

Why Cook?

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Cooking has always been a part of my life, but more like the furniture than an object of scrutiny, much less a passion. I counted myself lucky to have a parent — my mother — who loved to cook and almost every night made us a delicious meal. By the time I had a place of my own, I could find my way around a kitchen well enough, the result of nothing more purposeful than all those hours spent hanging around the kitchen while my mother fixed dinner. And though once I had my own place I cooked whenever I had the time, I seldom *made* time for cooking or gave it much consideration. My kitchen skills, such as they were, were pretty much frozen in place by the time I turned thirty. Truth be told, my most successful dishes leaned heavily on the cooking of others, as when I drizzled my incredible sage-butter sauce over store-bought ravioli. Every now and then I'd look at a cookbook or clip a recipe from the newspaper to add a new dish to my tiny repertoire, or I'd buy a new kitchen gadget, though most of these eventually ended up in a closet.

In retrospect, the mildness of my interest in cooking surprises me, since my interest in every other link of the food chain has been so keen. I've been a gardener since I was eight, growing mostly vegetables, and I've always enjoyed being on farms and writing about agriculture. I've also written a fair amount about the opposite end of the food chain — the eating end, I mean, and the implications of our eating for our health. But to the middle links of the food chain, where the stuff of nature gets transformed into the things we eat and drink, I hadn't really given much thought.

Until, that is, I began trying to unpack a curious paradox I had noticed while watching television, which was simply this: How is it that at the precise historical moment when Americans were abandoning the kitchen, handing over the preparation of most of our meals to the food industry, we began spending so much of our time thinking about food and watching other people cook it on television? The less cooking we were doing in our own lives, it seemed, the more that food and its vicarious preparation transfixed us.

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Our culture seems to be of at least two minds on this subject. Survey research confirms we're cooking less and buying more prepared meals every year. The amount of time spent preparing meals in American households has fallen by half since the midsixties, when I was watching my mom fix dinner, to a scant twenty-seven minutes a day. (Americans spend less time cooking than people in any other nation, but the general downward trend is global.) And yet at the same time we're *talking* about cooking more — and watching cooking, and reading about cooking, and going to restaurants designed so that we can watch the work performed live. We live in an age when professional cooks are household names, some of them as famous as athletes or movie stars. The very same activity that many people regard as a form of drudgery has somehow been elevated to a popular spectator sport. When you consider that twenty-seven minutes is less time than it takes to watch a single episode of *Top Chef* or *The Next Food Network Star*, you realize that there are now millions of people who spend more time watching food being cooked on television than they spend actually cooking it themselves. I don't need to point out that the food you watch being cooked on television is not food you get to eat.

This is peculiar. After all, we're not watching shows or reading books about sewing or darning socks or changing the oil in our car, three other domestic chores that we have been only too happy to outsource — and then promptly drop from conscious awareness. But cooking somehow feels different. The work, or the process, retains an emotional or psychological power we can't quite shake, or don't want to. And in fact it was after a long bout of watching cooking programs on television that I began to wonder if this activity I had always taken for granted might be worth taking a little more seriously.

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I developed a few theories to explain what I came to think of as the Cooking Paradox. The first and most obvious is that watching other people cook is not exactly a new behavior for us humans. Even when "everyone" still cooked, there were plenty of us who mainly watched: men for the most part, and children. Most of us have happy memories of watching our

mothers in the kitchen, performing feats that sometimes looked very much like sorcery and typically resulted in something tasty to eat. In ancient Greece, the word for “cook,” “butcher,” and “priest” was the same — *mageiros* — and the word shares an etymological root with “magic.” I would watch, rapt, when my mother conjured her most magical dishes, like the tightly wrapped packages of fried chicken Kiev that, when cut open with a sharp knife, liberated a pool of melted butter and an aromatic gust of herbs. But watching an everyday pan of eggs get scrambled was nearly as riveting a spectacle, as the slimy yellow goop suddenly leapt into the form of savory gold nuggets. Even the most ordinary dish follows a satisfying arc of transformation, magically becoming something more than the sum of its ordinary parts. And in almost every dish, you can find, besides the culinary ingredients, the ingredients of a story: a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Then there are the cooks themselves, the heroes who drive these little dramas of transformation. Even as it vanishes from our daily lives, we’re drawn to the rhythms and textures of the work cooks do, which seems so much more direct and satisfying than the more abstract and formless tasks most of us perform in our jobs these days. Cooks get to put their hands on real stuff, not just keyboards and screens but fundamental things like plants and animals and fungi. They get to work with the primal elements, too, fire and water, earth and air, using them — mastering them! — to perform their tasty alchemies. How many of us still do the kind of work that engages us in a dialogue with the material world that concludes — assuming the chicken Kiev doesn’t prematurely leak or the soufflé doesn’t collapse — with such a gratifying and delicious sense of closure?

So maybe the reason we like to watch cooking on television and read about cooking in books is that there are things about cooking we really miss. We might not feel we have the time or energy (or the knowledge) to do it ourselves every day, but we’re not prepared to see it disappear from our lives altogether. If cooking is, as the anthropologists tell us, a defining human activity — the act with which culture begins, according to Claude Lévi-Strauss — then maybe we shouldn’t be surprised that watching its processes unfold would strike deep emotional chords.

The idea that cooking is a defining human activity is not a new one. In 1773, the Scottish writer James Boswell, noting that “no beast is a cook,” called *Homo sapiens* “the cooking animal.” (Though he might have reconsidered that definition had he been able to gaze upon the frozen-food cases at Walmart.) Fifty years later, in *The Physiology of Taste*, the French gastronome Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin claimed that cooking made us who we are; by teaching men to use fire, it had “done the most to advance the cause of civilization.” More recently, Lévi-Strauss, writing in *The Raw and the Cooked* in 1964, reported that many of the world’s cultures entertained a similar view, regarding cooking as the symbolic activity that “estab-

lishes the difference between animals and people.”

For Lévi-Strauss, cooking was a metaphor for the human transformation of raw nature into cooked culture. But in the years since the publication of *The Raw and the Cooked*, other anthropologists have begun to take quite literally the idea that the invention of cooking might hold the evolutionary key to our humanness. A few years ago, a Harvard anthropologist and primatologist named Richard Wrangham published a fascinating book called *Catching Fire*, in which he argues that it was the discovery of cooking by our early ancestors — and not tool making or meat eating or language — that set us apart from the apes and made us human. According to the “cooking hypothesis,” the advent of cooked food altered the course of human evolution. By providing our forebears with a more energy-dense and easy-to-digest diet, it allowed our brains to grow bigger (brains being notorious energy guzzlers) and our guts to shrink. It seems that raw food takes much more time and energy to chew and digest, which is why other primates our size carry around substantially larger digestive tracts and spend many more of their waking hours chewing — as much as six hours a day.

Cooking, in effect, took part of the work of chewing and digestion and performed it for us outside of the body, using outside sources of energy. Also, since cooking detoxifies many potential sources of food, the new technology cracked open a treasure trove of calories unavailable to other animals. Freed from the necessity of spending our days gathering large quantities of raw food and then chewing (and chewing) it, humans could now devote their time, and their metabolic resources, to other purposes, like creating a culture.

Cooking gave us not just the meal but also the occasion: the practice of eating together at an appointed time and place. This was something new under the sun, for the forager of raw food would have likely fed himself on the go and alone, like all the other animals. (Or, come to think of it, like the industrial eaters we’ve more recently become, grazing at gas stations and eating by ourselves whenever and wherever.) But sitting down to common meals, making eye contact, sharing food, and exercising self-restraint all served to civilize us. “Around that fire,” Wrangham writes, “we became tame!”

Cooking thus transformed us, and not only by making us more sociable and civil. Once cooking allowed us to expand our cognitive capacity at the expense of our digestive capacity, there was no going back: Our big brains and tiny guts now depended on a diet of cooked food. (Raw-foodists take note.) What this means is that cooking is now obligatory — it is, as it were, baked into our biology. What Winston Churchill once said of architecture — “First we shape our buildings, and then they shape us” — might also be said of cooking. First we cooked our food, and then our food cooked us.

If cooking is as central to human identity, biology, and culture as Wrangham suggests, it stands to reason that the decline of cooking in our time would have serious consequences for

modern life. And so it has. Are they all bad? Not at all. The outsourcing of much of the work of cooking to corporations has relieved women of what has traditionally been their exclusive responsibility for feeding the family, making it easier for them to work outside the home and have careers. It has headed off many of the conflicts and domestic arguments that such a large shift in gender roles and family dynamics was bound to spark. It has relieved all sorts of other pressures in the household, including longer workdays and overscheduled children, and saved us time that we can now invest in other pursuits. It has also allowed us to diversify our diets substantially, making it possible even for people with no cooking skills and little money to enjoy a whole different cuisine every night of the week. All that's required is a microwave.

These are no small benefits. Yet they have come at a cost that we are just now beginning to reckon. Industrial cooking has taken a substantial toll on our health and well-being. Corporations cook very differently from how people do (which is why we usually call what they do "food processing" instead of cooking). They tend to use much more sugar, fat, and salt than people cooking for people do; they also deploy novel chemical ingredients seldom found in pantries in order to make their food last longer and look fresher than it really is. So it will come as no surprise that the decline in home cooking closely tracks the rise in obesity and all the chronic diseases linked to diet.

The rise of fast food and the decline in home cooking have also undermined the institution of the shared meal, by encouraging us to eat different things and to eat them on the run and often alone. Survey researchers tell us we're spending more time engaged in "secondary eating," as this more or less constant grazing on packaged foods is now called, and less time engaged in "primary eating" — a rather depressing term for the once-venerable institution known as the meal.

The shared meal is no small thing. It is a foundation of family life, the place where our children learn the art of conversation and acquire the habits of civilization: sharing, listening, taking turns, navigating differences, arguing without offending. What have been called the "cultural contradictions of capitalism" — its tendency to undermine the stabilizing social forms it depends on — are on vivid display today at the modern American dinner table, along with all the brightly colored packages that the food industry has managed to plant there.

These are, I know, large claims to make for the centrality of cooking (and not cooking) in our lives, and a caveat or two are in order. For most of us today, the choice is not nearly as blunt as I've framed it: that is, home cooking from scratch versus fast food prepared by corporations. Most of us occupy a place somewhere between those bright poles, a spot that is constantly shifting with the day of the week, the occasion, and our mood. Depending on the night, we might cook a meal from scratch, or we might go out or order in, or we might "sort of" cook. This last option involves availing ourselves of the various and very useful shortcuts that an industrial food economy offers: the package of spinach in the freezer, the can of wild salmon

in the pantry, the box of store-bought ravioli from down the street or halfway around the world. What constitutes "cooking" takes place along a spectrum, as indeed it has for at least a century, when packaged foods first entered the kitchen and the definition of "scratch cooking" began to drift. (Thereby allowing me to regard my packaged ravioli with sage-butter sauce as a culinary achievement.) Most of us over the course of a week find ourselves all over that spectrum. What is new, however, is the great number of people now spending most nights at the far end of it, relying for the preponderance of their meals on an industry willing to do everything for them save the heating and the eating. "We've had a hundred years of packaged foods," a food-marketing consultant told me, "and now we're going to have a hundred years of packaged meals."

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Not long ago, I read an Op-Ed piece in *The Wall Street Journal* about the restaurant industry, written by the couple that publishes the Zagat restaurant guides. Rather than coming home after work to cook, the Zagats suggested, "people would be better off staying an extra hour in the office doing what they do well, and letting bargain restaurants do what they do best."

Here in a nutshell is the classic argument for the division of labor, which, as Adam Smith and countless others have pointed out, has given us many of the blessings of civilization. It is what allows me to make a living sitting at this screen writing, while others grow my food, sew my clothes, and supply the energy that lights and heats my house. I can probably earn more in an hour of writing or even teaching than I could save in a whole week of cooking. Specialization is undeniably a powerful social and economic force. And yet it is also debilitating. It breeds helplessness, dependence, and ignorance, and, eventually, it undermines any sense of responsibility.

Our society assigns us a tiny number of roles: We're producers of one thing at work, consumers of a great many other things all the rest of the time, and then, once a year or so, we take on the temporary role of citizen and cast a vote. Virtually all our needs and desires we delegate to specialists of one kind or another — our meals to the food industry, our health to the medical profession, entertainment to Hollywood and the media, mental health to the therapist or the drug company, caring for nature to the environmentalist, political action to the politician, and on and on it goes. Before long it becomes hard to imagine doing much of anything for ourselves — anything, that is, except the work we do to "make a living." For everything else, we feel like we've lost the skills, or that there's someone who can do it better. (I recently heard about an agency that will dispatch a sympathetic someone to visit your elderly parents if you can't spare the time to do it yourself.) It seems as though we can no longer imagine anyone but a professional or an institution or a product supplying our daily needs or solving our problems. This learned helplessness is, of course, much to the advantage of the corporations eager to step forward and do all this work for us.

One problem with the division of labor in our complex economy is how it obscures the lines of connection, and therefore of responsibility, between our everyday acts and their real-world consequences. Specialization makes it easy to forget about the filth of the coal-fired power plant that is lighting this pristine computer screen, or the back-breaking labor it took to pick the strawberries for my cereal, or the misery of the hog that lived and died so I could enjoy my bacon. Specialization neatly hides our implication in all that is done on our behalf by unknown other specialists half a world away.

Perhaps what most commends cooking to me is that it offers a powerful corrective to this way of being in the world — a corrective that is still available to all of us. To butcher a pork shoulder is to be forcibly reminded that this is the shoulder of a large mammal, made up of distinct groups of muscles with a purpose quite apart from feeding me. The work itself gives me a keener interest in the story of the hog: where it came from and how it found its way to my kitchen. In my hands its flesh feels a little less like the product of industry than of nature; indeed, less like a product at all. Likewise, to grow the greens I'm serving with this pork, greens that in late spring seem to grow back almost as fast as I can cut them, is a daily reminder of nature's abundance, the everyday miracle by which photons of light are turned into delicious things to eat.

Handling these plants and animals, taking back the production and the preparation of even just some part of our food, has the salutary effect of making visible again many of the lines of connection that the supermarket and the "home-meal replacement" have succeeded in obscuring, yet of course never actually eliminated. To do so is to take back a measure of responsibility, too, to become, at the very least, a little less glib in one's pronouncements.

Especially one's pronouncements about "the environment," which suddenly begins to seem a little less "out there" and a lot closer to home. For what is the environmental crisis if not a crisis of the way we live? The Big Problem is nothing more or less than the sum total of countless little everyday choices, most of them made by us (consumer spending represents nearly three-quarters of the U.S. economy) and the rest of them made by others in the name of our needs and desires. If the environmental crisis is ultimately a crisis of character, as Wendell Berry told us way back in the 1970s, then sooner or later it will have to be addressed at that level — at home, as it were. In our yards and kitchens and minds.

As soon as you start down this path of thinking, the quotidian space of the kitchen appears in a startling new light. It begins to matter more than we ever imagined. The unspoken reason why political reformers from Vladimir Lenin to Betty Friedan sought to get women out of the kitchen was that nothing of importance — nothing worthy of their talents and intelligence and convictions — took place there. The only worthy arenas for consequential action were the workplace and the public square. But this was before the environmental crisis had come into view, and before the industrialization of our eating created a crisis in our health. Changing the world will

always require action and participation in the public realm, but in our time that will no longer be sufficient. We'll have to change the way we live, too. What that means is that the sites of our everyday engagement with nature — our kitchens, gardens, houses, cars — matter to the fate of the world in a way they never have before.

To cook or not to cook thus becomes a consequential question. Though I realize that is putting the matter a bit too bluntly. Cooking means different things at different times to different people; seldom is it an all-or-nothing proposition. Yet even to cook a few more nights a week than you already do, or to devote a Sunday to making a few meals for the week, or perhaps to try every now and again to make something you only ever expected to buy — even these modest acts will constitute a kind of a vote. A vote for what, exactly? Well, in a world where so few of us are obliged to cook at all anymore, to choose to do so is to lodge a protest against specialization — against the total rationalization of life. Against the infiltration of commercial interests into every last cranny of our lives. To cook for the pleasure of it, to devote a portion of our leisure to it, is to declare our independence from the corporations seeking to organize our every waking moment into yet another occasion for consumption. (Come to think of it, our nonwaking moments as well: Ambien, anyone?) It is to reject the debilitating notion that, at least while we're at home, production is work best done by someone else, and the only legitimate form of leisure is consumption. This dependence marketers call "freedom."

Cooking has the power to transform more than plants and animals: It transforms us, too, from mere consumers into producers. Not completely, not all the time, but I have found that even to shift the ratio between these two identities a few degrees toward the side of production yields deep and unexpected satisfactions. The regular exercise of these simple skills for producing some of the necessities of life increases self-reliance and freedom while reducing our dependence on distant corporations. Not just our money but our power flows toward them whenever we cannot supply any of our everyday needs and desires ourselves. And it begins to flow back toward us, and our community, as soon as we decide to take some responsibility for feeding ourselves. This has been an early lesson of the rising movement to rebuild local food economies, a movement that ultimately depends for its success on our willingness to put more thought and effort into feeding ourselves. Not every day, not every meal — but more often than we do, whenever we can.

Cooking, I have found, gives us the opportunity, so rare in modern life, to work directly in our own support, and in the support of the people we feed. If this is not "making a living," I don't know what is. In the calculus of economics, doing so may not always be the most efficient use of an amateur cook's time, but in the calculus of human emotion, it is beautiful even so. For is there any practice less selfish, any labor less alienated, any time less wasted, than preparing something delicious and nourishing for people you love? ■