



Noodle crimps pastry and (below) rolls it out. Despite allergies, our kitchen smells of happiness.

# HOLD THAT CALL, THE OVEN'S ON

My days are now measured in teaspoons not meetings. Here's why Noodle and I wouldn't have it any other way.

by LORRAINE ALLEN

**M**y 6-year-old daughter gallops – she's always galloping – into the kitchen waving her “magic” wand (a whisk). There is excitement in the air. She's about to bake all by herself for the first time. Will she make lemon, chocolate or pumpkin muffins? Maybe carrot cake – because she loves horses – with cream cheese frosting and gummy frogs on top. Why not? The ideas and choices seem endless, each more enticing than the last. She's pretty limited because of her food allergies, but only by ingredients. Not in taste, creativity or excitement.

Food has been a challenge and source of enormous worry in our family since her diagnosis in infancy of multiple severe food allergies, which include eggs, tree nuts, peanuts and shellfish. For the first two years we had to avoid other foods too as we struggled to figure out what was causing reactions. After her diagnosis, I left my 10-year career in non-profit marketing and communications to cook and care for her, and keep her safe. The decision has felt conflicting – easy to choose, yet hard to accept – ever since.

Now, here she is, her pockets filled with a colorful assortment of kid-sized spatulas.



Noodle, as we like to call her, is up on the step stool she got when she was just a toddler learning to use the soap dispenser. Over half a decade later I'm still cooking every meal, but the step stool makes my daughter almost my height.

Noodle decides to try a banana bread recipe. She grabs a measuring cup, dips it in the sugar jar and levels the top off with her small hand. She's already had years of experience helping me bake. Since she can't share “normal” treats, she measures pretty carefully for a first grader. She

dumps the sugar in a mixing bowl, licking her tiny index finger and stealing a taste with delight. I pretend not to notice.

“Horses love sugar. And look, only four more ingredients and I'm done!” she exclaims.

After her first scary reaction from a bite of an egg as a baby, we were given auto-injectors and a 12-page list of restrictions and scary warnings. One lick of the wrong item could be fatal. We worried about how would we feed and raise our child. Takeout, travel, and even staples like granola and macaroni were out. About 75 percent of packaged food is off-limits. Much of what we eat needs to be made from scratch and in a controlled environment, without the risk of food cross-contact.

I'm thinking of all these years spent painstakingly measuring quarter cups and teaspoons with her, holding the heavy milk jug while she struggled to learn to pour and prepare safe meals with me. On this day, I can't believe how fast Noodle is pulling this recipe together, all by herself. I'm relieved and astounded that despite her restrictions, or maybe because of them, she's managing to make her own food. Even if there's not all that much nutrition in chocolate chip banana bread, it's still a tricky thing to pull off without eggs, and it's as good a start as any to me.

Watching her bake, any doubt about leaving my career wafts out the window with the mouth-watering aroma of chocolate chips melting. I might be wearing a stained apron instead of a designer suit, and holding a banana instead of a phone, but that doesn't make me less of a provider or role model – just a different kind.

Noodle hops down from her stool and is suddenly small again, just above waist-high next to me. She flips on the oven light and presses her nose near the glass to peek inside. I kneel down next to her and hug her tight. There are days when I miss office life. But for now, I'm glad to be galloping beside her, between our refrigerator and stove, on imaginary ponies. When I stop long enough to weigh it all out carefully, this is what matters most. And life is still delicious, despite this difficult disease. To me, this kitchen smells of happiness and the sweetest kind of success.

*Lorraine Allen, based in the New York City area, is writing a book about balancing and managing the challenges of food allergies. Visit her at [Mixplayeat.com](http://Mixplayeat.com).*