Papa Earl's 5 Free Suppers

Five Easy Nights to Get You Started

A little gift from Papa Earl Dawson — outside Albany, Georgia.

A Word Before You Cook

Well, hey there, and thank you kindly for lettin me cook alongside you.

I'll tell you the truth — I couldn't boil an egg till I was past seventy. My wife Corinne did all the cooking our whole married life, and when she passed I stood in that kitchen not knowing where to start. So I started small. I didn't need a hundred recipes. I needed *five* — five I could cook without wrecking, that proved to me an old man could feed himself.

That's what these five are. One easy supper a night, each one a little bolder than the last, every one of them hard to mess up. Cook them in order, burn a batch and laugh about it the way I did, and by Friday you'll believe you can do it. Because you can.

Don't skip ahead. Just cook tonight's.

— Papa Earl

P.S. — These five are just the start. The whole No-Fuss Kitchen is three easy cookbooks in one — the air fryer, the slow cooker, and easy everyday suppers, all built small and made for one — tap or click right here to see it whenever you're ready.

Night One — Shake-in-a-Bag Air-Fryer Chicken Thighs

The easiest hot supper there is. No skillet, no grease, about a minute to clean up. If this is the only thing you ever learn, you'll still eat good.

WHAT YOU NEED

- 4 bone-in, skin-on chicken thighs
- 1 tablespoon oil
- 1 teaspoon salt, 1/2 teaspoon pepper, 1/2 teaspoon garlic powder, 1/2 teaspoon paprika

HOW IT'S DONE

1. Pat the thighs dry with a paper towel. Drop them in a gallon zip bag with the oil and all the seasoning, zip it, and shake it around till they're coated. (That's the whole "recipe" — a bag and a shake.)
2. Lay them skin-side up in the air-fryer basket, not touching. Cook at 380 degrees for 22 to 25 minutes.
3. They're done when the skin's deep gold and crackly and a thermometer in the thickest part, not touching bone, reads 165 degrees.

PAPA'S NOTE

— Don't crowd the basket. One good layer with a little room, or they steam instead of crisp. That's the only way an air fryer ever lets you down.

IF IT WENT WRONG

— Pale and floppy skin? You crowded it, or it needed a few more minutes. Give it room and go by the gold color, not just the clock.

Night Two — A Slow-Cooker Pot of Pintos

Tonight you learn the walk-off supper. You get it going in the morning, you leave the house, and supper's waiting on you when you get back. Beans and cornbread fed this whole South for two hundred years, and they'll feed you cheap all week.

WHAT YOU NEED

- 1 pound dried pinto beans
- A ham hock or a half cup of chopped ham (or leave it out for plain)
- 1 small onion, chopped
- 1 teaspoon salt (add at the end), pepper

HOW IT'S DONE

1. Pour the beans out on a plate and pick out any little rock or shriveled one. Rinse them. (Pintos need no boil-first — that's only for red kidney beans.)
2. Put the beans, ham, onion and pepper in the slow cooker. Pour in water to cover them by 2 inches.
3. Cook on LOW about 8 hours, till the beans are soft and creamy and mash easy against the side. Salt them at the end — salt early can keep them tough.

PAPA'S NOTE

— Leave the lid be. Every time you lift it to peek, you add a half hour. Set it and walk off; that's the whole point of the machine.

IF IT WENT WRONG

— Still firm after 8 hours? Old dried beans just take longer — give them another hour or two on HIGH. And never add salt or anything acid (tomatoes, vinegar) at the start; it toughens the skins.

Night Three — Sheet-Pan Sausage, Potatoes and Peppers

One pan, the oven does the work, and there's nothing to wash but the pan — and if you line it with foil, not even that. This is the supper I cook when I don't feel like cooking.

WHAT YOU NEED

- 1 package smoked sausage (kielbasa), cut in coins
- 3 or 4 potatoes, cut in chunks
- 1 onion and 1 bell pepper, cut in chunks
- 2 tablespoons oil, salt, pepper, a shake of garlic powder

HOW IT'S DONE

1. Set the oven to 425 degrees. Line a sheet pan with foil.
2. Dump the potatoes, onion and pepper on the pan, drizzle the oil, sprinkle the seasoning, and toss them with your hands. Spread them out flat.
3. Roast 15 minutes. Pull the pan out, scatter the sausage coins over, toss again, and roast another 15 to 20 minutes, till the potatoes are tender and everything's got some brown on it.

PAPA'S NOTE

— Give it room on the pan. Piled up, it steams and goes pale; spread out in one layer, it roasts and browns. Use two pans before you crowd one.

IF IT WENT WRONG

— Potatoes still hard? Cut them smaller next time — they take the longest, so they go on first and in smaller pieces than everything else.

Night Four — Skillet Chicken and Buttered Noodles

Now one real stovetop supper — chicken and noodles in one skillet, done in about twenty minutes. This is the one that turns "I can follow a card" into "I can cook."

WHAT YOU NEED

- 2 chicken breasts, cut in bite-size pieces
- 2 tablespoons butter, plus 1 more for the end
- Salt, pepper, 1/2 teaspoon garlic powder
- Egg noodles for one or two (about 3 cups dry)
- 1/2 cup chicken broth or the noodle water

HOW IT'S DONE

1. Put a pot of salted water on to boil for the noodles. Cook them while you do the chicken, and dip out a cup of the water before you drain them.
2. Melt 2 tablespoons butter in a skillet over medium-high. Add the chicken, season it, and cook, stirring now and then, 6 to 8 minutes, till it's gold on the outside and white all through with no pink, 165 degrees.
3. Pour in the broth (or that noodle water) and scrape up the brown bits off the bottom — that's flavor. Let it bubble a minute.
4. Add the drained noodles and the last tablespoon of butter, toss it all together, and let it go another minute till it's hot and glossy. Pepper it good.

PAPA'S NOTE

— Those brown bits stuck to the skillet after the chicken are the best thing in the pan. A splash of broth and a wooden spoon lifts them right up into the supper. Never waste them.

IF IT WENT WRONG

— Chicken dry and tough? It cooked too long or too hot. Bite-size pieces only need a few minutes — pull them the second they're white through.

Night Five — Ten-Minute Air-Fryer Salmon

By now you've got four nights under your belt, so let's eat a little fancy. Salmon sounds hard and isn't — it's the fastest supper in the whole week, and it makes you feel like you know what you're doing. Because now you do.

WHAT YOU NEED

- 1 or 2 salmon fillets
- 1 tablespoon oil or melted butter
- Salt, pepper, and either a squeeze of lemon or a spoon of brown sugar

HOW IT'S DONE

1. Pat the fillets dry. Rub them with the oil and season — salt, pepper, and the lemon or the brown sugar, whichever you're in the mood for.
2. Lay them in the air-fryer basket skin-side down. Cook at 390 degrees for 8 to 11 minutes.
3. It's done when it's turned from shiny-raw to matte and flakes apart easy when you nudge it with a fork — about 145 degrees. A thick fillet takes the longer time.

PAPA'S NOTE

— Fish goes from perfect to dry in about a minute, so check it early and trust your fork over the clock. If it flakes, it's done. Serve it with a bag of air-fryer frozen vegetables cooked right alongside and you've made a whole plate from scratch.

IF IT WENT WRONG

— Dry and chalky? You left it in too long. Next time pull it the moment it flakes — carryover heat finishes it on the plate.

Five nights, five suppers, and look at you — you're a cook now. Everything else in the No-Fuss Kitchen is just more of this same easy knowing, pointed at something new.

If an old man who couldn't boil an egg can learn to eat good, so can you. Now go fix yourself a plate.

— Papa Earl