

A Char is Born

By Nancy McKibben

Winner of the 2003 James Thurber House Humor Award

The cook's lexicon is peppered with exotic commands: "deglaze the pan"; "caramelize the onions"; and, of course, "boil turtle vigorously until the toenails drop off." By contrast, to take a dish and "run it under the broiler" sounds straightforward, the instructions breezy, casual, almost flip. But the broiler is a Machiavellian appliance. Turn your back on it for an instant, allow yourself even a nanosecond's lapse in concentration, and behold – "run it under the broiler" and "render it inedible" become interchangeable.

Cooking, as any cook can tell you, is multi-tasking run amok. As the mother of six, I have not single-tasked since 1987; no, it's the timing that defeats me, that single, immutable deadline – dinnertime. "I wasted time, and now doth Time waste me!" I cry with Will Shakespeare as the salad demands its last minute tossing at the same moment the boiling pasta rises in rebellion to overflow its pot and the microwave timer warns me that the broccoli is poised to unleash its delicate bouquet of sulfur compounds upon the unsuspecting diners. In the midst of this clamor, I thrust, or *run* the loaf of French bread, oiled and ready, under the broiler and anticipate the golden, crispy-crust results.

Some minutes later, as I'm bearing the finished dishes to the table, a family member sniffs the air and asks, with spurious innocence: "What's burning?"

Call me sentimental, but in my opinion, nothing enhances the ambiance of a family dinner like the thrilling tones of the smoke alarm, and, if I'm quick enough in my sprint to the oven, the bread is still edible, and the breadbasket can yet wend its way around the family table. I often take this opportunity to gently impart a moral lesson. "Children in some countries would be happy to eat this bread," I say, as my own children eye their blackened crusts and exchange glances.

In the event that the bread is smoking (okay, flaming), I thrust the offending loaf out the door and onto the deck, where it makes a marvelous mosquito repellent. For years I have burned the bread with admirable regularity, prompting my sixteen-year-old daughter to initiate the pre-emptive strike. "Mom," she says, in the indulgent tone one reserves for infants and the infirm. "would you like *me* to grill the bread?"

Although burning the bread is the centerpiece of my résumé, I am known to burn food in other grilling venues. I confess to using the gas grill to transform hamburgers directly into fossil fuel, accelerating a process that normally occupies eons. But since the gas grill seems to have been expressly designed to burn food – witness the open flame, the lack of information as to actual temperature – I burn burgers outdoors with a clear conscience.

Back indoors, I will not even speak of the perils of the innocent-seeming toaster oven, whose accumulated crumbs conspire to form a primitive and malevolent intelligence intent upon spontaneous combustion. More resistant to such internal conflagrations is the stalwart microwave. Nevertheless, on the day that my freshman son returned from Harvard for summer vacation, I toasted almonds in the microwave – to a crisp, as it happened – and my son, exercising his newly-attained Ivy League powers of both observation and empathy said: "I see you've been finding new ways to burn things while I've been gone."

Youth! Always searching out the positive. In my son's eyes, I hadn't burned the almonds, I had expanded my repertoire of char. In a flash of inspiration not unlike the flash that sometimes emanates from beneath the broiler, I realized that burning the bread had become a beloved family tradition, the font of countless hilarious anecdotes. Does anyone ever remember the perfectly glazed pork tenderloin teriyaki, the exquisitely executed black bean dip with the guacamole garnish? No, the most memorable dishes appear to be those that perish in a puff of smoke after being run under the broiler.

It isn't the legacy I envisioned. But I raise my right hand, encased in an oven mitt, and silently vow to continue creating these precious culinary memories for my family. As long as the broiler lurks in the kitchen, I cannot fail.