

Turning the Tables

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Exploring the flavours of the world put a new spin on Thursday nights for **Paul Mitchell's** clan.

It became known as 'crazy Thursday'. A hangover from when they were younger, every fortnight my two primary school-aged kids from my first marriage came to my wife and me for one night. Then they were back to their Mum for a week.

It was impossible, in fact it felt stupid, to carry on a normal family routine on crazy Thursday. The kids were disrupted and out of sorts, but the arrangement was, for the time being, set in something stronger than stone: court orders.

I felt out of sorts, too. Melancholy because I knew they were only with me for one night and then they'd be gone for a week. And, because the kids were unhappy, I was plagued by a sense of failure. I explained the situation to a family counsellor that my wife and I were seeing at the time and he agreed change was needed.

'You've got to find a way to make that night special,' he said.

Turn crazy Thursday into happy Thursday? Sounded good, but how? Play Twister in our PJs? Not known for my light bulb moments, one nevertheless floated above my head like an aroma from a quality kitchen.

'Like take them out to dinner?'

That was it. Get them out of the house. Can't pretend it's a normal family night then. But the kids were fussy eaters. Hannah and Hugo were then new to my wife's cooking – which was about 20 steps up from my packet Mexican – but they turned their noses up at beautifully prepared broccoli, sweet potato, cous cous, lentils, salmon, red peppers, osso buco and Niçoise salad.

'Let's do a different country's cuisine every crazy Thursday. Call it "Cuisines of the World"', my wife chimed in, a twinkle in her eye.

We live in the inner west and our first destination was West Footscray's Aangan Indian Restaurant. Known as a curry hotspot, it was bound to stretch the kids' palates. In the courtyard on a balmy November night, Hugo quickly found on the menu a facsimile of his favourite fried chicken: Tawa Chicken, the ingredients described as cooked together (i.e. fried) on a griddle. He loved it. But he didn't stop there, also having a go at Aloo Palak, a vegetarian number (45 to be precise) that included a food he'd never eaten: spinach. And it wasn't even fried.

'Where can we go next time, Dad?' he beamed as I handed over the cash. Hmm, I'd fed the family for under \$110. Crazy Thursday had turned its insanity at my wallet. I wanted to answer by saying we'd go English (the fish and chip shop), but I spun the globe in my mind and stuck the pin on Japan.

Hugo found fried chicken easy enough on the menu at Matsumoto Japanese Restaurant in East Brunswick. But after JFC, he moved onto chicken in nori rolls, and even had a go at some sushi. Though it was expensive, this antidote to crazy Thursday was working. The kids were trying new foods (and getting to stay up late) and we were all having fun. Especially trying to come up with reasonably priced, authentic world cuisine.

The kids pushed for French, I took out a loan, but then my wife suggested Café Breizoz in Williamstown. Brittany-inspired, its galettes and crepes were close enough to Hannah's favourite food, pancakes. Hugo graduated to fried quail at Star Vietnamese Restaurant in Footscray, and we all tried fish direct from the tank. Hannah tried guacamole at Tres Tacos in Flemington, the boys found meatlovers paradise at Pireaus Blues Greek in Fitzroy, and Hugo couldn't find anything fried on the Injera bread at Kensington's The Abyssinian.

My highlight came at Patee Thai in Fitzroy. Except for TV dinners, the kids had never gone floorside to eat. I remember their smiles as they figured out how to sit, and how experimental they were that night. They both tucked into Thai Fish Cakes, savouring the salmon they'd spat out a few months earlier. Asian Greens were no obstacle, and neither were Garlic Chive Dumplings, Vegetarian Green Curry Puffs or Calamari with Chilli and Basil.

I sipped my beer, knowing the night was going to make me another \$100+ lighter, but feeling a whole lot lighter in myself. Crazy Thursday had become my favourite night of the fortnight.

The care arrangements have, thankfully, recently changed. There are no more crazy Thursdays. We've also had a new baby who likes to eat in. Every night. But Cuisines of the World rolls on. The kids devour my wife's cooking, her splashes of the Mediterranean, and I cook more, 'specialising' in Asian and Italian. Even better, the kids now cook. While many their age are inspired by Junior Master Chef, I know my kids' forays into Chinese and Thai cooking is a product of how we fried old crazy Thursday.