



Alex—World’s Greatest Chef

Alex’s mother opened the front door of the restaurant. The restaurant was closed on Mondays, but Alex’s mother had finally said he could cook by himself. She’d even agreed he could use her work kitchen. *Today I become the World’s Greatest Chef*, thought Alex.

“Ready for your big day?” asked Alex’s mother. She locked the door behind Alex. “The place is all yours. I’ll be in the back doing paperwork. Let me know when you are ready to use the oven, and I’ll help you.”

Colorful flower vases adorned the empty tables. Chairs were neatly pushed under the tables. The restaurant looked like it always did. Yet, it felt different. The restaurant felt like his, Alex realized.

Alex grew up watching his mother cook. He knew how to safely use cooking tools and stoves. He knew the difference between mixing and beating. Most of all, he knew how to make food that looked beautiful.

“Food should look as good as it tastes,” his mother always said.

Alex no longer slapped a peanut butter-and-jelly sandwich together. Instead, he cut the bread into interesting shapes like stars or octagons. Then, he spread peanut butter and jelly evenly to the edge of the bread. Sometimes he used blackberry jelly. Sometimes, he used strawberry jam. These different ingredients created different colors and flavors. His peanut butter-and-jelly sandwiches were like great works of art.

In the kitchen, the sinks, stoves, and ovens gleamed. The steel closets and drawers held every kitchen tool imaginable, and the walk-in refrigerator was a small food market.

Alex put on a white jacket and a tall chef’s hat. Last night, he’d searched through cookbooks. He didn’t want a fancy recipe, and he didn’t want to fix an entire meal. He wanted a simple recipe that he could prepare perfectly. Alex finally chose allspice muffins since he understood the directions.

He read the first direction: preheat the oven to 375°F. Alex turned on the oven. He proceeded to read all the directions in the recipe and then set out the bowls, spoons, and measuring cups. *These will be the best muffins ever*, he thought.

Alex measured the dry ingredients and put them into a large bowl. He added the ingredients in the order listed: flour, sugar, brown sugar, and baking powder.

The next listed ingredient was a half teaspoon of allspice. *That’s a lot of spices*, thought Alex. He opened a drawer packed with jars of spices. The combination of spicy scents tickled his nose. He sneezed.

Pay close attention, Alex told himself. Don’t skip a spice or add one twice by mistake. Alex began with the jar in the lower right corner of the drawer. He measured a half teaspoon and sprinkled it into the bowl. He added spice from the next jar. He worked through the drawer half teaspoon by half teaspoon.

The last jar was labeled "allspice." Alex had a bad feeling, like discovering the snack drawer empty. He wondered if the recipe had called for the spice named allspice, not all the spices. Alex could ask his mother, but he really wanted to cook on his own.

Alex continued with the wet ingredients. He beat melted butter, eggs, and milk in a small bowl. Then, he poured this mixture into the dry ingredients. The directions stated the batter should be lumpy. Alex stirred until the batter was lumpy. Then, he spooned the batter into muffin pans.

"Mom, I'm ready to put the muffins in the oven," Alex said.

Alex's mother strolled into the kitchen. "Okay, let me help you put the muffin pans into the oven," she replied.

A wave of heat rolled over Alex when his mother opened the oven door. His thick oven gloves made it hard to set the pans on the top rack. He spilled a little batter.

"Okay, call me when they are done. I can't wait to taste them," Alex's mother said.

Someday the World's Greatest Chef would hire helpers to clean, but not today. Alex washed the dishes and wiped up the drips and spills until his workspace gleamed.

The scent of baking muffins spread through the kitchen. Alex frowned. The smell should say, "Welcome." This smell said, "Keep out!"

The oven timer dinged.

"Mom, the muffins are done!" Alex exclaimed.

Alex's mother came into the kitchen and helped to retrieve the muffin pans from the oven.

Alex set the muffins aside to cool.

"What do I smell?" Alex's mother asked, walking into the kitchen.

"Too many spices," replied Alex. He explained his allspice mistake.

Alex's mother struggled to keep a straight face. "Next time, gather all the ingredients before you begin," she suggested. "If you had, you would have caught your mistake before you made it."

"So much for being the World's Greatest Chef." Alex sighed.

"When I was your age," his mother said, "I made a tuna dish for Grandpa. Only I forgot to add the soup, which was one of the ingredients. Talk about dry! Grandpa ate it, not wanting to hurt my feelings."

Alex thought about all the spices he'd added. "Eating these muffins might not be safe," he said.

Alex's mother laughed. "Chefs learn from their mistakes, but we don't always eat them."

"Has anyone else mixed up allspice with all spices?" Alex asked, hopefully.

"Most people don't talk about their blunders," replied his mother. "But we all make them."

"Not the great chefs," said Alex, dumping his muffins into the trash.

"They make mistakes too," Alex's mother said, getting two brownies from the refrigerator. She handed one to Alex. "I've heard plenty of stories of cakes that fell flat, of underbaked or overbaked meals, the list goes on. One famous TV chef even mixed up the salt and sugar bins. She ended up with a salty dessert."

Alex imagined a great chef staring at a failed dish. He grinned. Becoming the World's Greatest Chef might take a bit more practice. But when he became famous, he would not hide the story of his allspice muffins.



What Belongs in a Garden?

I kneel in my garden
at my grandmother's house,
pulling one weed
after the next.

My bucket fills up quickly,
one skinny, spiny plant
at a time.

But the purple lilac flowers
smell like summer
as they rise above
the prickly weeds.

The daisies look up at me,
their deep, dark centers
like eyes opened wide.

Many of the weeds
have leaves that are jagged,
like the small, sharp teeth
of a kitchen knife.

I've removed all these plants
and their thorny stems
that have rudely shoved their way
up through the soil.

They just don't understand
that they're not welcome here.

Suddenly, I see it:
one last, lonely plant
with a flower
as white as a cloud,
a stalk that is tall
and bendy
and smooth.
Is it a weed?
Does it belong in a garden?
The flower has the soft smell
of freshly washed clothes,
of a clean white cat
sleeping soundly
in a windowsill.
Two of its leaves
have turned brown in the sun,
like toast that was left
in the toaster too long.

How can I know
whether to let this plant be
or whether to pull it
from the ground?
It has no sharp teeth,
no thorns anywhere.
I compare it closely
to the other flowers,
but none of them
seem to match.
When I ask my grandmother,
she, too, is unsure.
"This little plant
must be one of a kind,"
she says as she holds the flower gently
with her palm.

Whether flower or weed,
I decide the plant is beautiful
in its own strange and simple way.
I marvel at its flower
the color of snow,
with its twelve perfect petals
and its fresh green stem;
I even see something pretty
in its burnt-brown leaves.
"This plant should stay,"
I announce to my grandmother,
who smiles and nods
in agreement.



The Pot of Gold

by Augusta Stevenson

SCENE I

TIME: one spring day

PLACE: the farmer's vineyard

Characters:

THE FARMER

HIS THREE SONS

[The THREE SONS dig lazily among the vines.]

FIRST SON: Oh, I am tired of digging! Come, brothers, let us sit and talk!

[He throws down his shovel and sits.]

SECOND SON: Father said we should dig at every vine. But I must say I am tired of it.

[He throws down his shovel and sits.]

THIRD SON: I was tired when we began.

[He throws down his shovel and sits. The FARMER enters. His sons do not see him.]

FIRST SON: Now I should like to ride a great white horse.

SECOND SON: I should like to be a prince. I would do nothing all day long but wear my golden crown.

THIRD SON: I want to find a purse of gold. I would never work again, I tell you!

[The farmer shakes his head sadly.]

FARMER: My sons, these vines have not been dug about. Come, do this work as I have told you.

[The sons take up their shovels, but unwillingly.]

FARMER: Now listen, a pot of gold is hidden in this vineyard. It is buried deep beneath these vines.

SONS: A pot of gold!

FARMER: It is all I have to leave you. I think it best to tell you now, for I cannot live forever.

FIRST SON: Why do you hide the gold, my father?

FARMER: That you may dig for it.

SECOND SON: Why do you hide it in the ground?

FARMER: That you may dig for it.

THIRD SON: Why don't you tell us where it is?

FARMER: That you may dig for it.

[He goes.]

SONS: A pot of gold!

FIRST SON: Now I shall ride a great white horse!

SECOND SON: Now I shall marry a princess and wear a golden crown!

THIRD SON: Now I shall find my purse of gold and never work again!

SCENE II

TIME: one month later

PLACE: the vineyard

Characters:

THE THREE SONS

[The ground is completely dug up. The FIRST SON is seen digging. He throws down his shovel showing disappointment.]

FIRST SON: I cannot find it!

[Enter SECOND SON with his shovel.]

Did you find it?

SECOND SON: No, and I have dug up every inch of our western vineyard.

[Enter THIRD SON with his shovel.]

FIRST AND SECOND SONS: Did you find it?

THIRD SON: No, and I have dug up every inch of the eastern vineyard.

FIRST SON: Well, you see what I have done here.

SECOND SON: There is not a vine that has not been dug about!

THIRD SON: I cannot understand it! Surely, this was not a cruel joke!

FIRST SON: Our father spoke of the pot of gold.

SECOND SON: And told us to dig for it.

THIRD SON: I cannot understand it.

[They go, shaking their heads sadly.]

SCENE III

TIME: six months later

PLACE: the vineyard

Characters:

THE THREE SONS

THE FRUIT MERCHANT

[The MERCHANT enters the vineyard with the THREE SONS.]

MERCHANT: You say your grapes are ripe?

FIRST SON: They are ripe and ready to sell, sir.

SECOND SON: Come, now, and look at them.

[They cross to the vines.]

MERCHANT: Why, I have never seen such grapes as these!

THIRD SON: We have never had such grapes before, sir.

MERCHANT: How fine and large they are!

FIRST SON: And sweet, too! Just taste one, sir!

MERCHANT *(eating a grape)*: Are they all like these?

SECOND SON: Every vine bears just such grapes.

MERCHANT: I must have your grapes. I will give a pot of gold for them.

SONS: A pot of gold!

MERCHANT: Come, will you sell?

SONS: Yes, sir!

MERCHANT: Then tomorrow I will bring the pot of gold and take away the grapes.

[He goes.]

SONS: A pot of gold!

FIRST SON: I wonder if that was father's pot of gold.

SECOND SON: I almost think it was.

THIRD SON: I wonder now, I wonder—

FIRST SON: No horse for me! I will stay and dig again for gold!

SECOND SON: No prince's crown for me! I will stay and dig here, too!

THIRD SON: I have found my purse of gold! I will stay and find another!



Be a Green Kid

by KidsHealth

What does it mean to be green? “Green” is more than just a color. It also means taking special steps to protect the environment—the water, the land, and the air we breathe. Why green? Plants are green, and without them the Earth wouldn’t be such a lovely home for us human beings.

Every day, people make choices that affect the amount of trash and pollution that gets produced in our world. What can you do? A whole lot, actually. Here’s a four-step guide to being green:

1. Reduce the amount of stuff you use and throw away.
2. Reuse stuff when you can.
3. Recycle cans, bottles, paper, books, and even toys.
4. Enjoy the Earth—walk in the woods, plant a tree, and eat some of the delicious food it produces.

Reduce It!

When you use less of something, you do a good thing for the Earth. For instance, a shorter shower means you used less water and less fuel since your house uses fuel to run the water heater that warmed up the water.

Here’s a list of other stuff you can reduce:

- Turn off lights you’re not using. Better yet, encourage adults to switch to compact fluorescent light bulbs. They last longer and use less energy. They do need to be disposed of properly, though, so make sure your mom or dad helps if one breaks.
- Turn off the water when you’re brushing your teeth.
- When you can, walk or ride your bike instead of driving in the car. You’ll use less gas—and get some exercise!
- Unplug the chargers for your phone and MP3 player when you’re not using them.
- Put your computer to “sleep” instead of leaving it on with the screensaver running

Reuse It!

Sometimes people call ours a “throwaway society.” That means that we’re a little too willing to throw away old stuff and buy new stuff. Many times, even if you no longer need something, someone else just might. For instance, if your baby brother outgrows his plastic basketball hoop, why not give it to another family who has a little kid? That’s one less plastic basketball set that they need to buy. It’s also one less large plastic toy that needs to be produced, packaged, and shipped to the toy store.

Here are some additional ways to reuse the stuff you have:

- Use rechargeable batteries for your handheld computer games, MP3 players, cell phones, and digital cameras.
- Choose reusable travel cups instead of disposable paper or plastic cups.
- Take your own bags—preferably reusable ones—when you go to the grocery store.
- Drink tap water instead of buying bottled water. If you don't like how your tap water tastes, a low-cost filtration system could make a difference. Get a reusable water bottle so you can take it with you.
- Organize a swap among your friends. What can you swap? Books, toys, even clothes. It's a way for everyone to get something new without spending any money and without throwing a bunch of stuff away. Set aside some items for your swap when you're cleaning your room!
- Take paper from your computer printouts and use the other side for more computer printing or just to draw or doodle on.

Recycle It!

Recycling has never been easier. Many communities will pick it up right in front of your house and some towns even require it. Tell your mom or dad you want to become “Chief of Recycling” for your household. That means you'll organize the recyclable items in bins, remember to put them on the curb on recycling day, and help remind others which items can be rinsed and recycled.

By separating plastic bottles, cans, glass bottles, and more, you're reducing the amount of trash that goes to the landfill. What's a landfill? A big mountain of trash, where all the trash trucks go to dump their loads. Recycled goods go instead to a recycling center, where they can be crushed, broken down, and later turned into new cans, bottles, and paper.

What else can be recycled? Sometimes water can be. For instance, some communities take used water—like from the washing machine and shower—and clean it up so it's safe to use for watering the grass and flowers.

Enjoy It!

It's true that trash and pollution are problems, but the Earth remains a huge and glorious place that's ready for you to explore. You can start locally by visiting the naturally beautiful spots in your city and state. Go for a hike, visit local nature centers and gardens, climb up mountains, and explore lazy creeks.

Experience the outdoors in all sorts of weather—from a sunny day at the beach or lake to a wintry adventure when it snows.

But before you travel the globe, take a look at your own backyard. Is there a spot where you could plant a tree or put in a little fruit or vegetable garden? If so, get out there and get your hands dirty. Then you can watch with pride as your tree takes root and your garden plants grow from sprigs to big plants full of ripe, red tomatoes or tiny, succulent blueberries. Who knew being green would taste so good?