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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. Scorching, luminous, 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." Alongside 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” setups. People view cooking now as a time hassle, especially after a long day of work outside of the home. Americans typically spend less time cooking than they did in the past. “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, the advent of restaurants, fast-food, loss of productivity, and general 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 of 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 the way it appears on TV. There are no apparent “teaching” lessons of which Child brought into many households’ decades prior.

A major reason 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 she 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). Restaurants (especially the inexpensive ones, like McDonald’s and Applebee’s) load in the ingredients that humans crave. This tends to be a protagonist in gaining weight, which can be summarized in a “time-cost” plot. Generally, the more time and money you spend on food, the lower the accompanying caloric intake is. Not all “good” food takes a lot of time, either. A healthy and relatively low-time, low-cost dish would be butternut squash. In Corryn Lachance’s essay, she discusses the affordable nature of such. “All of these ingredients together total to about five dollars, which is very inexpensive for such a delicious dish.” Food need not be expensive to be enjoyable, nor must one dine at a restaurant to find the same luxury that could be created at home.

Between the struggle for finding a perfect balance in time after a long workday, justifying a set budget on food and meal preparation, the ever-increasing female presence in the workforce, and the temptation of restaurant dining, it is clear why homecooked meals seem like a looming thing of the past. Although not completely seen in all situations, especially those who have written Favorite Meal Essays. I believe that everything is cyclical. The age of homecooked meals are not dead—they’ve taken a hiatus. Our culture has shifted to experiencing different meals that were not feasible or economically possible in Julia Child’s time. In an effort to supplement our extremely busy lives with enjoyable meals, we tend to go to restaurants specialized in providing us with our desires. They take care of the busy work, leaving us with the lust of enjoyment. Restaurants provide people who care deeply about cooking a career in which they can deliver the

love and nurture that Julia Child presented to our homes, and emanate their talents towards us, the consumer, in a way that fits our schedules, budgets, and hectic lives. Sure, we may not cook as much as we used to. But it's still in our blood. We congregate during special holidays, sharing our best-kept recipes for our loved ones; enjoying every moment together and making it an occasion. Simply put, societies and cultures evolve, and food is pivotal in our embrace for the change we experience.

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