

Growing up in Virginia, we had a law that school couldn't start until the week after Labor Day. Apparently, the thinking went that high schoolers were a vital source of labor for the end-of-summer tourist boom at our historic sites and amusement parks, and thus should not be herded into school any earlier than need be. Why that applied to grade schoolers, I don't know, but I blissfully reaped the benefits all 12 years that I could. So it's mystifying to me that students here are already in their fourth week of school, and my teacher husband is gearing up to give his first test. What kind of topsy-turvy world are we living in where "Winter Hours" at the library start on August 17?

Because my internal schedule is so mixed up, I've had two warring desires in my brain. The first is to hurry and do all the summer stuff I missed out on this year. (Lounge at the pool! Drink mojitos on the patio! Visit friends at the lake!) The other is to buckle down and do something good for my brain, dammit, because it's time to start thinking seriously again.

With the aforementioned husband back in the classroom, I've been left to my own devices on both sides of the summer/school competition. Luckily, I stumbled across a delicious compromise at the bookstore. Since many publishers are coming out with cheap paperback reprints of the classics, I splurged on some of the, let's say less challenging, classic novels. I've now plowed through *Dracula* by Bram Stoker (dark! gothic!), *The Age of Innocence* by Edith Wharton (way better read as a scandalous romance novel than dissected in a freshman English class!) and my favorite, *The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins. The Moonstone, considered the first English-language detective novel, is trashy enough for poolside reading but engrossing enough to last until bedtime. All three of them are "classics," so my back-to-school brain is pleased, without demanding too much effort on the part of the summer brain.

Let's not forget, too, that these late-August days bring the peak of the local crops into our markets. I've been bouncing around from [Pepper Place Market](#) to the [Finley Avenue Market](#) to reap the benefits in peaches, tomatoes, squash, and other veggies. In the height of summer, my idea of cooking is to smack a hunk of ripe tomato on a plate and salt and pepper liberally. But now that school days (dear old golden rule days) are here, I've got to comport myself better. I've now armed myself with Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* and the (disappointingly out of print) *Martha Stewart Living Cookbook*, and rolled up my sleeves for a few cooking lessons. I'm proud to report that Martha's recipe for *Salade Niçoise in Tomato Cups* was a rousing success last night, and ultimately, it wasn't much more challenging than my usual tomato recipe.

But if all this seriousness and buckled-downedness fails me, I have an endless summer ace up my sleeve. [Atmosphere](#), the very mod home shop in Pepper Place, carries a jar candle called "A Day at the Beach" that means the seashore is only a matchbook away. Made by Botanicus, the candle is an olfactory jaunt to a place where Coppertone always rules, the waves are crashing nearby, and the biggest decision to make is Bud or Bud Light. It's the perfect antidote to taking this whole "school" thing too seriously, and I'm sure it will come in handy as the days get shorter and the temperatures finally begin to drop.