

Cooked – college essay



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BUSTER**

At a certain point in the late middle of my life I made the unexpected but happy discovery that the answer to several of the questions that most occupied me was in fact one and the same. Cook. Some of these questions were personal. For example, what was the single most important thing we could do as a family to improve our health and general well-being? And what would be a good way to better connect to my teenage son? As it turned out, this involved not only ordinary cooking but also the pacified form of it known as brewing.) Other questions were slightly more political in nature. For years I had been trying to determine (because I am often asked) what is the most important thing an ordinary person can do to help reform the American food system, to make it healthier and more sustainable? Another related question is, how can people living in a highly specialized consumer economy reduce their sense of dependence and achieve a greater degree of self-sufficiency?

And then there were the more philosophical questions, the ones I've been chewing on since I first started writing books. How, in our everyday lives, can we acquire a deeper understanding of the natural world and our species' peculiar role in it? You can always go to the woods to confront such questions, but I discovered that even more interesting answers could be had simply by going to the kitchen. I would not, as I said, ever have expected it. 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 realize my Incredible sage-Deter sauce over store-Doughnut arrival. 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 had 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 INTRODUCTION: WHY COOK? 3 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. 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 mid-sixties, 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, or 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, 4 COOKED 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 was worth taking a little more seriously.

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? 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 INTRODUCTION: WHY COOK? 5 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 hickey Kiev doesn't prematurely leak or the souffle© 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 L©vi-Strauss 7? 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 Walther.) Fifty years later, in *The Physiology of Taste*, the French gastronome Jean Anthem Barilla-Safaris claimed Tanat cooling mace us won we are, 6 COOKED DYE teaching men to

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use fire, it has 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 " establishes 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 pharmacologist named Richard Wrangler published a fascinating book called *Catching Fire*, in which he argued 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 adhering 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. INTRODUCTION: WHY COOK? 7 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," Wrangler writes, " we became tamer. " 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-faddists 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"? malign also De salsa AT cooking. Horst we cook food cooked us. EAI our T Ana teen our If cooking is as central to human identity, biology, and culture as Wrangler 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, aging 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 8 COOKED longer workdays and overstretched 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 cook-
INTRODUCTION: WHY COOK? 79 ins (and not cooking) in our lives, and a caveat or two are in order. For most of us today, ten sence Is not nearly as Adult as Eve Trauma It' Tanat Is, none cooking Trot 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.” This is a problem? for the health of our bodies, our families, our communities, and our land, but also for our sense of how our eating connects us to the world.

Our growing distance from any direct, physical engagement with the recesses by which the raw stuff of nature gets transformed into a cooked meal is changing our understanding of what food is. Indeed, the idea that food has any connection to nature or human work or imagination is hard to credit when it arrives in a neat package, fully formed. Food becomes just another COOKED commodity, an abstraction. And as soon as that happens we become easy prey for corporations selling synthetic versions of the real thing? what I call edible beadlike substances.

We end up trying to nourish ourselves on images. Now, for a man to criticize these developments will perhaps rankle some readers. To certain ears, whenever a man talks about the importance of cooking, it sounds like he wants to turn back the clock, and return women to the kitchen. But that’s not at all what I have in mind. Even come to think cooking is too important to be

left to any one gender or member of the family; men and children both need to be in the kitchen, too, and not just for reasons of fairness or equity but because they have so much to gain by being there.

In fact, one of the biggest reasons corporations were able to insinuate themselves into this part of our lives is because home cooking had for so long been denigrated as “women’s work” and therefore not important enough for men and boys to learn to do. Though it’s hard to say which came first: Was home cooking denigrated because the work was mostly done by women, or did women get stuck doing most of the cooking because our culture denigrated the work? The gender politics of cooking, which I explore at some length in part II, are nothing if not complicated, and probably always have been.

Since ancient times, a few special types of cooking have enjoyed considerable prestige: Homeric warriors dined on joints of meat at no cost to their heroic status or masculinity. And ever since, it has been socially acceptable for men to cook in public and professionally for money. (Though it is only recently that professional chefs have enjoyed the status of artists.) But for most of history most of humanity’s food has been cooked by women working out of the public view and without public recognition. Except for the rare ceremonial occasions over which men presided: the religious sacrifice, the July 4 barbecue, the four-star restaurant? cooking has traditionally been women’s work, part and parcel of homemaking and child care, and therefore undeserving of serious male attention. But there may be another reason cooking has not received its proper due. In a recent book called *The Taste for Civilization*, Janet A.

Flagman, a feminist scholar and political scientist who has argued eloquently for the social and political importance of “ food work,” suggests the problem may have something to do with food itself, which by its very nature falls on the wrong side? the feminine side? of the mind-body dualism in Western culture. “ Food is apprehended through the senses of touch, smell, and taste,” she points out, “ which rank lower on the hierarchy of senses than sight and hearing, which are typically thought to give rise to knowledge.

In most of philosophy, religion, and literature, food is associated with body, animal, female, and appetite? things civilized men have sought to overcome with knowledge and reason. ” Very much to their loss. The premise of this book is that cooking? defined broadly enough to take in the whole spectrum of techniques people have devised for transforming the raw stuff of nature into nutritious and appealing things for us to eat and drink? is one of the most interesting and worthwhile things we humans do. This is not something I fully appreciated before I set out to learn how to cook.

But after three years spent working under a succession of gifted teachers to master four of the key transformations we call cooking? grilling with fire, cooking 12 COOKED with liquid, baking bread, and fermenting all sorts of things? I came away with a very different body of knowledge from the one I went looking for. Yes, by the end of my education I got pretty good at making a few things? I’m especially proud of my bread and some of my braises. But I also learned things about the natural world (and our implication in it) that I don’t think I could have learned any other way.

I learned far more than I ever expected to about the nature of work, the meaning of health, about tradition and ritual, self-reliance and community, the rhythms of everyday life, and the supreme satisfaction of producing something I previously could only have imagined consuming, doing it outside of the cash economy for no other reason but e I Nils KICK Is ten story AT my coeducation In ten Slacken? out also In ten Takers, ten dairy, the brewery, and the restaurant kitchen, some of the places where much of our culture's cooking now takes place.

Cooked is divided into four parts, one for each of the great transformations of nature into the culture we call cooking. Each of these, I was surprised and pleased to discover, corresponds to, and depends upon, one of the classical elements: Fire, Water, Air, and Earth. Why this should be so I am not entirely sure. But for thousands of years and in many different cultures, these elements have been regarded as the four irreducible, indestructible ingredients that make up the natural world. Certainly they still loom large in our imagination.

The fact that modern science has dismissed the classical elements, reducing them to still ore elemental substances and forces? water to molecules of hydrogen and oxygen; fire to a process of rapid oxidation, etc. ? hasn't really changed our lived experience of nature or the way we imagine it. Science may have replaced the big four with a periodic table of 118 elements, and then reduced each of those to ever-tinier particles, but our senses and our dreams have yet to get the news. To learn to cook is to put yourself on intimate terms with the laws of physics and chemistry, as well as the facts of biology and microbiology. Yet, beginning with fire, I mound that the older,

presciently elements figure largely? hugely, in fact? in apprehending the main transformations that comprise cooking, each in its own way. Each element proposes a different set of techniques for transforming nature, but also a different stance toward the world, a different kind of work, and a different mood.

Fire being the first element (in cooking anyway), I began my education with it, exploring the most basic and earliest kind of cookery: meat, on the grill. My quest to learn the art of cooking with fire took me a long way from my backyard grill, to the Rebecca pits and pit masters of eastern North Carolina, where cooking meat still meant a whole pig roasted very slowly over a smoldering wood fire.

It was here, training under an accomplished and flamboyant pit master, that I got acquainted with cooking primary colors? animal, wood, fire, time? and found a clearly marked path deep into the prehistory of cooking: what first drove our approximant ancestors to gather around the cook fire, and how that experience transformed them. Killing and cooking a large animal has never been anything but an emotionally freighted and spiritually charged endeavor. Rituals of sacrifice have attended this sort of cooking from the beginning, and I found their echoes reverberating even today, in twenty-first-century barbecue.

Then as now, the mood in fire cooking is heroic, masculine, theatrical, boastful, moronic, and faintly (sometimes not so faintly) ridiculous. It is in fact everything that cooking with water, the subject of part II, is not. Historically, cooking with water comes after cooking with fire, since it

awaited the invention of pots to cook in, an artifact of human culture only about ten thousand years old. Now cooking moves indoors, into the domestic realm, and in this chapter I level into everyday home cookery, its techniques and satisfactions as well 14 COOKED as Its Elections.

Bentley Its student, tons Stetson takes ten snaps AT a single long recipe, unfolding step by step the age-old techniques that grandmothers developed for teasing delicious food from the most ordinary of ingredients: some aromatic plants, a little fat, a few scraps of meat, a long afternoon around the house. Here, too, I apprenticed myself to a flamboyant professional character, but she and I did most of our cooking at home in my kitchen, and often as a family? home and family being ere much the subject of this section.

Part III takes up the element of air, which is all that distinguishes an exuberantly leavened loaf of bread from a sad gruel of pulverize grain. By figuring out how to coax air into our food, we elevate it and ourselves, transcending, and vastly improving, what nature gives us in a handful of grass seed. The story of Western civilization is pretty much the story of bread, which is arguably the first important “ food processing” technology. (The counterargument comes from the brewers of beer, who may have gotten there first. This section, which sakes place in several different bakeries across the country (including a Wonder Bread plant), follows two personal quests: to bake a perfect, maximally airy and wholesome loaf of bread, and to pinpoint the precise historical moment that cooking took its fatefully wrong turn: when civilization began processing food in such a way

as to make it less nutritious rather than more. Different as they are, these first three modes of cooking all depend on heat. Not so the fourth.

Like the earth itself, the various arts of fermentation rely instead on biology to transform organic matter from one state to a more interesting and nutritious other state. Here I encountered the most amazing alchemies of all: strong, allusive flavors and powerful intoxicants created for us by fungi and bacteria? many of them the denizens of the soil? as they go about their invisible work of creative destruction. This section falls into three chapters, covering INTRODUCTION: WHY COOK? 15 the fermentation of vegetables (into sauerkraut, chime, pickles of all kinds); milk (into cheese); and alcohol (into mead and beer). Along the way, a succession of “ ferment’s” tutored me in the techniques of artfully managing rot, the folly of the modern war against bacteria, the erotic of disgust, and the somewhat upside-down notion that, while we were fermenting alcohol, alcohol has been fermenting us. I have been fortunate in both the talent and the generosity of the teachers who agreed to take me in? the cooks, bakers, brewers, pickles, and cheese makers who shared their time and techniques and recipes.

This cast of characters turned out to be a lot more masculine than I would have expected, and a reader might conclude that I have indulged in some unfortunate typecasting. But as soon as I opted to apprentice myself to professional rather than amateur cooks? in the hopes of acquiring the most rigorous training I could get? it was probably inevitable that certain stereotypes would be reinforced. It turns out that barbecue pit masters are almost exclusively men, as are brewers and bakers (except for pastry chefs), and a remarkable number of cheese makers are women.

In learning to cook traditional pot dishes, I chose to work with a female chef, and if by doing so I underscored the cliché that home cooking is woman's work, Tanat was sort of an idea: I wanted to delve into Tanat very question. We can hope that all the gender stereotypes surrounding food and cooking will soon be thrown up for grabs, but to assume that has already happened would be to kid ourselves. Taken as a whole, this is a "how-to" book, but of a very particular kind.

Each section circles around a single elemental recipe? for barbecue, for a braise, for bread, and for a small handful of fermented 16 COOKED items? and by the end of it, you should be well enough equipped to make it. (The recipes are spelled out more concisely in appendix I, in case you do want to try any of them. Though all the cooking I describe can be done in a home kitchen, only a portion of the book deals directly with the kind of work most people regard as "home cooking." Several of the recipes here are for things most readers will probably never make themselves? beer, for example, or cheese, or even bread.

Though I hope that they will. Because I discovered there was much to learn from attempting, even if only just once, these more ambitious and time-consuming forms of cookery, knowledge that might not at first seem terribly useful but in fact changes everything about one's relationship to food and what is possible in the kitchen. Let me try to explain. At bottom cooking is not a single process but, rather, comprises a small set of technologies, some of the most important humans have yet devised.

They changed us first as a species, and then at the level of the group, the family, and the individual. These technologies range from the controlled use of fire to the manipulation of specific microorganisms to transform grain into bread or alcohol all the way to the microwave oven? the last major innovation. So cooking is really a continuum of processes, from simple to complex, and Cooked is, among other things, a natural and social history of these transformations, both the ones that are still part of our everyday lives and the ones that are not.

Today, we're apt to think of making cheese or brewing beer as "extreme" forms of cookery, only because so few of us have ever attempted them, but of course at one time all these transformations took place in the household and everyone had at least a rudimentary knowledge of how to perform them. Nowadays, only a small handful of cooking technologies seem within the reach of our competence.

And it is entirely possible that, within another generation, cooking a meal from scratch will seem as exotic and ambitious? as "extreme"? as most of us today regard brewing beer or baking a loaf of bread or putting up a crock of sauerkraut. When that happens? when we no longer have any direct personal knowledge of how these wonderful creations are made? food will have become completely abstracted from its various contexts: from the labor of human hands, from the natural world of plants and animals,