

Holiday hunger busters. By Matt Preston



Here are seven easy meal solutions to make sure you cook less, but keep the kids happy these school holidays. Matt Preston reports.

Every few years since the 1870s the public record shows that Australia has been subject to plagues of locusts which have devoured everything in their path. The same thing happens at my house every school holidays. The danger is you end up spending so much time cooking for your kids and their mates you don't get any time to hang out with them. Here are seven meal ideas for the holidays that will ensure you can keep the kids fed and minimise your time at the stove.

1. Meatloaf & Mash

Meatloaf is a massive family favourite — perhaps because it goes so well with tomato sauce, or that it can go such a long way. You'll find a nice free recipe from MasterClass on the *MasterChef* website and another 47 on www.taste.com.au. Serve it with salad if it's warm, or mash if the weather is nasty. Leftover meatloaf is lovely, warmed or cold, in a sandwich for a simple, kid-friendly lunch on the run. Make extra mash so you can combine it with an egg and a can of salmon to make salmon patties for another meal.

2. Classic stew

Cook a big batch and it will provide a handy meal solution in the fridge or freezer for a number of occasions. To make it, just flour and brown some cheap secondary cut of beef (chuck, oyster blade). Fry loads of onions and chunks of celery until softened. Then deglaze the pan with a little vinegar and a couple of anchovies. Throw in a heap of root veg — potatoes, sweet potatoes, swedes, turnips, carrots — cut into decent thumb-sized chunks. Add a couple of tins of tomatoes and enough beef stock to cover. A little bundle of herbs is nice, too. I put in a couple of bay leaves. Pop on a lid and simmer at the gentlest heat for at least two hours; I'll let it go for three or more to let the flavours develop. Stir occasionally. Eat with buttered crusty bread. For the next meal add a little more stock and make some simple herb dumplings to drop into it. Cover and simmer. The dumplings will swell up and cook in the top of the stew.

3. Pot roast or corned beef

Whether you've poached a girello or silverside of beef in a spiced stock or slow cooked brisket with a little bacon and wine in a heavy and lidded pot, these two recipes will give you both a delicious, filling and sliceable night feed — with mash naturally, and maybe a parsley or mustard sauce with the former. They will still give you leftover meat to slam into a sanger with mustard pickles the next day.

4. Slow roast shoulder

Slow cooking meat is a marvellous way to put up a set and forget dinner — especially if you pick a cut of meat with a good fat content like lamb or pork shoulder or pork belly. Rub the scored skin with salt to dry it out a little, then massage in oil mixed with a little of your favourite flavours — perhaps five spice powder for a Chinese accent or a Mexican rub of blitzed bay leaf, oregano, coriander seed and allspice for the pork, or, for the lamb, smashed cumin and coriander seeds for a Middle Eastern flavour, or even something more exotic like cumin and Szechuan pepper which is very Turkic. Either way start in a very hot oven for half an hour, then turn everything right down until the meat is almost falling apart. Serve with culturally suitable accompaniments!

5. Roast chook [& a roast veg soup or salad]

Sure, with the stuffing and the veg, a roast chook can be a bit of a palaver to set up but if you are a small family, you'll also end up with meat for tomorrow's sandwiches plus a carcass and leftovers to make a soup. Otherwise just save time and buy a supermarket roast chook and take it from there, making it your own by roasting loads of veg, crispy roast potatoes, and making a clove and bay leaf-scented bread sauce. Put in an extra baking tray of pumpkin or carrots at the bottom of the oven while the roast is cooking and you are just a blender and some stock away from a nutritious soup, or even a roast veg salad dressed with hummus, yoghurt, herbs and pomegranate seeds. Add some freekah, brown rice or couscous for carby bulk and some toasted slivered almonds for crunch.

6. Braised beef mince

Beef mince works wonderfully with so many different flavourings, but why not make a huge pot of Bolognese for spaghetti or lasagne, and then customise with crushed coriander seed, fresh chilli, paprika, orange zest and fresh coriander to make a cheats chilli which can be spooned over baked potatoes, in tacos, or served with rice, corn chips or nachos — along with sour cream, grated cheese, a fresh tomato salsa and some avocado guacamole.

7. Chicken mince meatballs

Chicken mince is such a flexible meat, but I love to enlist the help of the kids to help shape loads of chicken meatballs which can then be cooked and added to a tomato sauce for pasta or to rack into a baguette, floated in a chicken broth, or skewered and grilled to serve with satay sauce.

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Matt Preston writes for the *taste* section, available every Tuesday in *The Courier Mail*, *The Daily Telegraph*, and *Herald Sun*, every Wednesday in *The Advertiser* and in Perth's *Sunday Times*.

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