

Chapter 1: The Supper You Meant to Make

The chop came out of the pan looking exactly right. Browned edges, a little crust, the smell that fills a kitchen and makes you glad you bothered. You plated it with potatoes, poured a glass of something, sat down at a table you set properly. Then you cut into it and the middle was grey and dry, and the potatoes had gone to paste at the edges, and you ate it anyway because you weren't going to waste it.

That is the supper this book is about. Not the disaster. The disappointment.

Disasters are easy to forgive. Burnt is burnt, you laugh, you make toast. What wears a cook down is the meal that was nearly right. You did the shopping. You stood up. You cooked. And the plate came back at you slightly wrong, again, in the same way it was wrong last month.

The plate that disappoints after real effort

Here is the thing nobody says out loud. The effort and the result stopped matching some time ago, and you can't see where.

A typical case, and I'd guess it's close to yours: she buys two pork chops on Tuesday, thin ones, because the thick ones come in packs of four and she's cooking for herself. She takes them straight from the fridge to a pan that's been warming a couple of minutes. She salts them once they're in. She turns them three or four times to check. She cuts into one on the board to see if it's done. By the time it reaches the plate, it has given up most of its juice to the board and the rest to the pan. Nothing in that sequence is careless. Every single step of it is a mistake.

I want you to notice something about that list. Not one of those errors is a recipe error. She didn't use the wrong herb. She didn't mismeasure. She followed no recipe at all, which is how most of us cook after forty years, and that was never the problem either.

The problem sits in the handling. In the temperature of the meat when it met the pan. In the minute the salt went on. In the three extra turns. In the cut that let the juice out before the meat had settled.

The Handling Gap. The distance between the food you bought and the food you served is not made of recipes. It is made of a dozen small physical decisions you make without thinking, and those decisions are where everything is won or lost.

I give it a name because you'll meet it again in every chapter. When a supper disappoints, the question is never "what recipe should I have used?" It is "what did my hands do to it?"

Why it feels worse cooking for one or two

There's a reason this stings more now than it did when you were feeding five people at half past six.

When you cook for a household, a poor chop disappears into the noise. There are three vegetables, a gravy, someone talking over it, a second helping for whoever wants one. Nobody is looking at your plate. You aren't looking at it either, because you're already thinking about the next thing.

Cook for one, and the plate is the whole event. There is nothing to hide behind. You sat down on purpose, at a set table, with the intention of eating well. When it isn't good, you have a quiet ten minutes to think about that.

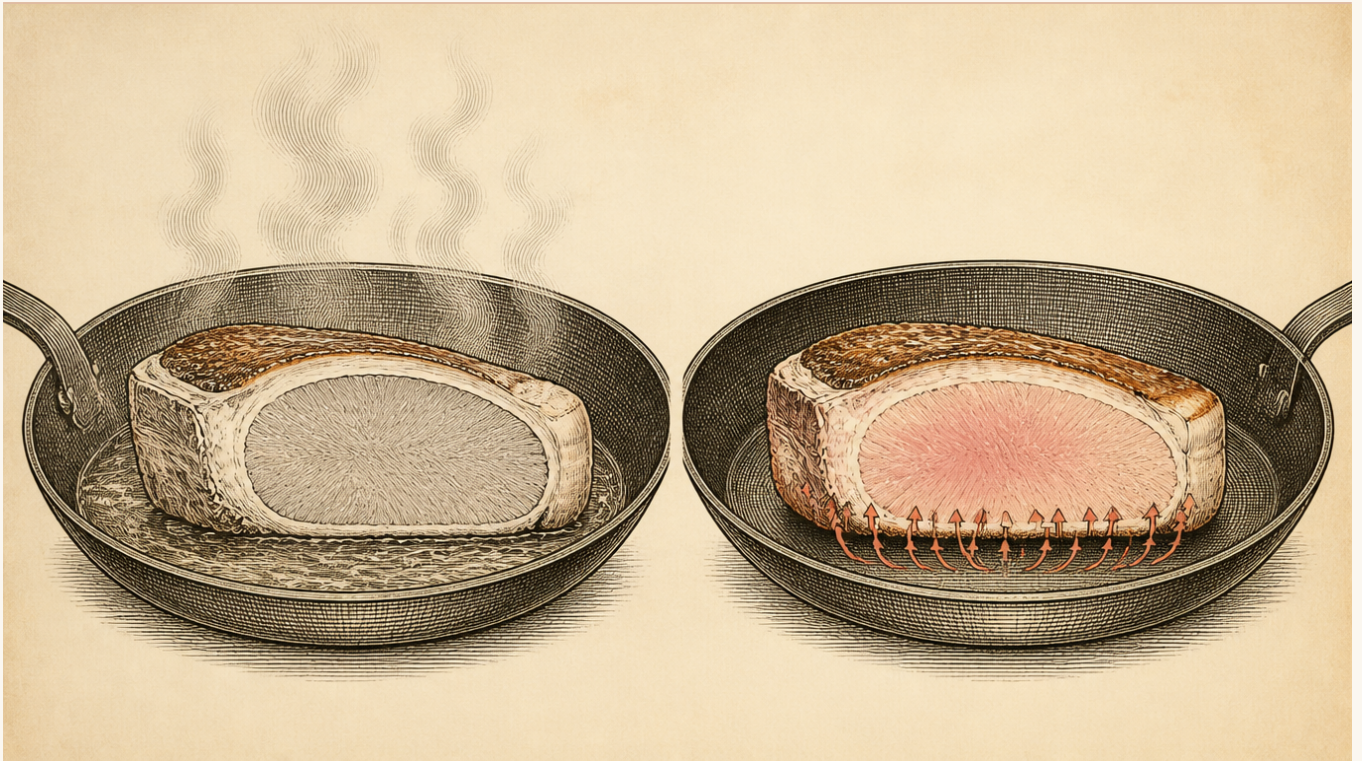
Then there's the money. Two chops cost what they cost. If you ruin them, you have ruined the whole meal, not a portion of it. In a big house, waste was absorbed. Alone, waste is total. And the shopping bill keeps climbing, which makes every failed pan feel like a small theft.

And there is a third thing, the one people don't like to say. It feels like a loss of ability. You grew up on plain food made from scratch. You watched it made. You made it yourself for decades. If pork chops have become difficult, the worry underneath isn't about pork chops.

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I'll tell you plainly: the ability didn't go anywhere.
What went is the repetition. You used to cook the
same handful of things four hundred times a year.
Hands learn from volume. Cook twice a week for
one and the same hands get slower at
remembering, not worse at doing.

That distinction matters enormously, and it's the reason I think most of this is
fixable in about a fortnight.



What this book will and will not ask of you

Before we go further, let me clear some ground, because plenty of cooking advice is sold the way miracle products are sold.

I spend a good deal of my life in the world of home remedies, and gardening is where I see this most clearly. Epsom salt is the great example. It is one of the most shared garden tips going, and university extension services say plainly there's no research support for the claims that it increases yields or sweetens tomatoes (NDSU Agriculture and Extension). It can't fix blossom-end rot, because it contains no calcium at all and that disorder is a calcium problem (NDSU Agriculture and Extension). Extension offices were still writing corrective articles about it in 2026³. The myth outlives the correction, every time.

Linda Chalker-Scott, the extension urban horticulturist at Washington State University, puts it about as short as it can be put:

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"There really aren't any miracle products — including Epsom salts." (joegardener podcast, Common Garden Myths)

The kitchen has exactly the same trade. Searing "seals in the juices." A pinch of something makes meat tender. A gadget fixes the problem. Master gardener groups publish myth lists year after year because volunteers field the same questions every season (1000 Islands Master Gardeners, 2021). Cooks pass round the same tired tricks for the same reason. Nobody ever tests them at home.

So here is my side of the bargain.

This book will not ask you to buy things. No thermometer, no gadget, no sous-vide anything, no special salt from a shop you'd have to drive to. If you own a heavy frying pan, a saucepan, a roasting tin and one knife you can sharpen, you are equipped.

It will not give you recipes to follow. There are seven ordinary suppers in Chapter 25, and they exist so you can practise, not so you can perform. The rest of the book is method: what heat does, what salt does, what water does, what waiting does.

It will not ask you to cook more than you want to. Cooking properly for one person is the whole point, not a consolation prize.

Here is what it will ask.

- ✓ **Change one thing at a time.** If you alter four habits at once and supper improves, you've learned nothing you can repeat.
- ✓ **Write one line a night.** What you cooked, what heat, how long, what came out. Six words is enough. This is the single habit that moves people fastest.
- ✓ **Taste while you cook,** not at the table. There's a spoon by the stove from now on.
- ✓ **Give it a fortnight.** Two weeks of ordinary suppers, cooked with attention, will teach your hands more than a year of reading.

Do this tonight, before you read on. Think back to the last supper you made that disappointed you. Not a disaster, a disappointment. Write down three things: what it was, what you did to it, and precisely how it was wrong on the plate. Dry? Watery? Grey? Bland even though you salted it? Keep that piece of paper. You will use it in the next chapter, and you may be surprised how quickly it explains itself.

Because I'll tell you now what fifty years of ruined suppers have taught me. Almost every plate that disappoints has gone wrong in one of four ways, and they are the same four ways every time. The trouble is that each one wears the mask of the others, so a salt problem looks like a dryness problem, and a dryness problem looks like a heat problem, and you end up fixing the wrong thing.

So which four are they, and how do you tell yours apart?