

Forget the Pots and Pans

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A Martha Stewart obsession leads to delicious meals and next-to-no cleanup. The answer? Parchment.

By **Brette Sember** | Monday, 28 November 2011 | 00:27

Martha Stewart changed my life. And not in the ways you would expect. I have a love/hate relationship with her as do many women -- we are drawn to the perfect world she creates, while simultaneously resenting her for making us feel inadequate. When I was facing down 40 (and all that number stood for), I gave in to the temptation to remake my life in Martha's image. I unofficially apprenticed myself to the queen of "good things" for one year. I cooked her recipes, made her crafts, organized and decorated my house according to her aesthetics and bought her products and those she recommended. I even (gasp) attempted to garden. Every single day for an entire year I blogged about my journey at [MarthaAndMe.net](#).



Handing my life over to Martha was like going to cooking school, opening a shop on Etsy, hiring a professional organizer and taking a class in domestic management. In short, it was mentally and physically exhausting. Martha does nothing halfway. What I will remember most about cooking with Martha are the dishes. Mountains of them. I don't believe Martha cooks much of anything herself, the woman has more staff than you have relatives. She's way past dishpan hands, and nobody at MSLO seems to give a second thought to the Everest of dishes their recipes produce. At the end of a Martha meal, my kitchen was a disaster, with teetering towers of dirty bowls (sometimes I used every single one I owned), sticky pots, baking sheets and caked-on pans amid a jumble of spatulas, spoons, knives and rubber scrapers. I dreaded it.

Facing that pile every night became more than I could bear. Cooking Martha made me tired. I still wanted to eat good food, though. Some months after completing my year of Martha, a handful of parchment paper packet recipes was included in one of her magazines. Aha! The perfect antidote to Martha madness -- cooking without any pots at all! I had made a dish "en papillotte" years ago; Martha reminded me of the beauty of parchment. I started a new blog, [NoPotCooking](#) to share my adventures.

Just about anything can be cooked in parchment. Pasta? Check. Dessert? Yes. A clambake? Oh, yes. Even gnocchi (how I hate scrubbing that sticky gnocchi pot). And meat, fish, veggies, sandwiches, wraps, potatoes and breakfasts. Baked brie, chocolate bread pudding, chorizo with polenta and broccolini, breakfast sandwiches, lemon chicken, steak in the grass -- you name it, I've made it in parchment.

I'm a convert. Parchment paper is life-changing. With my method, at most a small cutting board, small bowl, a spoon or knife are waiting in the sink when I'm done. Cleanup time minimized! What a relief!

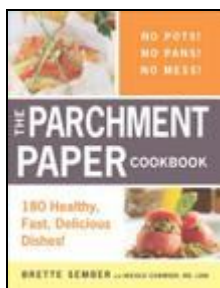
The process is simple: Cut a piece of parchment, place it on a baking sheet (which does not get dirty) and layer the food right on the paper. Fold (there are [simple instructions](#) on my blog) into packets and bake in an oven or toaster oven -- perfect for people with small kitchens. Individual packets give each diner a perfect portion and arrive like a lovely present -- a huge hit with kids. Packets can also be served family style.

If I sound like a zealot, it's because I am one. I love parchment paper. I buy it in rolls (instead of precut sheets) so I can cut it to the required size. Beware false substitutes. Parchment bags don't make the same impressive presentation that a packet can, and Martha Wrap, a Martha Stewart product that features parchment on one side and foil on the other, has limitations. It's the wrong dimension for packets, and the thickness makes it hard to fold.

Aside from the no-mess and sheer cuteness of packets, meals cooked in parchment are moist, tender and full of flavor. Because the food -- and its nutrients -- are sealed in, little or no fat is needed. Parchment can be recycled and composted and minimizes the water required for cleanup and the energy for cooking (since all meal components are cooked in one oven), making it an environmentally-friendly alternative to boot. No matter how you fold it, parchment is a cook's best friend.

This week's [Zester Daily soapbox](#) contributor, former attorney [Brette Sember](#), is the author of 35 books including "[The Parchment Paper Cookbook](#)" and two upcoming titles: "[The Organized Kitchen](#)" and "[The Muffin Tin Cookbook](#)" (Adams Media). She also blogs about [parchment paper cooking](#) and [living and cooking the Martha](#) (Stewart) way. Sember is a member of the International Association of Culinary Professionals and lives in Buffalo, N.Y., with her husband, two children and two golden retrievers. You can follow her on Twitter [@brettesember](#).

Photo: Brette Sember and her dogs, Percy and Merlin. Credit: Brette Sember



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