

# WHEN BREAST *isn't* BEST

A FOOD WRITER FACES HER STRUGGLES  
WITH BREASTFEEDING

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It happens every time I pour milk into a sippy cup or add a splash to my morning coffee. I consider each drop with an exacting precision, and my mind races. Unanswerable questions—how many cows are milked each day to produce all the dairy the world consumes? How many udders are being tugged at this exact moment?—make my brain hurt.

This very intense obsession stems from my own struggle to produce breast milk. When I was pregnant with my daughter in 2015, I didn't think twice about nursing. I wanted to do it for all the right reasons: bonding, health benefits for mother and child, the ease associated with just pulling out my breast. Compared with how many hours went into planning for the actual birth, I hardly gave breastfeeding a passing thought. I didn't expect to have an issue with it. I certainly didn't consider failure.

But despite my best efforts, my body couldn't produce enough milk to feed either of my kids (ages 1 and 3.) Food, which once brought me so much joy, instead became a source of sadness and stress. I had taken sustenance from the planet my whole life, and had none to give back. The irony of being a food writer and an evangelist for local/organic/sustainable food systems, while at the same time a formula feeder, twisted my heart into a knot that is still not completely untangled.

When I was deep in the struggle in the early months of my daughter's life, I told myself over and over (and over) again that this wasn't how it was supposed to be. And yet, there I was, my nipples attached to a hospital-grade breast pump at all hours. I did everything I could to increase my supply: The lactation consultant said breastfeed, pump, wait an hour, and do it again. And don't forget to feed the baby formula in between so she actually, you know, eats. I dosed myself on fenugreek and a witchy concoction called More Milk Plus. I massaged my breasts. I taped a tiny tube to my breast that was connected to a bottle of formula so that she could nurse while also receiving milk (called the Supplemental Nursing System, or SNS). I Googled what the hell was wrong with me in the dark of night, my husband snoring beside me, and in the blinding light of day. I cried all the time. My milk never "came in."

When my career shifted from reporting on music and culture to restaurants, chefs, and food, I was able to combine my two great loves: storytelling and eating. It was a delicious match for a journalist raised in a health-conscious home where food was paramount. My mother was a natural-food proponent before that was cool. We ate buckwheat pancakes. Cold cuts and processed foods were forbidden. My sandwiches, on whole grain bread baked at home and studded with seeds, almost always featured the sprouts grown in the Mason jar in the cupboard. (That freaked out all my friends.) Instead of a Toll House cookie, my special treat was Blackstrap molasses, which I lapped out of a delicate dish with my tongue. And while I rebelled against this whole approach to eating when I grew older, it undeniably influenced my relationship to food. I was even a vegetarian for nine (very long) months.

It wasn't until my body couldn't feed my babies that I considered how fortunate I was to even have the choice of how and what to eat. I had always considered food a luxury—my mother was the director of a soup kitchen, and letting food go to waste was a crime in our house. For those who face food insecurity, the question is not "What do I want for dinner tonight?" but "How will I eat tonight?" I was lucky to afford organic baby formula; it would have added to the pain had this purchase been out of reach financially.

You're probably wondering why I didn't make enough milk. Me too. And that's the conundrum. It could have been the very slight tongue ties in both my babies, but they were corrected (at 10 days for my daughter and four days for my son) and I pumped all the time to essentially trick my breasts into thinking I was nursing, which in turn tells them to produce more. Or, it could have been insufficient glandular tissue in my breasts. There's no way to know for sure and statistics on how many women can't breastfeed are shaky at best.

Whatever the case, I blamed myself, as most women do. If I had pumped 10 times a day instead of eight, would it have changed anything? Would I still be, literally, crying over spilled milk? My doula and lactation counselor Emily Cohen-Moreira, put it quite well: "There's nothing more loaded in terms of your body than having a baby. You built it, you pushed it out. So, of course, you are more likely to internalize anything, both with the birth and the breastfeeding."

Breast milk is often referred to as "liquid gold" by proponents, and there's really no debate that it's the best food for newborn babies. (See the recent Trump Administration drama over a World Health Organization resolution

regarding breastfeeding and the marketing of formula.) Even breastfeeding proponents tend to focus on the main message (#breastisbest, #normalizebreastfeeding) in order to fight against those who would rather shame women into covering up or staying home.

All of this just made me feel more marginalized. I was so overcome with embarrassment about having to bottle feed that I didn't join any mommy groups, which on the surface may seem ridiculous, but when you have a newborn and no idea what you're doing, talking with other parents is a legit lifesaver. Those packs of women you see in coffee shops or sitting in a circle at the park, their babies in their laps or nuzzled at their breasts? I wasn't one of them.

Today, when I see hip, celeb foodie mamas (Eden Grinshpan, Chrissy Teigen) breastfeeding their babies on Instagram in tasteful, celebratory pictures—jealousy still swells in my chest, ready to pop. To move forward, I had no choice but to accept my reality. My body's inability to do the most natural thing in the world was gut wrenching, and I'm only able to address it now, with a clear head, a full three years later.

