



Liz Weiss '82, who is herself a working mother, addresses the problem of childhood obesity by offering tasty alternatives to the fast food drive-thru.

Search past
QUAD ANGLES:

[Previous](#) | [Next](#)

Search

[Fall 2004](#)

Features

[McElroy Named
Director of
Athletics](#)

[The Path to
Recovery](#)

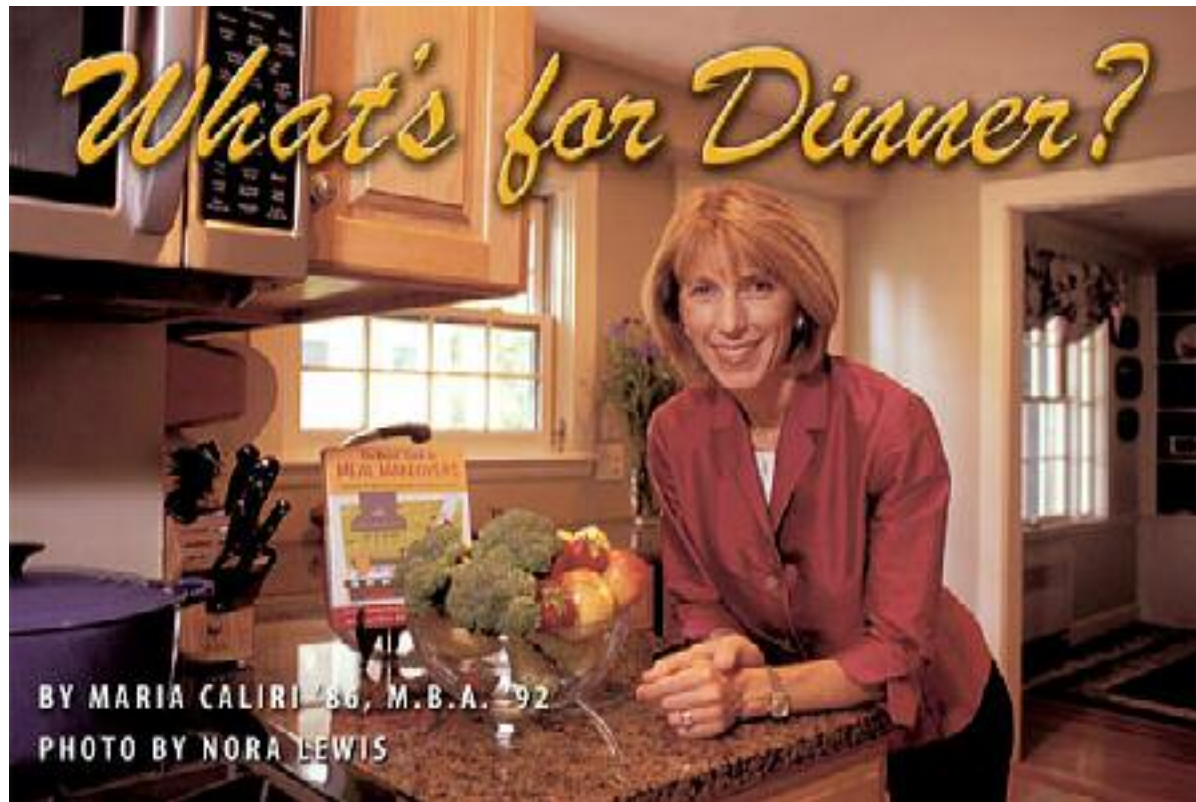
[An Exceptional
Life](#)

What's for
Dinner?

UpFront

[News&Views](#)

[Focus on the](#)



"I'm hungry! When's dinner!?" "Broccoli!? Hate it!" "Can we go to McDonald's?" "Please, plee-ee-ze buy the marshmallow cereal!"

[Colleges](#)

[Arts&Culture](#)

[PressBox](#)

[ClassActs](#)

[Read Classnotes
Online](#)

[Class Acts
Profiles](#)

[Departments](#)

[Alumni Chapters](#)

[Profile in Giving](#)

[Homecoming
Weekend 2004](#)

[Family Camp
2004](#)

[QUAD ANGLES
Masthead](#)

[Previous Issues](#)

Sound familiar? Probably—especially if you have children and typically shop and cook for your family. Across America, frazzled parents —usually moms, who are still primarily responsible for cooking—are barraged with these protests and pleas. Given moms’ harried schedules that often include full-time jobs, shopping, cooking, and shuttling to and from soccer games, it’s not surprising that fast-food restaurants offer an appealing solution. Even well-intentioned mothers—aware that a Burger King Original Double Whopper with Cheese contains 1,150 calories—relent under pressure and try to justify the decision. After all, there is calcium in cheese, isn’t there?

Let your children taste what you are making and tell you what the recipe does or doesn’t need. If they say the food tastes good, they are more likely to eat it at the table.” —Liz Weiss ’80

Stretched in so many directions, moms often feel defeated when trying to plan and prepare healthy meals. Consequently, children are snacking on cookies and chips, while adults’ eating habits are not much better. Relying on the quick fix at mealtimes is beginning to take its toll. Sixty-one percent of U.S. adults are considered obese or overweight, and 27 percent of children and teens (ages 6 to 19) are overweight.

“Childhood obesity is at an all-time high,” says Liz Weiss ’82, a registered dietitian who holds a B.S. in Nutrition and Dietetics from URI and a Master’s in Nutrition and Mass Communications from Boston University. An award-winning television journalist who has covered health and nutrition for PBS and CNN and has written and hosted nutrition education videos, Weiss adds, “obesity crosses all socioeconomic classes. No one is immune.”

Weiss, who is herself a working mother, has addressed the problem by offering feasible alternatives to the fast food drive-thru. She teamed with fellow dietitian Janice Newell Bissex, M.S., R.D., to create *The Moms’ Guide to Meal Makeovers* (Broadway Books, 2004), a book designed to take the “yuck factor” out of spinach and to help families understand that healthy and delicious meals can be prepared in about the same amount of time it takes to grab take-out food.

“My sons, 9-year-old Josh and 5-year-old Simon, were the driving force behind the book. As a mom and a dietitian concerned about the growing rate of obesity and the nutritionally lackluster diets many families consume daily, I was motivated to write this book.”

To help families begin a healthier eating journey, Weiss and Bissex provide a five-step meal makeover plan. Initial steps include making small changes and marketing good nutrition to family members. Like many rewarding endeavors, learning to eat well takes time and patience. “I continually tell moms that it’s easy to become a Meal Makeover Mom. All it takes are little changes, like adding an extra serving of fruit to the

family diet each day or cutting back on soft drinks from once a day to once a week. All those changes are something to be proud of because they really can make a difference.”

While adding an extra fruit serving is as simple as tossing berries on cereal, marketing healthy eating habits is more challenging. Marketers bombard children with advertisements for unhealthy foods, and they know when children are watching television: nine out of ten food ads on Saturday morning TV are for sugary cereals, candy, salty snacks, fatty fast food, and other junk food.

One way to combat Madison Avenue’s finest creative minds is to involve children in the cooking process. “Let your children taste what you are making and tell you what the recipe does or doesn’t need. If they say the food tastes good, they are more likely to eat it at the table.”

The makeover plan also involves establishing food rules, such as cooking one meal for everyone in the family instead of several different ones to accommodate finicky eaters. Another rule: Mom (or Dad) is the executive chef, not the short-order cook. The plan includes tips for streamlining time spent in the kitchen and finally, it stresses eating together as a family. Research shows that children who eat with their families consume more fruits and vegetables and fewer fried foods and frozen dinners.

Yet with today’s complex family schedules, is it realistic to expect a family to sit down and share a meal? Weiss says that families may have to “go out of the box” to eat together, but it is possible. “If the family can’t come together to share a meal, bring a meal to the family. It’s OK to order pizza and bring it to the ballpark. Just remember to pack the fruit too. Or, eat separately and come together for a dessert of chocolate-dipped strawberries later in the evening.”

Weiss concedes there are times when conflicting schedules are not conducive to family meals and offers a solution that supports proper nutrition. “If Dad can’t be home until eight, Mom can still make the family meal at five and eat with the children. As long as one parent is sitting with the kids, it can work. Serve Dad leftovers from the same meal at eight and join him then. That’s your time to relax with a glass of wine.”

Beyond the five-step plan, Weiss and Bissex created 120 “makeover” recipes for their book, all of which were tested on their families and friends. The recipes are wholesome versions of kid and family favorites such as macaroni and cheese and fish sticks. Gone are the whole milk and butter found in most macaroni and cheese recipes and the excess trans fats (cholesterol-raising fats) common in many frozen fish stick products. Weiss and Bissex replace them with low fat milk for the pasta dish and canola oil and a corn flake breading for the seafood.

Complementing their book is a Web site, www.mealmakeovermoms.com, where visitors can join their free Moms' Club. Membership benefits include a bimonthly newsletter and access to a customized supermarket shopping list and discussion board.

In addition to the book and Web site, Weiss and Bissex write a monthly column for *Nick Jr.* magazine that features healthy family recipes. As a contributing editor for *Health* magazine, Weiss also appears twice monthly on *CNN Headline News* to discuss topics from the magazine.

“Writing *The Moms' Guide to Meal Makeovers* was a labor of love,” says Weiss. “It took three years from proposal to publication—a ton of work but well worth it! In addition to the book, I have my own fun and interactive Web site now that allows me to help people. It's a pretty cool thing.”

Maria Caliri is communications manager for Citizens Bank.

[Previous](#) | [Top](#) | [Next](#)



© URI Alumni Association. All rights reserved. Produced by the URI Publications and Alumni Relations Offices, Division of University Advancement. Last modified Thu, Sep 2, 2004. University of Rhode Island Alumni Association, 12 Davis Hall, 10 Lippitt Road, Kingston, RI 02881. Phone: 401-874-4520 | Fax: 401-874-5621 | [Email: vwgriffin@advance.uri.edu](mailto:vwgriffin@advance.uri.edu)