

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Mary Jo Rulnick

412.862.9763 or [mjrwrites@aol.com](mailto:mjrwrites@aol.com)

## Media Interview Q&A

### ***Reclaiming the Family Dinner Meal***

Mary Jo Rulnick, author of *The Frantic Woman's Guide to Feeding Family and Friends* (Grand Central, formerly Warner Books), offers the following questions and answers for media.

#### **1. Why do some women view shopping as a dreaded chore?**

In 1960, supermarkets carried about 6,000 products. Today's supermarkets carry more than 30,000 products. That's an abundance of choices for a busy woman to make who doesn't have a week's worth of menus and grocery list planned. Compare this to a kid in the candy store with too many choices, a limited amount of money and time to make a decision. It's overwhelming.

#### **2. Is it really a big deal that 50 percent of the American food budget is spent on meals away from home? (Resource: U.S. Census Bureau)**

Yes, there are several studies that link the breakdown of the family dinner hour to childhood obesity, especially among teenagers. Children tend to eat better, more fruits and veggies, when they eat at home. The declining tradition of the American dinner meal can be attributed to the lack of table manners and respect for others. Parents can reinforce these lifelong skills through their own actions every night at the dining room table.

#### **3. Should eating out be considered an everyday ritual?**

At one time, eating out was a treat for a special occasion like a birthday or anniversary or a reward for a job well done. Today, we eat out more often than not and it isn't considered a treat anymore. And it should be. Look at it this way, would you spend \$50 on an outfit you would wear once and never put it on again. You might for a very special occasion. However, you wouldn't buy three or four outfits each week to wear once and give away. You can compare eating out to disposable clothes.

#### **4. How do you fit a family meal in when dad or mom works late?**

This is a common dilemma for a lot of families. If dad or mom gets home later than eight, it is hard to feed the children at that time because they'll be famished. And you'll probably have more than one little Oscar the Grouch. Try feeding the kids earlier around six or so. Then, when the other parent gets home from work, the kids can have a light dessert, sliced fruit or a special smoothie to eat or drink while the late arrival has his or her dinner. The kids can share their day with the working late parent and still keep the family bond strong.

#### **5. How can I encourage the kids to help set the table?**

Make it fun. Have the kids customize their own placemats with poster board and clear adhesive paper (like Contact). For littler ones, guide them in drawing a place setting (complete with plate, silverware, napkin and glass) on poster board. Make one for mom and dad, too. This will teach and remind them the proper place setting without asking you how to do it. You little ones can set their own place settings on their very own placemat.

#### **6. How can I persuade the kids to help with meal preparation?**

Make it easy, fun and coordinate the tasks to the age of the child. Little ones can get fruits and veggies from the refrigerator and wash them. Invest in a step or bar stool so the kids can reach the sink and countertop. Grade school kids can pull canned and packaged goods from the pantry, open cans with a can opener and put empties in the trash or recycling bin. They can learn to use a multi slicer to slice vegetables. A pair of garden gloves will keep their little fingers safe. Teach kids how to use a mini chopper for any chopped fruits and veggies you might need. Older kids can prepare and cook a meal once a week. Of course, allow them to make their favorites. My daughter, then a young teen, became very adept at making Chicken Teriyaki. I completely ignored the fact that we had it once a week for months until she grew sick of it. I was happy it was one meal I didn't have to cook.

#### **7. My kids don't want to eat at home?**

Sometimes this happens when you make the same thing over and over again. This happened in our house a number of times. Once I found a meal the kids liked, I would continuously make it until they grew tired of it. (Hmm. And I wonder where my daughter had gotten that idea.) Offer a variety of meals in a two-week menu. Other times, it could be because they want a favorite meal. Include a restaurant favorite of theirs, even if it is pizza, nachos or hot dogs.

#### **8. My family won't eat leftovers?**

Leftovers need to be disguised as a complete new meal. Use the entrée as the basis for something different. Chicken strips can turn into chicken Caesar's salad, feta and chicken wrap or chicken casserole. Roast can be the foundation for roast beef sandwiches with gravy, beef tips with noodles and quesadillas.

#### **9. What can a frantic cook do to make dinner time preparation less hectic?**

Think ahead to tomorrow's meal. As the cook's cleaning up dinner dishes, pull out the frozen package for tomorrow's meal. Look over the recipe and take out the pantry ingredients and place them on the countertop for the next day. Maybe some of the preparation work can be completed that night or before rushing off to work in the morning. There will be times that the cook will be running out the door immediately after dinner and dishes are not on her mind. However, before bedtime, make sure anything that's frozen is taken out to be thawed in the refrigerator. Also, get in the habit of using the slow cooker. Toss the ingredients in the cooker first thing in the morning and when you walk in the door the

aroma of the delicious dinner will make you glad you had taken those few extra minutes before work to put it together.

**10. Why does it seem harder for today's women to decide what to have for dinner?**

Back in the 50's & 60's, women didn't have as many product choices as we do today. And they didn't have the vast array of restaurants. So dinner menus were simple. Monday was Meatloaf; Tuesday was spaghetti, and so on. Moms knew what they were cooking each night of the week, every week. They had a system.

**11. How can a frantic cook have a meal on the table during an extremely hectic week?**

For overscheduled weeks, plan to make a large turkey or ham before the start of the hectic period. Divide the remaining ham or turkey into portions for the days to come. The leftover portions will be the foundation for dinners that week. In 10 to 15 minutes, the frantic cook can whip up hot turkey sandwiches, turkey rice casserole, and turkey over noodles, turkey salad and more.

**12. How can a family make the dinner meal a tradition again?**

- a. Create a system. Whether the system is from my book, cooking by the month or cooking over the weekend for the next week, the family cook must have a system. "If meal planning and writing a shopping list is more than you can manage, find a cookbook like *The Frantic Woman's Guide to Feeding Family and Friends* that does the thinking for you so you don't have to."
- b. Make the kitchen efficient. Think how a restaurant's kitchen is organized. Everything is easily accessible so whatever the cook needs is at her fingertips. Keep cookware, utensils and spices near the stove. Keep the knives, mini-chopper and cutting board close by each other. Do the same for baking supplies, mixing bowls and hand-held mixer.
- c. Keep pantry meals on hand. Canned and packaged goods should be in the cupboard for those days when Murphy's Law seems to be your shadow. A can of tuna or chicken, a box of fast-cooking rice and a can of creamed soup can be tossed together. Sprinkle in canned veggies, a dash of a favorite spice or two, crumbled French fried onion rings, a handful of shredded cheese and you'll have a filling casserole dish can be on the table in 15 minutes.
- d. Cook up a main ingredient. For a busy week, as mentioned previously, start with a ham or turkey. Use the leftovers as the main ingredient for a week's worth of meals.

**13. How can families benefit from eating together as a family?**

- a. Strengthens the family bond. In this case, forget the cliché that absence makes the heart grow fonder. You need time together as a family to build a relationship together.
- b. Gives kids a chance to share their thoughts, ideas and fears. The more you share a meal together, the more comfortable kids become at sharing their thoughts.

- c. Helps develop the art of conversation. The dinner table is the starting point for developing communication.
- d. Keeps parents informed about their child's school day, activities and friends. You definitely want to know what's going on at school and/or the extracurricular activities.
- e. Instills family values. By example, you can easily incorporate your values into a conversation without it sounding like a lecture.
- f. Teaches table manners and respect for others. Gulping down fries and burgers on the way to a soccer game isn't the best scenario for table manners.
- g. Teaches kids lifelong skills of table setting, meal planning and preparation and working together as a team. Yea! You'll get some help.
- h. Offers thankfulness of family and food. Maybe a small prayer of thanks can become a new tradition and the time to realize how much we have to be grateful for.
- i. Improves eating habits and helps prevent obesity. The statistics say it all.
- j. Provides kids lasting memories to share with their own families someday. How much fun is it to remember silly things like brother Jay thinking the butter was ice cream and stuck a scoop of butter in his mouth. Or dad dropping the plate of grilled steaks and the dog eating them.

**14. What are some common problems that get in the way of making a family meal?**

- a. Today's fast track woman comes home from work and probably exhausted and stressed out. She has to shift from the workplace to home life and that isn't always easy. Then, as soon as she walks in the door, she's blasted with "What's for dinner?" when all she wants to do is sit down and relax for a few minutes. Or the at-home mom hasn't had a moment to herself with the kids and has to concentrate on what she needs to make for dinner when all she wants is five minutes of peace.
- b. Forgetting to plan ahead for dinner is another pitfall. Walking in the front door at the five o'clock whistle and trying to scan the kitchen pantry for a quick meal is a prelude to calling 1-800-takeout.
- c. Having to make the same decision day in and day out. Asking the family what they want for dinner usually ends with "I don't know, I don't care or whatever." After putting in a full day, today's busy woman would be thrilled to have someone else make the decision.
- d. Old Mother Hubbard's cupboard only works in fairy tales. A bare pantry makes it really hard to prepare a meal. And if mom hasn't scheduled a shopping trip in the overscheduled week, then the cupboard shelves won't hold enough ingredients to whip something together in 30 minutes or so.

**15. How can a busy woman fit grocery shopping into her day?**

- a. Shop during off-peak hours and days. Mornings are usually slower than the rest of the day. Evening hours, after eight are usually

slow, too. Sunday, Monday and Saturdays are usually the busiest shopping days. If you have to shop on one of these days, shop first thing in the morning before banker's hours.

- b. If you have flex time, take advantage of it. Shop before work, take the groceries home and then off to work you go.
- c. You can still shop before work even if you do not have flex time as long as your workplace has a refrigerator and freezer to store your perishables in it. Be sure your co-workers are not shopping on the same day.
- d. Use the order and pick-up system that most warehouse clubs offer. You can email or fax your shopping order to them by a certain time the day before and can pick it up during designated hours the next day. Now, if you want to select your own fish, meat and poultry, you can still do so and just add it to the pre-order at checkout.
- e. Arrange activity car pools with another mom so you have one night each week or bi-weekly that you do not have to be responsible for taking the kids to and from practice or lessons. Plan to go grocery shopping on this night off.

**16. How can you save money feeding the family?**

- a. Preplan menus and shop with a list (yes, you've heard it before, however it is very important).
- b. Shop bi-weekly and pick up fresh produce at a Farmer's Market. Or if you need to shop weekly for financial reasons, be sure to shop only once.
- c. Eat leftovers. Food tossed in the garbage is dollars that could be in your pocket.
- d. Buy produce in season only.
- e. Take advantage of loss leader items and stock up.
- f. Eliminate buying overpriced snack foods.
- g. Make it a habit to eat less expensive foods, such as popcorn, peanut butter on celery sticks and saltines with jelly, for snacks

###

Mary Jo Rulnick is an award winning writer and author of *The Frantic Woman's Guide to Feeding Family and Friends: Shopping Lists, Recipes and Tips for Every Dinner of the Year* (Warner Books), the second book in the *Frantic Woman* series. A cookbook offering doable tips and a new cooking system to help today's busy women conquer the dinner dilemma. Mary Jo is the cooking, holiday and party expert on the popular ClubMom.com, a website co-founded by *The Today Show* host Meredith Veira. As a feature writer for *Pittsburgh Parent Magazine*, she specializes in home, work and life issues. Balancing family and work is topic she takes to heart. Contact Mary Jo Rulnick at 412.862.9763 or rulnickmedia@aol.com.