

The Saucerer

Paul Guest shares his success of expanding the diet of his autistic son through the magic of sauce!

Now I'm not a big fan of tomato sauce in the way it is produced today. 'They' say that 30% more sugar has been added over the years to keep us buying it. Add preservatives, salt and the natural acidity of tomatoes and it is perhaps not the perfect ingredient in a balanced diet for anyone, let alone a little Autistic boy. Having said that, I married into an Italian family and so the word 'staple' comes to mind. For what is pasta without sauce? Well, I don't want to even think about it. I'd hand my wife back and ask for a refund, frankly. "*Not authentic!*", I'd say and send her back with the receipt. Alas, once a 'saucy minx' herself, all that remains is the 'minx'. The legacy perhaps of having 3 kids in less than 3 years, all on the spectrum. So much for sauce!

And so it was that I found myself in a holiday house at Christmas with my children, providing well-earned respite to my wife by taking on the task of minding the troops for a week, armed with little more than a bottle of tomato sauce and a tired, dusted-off-again bravado that has time and again been put into its place by an Autistic child who is well trained in deciding the daily agenda of everyone in the family, often at a moment's notice, on a whim.

I faced this Christmas break with the quiet confidence of a man who was a provider to his flock; a river to his people, a man who would not be beaten. For I ask not 'what my family can do for me' but what 'I can do for my family'. Yes, after this holiday, streets would be named after me; movies would be made and perhaps a statue would be erected in my honor. Man will conquer. Mountains will be climbed. Perhaps we'll also find out along the way about how this theory of testosterone and 'extreme male brain' ever got a gig in possible Autism causation....

You see, my self-adopted quest for the week was to completely turn around my severely autistic son's diet. Now 6 years old, Lachlan's diet consists almost entirely of 'crunch'. Armed with the primal gag reflex of a baby, Lachlan has thrived on a sensory diet ~ one that enables him to 'feel' what he eats. Cruskets, rice cakes, corn flakes (no milk); that sort of thing. No variety; day-in, day-out; the same thing. Getting a child like Lachlan to change his diet has been an 'Everest' in our house, right up there with getting him out of nappies and getting him talking, which he now does.

Now this mountainous attempt has seen only dismal failures previously. Each attempt only tightening his resolve to stay put. And so our routine typically involves juicing fresh vegetables and fruit twice a day and supplementing this with nutritional boosters in an attempt to piece together the sensory interpretation of a more traditional, balanced diet for a growing child.

Lachlan's toileting has been another matter and given that a good 'poo' generally means a 'happy boy', and a 'happy boy' generally means a 'happy house', then the '*Quest For The Perfect Poo*' remains near the top of our lifetime quests. For now, we continue to deal with 6 to 8 dirty undies each day and the occasional *motherload* to break the cycle. At least my life has purpose, huh?

So it was with a disbelieving laugh and a disparaging scorn that my wife of many titles (*Keeper Of The Money, She Who Must Be Obeyed, Queen Of All Things Except Autism*) smugly informed me (*Provider Of The Money, Washer Of The Dishes and Protector Of The Remote*) that my short-lived bubble was primed for a 'good burstin' and promptly left me with a 'good luck honey; let me know how you go' before she retired into a week of long sleep-ins, shopping, cafes, book-reading and all-round, well-earned ignorant bliss.

Back to the sauce, Here I was. Day 1. All or nothing.

The car had been loaded up with all the usual culprits – cereal, cruskets and rice cakes along with a small selection of his usual spreads. I had been thinking about various strategies all the way down to the beach. The beauty of a change of scenery is the opportunity that that presents to introduce change to daily routine. A change of routine at home is simply unacceptable to Lachlan. In his overly-anxious world, the more that he can control the order of things; the easier it will be for him to manage his world.

But a holiday house is a ‘new’ place with an opportunity to create ‘new rules’. So the old food went into the laundry whilst he was exploring the respite house where we spend our week and I promptly took Lachlan to the fridge and pantry and pointed out that we need to go to the supermarket.

Now I kept well clear of the usual hunting grounds in this supermarket that would lead to ‘traditional purchases’. Pointing out that ‘this supermarket’ didn’t have any cruskets and that they were ‘all gone’. I had Lachlan help me select some sausages, chicken and mincemeat from the butcher and carrots, potatoes, eggs, watermelon, apples and strawberries. As I am pretty well practiced, I had Lachlan repeat each item selected and ‘take ownership’ by completing each of my sentences (e.g. “It’s time to buy some.....sausages”)

‘We can have some sausages and sauce’ (ah, the sauce!), I said to him casually, trying not to make a big deal of it.

Fortunately, things went well and this complete change of routine (including everybody sitting at the table to eat at once), managed to do the trick. And so, my little family sat down for dinner to ‘sausages and sauce’. I sat there like an expectant father trying to keep it all in but also well aware that *Mt Vesuvius* lay in waiting and the blissful little family in Pompeii might all be over-powered by an almighty *pyro-clastic autism flow™* at any moment.

Admittedly, being on holidays and not arriving home from work after the children’s dinner time afforded me the time to sit and spoon (fork) feed Lachlan for every mouthful. This was not a time to win the battle of him using cutlery to feed himself. Experience has taught me about Lachlan’s gag reflex and so I reckon that I cut up this first little sausage into perhaps as many as 120 pieces; a remarkable feat for a left-hander. These ‘nano-sausages’ proved to be just the trick and Lachlan was quick to point out if the piece that I was offering on his fork was ‘too big’. ‘Little one’ was the phrase he used over and over as I tried to ‘up the ante’. I would also be reminded several times that I was being too miserly with the sauce, which was dunked with each piece.

But, whilst the exercise took some 45 minutes, Lachlan.....ate.....the.....sausage!

Well I can tell you that we had sausage and sauce for breakfast and lunch the next day too before I moved onto chicken and sauce, hamburger and sauce, each now with raw carrot sticks. By the time the week was out it was mashed potato and pumpkin, (rice and corn) pasta and Bolognese sauce and all sorts of fruit. I even managed to create an alternative to tomato sauce; a ‘yellow sauce’ in the form of a runny egg. I am working on a green one now using avocado and hommus.

The smaller pieces were obviously an important factor in giving Lachlan the confidence that he actually could eat this food and that, combined with the opportunity of his temporarily-changed environment proved to be the catalyst of change. It is hard ‘even for me’ to wallow in self-glory when every day on our holiday was still met with typical tantrums and daily ‘moments of insanity’, a cornerstone of the world in which our family lives but we have achieved another important step for our little boy and the result is that whilst his diet is far from



perfect he now dirties only half his undies and we don't have to think hard and stress over his daily diet as much as we used to.

And so, holiday over, the opportunity of lauding such achievement lay at my feet and I can tell you that the trip back home was indeed as good a time as I have had in 50-odd kilometres of bumper-to-bumper traffic. For this was a victory. (Insert inspirational music) A victory for fatherhood and fathers in general. A victory for mankind ~ for man but mostly, for one little man. But it was not glory that I wanted. Glory comes in the knowledge that the game was played to the best of one's ability and won; not in the smuttiness associated with rubbing victory in the face of non-believers, of those that scoffed prior to the event. For I am better than that.

No, I just wrote a little article and had it published. Victories are few and far between in our house. In a description that many readers will relate to, I often feel that our family is simply, a prisoner of Autism in that we all find it a battle to create our own daily, annual and life agendas in the face of a condition that draws you into its anxiety; its own agenda.

So I often remind myself that Autism is like golf.

'You play one good shot and you pretty much think you have the game conquered. Then it brings you to your knees.' The thing is though, that if you play it every day and keep practising then eventually you lower your handicap and become a more consistent player.

Paul Guest
Humble Father.

PS. Lachlan now feeds himself and no longer has the gag reflex.