

Ian's quest for good taste

A budding scientist steps into the kitchen

BY DEBBIE LEAMAN

My son Ian is a kid who doesn't see the box to think outside of. Always probing and rarely accepting the status quo, he hears "it can't be done" as the ultimate challenge. Passionate about science and cooking, Ian wants to be an inventor when he grows up. So, it shouldn't have surprised me when last year, an innocent story turned into a baking experiment that lasted for months. It all began with the Clif Bar.

By pre-school, Ian was already a budding scientist. At four, he bought a clipboard with his savings. At five, he carefully engineered 20 straws together to create a butterfly "proboscis" and insisted on drinking his juice from a table 10 feet away. At seven, bored with a kitchen chemistry set, he combined all the

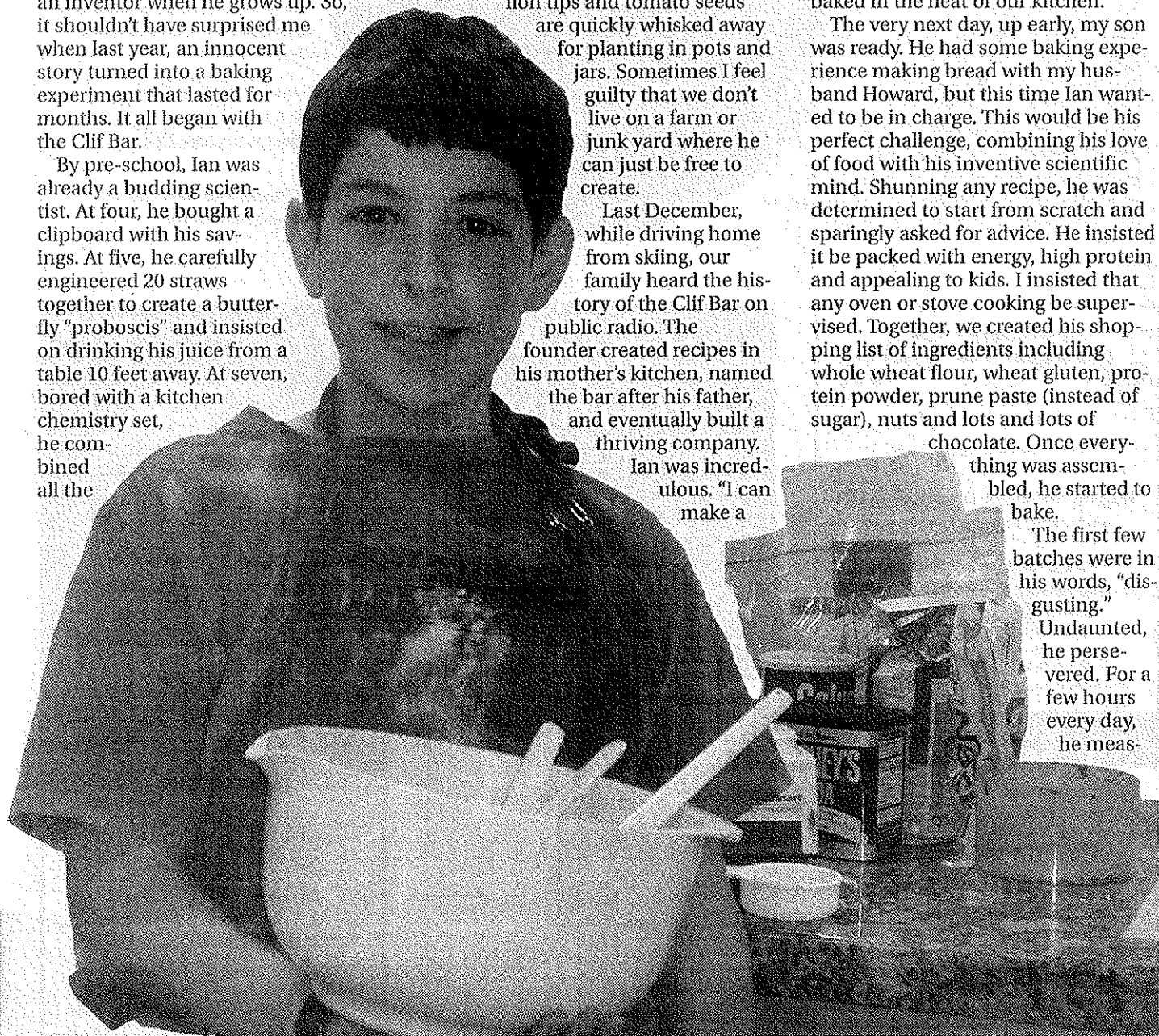
ingredients only to have the concoction blow up onto our newly painted ceiling. He cried at eight when he was too young to have a welding torch. Now 11, he fills my kitchen with experiments in progress. Whenever I make a salad, the avocado pits, scallion tips and tomato seeds are quickly whisked away for planting in pots and jars. Sometimes I feel guilty that we don't live on a farm or junk yard where he can just be free to create.

Last December, while driving home from skiing, our family heard the history of the Clif Bar on public radio. The founder created recipes in his mother's kitchen, named the bar after his father, and eventually built a thriving company. Ian was incredulous. "I can make a

better tasting bar than that!" What began as a harmless story turned into a calling, a personal quest. At that moment, Ian was inspired to create a better tasting nutrition bar. And, thus began our Christmas vacation. Many go to warm climates. We, however, baked in the heat of our kitchen.

The very next day, up early, my son was ready. He had some baking experience making bread with my husband Howard, but this time Ian wanted to be in charge. This would be his perfect challenge, combining his love of food with his inventive scientific mind. Shunning any recipe, he was determined to start from scratch and sparingly asked for advice. He insisted it be packed with energy, high protein and appealing to kids. I insisted that any oven or stove cooking be supervised. Together, we created his shopping list of ingredients including whole wheat flour, wheat gluten, protein powder, prune paste (instead of sugar), nuts and lots and lots of chocolate. Once everything was assembled, he started to bake.

The first few batches were in his words, "disgusting." Undaunted, he persevered. For a few hours every day, he meas-



ured, mixed and tasted. He experimented with cooking temperatures and times, baker's vs. dark chocolate, and proportions of flour, eggs and vanilla. Documenting his data on the computer, Ian created his own unique recipes.

Each day would bring a fresh idea, as he begged me to shop for new ingredients. "Mom, can we try mint leaves?" By week two he was grinding up nuts in the food processor, grating orange rinds, and pleading for strawberry extract.

After the first two days, I was adamant: he cooks, he cleans up. Cringing as I'd glance into the kitchen, I saw batter smudged across all surfaces, and stacks of bowls, utensils and flour everywhere. For the most part he cleaned as well as he could, but for days we'd find shreds of chocolate tracked around the house. At that point my mantra was "at least he's not blowing things up."

The holidays provided ample time for market research. Besides polling his friends about flavor preferences, Ian had a long discussion with neighbors about the pros and cons of Cliff vs. Luna bars. Hearing that they liked the icing on Luna Bars, he began coating each bar with a melted chocolate combination. Then, he enlisted his eight-year-old sister Rebecca as official taster. Throughout Christmas break, Rebecca's play-dates were punctuated by taste tests with her friends. Lining up different batches, Ian would ask the girls which one they preferred. Often, stuffed animals would join the judging as they voted on batches 4, 5, or 6, lemon vs. orange, chocolate-iced or plain.

Baking was his ritual, day in and day out for two weeks straight. Eventually I urged him to get away from the ovens and go ski, swim or

play with his friends. He obliged, but toted along a bag of energy bars for his buddies. By the end of Christmas break, I was ready for him to leave the kitchen. Having a 10-year-old commandeer my space was a lesson in patience.

One afternoon while searching for bulgar wheat to make tabouli, I realized it had been mistaken for protein powder and added to Ian's latest mixture. The unusual texture made for a

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particularly tooth-breaking batch. Unfortunately it was too late to retrieve that sample he had given our neighbor, a Marine, who was either kind enough to hold his tongue or in agony from a chipped tooth. Unfazed, Ian baked on.

When school was back in session, he distributed free samples at recess. At one point Howard had to explain to Ian's teacher that the flecks of green herbs in the chocolate bars were, in fact, mint. A big hit on the play-

ground, Ian was hooked and wanted to go retail. Rebecca was ready to design the packaging. Asking me where he could rent warehouse space, Ian was convinced I would take over the baking and financial operations while he pursued his fourth grade studies.

By the end of February, Ian allowed Howard to get involved. Actually cracking open a cookbook, they found a recipe for low-fat brownies and made a few revisions. Additional ingredients were thrown in and the batch was topped off with a light dusting of confectioner's sugar. They were delicious. Ian, however, preferred his own.

By March, Ian's interest waned—the weather was getting nicer and he was more interested in running around outside. He moved on to other activities and didn't bake for months.

In retrospect, this baking experience gave Ian much more than recipes. Shy by nature, but very determined, the bars gave him a much needed focus. The process helped him in school by providing a topic for a large writing project and we used his math skills to calculate the cost of each bar (\$.98). He learned to navigate the kitchen as his cooking skills unfolded. His persistence was impressive.

But now it's winter again and Ian is talking about creating an alternative engine for better fuel efficiency. He's already pummeled me with questions about carburetors and solar panels. I'm a little worried. Is it too late to book that San Diego trip for the holidays? ♦

Debbie Leaman has spent over 20 years in financial services and recently retired to explore new pathways as a writer. She lives in Salt Lake City with her husband and two children.

Ian Leaman's Chocolate Orange Energy Bars

Makes eight bars.

1/4 tsp. baking soda

Combine ingredients of both

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