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Our Relationship Status with Food: It's Complicated

Who were the first people to ever cook food and why did we ever begin to cook food in the first place? Around 1.9 million years ago, at the turn of the late Pliocene epoch, early humans were consuming a diet that consisted of leaves and fibrous roots for breakfast, raw meat and brains from monkeys for lunch, and leaves, fruits, and grubs for dinner (Lawton 2016). Then there was fire. Warmth, illuminous, sometimes uncontrollable and dangerous. Igniting the excitement of curiosity and potential in the brain of *Homo erectus*. *What if we put our food to the flame?* Suddenly, the appetites of our early ancestors were satiated for longer. We didn't know it at the time but cooking even the most elemental of foods—potatoes, eggs, oats, etc.—release an immense quantity of calories that were once locked into undigestible fibers that only temporarily satiated our ancestors. Once the knowledge of cooking food over flame became widespread and more foodstuffs were cooked, our ancestors had increased time to do other tasks such as rearing children at home, building larger houses, establishing trade and ideas, and creating job roles. Society was born.

Although we've come a long way from putting what we hunt and gather onto an open flame, we seem to have digressed a bit in the effort we put into cooking. Michael Pollan delves into this issue with his 2009 *The New York Times Magazine* article "Out of the Kitchen, Onto the Couch." With the invention of the television, cooking shows started popping up. They were on par with cookbooks, with a more interactive spin to the instruction. Women could learn to cook

more elaborate meals, spending more time in preparations, cooking, and presentation for her family once dinner came around. In more recent times, women are increasingly leaving the house and deviating from traditional family roles to go to college, start a career, and make a living on their own. As this shift came to be, cooking shows became networks such as The Food Network. The audience has shifted from instructing women on how to cook certain dishes to a more family-oriented viewing of food battles, time-based competitions, and perfectly-staged homestyle “from scratch” set ups. People view cooking now as a time hassle, especially after a long day of work outside of the home. “The average American spends a mere 27 minutes a day on food preparation (another four minutes cleaning up); that’s less than half the time we spent cooking [in the 1960s]” (4). We now find it less compelling to cook a meal than to just sit and watch food-related shows. There are plenty of reasons to support this shift such as the rise of feminism and woman-work force, TV audience primarily being men, the advent of restaurants, fast-food, loss of productivity, and cost.

In the 1960s, a clumsy, eager, and unedited woman by the name of Julia Child appeared on TV with her show *The French Chef*. Her show was aimed for the audience of women at home who want to hone their skills in the kitchen and that, given time, confidence, and enthusiasm *food isn't that difficult to make*. And she surely had enthusiasm. In one of her episodes, Child is seen preparing a pancake on a pan and attempting to flip it. She has uncertainty and caution in her voice. When she executes the flip, she flounders, and the pancake goes all over the stovetop. “When I flipped it, I didn’t have the courage to do it the way I should have. You can always pick it up ... The only way you learn to flip things is just to flip them!” (Pollan 5). This exemplification of failure was a show to women watching that making a mistake is all in the learning experience that *is* cooking. Failure is known well in cooking, which helps one learn how

to perfect it in the future. It seems not to matter, either, whether cooking failures make or break the meal itself. Conversely to The Food Network of today, which is littered with perfect kitchen sets modeled after countryside ranches or Italian stucco waterfront homes and features celebrities (rarely regular people). The Food Network daytime cooking shows are simplistic, efficient, flawless, and are less inclined to teach how to cook more so to show what the perfect end-result is. This flawless nature of cooking shows today leaves viewers confused, hungry, and wanting to go out and purchase a meal that looks and tastes the way they believe it does from what they've watched. There are no apparent "teaching" lessons of which Child brought into many households' decades prior.

A major reason for why people do not cook as much as they had once is due to productivity, cost, and time—all of which go hand-in-hand. Pollan discusses how modern Americans choose to omit cooking as a regular activity due to the need to work more. "...for most of us it doesn't pay the rent, and very often our work doesn't leave us the time ... For many years now, Americans have been putting in longer hours at work and enjoying less time at home" (14). This problem is multifaceted. Yes, going home to prepare, cook, serve, and clean post-meal does require a lot of time. Most would seem to rather unwind after a long day by sitting on the couch watching shows (including The Food Network) than actually putting in the culinary work. However, in the case of Danielle Jewell's Favorite Meal Essay, she and her family prefer to unwind together with a dish they mutually enjoy. "Through all the inconveniences this meal makes for my family, my favorite meal shows my family's love for each other as a priority in all of our lives ... Sitting down to eat as a family has always been very important to us despite our busy schedules." Although the connection between time, money, and productivity alongside

making a meal after a long day of work is clear, there are also prevalent trade-offs that must be made in order to maintain a level of happiness seen in a functioning family household.

The rise of women entering the workforce is another significant reason for the decline in home-cooked meals. Women are increasingly finding more opportunities for themselves and their betterment outside of the home to make money and establish a career. In Julia Child's time, it was a woman's obligation to be at home and cook meals for the family. Within the modern day, Pollan establishes that women are cooking less, and men are starting to slowly take on the role. "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" (18). The increase (or simply presence) of men cooking is evident also in Sarah Smith's essay where her father and her jointly prepare her favorite meal whenever they can. "Regarding how [the chicken enchiladas are] made, my dad handles the first step by mixing a pound of grilled chicken with the seasoning powder and a quarter cup of water. Once that simmers on the stove for about ten minutes we can both divide the tortillas up and start crafting our masterpieces." Whether the fashion of men cooking for their family be situational, such as in Smith's essay, or a hobby such as the rise in grilling, one thing stands out—men are cooking more, even though the amount of cooking per household is declining.

Restaurants and fast-casual (also known as fast-food) establishments and the wide abundance of such have created a societal norm to leave the house and grab a bite to eat. Imagine this, you come home from a long day of work and you could do two of either things: pull ingredients out of the fridge and cupboards and whip something up for dinner or you could hop in your car with your family and drive a few minutes to have someone else prepare it all, often for a cheap upfront cost. Most Americans would choose the latter. Pollan explains that eating out

can be deleterious to humans in that we are more inclined to “indulge impulsively” when prepared meals are handed to us. “When we let corporations do the cooking, they’re bound to go heavy on sugar, fat and salt; these are the three tastes we’re hard-wired to like, which happen to be dirt cheap to add and do a good job masking the shortcomings of processed food” (19).

Works Cited (to be formatted later)

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