for a tasty grill one night and slice it into strips for a Chinese-style saute with cabbage on the next.



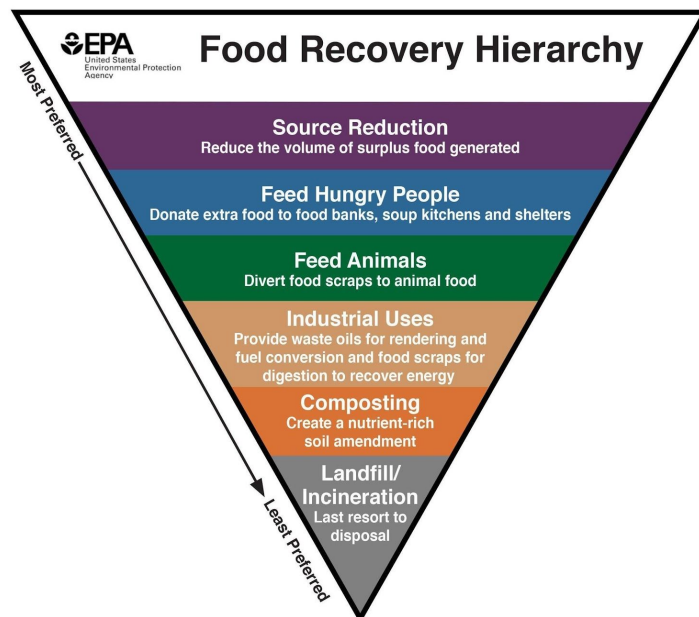
“*Intentional leftovers*”

Strategy #2 Store and Dispose of Leftovers Properly

From the moment it's picked, pickled, bottled, canned or butchered, food is in a race against time. Guided by "[Best By](#)" and "[Use By](#)" labels (which, correctly interpreted, denote best quality/peak flavor, *not* safety or purchase date), we are constantly challenged to find that exact moment when flavor, nutrition and freshness collide for optimum enjoyment and nutrition. Fruit is sweetest when it's just picked. Steak is more flavorful when it's left to dry age for three weeks. We wait years for scotch whiskey to mellow in an oaken cask.

From the moment they are first cooked, leftovers (like all prepared foods) must be defended against the onslaught of air and microbes designed to turn them, circle-of-life style, back into soil. Admittedly, some leftovers, often due to poor storage or reheating methods, can be risky to eat. But most leftovers are still perfectly edible during the moments when they are tossed into the trash.

So, if we wrap tonight's extra burger as soon as possible after grilling it, not in a loose piece of foil, but in a Tupperware-type bowl and burp it to remove the air — or better yet, a vacuum sealer — it should last at least until tomorrow's lunch (and likely beyond). Properly wrapped and labelled, leftovers stored in the freezer will stay "fresh" for weeks or even months. (Learn more in "Waste Free Kitchen Handbook" and other resources, below.)



Eat first, compost next

Our pandemic kitchen had a countertop compost pail, the contents of which we deposited in the big tumbler in Karen's raised bed garden. Throughout the 60 days, however, we didn't contribute so much to the compost. Why? Guided by the US Environmental Protection Agency's **Food Recovery Hierarchy** (pictured above), from an environmental standpoint, actually eating one's edible food scraps (or feeding them to animals, as appropriate), is eminently preferable to churning them into compost.

So we challenged ourselves to warm up or recreate all of our leftovers into tasty new meals. We also enjoyed using up our cooking scraps using some now popular recipes, for example, "Broccoli Spear" Slaw. (See Resources, below, for "Cooking with Scraps.")

Ask for a doggy bag Don't be shy! In France and Japan, restaurants are now required by law to provide doggy bags to patrons. With expenditures for out-of-home dining now overtaking those in the home, your impact could be significant! Always ask for a doggy bag (or better yet, bring your own collapsibles) to take home what's still on your plate (and, while you're at it, as described in the story linked here from the website I manage, ask for the [breadbasket](#), too.)

Strategy #3 Organize for Leftovers

Start with a mindset to plan for leftovers, acquire a few affordable tools, reorganize the fridge a bit, and you'll be set to save a substantial part of the \$600 each year that Americans scrape from their plates directly into the trash.

Designate a shelf in the fridge for items that **"Must Go"** — the fruit on the wane, the prepared leftovers, the last few slices of bread.

Get some zip bags, clear glass boxes, or better yet, a vacuum sealer, for freezer use; keep markers handy for labelling them well, including date.

Use one zip bag to store an ongoing collection of carrot tops, broccoli spears, celery ends and other scraps, along with bones for stock. Pick up some canning jars for that day each week or two (I'm on a ten-day rotation), for when you make your flavorful broth. Use another resealable bag to store crumbs that accumulate from the ends of bread, broken crackers, even tortilla chips. Some chefs save the ends of bread for Thanksgiving stuffing. I use mine all year long to extend meatloaf, as a breading for fish and chicken, and as a crunchy topper for mac and cheese; I prefer them to store-bought because of their multiple eye-appealing colors and textures. (I do, however, refrain from using a crust of bread for scrubbing pans, as one 19th-century English journalist and writer recommended.)

Make sure you've got a good skillet or sheet pan so you can cook up some tasty "intentional leftovers," and in turn, benefit from fewer ingredients and cleanup. And, if you don't already have a set, get a few spatulas of different sizes; you'll be surprised how much good food can get inadvertently left behind on bowls, pans and in casseroles. One morning, Karen scraped enough pancake batter left in the bowl to make a delightful "Smiley Pancake," personified with berries. Shudder to think, "Smiley" almost went down the drain!



Smiley Pancake made with batter bowl scrapings

Finally, because we Americans are prone to making much more food than we can consume, keep some containers handy to send home extra food with guests (better yet, encourage them to bring their own reusables.)

Strategy #4 Warm Up Leftovers the Same Way They Were Cooked

As someone who is always in a hurry, I tend to want to heat up food super quick. Out on Shelter Island, Karen had to remind me to “warm things up” on low temperatures — let’s say 250 degrees versus 350 — as opposed to “reheating” food and risk changing its flavor. (Link here for [USDA Guidelines](#) for Safe Food Handling.)

Many young people eventually discover to their horror that the fastest way to kill a slice of leftover pizza is to put it in the microwave and hit “cook.” So, I pass along the answer to one of my key questions posed to my ICE instructor:

Quick Cooking Lesson:

The microwave is not a reheating machine! Pizza, like most leftovers, are best reheated the same way they were cooked, in this instance, baked for a few minutes in a 400-degree oven, or, as some prefer, in a pan on the stove to crisp the crust. (Start face down on medium heat to melt the cheese a bit, then flip.) Pizza makes a great leftover cold. For added color and nutrition, warm it up with whatever extra veggies that may be around.



A side of fresh couscous dresses up a leftover chicken leg

Strategy #5 Add an Element of “New”

Variety not only makes food fun, it helps ensure that we get a full range of vitamins and nutrients. Short of reinventing leftovers altogether (see Strategy #6, just below), to keep things interesting when simply warming up a dish as is, add a side of something new, or serve them in a new way. For instance, add a side of fresh steamed asparagus to last night’s warmed up supper. As pictured above, prepare a side of couscous to jazz up a chicken leg from yesterday’s roast. Serve last night’s meatloaf for lunch on a piece of toast, topped with some homemade gravy and a flash of parsley; bring out the last of the pork chops tonight, spruced up with apple slices.

Strategy #6 Learn New Recipes for Transforming Leftovers

The possibilities for re-creating one's leftovers into entirely new meals are endless! And easier than you might think, whatever your skill level, whatever ingredients you have available, whatever the season, or even your location in the world. That's because, every culture, has its favorite go-to recipes for using up their leftovers; many of them rely on the same seven universal dishes that happen to be perfect vehicles for using up odds and ends.

Call it the Leftovers Matrix: frittatas, omelets and other egg creations, fish and other types of "cakes," grain bowls, fried rice, curries, savory pies and tarts, soups and stews(4), delightedly, they represent a magic carpet ride through culinary history and a way to savor international cuisines.

Referring to them as "les restes," "las sobras," "carry-overs," "rechauffees" and "bring-ups," among many other names, frugal restaurant chefs all over the world repurpose what's left over from their food prep (not plate waste!) into profitable menu items, starting "soup du jour," the French concept for serving up yesterday's veggies; topped with croutons (made, from stale bread, of course), it makes diners feel downright luxurious.

Fried rice is how, for centuries, Chinese chefs have repurposed day-old rice. (It's impossible to make fried rice with fresh steamed rice!) **Rice**, in the forms of paella, risotto, biryani, pilaf, jambalaya and bibimbap is a universal "container" for all kinds of meats, seafoods, and vegetables.

The Thais and Indians have long made **curries** with add-ins of fish, meat, poultry or shellfish, either alone or in combination with vegetables; they can be entirely vegetarian, too, made with tofu, tempeh and/or veggies.

Eggs serve as a terrific "binder" for odds and ends.

Chances are, the omelet you last enjoyed with a mimosa at a pricey brunch was likely loaded with tasty scraps from the kitchen. Omelets are thought to have originated in 14th-century Persia, when the Iranians cooked up "kookoo sabzi" for breakfast. Now, Italians make frittatas, and the Chinese whip up egg foo yung, while the Japanese enjoy omurice, an omelet filled with rice and served with ketchup.

The English have long stashed leftover bits of beef into a **savory cottage pie**, and lamb into shepherd's pie. Other food cultures pack their own leftovers into pitas, pizzas, quiche, and

FRITTATA

FISH CAKES

GRAIN BOWLS

FRIED RICE

CURRIES

SAVORY TARTS

SOUP

tacos and burritos, as well as portable pasties, turnovers, empanadas, pierogi, and calzones. And these represent only the beginning of the savories sampled around the world! Sweets made from leftovers are nothing to trifle at!

Culinary Prediction: *At some point, just like we see a rotating “Soup du Jour” on restaurant menus today, we will see a daily “Confetti Rice” or even funky “Trash Rice” dishes on menus tomorrow.*

Strategy #7 Keep Leftover-Friendly Ingredients on Hand

Keep a supply of your preferred herbs and spices, along with go-to staples and condiments and you’ll always be able to take advantage of opportunities to make your favorite dishes from the Leftovers Matrix. What you stash in your fridge and pantry will reflect the kinds of dishes that you like to eat. Here’s what we kept in our pandemic kitchen:

Herbs and Spices Fresh thyme, parsley, basil, and when it started to grow on Karen’s deck, fresh chives, were always kept on hand and used liberally. I’m having fun experimenting with more exotic spice blends these days, but my go-to spices during my stay on Shelter Island were a shaker of “Herbamare” — a herbed sea salt infused with organic herbs and vegetables which we used in soups, salads, and grilled cheese; and packets of Sazon Goya which I leaned on to give big batches of rice color and flavor.



Spinach adds color, flavor and nutrition to homemade soup

Bouillon Cubes and Stock If you don’t have home-made or even store-bought stock around, make an easy soup by dropping a bouillon cube or two into water, along with add-in like yesterday’s veggies, bits of leftover chicken, and your favorite pasta or rice. Pictured here: homemade chicken broth, leftover chicken chunks and rotini, livened up with spinach (added just moments before the end of cooking so it retains its bright color), to add color, flavor, and a boost of vitamin C.

Onions, Carrots, Celery, Scallions The ingredients in a traditional “mirepoix” (two parts onions, one part carrots, and one part celery), use onions, carrots and celery, usually finely

diced, to jumpstart the flavors for soups and stock, meat dishes and sauces. Celery (even wilted!), we discovered, also makes a fine braise. Add chopped scallions to salads, sautes and as a topper for soups, and ramen noodles, even congee. During the pandemic, images of scallions growing in a glass of water were popular among home cooks eager to share tips on how to stretch food resources. I've got some scallions growing in a glass in my NYC kitchen right now!

Pastry Sheets Pepperidge Farm sells them two to a box in the freezer case. Come holiday time, these are my go-to's for pie shells, and year-round, for my signature apple tarte tatin. From the box I had stashed in our Shelter Island freezer drawer, I was able to pull out four triangles of dough that had been leftover from baking a pie. They became the wrappers for the spanakopita hors d'oeuvres described above. Got extra jam, a few nuts? Use the same pastry sheets cut into triangles and pop them into the oven to enjoy quick homemade "rollarounds" like my great-grandmother used to make.

Eggs As demonstrated throughout this document, eggs are amazingly versatile by themselves or as a component within a protein-rich breakfast, lunch or dinner. And any leftover can be improved by the simple presence of a fried-egg topper. One of my favorite things to make: a two-egg omelet laced with fresh spinach and a cube or two of feta cheese, with a slice or two of tomato on the side.



Fried rice with confetti color veggies

Umami Discovered by the Japanese in the last century and termed the "fifth flavor," chances are, some of these savory meaty-mushroomy flavor-boosters are already in your own fridge. My favorites: Parmesan Reggiano cheese*, feta cheese, anchovies (canned and tube), mushrooms (canned and fresh), capers, and sauces including Worcestershire, fish, oyster and soy. Experiment liberally and enjoy the unique flavors that result. (*Make sure the rinds wind up in stock!)

Rice I would make big batches of rice in the beginning of the week, to serve as a side, and to use as the basis of a tasty fried "Confetti Rice." Add in pieces of cut-up chicken, a handful of chopped onion, a slice or two of ginger, and some peas and carrots.

Strategy #8 Start a New Tradition

Encouraging everyone to eat up their leftovers will require making leftovers as “normal” as they once were. Building leftovers into weekly family dinners and even encouraging one’s social circle to eat theirs, too, by making them into a social occasion, will help make eating leftovers “cool.”

Turn one dinner each week into a “Must Go Buffet.” Have fun calling it whatever your household might fancy — an “Odds and Ends” Buffet,” a “Leftovers Smorgasbord,” “Taco Tuesday” or “Whatever Wednesday.” And when it’s safe to host your next potluck, throw a **“Leftovers Pooling Party.”** Encourage friends, neighbors, and colleagues to pool their leftovers instead of whipping up something new — and enjoy recounting the stories they conjure up: a favorite recipe, a take-out meal from a special place, a new concoction created on the fly. An especially great time for a Leftovers Pooling Party: holiday times, especially after Thanksgiving and SuperBowl Sunday, when there’s usually plenty of good food left from the celebration.

GOING FORWARD INTO THE “NEW NORMAL”

During this Covid-19 pandemic, I hope you, too, are acquiring a greater respect for food, and indeed, sensing its magic. I hope you, also, are taking away new strategies for making the most of every piece of protein, produce and carb we are so lucky to have in our kitchens. Let’s reflect upon this experience and share with others some of our best new culinary-related pleasures including the joy of making over leftovers. Together, we can help create a more sustainable “new normal” for everyone.

Celebrate Food

Starting from a young age, we humans share the ability to cook our own meals. Celebrate how we can all enjoy the thrill of transforming simple ingredients into delicious, shareable pleasures.

Dignify Your Dining Experience

Creatively “plate” each meal, even if just by topping the entree with a single sprig of parsley. Spoon a big dollop of chicken or egg salad on top of a mound of fluffy ruby lettuce dressed up with ruby red tomatoes. Sprinkle a dash of paprika to add color to cream soup. Set a pretty table. Put on a pretty blouse. Light candles. Say the grace you learned as a child. Eat pancakes in the middle of the week.



A sprig of parsley graces any meal

Teach Kids to Cook

The more kids are engaged with cooking, the more they will appreciate leftovers, starting with the meals they’ve helped to cook themselves. One silver lining of the pandemic is that more kids are learning the fundamentals of cooking, and its ancillary benefits of appreciating food and enhancing family togetherness.

Use your quarantine time to take a break from the zoom lessons and the doom of the news, to create fond memories for your own kids of making bread, pancakes, soups, and smoothies (made with overripe fruit!) with parents and grandparents. Demonstrate fundamentals, including the best way to warm up last night's spaghetti and meatballs.

We can't teach our kids to cook too soon! Before the pandemic, we were fast losing our cooking skills as a society. Busy Moms and Dads were no longer in the kitchen. Enrollment in cooking schools was half of what it was ten years ago. And we seem to all be doing a lot more watching of cooking shows than actual cooking.

My Culinary Wish #1 : Let's Start a National "Teach our Kids to Cook Day." Start in your own kitchen by teaching even the youngest kids some simple food prep skills. Designate particular meals or days to enlist kids' help. Bring "Teach our Kids to Cook Day" to your kids' school and community. Give kids and grandkids a cookbook on their next birthday, crack the spine and cook some tasty and nutritious meals, together. Until a specific day is designated, should we opt to start the festivities by helping to celebrate the UN's newly declared "International Day of Awareness on Food Loss and Waste" on September 29?

Share Your Tips with Others

It's impossible to codify and catalog the countless tips and tricks, the myriad funky dishes that, for centuries, our mothers and fathers, grandmothers and their mothers, pulled out of their heads and hearts for repurposing last night's supper.



Homemade croutons add texture to split pea soup; pita pizza

Inspired by generations of home cooks before us, let's all take the time to pass along our own favorite tips with others. Start with your kids and other family members, and branch out into your social media circles and physical community. Share tips with the local paper, your favorite food writers — and everyone else who eats.

In days gone by, historic recipes contained tips for pickling, salting and other preservation tips. But perhaps the dawn of refrigerators changed all of this. I'm delighted to see a few food writers are now adding notes to their recipes about the best way to store a dish for

safekeeping, or how best to reheat it. With so many homecooks looking to learn new skills and new dishes to make during the pandemic, we have an opportunity to make it easier for everyone to learn how to cook better, and keep as much food as possible out of the trash.

Culinary Wish #2: That every recipe published in America would come with endnotes that let home cooks know how long a dish might last in the fridge or freezer, which dishes might taste better on a second or even third day, and how best to reheat or even repurpose, what's left behind. Suggest substitutes that could help use up what's already on hand, and ideas for using up specially purchased ingredients that might be leftover, too.

Americans now spend three times as much money eating out or ordering in than they do on grocery purchases. (5) Take-out and meal-kits are becoming more popular during the pandemic. This suggests that to achieve proper scale, restaurants, take-out places, and meal-kit purveyors, as well as grocers and food manufacturers, have an opportunity to contribute to reducing food waste by providing reuse tips, too, for their own foods, as well as guidance for using leftovers to add nutrition to their own creations. What an opportunity to pass along tips from top chefs to get consumers excited about cooking!

Culinary Wish #3: That Every Pizza Carton Ever Delivered, and every take-out box of Chinese rice, every meal-kit, as well as every can or package plucked from a supermarket shelf, would come with tips on proper storage, re-warming, and transforming what's left over (including what's likely to be a delicious sauce!)

Share Food with Others

Throughout the pandemic, Karen and I shared some of our homemade soups with a frequent walking pal, dropped off casseroles for an elderly friend getting used to a new hip, and dined with another artist friend while “socially distanced” down our table. All around the world, many other families, friends and roommates discovered the magic of sharing a meal within their “pod,” too.

When it is safe again, commit to eating more and cooking more with loved ones. Use food to nourish, bridge — and pass on the love. Send guests home with leftovers, or arrange for swaps with neighbors so everyone can enjoy something “new.” Drop off cooked food with seniors and friends in need. Bring unused canned goods to a local food pantry, help create a [“Solidarity” Fridge](#) in your community. Invite neighbors to deposit their food scraps and other organics into your composter.

Tell the Story of Your Own Food

Chances are, those who are most motivated and confident about using up their leftovers were inspired by others. A grandmother or father. A scout leader, home ec teacher, or professional chef. A heart-warming story of a community leader setting up a food rescue program, or a lone neighbor taking it upon herself to set up a solidarity fridge. Stories motivate those of us who love food, and want to pass along the love to others.

That's why I'm sharing my pandemic cooking story and its many lessons, here. Have I inspired you to transform your leftovers? What are you personally learning about food and cooking more efficiently and better while sheltering in place? How do you improvise? What favorite recipes, leftovers' hack can you share on social media and over the back fence that can help others save money, improve their cooking, and reduce food waste? I want to know. The world *needs* to know!



Baked apple dressed with cinnamon stick, yogurt

END NOTES

1. Food Matters: What Food We Waste And How We Can Expand The Amount Of Food We Rescue *NRDC Issue Brief, October 2017*
2. Op cit. Per International Panel on Climate Change, Fifth Assessment Report (2013,) Table 8.7. Methane packs 36 times the heat-trapping punch of carbon dioxide, pound for pound, over the course of a century after it is released. However, over a shorter period of 20 years, non-fossil methane is 86 times more powerful than carbon dioxide.
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RESOURCES

Cookbooks and Guides

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The Complete Cookbook for Young Chefs: 100+ Recipes that You'll Love to Cook and Eat. America's Test Kitchen, October 2018

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Websites

[Food: Too Good To Waste](#) U.S. EPA Implementation Guide and Toolkit

[LoveFoodHateWaste.com / recipes](#) UK and Canadian Food Waste Initiative

[SaveTheFood.com/Recipes/](#) NRDC-led food waste initiative

[Supercook.com](#) Recipe-finding website and app

[WeHateToWaste.com/Recipes](#) Website of the author

ABOUT JACQUELYN A. OTTMAN

Jacquelyn Ottman is a native **New Yorker** and longstanding advocate for **zero waste**. For 30 years, she pioneered the field of **Green Marketing**, authoring three award-winning books, and sharing her insights and strategies with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, US Department of Agriculture, Fortune 500 firms, and audiences in North America, South America, Europe, and Asia.

She is now applying her expertise, her passion and her personal perspective to the goal of reducing edible **household food waste**. Through e-books like this one and other activities, she offers her insights to policymakers, food waste activists and food influencers on how to change perceptions and create new consumer habits that can help encourage home cooks to discover the joy in transforming what's left over from last night's dinner into something new and special.

The daughter of a foodie family, and a home cook since childhood, she is the author of three books on her **personal culinary history**.

She is a member of the Culinary Historians Society of New York and the Authors Guild.



Author Jacquie Ottman experimenting with leftovers while sheltering in place.

An avowed “**waste hater**” since age four when she dragged home board games from the neighbor’s trash, Ottman is immediate past chair of the **Manhattan Solid Waste Advisory Board**, a group that advises the New York City Council, the Mayor’s Office, and the Department of Sanitation of New York on solid waste, recycling, and composting issues. She is founder and editor of WeHateToWaste.com.

Catch her in her spare time researching her family's history, writing her sustainability career memoir, and cooking up a storm in her tiny New York City kitchen.

BOOKS BY JACQUELYN A. OTTMAN

[*The New Rules of Green Marketing: Strategies, Tools and Inspiration for Sustainable Branding*](#) (Berrett-Koehler, 2011) Named a top sustainability book of the year by Cambridge University, UK. Published in two prior editions, 1993 and 1998.

[*How to Make Credible Green Marketing Claims: What the Updated FTC Green Guides Means for Marketers*](#) (with David Mallen), Advertising Age, 2012

[*Family Gatherings: Five Recipes from Five Generations*](#) (Published privately, 2000)

[*Ottman & Company: One Daughter Remembers*](#) (KDP 2017)

[*If Trash Could Talk: Poems, Stories and Musings*](#) (KDP 2018)

[*Creating a Culture of Recycling in Your Multifamily Building and Engaging Residents of NYC Multifamily Buildings in Organics Collection*](#) (MSWAB, 2018)

[*Connecting from a Quarantine Kitchen: My Shelter Island Pandemic Story*](#) (KDP 2020)



CONNECTING FROM A QUARANTINE KITCHEN

My Shelter Island Pandemic Story

JACQUELYN A. OTTMAN

CONNECTING FROM A QUARANTINE KITCHEN was prompted by a call in summer 2020 from the Shelter Island Historical Society for Island pandemic stories. It documents in four-color images, all of the meals Ottman and Kiaer made from March 17 – May 21, 2020, along with descriptive text and other information. **Copies are available for sale at Amazon.com** in paperback and e-book. They are also being sold on **Shelter Island** at the Shelter Island Historical Society's Havens Market, and Finley's Books. Copies are being donated to **culinary historians and food studies programs** as a contribution to future efforts to study the Covid-19 pandemic. Contact Jacquie Ottman for more details.

ABOUT THIS E-BOOK

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Images by Karen Kiaer and Jacquelyn Ottman

This book is dedicated to my parents, Valerie and Jack Ottman, who taught me to love food, to hate waste, and the value of sitting around a table with food, family and friends.