Think of your kitchen as a relationship

By HEIDI WILLIAMS
THE OREGONIAN

Nisa Burns was on track in college to become a nurse. When she needed relief from her studies, she headed to the kitchen.

"Some people run; I cook," Burns says. "That was my getaway."

Then she got accepted into nursing school, and her life plan "totally went up in the air."

Sitting in orientation, Burns, in her own words, changed her mind and freaked out. She went home, pulled everything out of her fridge, and cooked. And cooked.

After a few hours, her boyfriend tiptoed into the kitchen and quietly told her, "Why don't you just do this? This is what you do."

And that is how Burns, a blogging and YouTube sensation and culinary graduate of the Art Institute of Virginia Beach, came to be promoting her book, "Kitchenability 101: The College Student's Guide to Easy, Healthy and Delicious Food." The goal behind Kitchenability is to give young people the confidence and accessibility to cook healthy food for themselves, whether they live in a dorm, an apartment or at home.

Burns hopes to reach an increasingly less-active age group that depends on fast food and 7-Elevens for meals, for whom the term "freshman 15" (we're talking pounds) was invented, whose food staples often consist of caffeine and pancakes during late-night study jams. She also offers an assist for parents who are eager to encourage better options for their severely budget-limited college students.

This week Burns comes to Portland for a book-signing and cooking demonstration for students.

"It's not about having a big, fancy kitchen," Burns says. "It's about developing a partnership with your kitchen, knowing what you can do and how you can play in it."

Burns has achieved more than your average college grad and exudes poise beyond her years. Yet her enthusiastic, fresh and uncensored manner is, well, exactly what you'd expect from a 21-year-old.

"I would die if I lost my Rachael Ray spoon," she says.

She sounds serious.

A huge "Portlandia" fan, Burns recounts with laughter when her boyfriend showed her his recently carved pumpkin — with a bird on it.

She says she insisted Portland be a stop on her tour because she's "a huge foodie."

Fancy cooking, however, is not Burns' thing. When choosing her final dishes on which to be tested at culinary school, Burns surprised her instructors by whipping up chicken tacos and "my type of mousse," a shortcut on the traditional mousse preparation she was taught.

"They didn't even know the difference," she said, a little sheepishly.

"I don't care if they know now, I have my degree. My whole point was, see? Practicality is everywhere. The everyday cook can be a winner."

This down-to-earth approach helps students who are easily intimidated or overwhelmed by the thought of creating homemade, healthy meals. Burns says creating kitchen skills is like building a relationship.

"You don't commit right away. You test the waters, you flirt. Because you're not 100 percent familiar with it, you're going to be a little timid."

Buy one pot and one spoon, she says. Try them out. Get familiar with them. Then take the next step in the relationship. "Add another item, maybe a sauté pan, a little more challenging," she says. Before you know it, you have a history together.

For students severely limited by space issues, Burns lists in her book the essential items needed to create a "kitchen" anywhere.

A kitchen isn't defined by a stove or a sink," she says. "Whatever your space is, it's the confidence that you feel cooking in it."

For parents who want to encourage Kitchenability in their kids, Burns says, "Involving them is the biggest thing." Rather than let your children or home-for-the-holiday college students sit around watching TV before dinner, get them in the kitchen with you. Make meals together a priority.

"Kitchenability 101" offers shopping plans, supply lists, budgeting tips and recipes for cooking in college spaces, as well as for teens still living at home.

For Burns it's the culmination of a childhood of memories.

"I grew up in a household where you're always exposed to homemade food," she says. "Did I go to culinary school? Absolutely. Did I prove myself? Absolutely. But you..."
go back to your roots."

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**Kitchenability 101**

Meet Nisa Burns on Saturday from noon to 1 p.m. at St. John's Booksellers, 8622 N. Lombard St. in Portland. Free and open to the public.

**TV:** "AM Northwest," 9 a.m. Thursday, KATU (2)

**Online**

See Nisa Burns' blog at kitchenability.com or check out her cooking videos on Kitchenability’s YouTube channel at youtube.com/user/Kitchenability

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**Nisa Burns**

Anastasia Meunier, 17, proudly displays dark-chocolate cookies — a recipe the whole family proclaimed a winner.

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