The Cooking Animal

MICHAEL POLLAN

Michael Pollan has written extensively about food and changes in our relationship to it with the rise of industrialization and agribusiness. Some of his best known works are The Botany of Desire (2001), The Omnivore's Dilemma (2006), and In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto (2009). Pollan is a contributing writer to the New York Times, where the essay “Out of the Kitchen, Onto the Couch” appeared on July 8, 2009. “The Cooking Animal” is an excerpt from that essay. Pollan is the Knight Professor of Journalism at the University of California, Berkeley and Recipient of the 2010 Lennon-Ono Grant for Peace.

THINKING AHEAD  What do you think are the reasons that humankind developed the art of cooking? What effect has cooking had on the human race? What do you think is the future of cooking as a part of our culture?

Paired Selection  Read this selection and the one that follows for two approaches to a similar topic. Then, answer the “Drawing Connections” questions on p. 113.

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 Wal-Mart. 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, the anthropologist Claude Lévi- Strauss, writing in 1964 in The Raw and the Cooked, found that many cultures entertained a similar view, regarding cooking as a symbolic way of distinguishing ourselves from the animals.

For Lévi- Strauss, cooking is a metaphor for the human transformation of nature into culture, but in the years since The Raw and the Cooked, other anthropologists have begun to take quite literally the idea that cooking is the key to our humanity. Earlier this year, Richard Wrangham, a Harvard anthropologist, published a fascinating book called Catching Fire, in which he argues that it was the discovery of cooking by our early ancestors—not tool- making or language or meat- eating—that made us human.

1 gastronome: A connoisseur of good food; a “foodie.”
providing our primate forebears with a more energy-dense and easy-to-digest diet, cooked food altered the course of human evolution, allowing our brains to grow bigger (brains are 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 of our size carry around substantially larger digestive tracts and spend many more of their waking hours chewing: up to six hours a day. (That's nearly as much time as Guy Fieri devotes to the activity.) Also, since cooking detoxifies many foods, it cracked open a treasure trove of nutritious calories unavailable to other animals. Freed from the need to spend 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 likely have fed himself on the go and alone, like the animals. (Or, come to think of it, like the industrial eaters we've become, grazing at gas stations and skipping meals.) But sitting down to common meals, making eye contact, sharing food, all served to civilize us; "around that fire," Wrangham says, "we became tamer.

If cooking is as central to human identity and culture as Wrangham believes, it stands to reason that the decline of cooking in our time would have a profound effect on modern life. At the very least, you would expect that its rapid disappearance from everyday life might leave us feeling nostalgic for the sights and smells and the sociality of the cook-fire. Bobby Flay and Rachael Ray may be pushing precisely that emotional button. Interestingly, the one kind of home cooking that is actually on the rise today (according to Harry Balzer) is outdoor grilling. Chunks of animal flesh seared over an open fire: grilling is cooking at its most fundamental and explicit, the transformation of the raw into the cooked right before our eyes. It makes a certain sense that the grill would be gaining adherents at the very moment when cooking meals and eating them together is fading from the culture. (While men have hardly become equal partners in the kitchen, they are cooking more today than ever before: about 13 percent of all meals, many of them on the grill.)

Yet we don't crank up the barbecue every day; grilling for most people is more ceremony than routine. We seem to be well on our way to turning cooking into a form of weekend recreation, a backyard sport for which we outfit ourselves at Williams-Sonoma,^ or a televised spectator sport we watch from the couch. Cooking's fate may be to join some of our other weekend exercises in recreational atavism:^ camping and gardening and hunting and riding on horseback. Something in us apparently likes to be reminded of our distant origins every now and then and to celebrate whatever rough skills

^ metabolic: Any basic process of organic functioning or operation.
^ Williams-Sonoma: A high-end cooking store.
^ atavism: Reversion, or throwback.
for contending with the natural world might survive in us, beneath the thin crust of 21st-century civilization.

To play at farming or foraging for food strikes us as harmless enough, perhaps because the delegating of those activities to other people in real life is something most of us are generally O.K. with. But to relegate the activity of cooking to a form of play, something that happens just on weekends or mostly on television, seems much more consequential. The fact is that not cooking may well be deleterious to our health, and there is reason to believe that the outsourcing of food preparation to corporations and 16-year-olds has already taken a toll on our physical and psychological well-being.

Consider some recent research on the links between cooking and dietary health. A 2003 study by a group of Harvard economists led by David Cutler found that the rise of food preparation outside the home could explain most of the increase in obesity in America. Mass production has driven down the cost of many foods, not only in terms of price but also in the amount of time required to obtain them. The French fry did not become the most popular “vegetable” in America until industry relieved us of the considerable effort needed to prepare French fries ourselves. Similarly, the mass production of cream-filled cakes, fried chicken wings and taquitos, exotically flavored chips or cheesy puffs of refined flour, has transformed all these hard-to-make-at-home foods into the sort of everyday fare you can pick up at the gas station on a whim and for less than a dollar. The fact that we no longer have to plan or even wait to enjoy these items, as we would if we were making them ourselves, makes us that much more likely to indulge impulsively.

Cutler and his colleagues demonstrate that as the “time cost” of food preparation has fallen, calorie consumption has gone up, particularly consumption of the sort of snack and convenience foods that are typically cooked outside the home. They found that when we don’t have to cook meals, we eat more of them; as the amount of time Americans spend cooking has dropped by about half, the number of meals Americans eat in a day has climbed; since 1977, we’ve added approximately half a meal to our daily intake.

Cutler and his colleagues also surveyed cooking patterns across several cultures and found that obesity rates are inversely correlated with the amount of time spent on food preparation. The more time a nation devotes to food preparation at home, the lower its rate of obesity. In fact, the amount of time spent cooking predicts obesity rates more reliably than female participation in the labor force or income. Other research supports the idea that cooking is a better predictor of a healthful diet than social class: a 1992 study in The Journal of the American Dietetic Association found that poor women who routinely cooked were more likely to eat a more healthful diet than well-to-do women who did not.

So cooking matters—a lot. Which, when you think about it, should come as no surprise. When we let corporations do the cooking, they’re bound to go heavy on sugar, fat and salt; these are three tastes we’re hard-wired to like, very cheap, and built that it has which televisions of the to a kitchen. Har. ches: tea, coo the wor very mo fers market rec hit this shan.
like, which happen to be dirt cheap to add and do a good job masking the shortcomings of processed food. And if you make special-occasion foods cheap and easy enough to eat every day, we will eat them every day. The time and work involved in cooking, as well as the delay in gratification built into the process, served as an important check on our appetite. Now that check is gone, and we’re struggling to deal with the consequences.

The question is, Can we ever put the genie back into the bottle? Once it has been destroyed, can a culture of everyday cooking be rebuilt? One in which we share equally in the work? One in which the cooking shows on television once again teach people how to cook from scratch and, as Julia Child once did, actually empower them to do it?

Let us hope so. Because it’s hard to imagine ever reforming the American way of eating or, for that matter, the American food system unless millions of Americans—women and men—are willing to make cooking a part of daily life. The path to a diet of fresher, unprocessed food, not to mention a revitalized local-food economy, passes straight through the home kitchen.

But if this is a dream you find appealing, you might not want to call Harry Balzer right away to discuss it.

"Not going to happen," he told me. "Why? Because we’re basically cheap and lazy. And besides, the skills are already lost. Who is going to teach the next generation to cook? I don’t see it.

"We’re all looking for someone else to cook for us. The next American cook is going to be the supermarket. Takeout from the supermarket, that’s the future. All we need now is the drive-through supermarket."

Crusty as a fresh baguette, Harry Balzer insists on dealing with the world, and human nature, as it really is, or at least as he finds it in the survey data he has spent the past three decades poring over. But for a brief moment, I was able to engage him in the project of imagining a slightly different reality. This took a little doing. Many of his clients—which include many of the big chain restaurants and food manufacturers—profit handsomely from the decline and fall of cooking in America; indeed, their marketing has contributed to it. Yet Balzer himself made it clear that he recognizes all that the decline of everyday cooking has cost us. So I asked him how, in an ideal world, Americans might begin to undo the damage that the modern diet of industrially prepared food has done to our health.

"Easy. You want Americans to eat less? I have the diet for you. It’s short, and it’s simple. Here’s my diet plan: Cook it yourself. That’s it. Eat anything you want—just as long as you’re willing to cook it yourself."

5 baguette: A loaf of French bread that is long and crusty.
EXERCISING VOCABULARY

1. Record your own definition for each of these words.
   - primate (adj.) (2)
   - forebears (n.) (2)
   - notorious (adj.) (2)
   - detoxifies (v.) (2)
   - trove (n.) (2)
   - forager (n.) (3)
   - seared (adj.) (4)
   - explicit (adj.) (4)
   - adherents (n.) (4)
   - relegate (v.) (6)
   - deleterious (adj.) (6)
   - whim (n.) (7)
   - inversely (adv.) (9)
   - correlated (v.) (9)
   - shortcomings (n.) (10)
   - gratification (n.) (10)
   - check (n.) (10)
   - poring (v.) (16)
   - handsomely (adv.) (16)

2. In paragraph 6, the author writes, “The fact is that not cooking may well be deleterious to our health, and there is reason to believe that the outsourcing of food preparation to corporations and 16-year-olds has already taken a toll on our physical and psychological well-being.” What happens when a business practices outsourcing? How can food preparation be subject to outsourcing? Who are the corporations and 16-year-olds that Pollan refers to here?

3. Pollan says that human beings are “hard-wired to like” three tastes: “sugar, fat and salt” (para. 10). What does it mean when something is hardwired? How can tastes be hardwired?

4. In paragraph 12, the writer states, “The path to a diet of fresher, unprocessed food, not to mention to a revitalized local-food economy, passes straight through the home kitchen.” Look up the definition of the word revitalized. From which root word does it come? What then is a revitalized economy?

PROBING CONTENT

1. Who were James Boswell and Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin? What did they have to say about cooking?

2. According to Lévi-Strauss and other anthropologists, what effect did cooking have on human evolution? Why?

3. What effect has the decline of cooking had on modern life? Which one kind of cooking has increased? Why?

4. Who is David Cutler? What have he and his colleagues discovered about food preparation around the world? What have they discovered about obesity?

5. How does Harry Balzer envision the role the supermarket will play in the future? How does he believe that Americans can improve their diets and their health?
CONSIDERING CRAFT

1. Find two examples where the author uses humor in his essay. How does this occasional use of humor affect the tone of this essay?

2. In his essay, Pollan liberally paraphrases the words of other people. What effect does this strategy have on your reading?

3. Find two examples of the writer's naming celebrity chefs in his essay. Why does he do this?

4. Pollan includes several interesting metaphors in his essay. For example, in paragraph 5, he compares grilling to "a backyard sport for which we outfit ourselves at Williams-Sonoma, or a televised spectator sport we watch from the couch." Find another example in which he uses a metaphor. Explain what effect this figure of speech has on your reading experience.

5. What effect does Pollan's use of expressions such as "crank up the barbecue" (para. 5) and "put the genie back in the bottle" (para. 11) have on your understanding of this essay? Why does he include them?

WRITING PROMPTS

Responding to the Topic  Write an essay in which you discuss how the invention of cooking has affected humankind. Use Pollan's essay as inspiration. Do more research on the topic by consulting the works of some of the experts he refers to in "The Cooking Animal."

Responding to the Writer  How do you react to the writer’s image of the future of cooking and eating? Write an essay in which you present your own vision of our culinary future. Cite specific reasons explaining why and how you agree or disagree with the vision presented in Pollan's essay.

Responding to Multiple Viewpoints  How would Bill McKibben ("The Only Way to Have a Cow," p. 129) and Seanon Wong ("Noodles vs. Sesame Seed Buns" p. 123) react to the picture Pollan paints of the future of cooking and eating? Write an essay in which you answer this question.

For a quiz on this reading, go to bedfordsmartins.com/mirror.