

PRESSURE COOKING

To keep the romance alive, keep it out of your kitchen

By Lindsey Crittenden

I'VE FALLEN FOR MEN on little more than a shared predilection for New England clam chowder, and written off others for disliking avocados. During high school, I manifested my unrequited crush on our class's "Most Organic" by spading up a patch of the back yard and planting vegetables. And every Saturday morning of my childhood I ate my father's pancakes: Thin, delicate, and swimming in a puddle of Log Cabin syrup, they represented not just the superiority of weekends but the comfort of home.

So it's no wonder that when I met a man I liked, I would invite him in for dinner. On our first date, P and I had shared a vegetarian Indian meal while seated cross-legged on the restaurant's embroidered pillows and talking over the soft background sounds of a sitar. He'd served me dal and poured my beer, and after dinner we'd walked to a cafe and bonded further over Nutella crepes and peppermint tea. When we said our good-nights, we both knew we'd do it again.

We did—a week later. It was a cold, rainy evening, and when he showed up at my door after driving around the block five times, I thought of the soup I'd made that afternoon. Carrot, pureed with potatoes and leeks.

"Hey," I said, "why don't we stay here?"

"Great," he replied. And then, as I hung up his dripping jacket and poured us each a glass of wine, as I slipped a John Coltrane CD into the player and an apron over my head, I felt a slight but palpable shift, a fog of formality rolling in on what had been a sunny moment.

Normal second-date jitters, I thought. *They'll burn off once we start talking.* But they didn't. Oh, the evening went all right; he cleaned his bowl of my soup and expressed delight that the whole wheat bread came from his favorite bakery. He stayed until midnight, and washed the dishes while I dried.

But something had changed. What we'd shared over dal and Kingfisher beer, the slight *frisson* as I'd licked Nutella off my index finger and, 30 seconds later, watched him do the same off his, had dissipated. This time, as we said good-night, the magic was over.

Enjoying food together is a staple of dating, but there's a good reason it usually happens in restaurants. Bring that food into your kitchen, and the relationship enters a whole new realm. It's one thing to share a bottle of wine in a public place, another to do so on your own couch in pedicured bare feet. Never mind the innuendos of jazz on the CD player; my refrigerator kept humming the siren song of domesticity all evening long. I'd conjured up a vision of P in my life, a vision that seemed appealing and possible. But when I saw him stride across my kitchen floor, expectation clashed with reality.



He and my kitchen just didn't fit. I knew I wasn't ready for him to stand at my sink with a dish towel over his shoulder. Too much pressure, and we hadn't even kissed.

We offer ourselves up when we cook, even if we're making a piece of toast. I'd kept my bedroom door closed the entire evening—no accident, I realized later. I'd already revealed enough in my proportions of vegetables to stock, my blend of seasonings. And that was just the soup.

He'd seen my refrigerator with its magnetic-poetry-kit haiku involving the words *chocolate*, *sordid* and *fluff*; the photo of me in a smocked party dress at age five; the postcard of a Giotto Annunciation. He'd seen the washed Ziploc bags drying from the protruding handles in my knife block, the four brands of mustard, the frozen heel of bread. He didn't also need to see the color of my sheets and my friendly old teddy bear.

Of course, P and I didn't stop dating just because he'd eaten my soup and glimpsed the inside of my refrigerator. Other factors played a decisive role. Even without his fussy scrubbing of the sink, I wouldn't have been charmed by his mention of his ex's current relationship woes or the fact that he rarely speaks to his two siblings. But learning them in my own kitchen helped to clarify, once more, what I want in a man and what, it turned out, P was not.

Cooking for a man, it seems, is a helpful diagnostic. So the next time I meet a man I like, I'll invite him over, too. And if he's Mr. Right, homemade soup won't scare him (or me) off. ➤

ILLUSTRATION BY NATALIE ASCENCIOS