

## Food Fight: Lessons Learned from the Case of 'Vegetable Plagiarism'

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I must admit I've been fascinated following the fight between the "deceptive" and "sneaky" cookbook authors.

No doubt, many of you may be eagerly awaiting the outcome of the lawsuit Missy Chase Lapine filed against Jessica Seinfeld, author of the best-selling book *Deceptively Delicious*. Lapine alleges that Seinfeld "brazenly plagiarized" her book *The Sneaky Chef*, published six months earlier than Seinfeld's.

Can the concept of grinding up and hiding vegetables in food be copyrighted? Are the "pureed" recipes in the book too similar? Did Jessica's publisher truly steal the idea? Ms. Chase claims that Seinfeld's publisher had access to her proposal long before Ms. Seinfeld sent in her proposal. The publisher rejected Chase's and accepted Seinfeld's.

This controversy stirs up so many intriguing issues - originality of recipes, ethics of publishers and agents and the power of celebrity. But the one I've been most concerned about is the actual content of the books. Is the advice being dispensed really good for kids?

As a registered dietitian and mother of twins, the concept of camouflaging vegetables just hit me wrong. Deception at the dinner table was also a bit disturbing to me.

But I wanted to see what other dietitians thought about the books. Maybe I was being too harsh or perhaps a bit biased since my preschoolers love vegetables. I've never had to resort to "stealth" veggies.

Some of the dietitians I spoke with applauded the concept - encouraging parents to do whatever it takes. Others were grateful that the buzz over the books had at least drawn attention to children's diets - which undoubtedly need improving.

But the majority of dietitians I contacted thought the sneaky approach sends several wrong messages.

### Tricks are for kids?

Ellyn Satter, a childhood feeding expert and author of *Your Child's Weight: Helping Without Harming*, believes this type of trickery erodes trust. "Sooner or later children catch on that they're being tricked," she said. "When this happens, they feel hurt and angry and are set back in their ability to learn and grow." Satter said the goal of parents should not be to get certain foods into children, but to trust them to push themselves along in learning to enjoy those foods for a lifetime.

Mary Abbott Hess, a Chicago dietitian and culinary consultant, thought the books validated "deception" and reinforced the damaging notion that vegetables are so bad they have to be hidden.

Sharon Salomon, a dietitian and food writer in Phoenix, agreed. Early childhood is a critical time of palate development, she said. When vegetables are hidden, children miss out on the opportunity to acquire a taste for these important foods. "Kids should know what the naked vegetable looks and tastes like or they'll never learn to eat it," she said.

Sanna Delmonico, Napa-based dietitian and founder of Tiny Tummys, said her objection to the sneaky approach goes beyond the deceit. She thinks the time-consuming and complicated recipes in the books make extra work for already busy parents. "Getting children to eat vegetables just isn't that difficult, she said. "Vegetables are delicious and beautiful - we should be highlighting them, not hiding them."

### Undercover veggies

Boston dietitians Liz Weiss and Janice Bissex, co-authors of *The Moms' Guide to Meal Makeovers*, were

worried the books will encourage parents to throw in the towel and stop offering "real" vegetables to kids. "These recipes require a huge amount of time and effort," said Weiss. "I'd rather parents channel their energy into making vegetables more appealing to kids than to give up too quickly."

Weiss and Bissex tested some of the recipes in *Deceptively Delicious* to see if they worked and, more importantly, to see how nutritious they really were. The recipes in the book did not include nutritional analysis, which they thought was a "red flag."

Once they got cooking they found that several of the recipes provided a measly amount of vegetables – some only about 1 tablespoon per serving.

"The recipes seemed to focus mainly on sneaking in small amounts of vegetables and in many cases missed the boat on overall good nutrition," said Bissex.

For example, a recipe for chocolate pudding included pureed avocado but surprisingly no milk, so it contained no bone-building calcium. It was also high in sugar (10 teaspoons per 1/2-cup serving) and contained, oddly, uncooked cornstarch that gave it a gritty texture, she said.

When they sampled the dishes, they thought many didn't even taste good.

"The great irony is that these foods that are attempting to mask the taste of vegetables didn't taste good," said Weiss.

Weiss and Bissex agree with the concept of boosting the nutrient density of the foods kids eat (such as adding grated carrots to meat balls or finely diced bell peppers to pasta sauce), but disagree with the "deceptive" approach.

### **Pressure can backfire**

Jessica Seinfeld has readily admitted in media interviews that she resorted to these stealth tactics with her children because she grew tired of "bribing them, begging them, whining at them" to eat their vegetables. But studies show that pressure like this doesn't work. When you bribe or force children to eat certain foods, they like those foods less.

So what can we learn from this cookbook controversy? For me, I'm even more convinced that there are better ways to get kids to eat their veggies.

"We should be making vegetables taste good with seasonings and sauces and dips, and not apologizing for them," said Delmonico. "If we do that, children will learn to eat vegetables the same way they learn to eat other foods: by seeing parents eat it, looking, smelling, slowly tasting and learning to enjoy."

Getting kids involved in selecting and preparing vegetables can make them more appealing. Trips to farmers markets and even growing your own vegetables can help too.

We need to remember that we're helping to establish food preferences that can last a lifetime so it's worth the effort. There are no quick fixes.

"Let's face it, moms may buy the book and cook and puree for a few weeks, but I don't think this is going to change the way America eats," Salomon said. "It's a gimmick and gimmicks don't usually stick around for long."

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