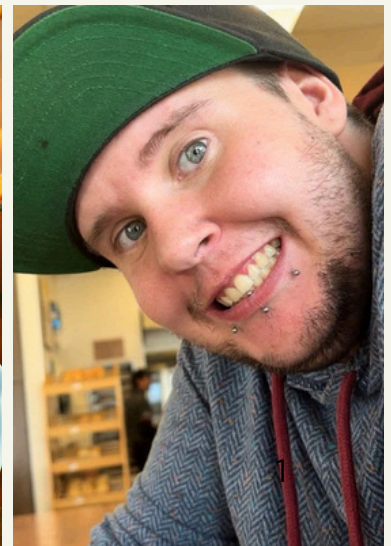




MORE THAN MEALS:

Stories and recipes of young people from child welfare



FOREWORD

A light green line-art illustration of a steamer basket filled with dumplings, a hand holding a spoon, and a bowl of food, positioned on the right side of the page.

This cookbook is more than a collection of recipes. Every meal carries the story of someone with lived experience in the child welfare system — a reality that continues to be overlooked in many children’s lives.

At this moment across Canada, approximately 61,000 children and youth live in permanent government care, at least 300,000 live in households where they are at risk of entering care, and thousands are transitioning out of the system, many as young as 18. Despite the number of children impacted, their stories remain hidden, tucked behind closed doors where they navigate challenges no child should ever have to face.

Being there for kids in the child welfare system can be as simple as listening to their story, or in this case, cooking a dish that helped shape their sense of identity. You will learn about how they entered the child welfare system and persevered through food insecurity, instability, and other hardships, and how food became a tool of survival, self-expression, and self-care.

These pages are a direct window into the lives of the young people we support. These are their words, their flavours, their stories. The team at Children’s Aid Foundation of Canada is deeply grateful to Chef Michelle Rochester, President, CEO, and Head Chef of MNR Catering, for bringing these recipes to life. A Forbes-featured Caribbean culinary entrepreneur and dedicated contributor to this project, Chef Rochester prepared every dish photographed in this book, ensuring that each plate reflects the dignity and care these stories deserve.

We hope they offer you a new perspective on the child welfare system.

*The team at Children's Aid
Foundation of Canada*

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SHOPPING LIST

Want to cook your way through this book? Here's a list of ingredients to make everything within *More than Meals*.

PRODUCE

- ❑ 2 bunches broccoli
- ❑ 1 lemon
- ❑ 2 garlic bulbs
- ❑ 1 medium onion
- ❑ 2 celery stalks
- ❑ 1 green bell pepper
- ❑ 6-8 bananas

MEAT & PROTEIN

- ❑ 1 block extra firm tofu or 2 chicken thighs
- ❑ 1 pound ground beef
- ❑ 2-3 lbs chicken quarter leg and thigh

CANNED & PACKAGED GOODS

- ❑ 2 cans tomato purée
- ❑ 1 can diced tomatoes
- ❑ 1 can kidney beans
- ❑ 1 can six-bean blend
- ❑ 1 packet taco seasoning

OILS & LIQUIDS

- ❑ 1 cup olive oil
- ❑ Vanilla extract (about 4 teaspoons total)
- ❑ Oil for frying

BAKING & DRY INGREDIENTS

- ❑ All-purpose flour (about 6 cups total)
- ❑ Baking soda (about 2 teaspoons total)
- ❑ Salt (about 5 teaspoons total)
- ❑ Black pepper (about 2 teaspoons total)
- ❑ Oregano (about 1 teaspoon total)
- ❑ Parsley (about 1 teaspoon total)
- ❑ Cinnamon (about 3 teaspoons total)
- ❑ Nutmeg (about 1 teaspoon total)
- ❑ Brown sugar (preferred) or white sugar (about 2 cups total)
- ❑ Paprika (about 1 teaspoon total)
- ❑ Garlic powder (about 1 teaspoon total)
- ❑ Onion powder (about 1 teaspoon total)
- ❑ Chicken seasoning (about 1 teaspoon total)
- ❑ All-purpose seasoning (about 1 teaspoon total)
- ❑ Chocolate chips or chopped chocolate (dark, milk, or semisweet) (about 1 cup total)

DAIRY & REFRIGERATED

- ❑ 6 large eggs
- ❑ ¼ cup Greek yogurt
- ❑ ½ cup butter
- ❑ 1 cup milk or buttermilk

WHO WE HELP



The challenges faced by children and youth from care are serious, but they are not inevitable. Research is clear: with the right support at the right time, young people can and do thrive. That's what drives everything we do at Children's Aid Foundation of Canada.

Right now, approximately 61,000 young people in Canada are living in out-of-home care in foster homes, group homes, or with extended family. Thousands more are at risk of being removed from their homes. Children come into care because they have experienced abuse, neglect, or abandonment, with poverty, mental health challenges, substance use, and family violence among the most common factors leading to child welfare involvement.

The system does not affect all children equally. Historical injustices and systemic racism have resulted in Black and Indigenous children, who make up just 6% and 7% of Canada's child and youth population, respectively, being overrepresented in care.

Children and youth from care carry some of the highest Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) scores in the world. Trauma, instability, and family separation make it hard to build trust and healthy relationships, and the consequences follow young people well into adulthood. Without targeted, consistent support, they are significantly less likely to graduate high school than their peers, two to six times more likely to experience mental health concerns, and nearly 200 times more likely to face homelessness.

For decades, Children's Aid Foundation of Canada has been there for kids in care, working to fill the gap between what the government provides and what young people actually need. But the challenges persist, and outcomes are not changing at a rate that reflects the urgency.

Unlike programs that address a single need, Children's Aid Foundation of Canada takes a whole-life approach. We know that trauma doesn't operate in isolation, and neither can the solutions. By funding and coordinating support across four interconnected areas, we ensure that young people aren't left to navigate a fragmented system on their own.

WHO WE HELP



STRONG FAMILIES AND LIFELONG CONNECTIONS

Safe, stable relationships are among the most powerful forces in a young people's lives. We fund programs that empower families, caregivers and mentors to be unconditional, trusted presences, because no young person should have to face the future without someone in their corner.

Program highlight:
Safe at Home

MENTAL HEALTH & WELL-BEING

Mental health challenges create a ripple effect, hampering young people's ability to finish school, find work, and live independently. We lead innovative solutions that make mental healthcare timely, accessible and appropriate, while strengthening young people's sense of identity and belonging.

Program highlight:
Back to the Land

EDUCATION

Young people from care are significantly less likely than their peers to graduate high school or pursue post-secondary education. Education is one of the most direct pathways out of poverty and away from intergenerational involvement with child welfare. We remove financial and systemic barriers so more youth from care can engage in meaningful learning and pursue their goals.

Program highlight:
Post Secondary Education Program

EMPLOYMENT

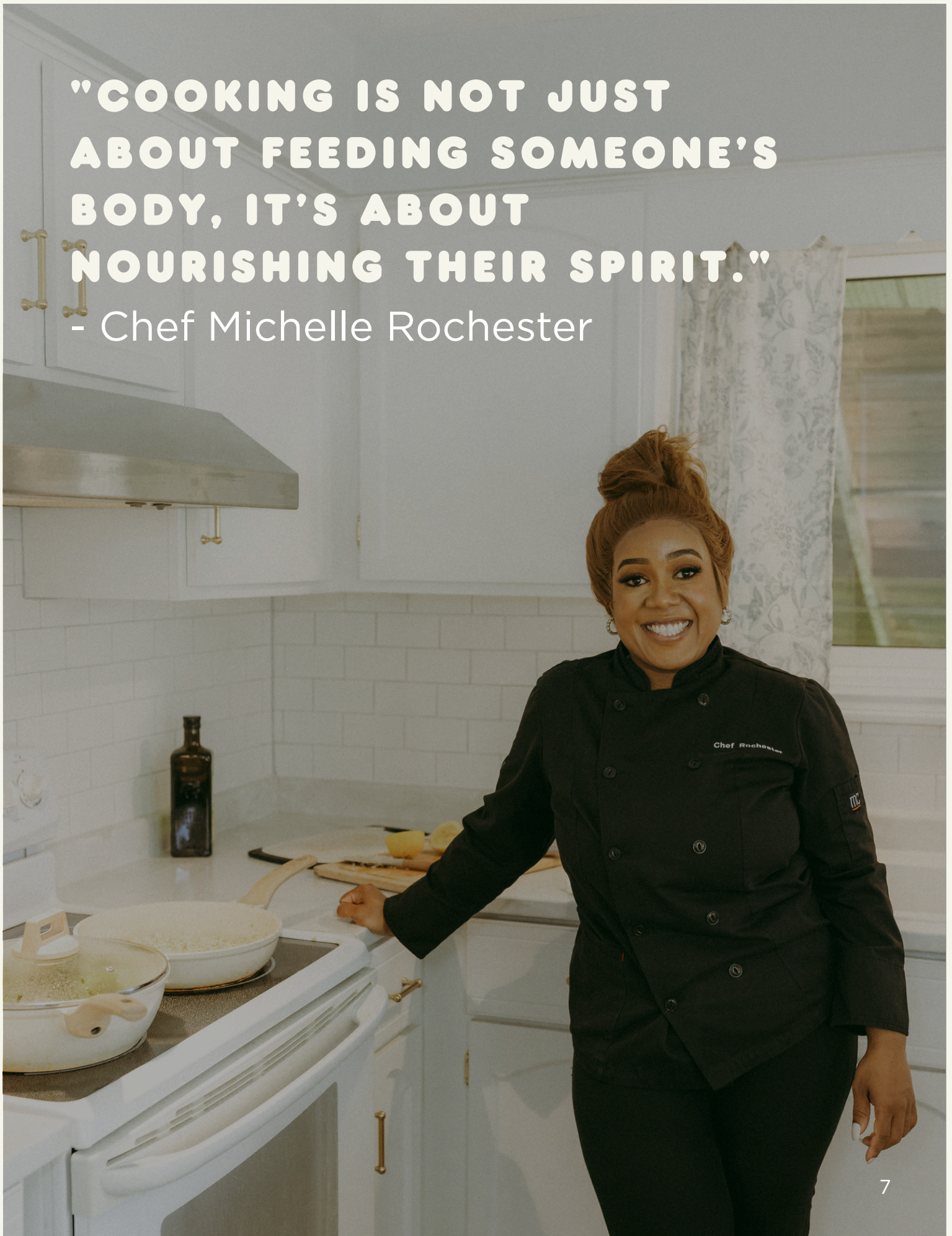
For youth from care, barriers to employment are compounded by limited education, lack of skill-building opportunities, and absence of professional networks. We equip young people with the skills, resources, and connections they need to build meaningful careers and achieve long-term stability, including support to help them get their first work experience.

Program highlight:
Youth Works

TOGETHER, THESE FOUR PILLARS REFLECT OUR BELIEF THAT NO SINGLE INTERVENTION IS ENOUGH — AND THAT WHEN YOUNG PEOPLE ARE SUPPORTED ACROSS ALL AREAS OF THEIR LIVES, THE OUTCOMES CHANGE.

**"COOKING IS NOT JUST
ABOUT FEEDING SOMEONE'S
BODY, IT'S ABOUT
NOURISHING THEIR SPIRIT."**

- Chef Michelle Rochester



OUR IMPACT



**\$19.2
MILLION**

raised by our generous community to make a difference in the lives of the children and families we support in 2025-2026.

\$11.05M

was granted

14,579

children, youth and families were engaged in 2025-2026.

BEING THERE FOR KIDS SINCE 1979.



3,064

children and youth experienced stronger connection, inclusion, and affirmation of their identities across community, peer, and learning environments.



3,159

youth strengthened their engagement and progression in school (all levels).



624

youth strengthened foundations for employment readiness and discovered future career pathways.



1,457

families built safer, more stable, and more supportive environments for children and youth.



2,175

children, youth, and families received support to meet immediate needs and strengthen stability during crisis.



5,770

children and youth accessed timely health and mental health supports and were better supported through crisis and transition.

As young people continue to navigate government care, we will continue to be there for them as Canada's leading charity for improving the lives of children, youth, and families involved with the child welfare system.

[**LEARN MORE BY EXPLORING OUR MOST RECENT ANNUAL REPORT.**](#)

HOW TO HELP



Thank you for being there for kids. For cooking their recipes, for reading their stories and for making an active effort to learn about a complex system that remains unfamiliar to many Canadians.

Ready to take the next step to support youth impacted by the child welfare system?

Start by sharing this cookbook with a friend or family member, inviting them to learn about the realities that many young people face. Simply share this cookbook link on your social media, over text, or by email, along with a message about your favourite recipe and what impacted you the most.

There are also other ways you can support our mission to advocate for a better child welfare system and provide programming and services to help youth thrive. You can become part of our generous community of donors and supporters who make what we do possible. As a charity, Children's Aid Foundation of Canada relies entirely on the support of our community. Every donation and every effort counts.

You can:

- Sign-up to make a monthly donation. A small amount each month will make a big difference.
- Make a one-time gift in any amount you would like.
- Make a donation to honour and celebrate a loved one – either in their memory or in their honour.
- Name Children's Aid Foundation of Canada in your Will.

To learn about how you can make a difference and be there for kids, visit us online or contact the Foundation team at info@cafdn.org.

From all of us here at Children's Aid Foundation of Canada, thank you for welcoming Chantal, Jae, Natasha, and Michelle into your kitchens and for taking an important first step to support youth in the child welfare system.

Sincerely,

*The team at Children's Aid
Foundation of Canada*

GLOSSARY OF TERMS



Adoption: A legal process in which a child or young person becomes a full, permanent legal member of a family that is not their biological family.

Aging out (of care): The point at which a young person transitions out of the child welfare system. This differs province-to-province, but is usually at 18.

Caseworker (or social worker): A professional who supports young people and families in the child welfare system by helping coordinate care, services, and planning.

Child welfare system (sometimes referred to as 'care'): A system of government and private services designed to protect children from abuse, neglect and abandonment and strengthen families experiencing vulnerability.

Crown ward: A young person under the age of 18 who has been removed from their parents' care and placed under the permanent supervision of the child welfare system.

Foster care: An all-encompassing term often used to describe a situation in which a young person is removed from their biological family home and placed in a temporary government-funded living arrangement to protect their safety. Foster care placements can include private homes, group homes, kin care or other institutional settings.

Food insecurity: The lack of reliable access to enough affordable, nutritious food.

Foster home: A private home or homelike setting where a young person is placed in temporary care. Young people in foster homes are typically cared for by one or two foster parents, who are responsible for ensuring their safety and well-being.

Group home: A residential setting in which several young people who have been removed from their biological homes live under the care of supervising adults.

Independent living: A stage where a young person lives on their own, often as young as 18, with some level of support, after leaving care.

Kin or kinship care: An arrangement in which a young person who has been removed from their biological home lives with and is raised by a close relative or family friend, thereby maintaining strong connections to their biological family and community.

Transitional support: Programs or services designed to help young people move from care into independent adulthood, including support with housing, education, and employment.

Youth in care and youth from care: "Youth in care" refers to young people currently involved in the child welfare system, while "youth from care" refers to those who have transitioned out of it.



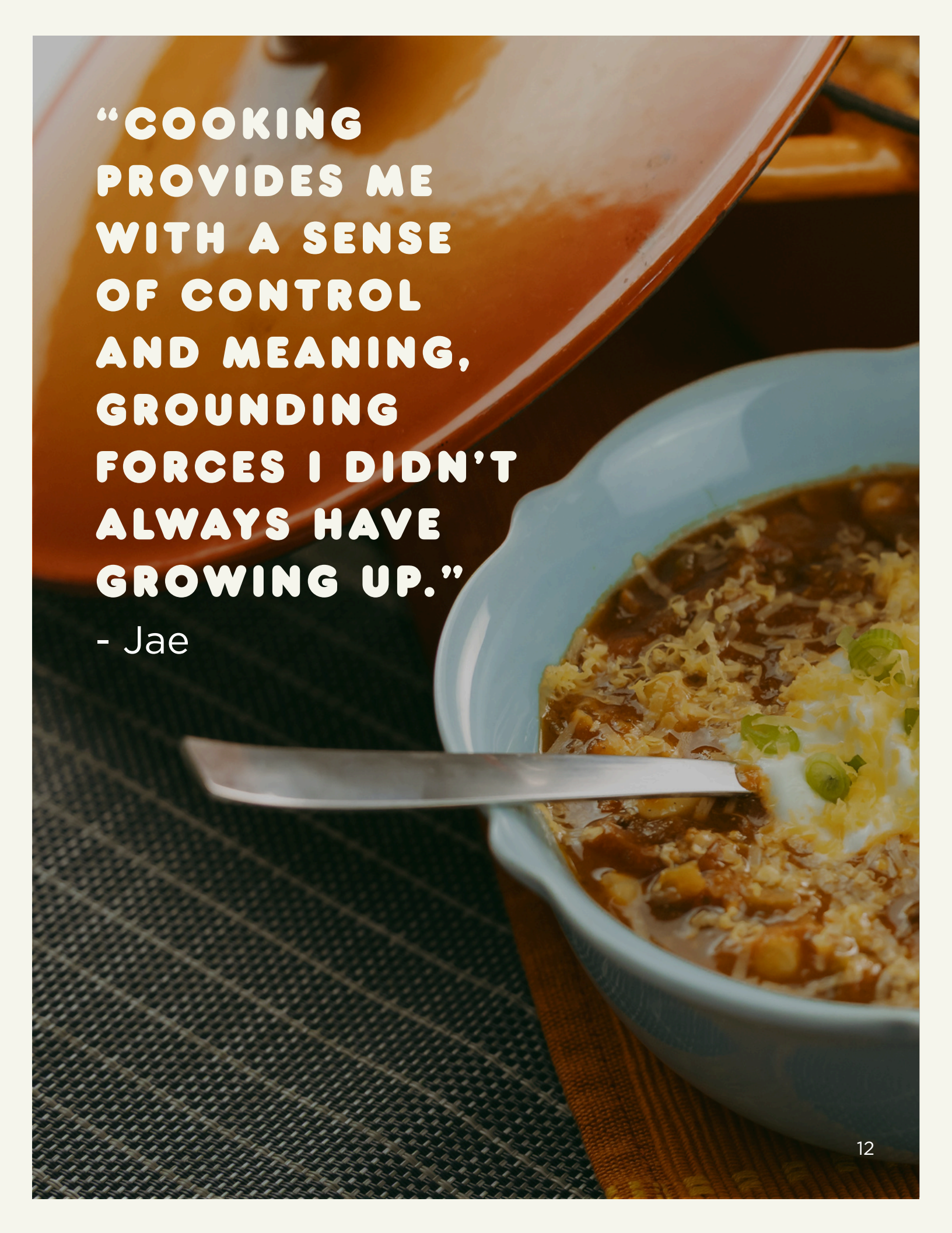
OTHER RESOURCES

Need financial support for groceries?

If you're a young person in or from care experiencing food insecurity, you can locate your nearest food bank using [Food Banks Canada's online search tool](#). Many of the ingredients in these recipes may be available there, and staff or volunteers can also help suggest alternatives.

Need other support?

To learn more about accessing financial support through Children's Aid Foundation of Canada, visit the [For Youth page on our website](#). We can provide support for education, employment, housing, mental health, and much more.



**“COOKING
PROVIDES ME
WITH A SENSE
OF CONTROL
AND MEANING,
GROUNDING
FORCES I DIDN'T
ALWAYS HAVE
GROWING UP.”**

- Jae



CHANTAL'S

Easy-Peasy Chocolate Banana Muffins

Serves: 4-6

Total prep and cooking time: 45-60 minutes

Ingredients:

2 cups all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon baking soda
1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon cinnamon (or measure with your heart)
1 cup brown or white sugar (brown is best but white works too)
4 extremely overripe bananas, mashed
2 large eggs
4 tablespoons Greek yogurt
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
½ cup (120 ml) extra-virgin olive oil (coconut oil, vegetable oil, and applesauce work too)

Additions:

1 cup of chocolate chips (dark, milk, or semisweet) or chopped chocolate for a more affordable option

Instructions:

Preheat the oven to 400°F.

Line or grease a muffin pan, using a paper towel to spread butter or margarine across all the surfaces of your pan.

In a large bowl, mix your wet ingredients, starting with the bananas. Mash them with a fork on the bottom and side of the bowl until they have a smooth texture. This is easiest (and sweetest) if your bananas are very brown or black.

Add the sugar, eggs, yogurt, vanilla, and olive oil to the banana mixture.

Add the dry ingredients one by one to the wet mixture. Start with the flour, and then add the baking soda, salt, and cinnamon. Mix gently so as to not overmix. (Optional: Add the chocolate chips or chunks to the mixture and gently mix.)

Pour or scoop the batter into your pan, filling them until they are ¾ full.

Put your pan in the oven and bake at 400°F for the first 5 minutes only.

Reduce the temperature to 350°F for the remaining 20 to 25 minutes. Leave the pan in the oven as the temperature changes, as it allows the muffins to rise higher. Cook time may vary, but when finished, the top of the muffins should no longer look wet. You can use a toothpick or fork to test if they are done. If it comes out clean, then it is ready. If it comes out with batter, cook for an additional 5-10 minutes before checking again.

Once it's ready, remove it from the oven and let it cool for 5 minutes in the pan. After 5 minutes, remove the muffins from the pan and set on a cooling rack. Enjoy solo with a warm beverage or invite a friend or family member over to share.

Tip: This recipe has lots of room for variation. Add whatever mix-ins you'd like. There's no need to go out and purchase ingredients. This recipe is all about being accessible, affordable, and using what you have.



Drawing from her own journey through child welfare, Chantal (she/her) advocates for youth navigating the system and the transition to independence. She believes food is a powerful connector, a way to bring people together for a shared experience that nourishes both the body and the soul.

Growing up in poverty and an unsafe environment, I had a difficult relationship with food. Skipping meals or excessively exercising became part of my regular routine, and one of the only ways I was able to exercise control in my life. While everything around me was falling apart, the positive validation I received about my appearance made me feel like people cared, like I mattered.

I continued to feel isolated and misunderstood when I entered care at 12 years old. I especially felt judged around the dining table, feeling like I was the odd one out. I went back and forth between foster and kinship care until I was 16, when my foster parents had me move out on my own.

Now that I have my own family, both biological and found, my relationship with food has shifted. We have so many shared memories making this recipe together – my son licking the batter off the spoon as we clean up, preparing it for bake sales, and sharing it with friends and family. These moments have been an important part of my healing journey.

I've also found that taking the time to slow down and focus on baking and cooking is a true form of self-care. That's why I often pair this recipe with a cup of tea and honey because the ritual of making tea is also about being in the present and enjoying the moment.

Food should be for you, to soothe, to settle, and to share. Cooking for my friends and family is my little way of saying, 'I'm here for you, you matter, and it's okay to enjoy something.'



JAE'S Warm Chili

Serves: 8-10

Total prep and cooking time: 8 hours and 15 minutes (15 minutes to prep and 8 hours to cook)

Ingredients:

- 1 pound ground beef
- 1 cup diced onion
- 1 cup diced celery
- 1 cup diced green bell pepper
- 2 cloves garlic, cut into pieces
- 2 cans tomato purée
- 1 can diced tomatoes
- 1 can kidney beans
- 1 can six-bean blend
- Half a bag of taco seasoning
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon black pepper
- 1 teaspoon oregano
- 1 teaspoon parsley

Instructions:

Heat a skillet and add ground beef, a pinch of salt, and taco seasoning. Cook for 8-12 minutes.

While the beef is cooking, put the remaining ingredients in a slow cooker.

Once the beef is cooked, add it to the slow cooker with the other ingredients.

Simmer on low for the day, stirring every hour.

After 8 hours, the chili should be ready to eat and enjoy!

Tip: This chili is best enjoyed on a dreary but relaxing day at home.



A long-time ambassador for Children’s Aid Foundation of Canada, Jae (they/them) first shared their story in the original edition of A Safe Plate. They often say the Foundation feels like family, providing a sense of belonging and comfort that has sustained them for over ten years.

I’m happy to be back again after taking part in the first edition of the Foundation’s cookbook. My love of cooking is just as prominent in my life as it was then, when I shared my Famous Potato and Lemon Salmon recipe.

Cooking provides me with a sense of control and meaning, grounding forces I didn’t always have growing up. After an adoption breakdown led me to spend my childhood in foster care and group homes, the kitchen became a place where I could create something for myself.

This recipe, like most of my creations, was born from endless experimentation. I like to try out new things in the kitchen and share them with my friends to test out. It’s a win-win – they get a delicious meal and my imagination gets to run wild, dreaming up different food flavours and combinations.

This chili is flavourful, packed with hearty and healthy ingredients, and is easy to prepare... as long as you have a little bit of time and patience to get the flavours just right. I hope you enjoy it!



NATASHA'S

Broc-Fu

Serves: 2

Total prep and cooking time:
20 minutes

Ingredients:

1 block extra firm tofu
2 bunches broccoli
2 tablespoons olive oil
1 lemon
As much garlic as your heart desires
Salt, to taste

Instructions:

Break the broccoli apart with your hands.

Steam the broccoli, either in a microwave-safe bowl or in a saucepan and steamer on the stove.

Heat a frying pan on medium-high heat and drizzle the bottom of the pan with olive oil.

Chop the garlic and add it to the pan.

Immediately crumble up the tofu in your hands and add it to the pan with the garlic and olive oil. Stir the tofu and garlic occasionally, until the tofu turns a slight golden colour.

Cut your lemon in half, squeeze it over the tofu, and turn off the heat.

Once your broccoli has properly steamed, you can serve together and enjoy!

Tips: You can add as much garlic, olive oil, or lemon juice as you want! You can also add some salt to the tofu if desired.

Not a fan of tofu? You can replace it with chicken. Cut two boneless, skinless chicken breasts into small pieces, and season with salt. Heat a frying pan on medium-high heat, drizzle in olive oil, and cook the chicken, stirring occasionally, until it starts to brown and is mostly cooked through (about 5 to 7 minutes) before continuing with the garlic and lemon steps.



Food has always been a huge part of Natasha's (she/her) life. Having grown up on her mother's professional Persian cooking, she views food as a bridge between her heritage and her own journey toward self-discovery.

For me, food has always been about more than just familiar tastes or bold flavours. My mom was formally trained as a chef in Spain, and cooked incredible Persian food growing up. Even today, dishes like Kabob Koobideh connect me to my culture and my mom's home country of Iran.

When I entered care at age 14, my family was under a lot of pressure. My mom had emigrated from Tehran right after the revolution broke out and our family struggled. My parents went through a difficult divorce and my sister was experiencing chronic health problems. It wasn't easy.

I found that a lot of families were hesitant to foster someone my age. I think it's important to know that there are so many diverse and complicated situations in the foster care system, and every single kid, no matter their age, needs attention and support.

I created this "Broc-Fu" recipe when I was living on my own at 16 and dealing with food insecurity - I was struggling to get protein and vegetables into my diet. This dish was a simple solution. But more importantly, it takes me back to a time when I had the freedom to make my own decisions. I was exploring so many extracurriculars and new things, like weightlifting and yoga, which helped me gain a newfound sense of independence and motivation.

That is why I am proud of this recipe, because despite the difficulties I faced, I was able to create something healthy and nourishing for myself.



MICHELLE'S

Caribbean-Inspired Banana Bread

Serves: 12

Total prep and cooking time: 1 hour and 15 minutes

Ingredients:

2 cups all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon baking soda
¼ teaspoon salt
¾ cup brown sugar or white sugar
½ cup butter
1 tablespoon of vanilla extract
1 teaspoon of nutmeg
2 teaspoons of cinnamon
2 large eggs, beaten
2 ⅓ cups mashed, overripe bananas

Instructions:

Preheat your oven to 350°F.

Grease a 9x5-inch loaf pan or line it with parchment paper.

In a large bowl, mash the overripe bananas with a fork or potato masher, until smooth.

Add the melted butter, brown sugar, beaten eggs, and vanilla, mixing until well combined.

In a medium bowl, whisk together the flour, baking soda, salt, nutmeg, and cinnamon.

Gradually add the dry ingredients to the banana mixture, stirring until just combined. Do not overmix.

Pour the batter into the prepared loaf pan and smooth the top.

Bake for 60 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted in the centre comes out clean.

Remove from the oven and let cool in the pan for 10 minutes.

Transfer the loaf to a cooling rack and let cool completely before slicing.

Tips: This recipe works great with very ripe bananas, the riper, the sweeter and more flavourful bread!

For extra flavour, sprinkle a handful of chopped nuts or chocolate chips, or add coconut milk into the batter before baking.



Michelle's (she/her) experiences as a crown ward shaped her catering business, where care is a key ingredient in each meal served.

Growing up, my family came together around meals. I was lucky to learn early on that sharing food can bring comfort, joy and a sense of belonging. This shaped my understanding of care – it's all about creating moments of connection and warmth.

I lived in both foster and group care as a child, experiences that ultimately taught me resilience and independence. I learned firsthand the importance of care, stability, and nurturing connections, lessons that continue to guide me in my life and catering business today. Food has become both my tool and my language for expressing care in meaningful ways.

My family recipe for banana bread is a tribute to my grandmother's kitchen, where the sweet aroma of baking always made the house feel like home. With every bite comes warmth and love, making it more than just banana bread, it's a taste of cherished memories.

Moist, flavourful, and comforting, it blends ripe bananas with just the right touch of sweetness to create a loaf that's perfect for breakfast, dessert, or a quick snack.

My second recipe, fried chicken, has always been one of those comfort meals that brings people together in my family. It reminds me of Sunday dinners, celebrations, and the feeling of home. It's simple, comforting, and made with love, the kind of meal that creates memories around the table.

Cooking is not just about feeding someone's body, it's about nourishing their spirit. Preparing meals for others allows me to combine creativity with compassion. Sharing a meal (or a recipe in this case), whether simple or elaborate, is a way to show consideration and build connection.



MICHELLE'S

Jamaican Fried Chicken

Serves: 4

Total prep and cooking time: 30 minutes

Ingredients:

- 2-3 lbs chicken quarter leg and thigh
- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1-2 teaspoons salt
- 1 teaspoon black pepper
- 1 teaspoon paprika
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon chicken seasoning
- 1 teaspoon all-purpose seasoning
- 1 teaspoon onion powder
- 2 cloves of garlic
- 2 eggs
- 1 cup milk or buttermilk
- Oil for frying

Instructions:

Season chicken with salt, pepper, paprika, garlic powder, and onion powder.

In one bowl, whisk eggs and milk together.

In another bowl, combine flour with remaining seasonings.

Dip chicken into egg mixture, then coat in seasoned flour.

Heat oil to 350°F and add two cloves of garlic to the pan. Fry chicken until golden brown and fully cooked through (about 12-15 minutes depending on size).

Let rest on a wire rack or paper towel before serving.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



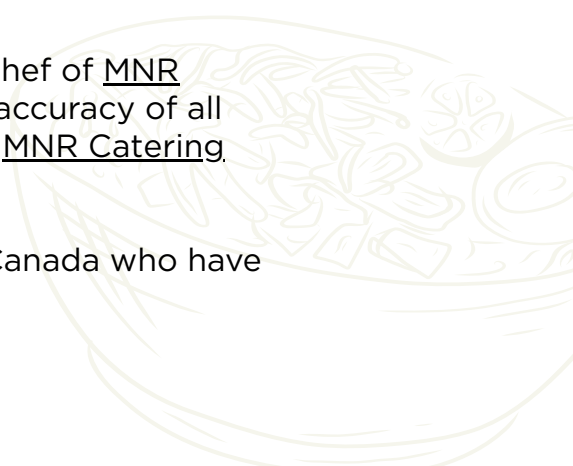
Many people came together to produce *More Than Meals*. The team at Children's Aid Foundation of Canada would like to give their thanks to all who made this project possible through their ideas, creativity, skills, and stories.

Our sincere thanks to:

The four young people who shared their incredible stories and delicious recipes with us:

Jae Elias Bruneau
Natasha Hickey-Dreux
Michelle Rochester
Chantal VanLeeuwen

Chef Michelle Rochester, President, CEO and Head Chef of MNR Catering, who crafted every recipe and ensured the accuracy of all ingredients, measurements, and instructions. Follow MNR Catering on Instagram!



The staff members at Children's Aid Foundation of Canada who have supported this project since its conception:

Niki Gastis
Jeffrey Schiffer
Vanessa Rankin
Tonya Reid
Carmen Silva

Our heartfelt thanks to our creative team, whose vision, artistry, and craftsmanship helped shape the visual and narrative direction of *More Than Meals*:

Rachel Callan of Rachel Callan Photography
Aislin Miller, Hannah Condie, and Sarah Davies of Dapple Creative Co.



More Than Meals is more than just a cookbook. It's a tribute to the restorative powers of cooking and storytelling. Whether you are a young person involved with the child welfare system, a foster parent, a child welfare advocate, a foodie or simply curious about the lives of young people supported by Children's Aid Foundation of Canada, we hope that *More Than Meals* will leave you with a deeper understanding of the child welfare landscape, a desire to inspire change and a host of new recipes to try.

Follow us on social media:



Children's Aid Foundation of Canada is our country's leading charity dedicated to improving the lives of children and youth involved with the child welfare system. For more information about the work of Children's Aid Foundation of Canada and to donate today, please visit cafdn.org.