

## Life with Weird Kids

Every year about this time, just before spring, I think about my kidneys. It happens when the days snap back and forth from cold to warm and back to cold again in that spastic Seattle way. I used to make fun of this city for working up a lather about a “cold front” coming, as if it was a hurricane, but now I do it too. Two years ago, I had what I called my own cold front. Out of nowhere, I lost my appetite. After months of doctors, I discovered that my kidneys were failing—all part of having lupus, it seems.

Now, with an eccentric blend of induction therapy (chemo for wimps), steroids, a lovely bouquet of other drugs, acupuncture, Chinese herbs, and a New! Improved! Diet! I’m still not totally on board with, my kidneys are happy. But every year, when Sodium Girl’s Recipe Rally rolls around, I remember—with a twang of fear—that those two little organs are fragile, hiding there behind my back.

For someone with stage 4 glomerular nephritis, I had a wicked fast recovery. You’d never know much about the whole shebang, unless you were the one who watched my child and cooked me dinner and took me home from the hospital, drug-woozy, in those first weeks. And now, you can’t tell. The problem is, neither can I.

It’s easy for me to do my kids some general kindness. (Yes, of course they have a nickname.) I don’t drink all that much. I don’t use Advil. I avoid boxing. But when it comes to eating the one thing that has the most effect on kidney health—sodium—I can’t exactly say I pay attention.

Jess Goldman-Fuong is the exact opposite of me. Well, in some ways. Her name is Jess, and she’s a food writer, and she has lupus, all like me. She lives perpetually in the sun, no matter what the weather is, preferring a persistent upbeat attitude to any of the negativity having a chronic condition sometimes brings. But she lives in San Francisco, not Seattle. And her kidneys can’t take sodium at all.

Over the years, Jess has garnered a following among sodium-free cooks. At Sodium Girl, she takes the normally salt-laden food she loves—things like crab salad, and bacon-wrapped scallops, and movie popcorn—and reengineers them to fit her diet. The thing is, her food doesn’t taste saltless. It tastes creative. So each February, when she issues the call for low-sodium recipes across the web, I get into the kitchen. For my own sake.

It’s never difficult to find something to desalinate. This year, I was on my neighbor’s couch, devouring French onion dip with potato chips while I pretended to watch the Super Bowl, when I realized I’d consumed four days’ worth of sodium in a single sitting. I’m not joking. Four days.

Back to the stove I went. I caramelized onions over low heat until they were deep golden brown, threatening to burn but really just improbably sweet. I pureed them, then whirled them with crème fraîche, which (contrary to what you might think) has far less salt than sour cream or mayonnaise. The result? A simple, low-sodium dip with every bit as much

addictive power as homemade. This dip isn't actually slimming. It still has the creamy punch you need at the end of your crunch.

So the next time you're heading for the tube, mix it up. If you're sitting on your ass in front of the television, at least your kidneys will be healthy.

## Low-Sodium Onion Dip

I love a good packaged onion soup dip mix as much as the next person. Maybe it's the MSG? This version depends on crème fraiche, which is naturally low-sodium, instead of mayonnaise or sour cream, for its creaminess—and because it's made with deeply caramelized onions, there's plenty of flavor. Take the time to get the onions good and brown.

Makes: 8 servings

2 tablespoons olive oil  
3 large yellow onions (about 2 1/2 pounds)  
Freshly ground pepper  
3 cloves garlic, finely chopped (optional)  
1 1/2 cups (12 ounces) crème fraiche

Heat a large soup pot over medium heat. Add the oil, then start slicing the onions, first in half through the root and then into 1/4" slices with the grain, adding to the pot as you go. When all the onions have been added, season them with salt and pepper, stir to blend, and cook for 30 minutes, stirring every five minutes or so while the onions begin to cook down.

Add the garlic (if using), and reduce the heat to your stove's lowest temperature. Cook the onions for another 1 1/2 to 2 hours, stirring frequently, or until the onions are a deep golden brown. (Timing will depend on your stove and the vessel you're using. The important thing is the color, though, so don't rush it. If the onions begin to burn or stick to the bottom a bit before they're done, add a little water to the pan or adjust the heat, as necessary.)

Transfer the caramelized onions to the work bowl of a food processor. Whirl for the count of 10, so the onions are still a bit chunky, then cool for about 15 minutes (or overnight) in the refrigerator. Transfer the onions to a bowl, stir in the crème fraiche, season with pepper, and serve.