

Why Food Matters

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COOKING LESSONS: A SHORT HISTORY OF EATING

Most theories say it was lightning. But I prefer to think it happened this way.

So humor me. Close your eyes. Let the walls slowly melt away as a forest grows around you. These woods are deep. Dark mosses creep beneath your feet, strange birds wheel through the sky, and tiny creatures rustle in the brush. You are large, very large, and when you reach up it is easy to pluck some fruit from the tree above you, put it into your mouth, and begin to chew. As you chew you break two small sticks from the tree and rub them idly together. They make a fine sound, a soothing music to accompany the rhythm of your jaws, and so you look up at the sun and listen to the birds, and you chew and rub, rub and chew, chew and rub. You are protoman, and chewing occupies half your waking hours; when the sun slides into the mist of the forest you are still at it. The light vanishes, the moon slides into the sky, and as the stars begin their dance you are still beneath your tree, chewing and rubbing.

Suddenly, a tiny orange creature comes bubbling out of your sticks, and as you watch it grows larger, changes color, turning black and yellow as it races up the bark devouring everything in its path. When it reaches the end of the stick it jumps forward and bites your hand. With a howl you drop the burned shard and run into the forest.

But you are curious, and the next day you try to summon the orange flame, patiently rubbing the sticks until he reappears. Again he grows large, and you begin to see that if you feed him more sticks this creature will become strong enough to leap into the trees and devour them.

Call him Prometheus or Vishnu—call him any of the names man has given his infinite fire myths. He shows up everywhere, for at some point in the distant past our ancestors began playing with fire—and they were the only ones to do it. The anthropologist Richard Wrangham believes that this is what made us human. We cooked; they did not. And so we evolved in a unique and particular way.

Nobody knows when this happened, but sometime between 1.9 million and 500,000 years ago our ancestors found fire and began to change. By 300,000 years ago they were using ovens. As the historian Alfred Crosby points out, “Cooking is even more uniquely characteristic of our species than language. And few advances comparable in importance...

have happened since.”¹ Being able to roast, bake, and boil gave early man the ability to transform what were once unpalatable items into edible fare. And so, presented with a huge new grocery list, the more curious among us went off to explore the earth and discover new places to inhabit.

The menu got broader and the world grew bigger, but cooking was introducing the genus *Homo* to the realm of abstract concepts. Think about what it means to go into the forest, pick up sticks, and collect logs; pile them up; blow on them until the flames catch; and then tend the fire, nurture it, keep it going. This is possible only if you have the capacity to conceive a future, only if you are able to imagine a dinner that is yet to come. To become a cook means no longer living in the moment; it means thinking ahead. And those who have a future, of course, also have a past.

Cooking not only gave us a notion of time but also revolutionized the way our ancestors related to one another. Wrangham credits cooking with no less than the origin of human male-female relationships, and he makes an interesting, complicated, and controversial case for that.² But it does not require a great leap of the imagination to visualize the community that arose as these first cooks started hunting larger and larger beasts. It would have made sense for them to pool their energies, dividing the work as they traveled longer distances in search of prey, and to share the spoils of the hunt. As we watch them sitting around that fire it is easy to understand how cooking created us. If we do not want to believe that fire was a gift from the gods, we have to believe that in the moment our ancestor first discovered it he was on the way to larger revelations. Cooking, in a real sense, gave us space, time, and society.

What I want to talk about is man as a cooking animal, to discuss why this is a useful way to think of our species, and why it is particularly important to do so now. Cooking once gave us the concept of the future, but cooking now threatens that future in many ways.

Looking at food from this angle does not come naturally to me. I am a person who has spent most of her life celebrating the pleasures of the table. I think of cooking as the ultimate comfort, and my body is never more content than when moving to the rhythms of the kitchen, leaning into the peeling and slicing, reveling in the rubbing, rolling, and kneading. Sharing food is the only sacrament I recognize, and I believe that when we sit

1. Crosby quoted in Peter Menzel and Faith D’Alusio, *Hungry Planet* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2005), 52.

2. “The Evolution of Cooking: A Talk with Richard Wrangham,” February 28, 2001, <http://www.edge.org>.

down to eat together we receive sustenance of many kinds. There is the purely simple refreshment of eating good food. There is the nourishment that comes from the communion of the table, the airing of ideas and fostering of friendship. And there is the poetry of the senses available to anyone willing to open himself to the experience in all its sensual complexity. Pick up a peach. Take a bite. Savor the way the color changes just beneath the peel until you might be tasting sunrise. Enjoy the caress of the fuzz against your lips, and the cool shock of the flesh beneath your teeth. Feel the erotic wash of juice as it goes roaring through your mouth, trailing the scent of lilacs, of almonds, grass, and vanilla, the memory of the seasons that have passed. Soft and slick, moist and fragrant it slips and slides along its path, growing smaller, gone now, leaving the ghost of flavor that lingers, reverberating, until it is humming in your fingertips. Bite in again . . .

I am capable of making a single bite go on for pages. But that is not on today's menu. The peach I just described is a peach of the past, an almost-forgotten memory, and if you love to eat as much as I do it is impossible not to worry about what is happening to our food. If you believe that what and how we eat tells us a great deal about what is going on in the world, there is no way to ignore the developments in the modern marketplace.

Preparing to write this paper I read a number of past Tanner Lectures. I was struck by how often they begin with the notion that we have come to a crucial point in history. And, of course, I want to say exactly the same thing. We have reached a critical juncture, and the choices society makes now will have enormous implications for the future. We are standing at a crossroads, and we are running out of time.

We have been at this culinary crossroad before. We did not handle it well. When Columbus stepped onto this continent he set off an ecological convulsion that changed the way the entire world ate. It was a cataclysmic transformation that touched every aspect of human life. Within a year new foods were whizzing back and forth across the oceans, dazzling and frightening people with exotic flavors and endless possibilities. Without the great Columbian Exchange there would be no tomatoes in Italy, no chiles in India, no chocolate in Switzerland, peanuts in Africa, or potatoes in Ireland. America, on the other hand, would have never known the taste of pigs, sheep, chicken, garlic, wheat, rice, apples, grapes, oranges, pears, or peaches. No area of life on earth was left untouched by these changes in the food supply. It was an extraordinary moment in the history of the world, and as hundreds of books have documented it was the source of far

more pain than pleasure. It would devastate the population of the American continent, wipe out a number of species, and create the conditions for the thriving sugar-rum-slave triangle. It would spawn the potato famine in Ireland. And that is just for starters.

But recent changes in the food supply have been equally catastrophic. They have been referred to as an edible intervention, the triumph of transportation and the industrialization of agriculture, but whatever you care to call the alteration in our eating habits, their consequences are being felt in every corner of the earth.

“Food will win the war!” trumpeted Herbert Hoover in 1917.³ As head of the U.S. Food Administration, the future president felt that America’s food would be the key to winning the First World War, and he had posters printed in seven languages exhorting recent immigrants to help their new country. We are stepping into history at this particular moment because it was a pivotal point. The United States was still a largely agrarian society, but most of the major innovations that would change that were already on the horizon.

All of Europe had been turned into a battlefield, and most of its farmers had been sent off to fight. Russian foodstuffs, which might have helped, were cut off. America’s farmers suddenly discovered that they had a much larger market than they had ever dared to imagine. “Plow to the fence for national defense” was the mantra, and the government, for the first time ever, set minimum prices for food commodities. It was at this time, too, that the system of county extension agents was created by the federal government to help farmers produce more food.⁴ These government agents were so effective that in the years between 1913 and 1919 wheat acreage almost doubled. (They were even more effective in helping farmers increase production during the next war.) The pattern of farm subsidies, which has had such an enormous and controversial global impact on international farming, was being created. Today, the extension service proudly takes credit for the fact that the farmer who produced food for 15 people in 1950 now produces food for “140 U.S. citizens.” The service is less forthcoming about the social and environmental costs of these advances.

The notion that food had a role in war was not original; food had been winning wars for centuries, and many of the methods of modern food

3. Daniel Akst, “Cheap Eats,” *Wilson Quarterly* (Summer 2003): 37.

4. Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service, <http://www.csrees.usda.gov/qlinks/extension.html>.

processing were originally developed as military applications. In 1795 Napoléon offered a huge reward to anyone who could figure out a way to make rations last longer.⁵ A former chef named Nicolas-François Appert claimed the reward in 1810 for his ingenious method of preserving food in bottles. Meanwhile, the English were busily working on the same problem. Their solution was slightly different, as it involved putting food in cans, but it was equally effective, and by the time Wellington met Napoléon at Waterloo, neither army was forced to forage for its food.

Canning gave armies a huge military advantage, but it was both time-consuming and expensive. Even worse, the process often had unpleasant effects on texture and flavor, which meant that inventors continued to look for more efficient methods of preserving food. The Chinese had been shipping food on ice since the Ming dynasty (around the year 1000), and they were widely copied, but this method depended on natural supplies, which meant that refrigeration was limited. In 1850 an inventor in Australia discovered a way to use the evaporation and compression of ether for an ice-making machine, and a cold new world became possible. When a French engineer produced a more efficient contraption ten years later, using ammonia gas, the possibilities for shipping meat, fruits, and vegetables around the world began to seem endless. American industrialists like Gustavus Swift were quick to adapt the new technology to railroads; their refrigerated trains meant that by the 1870s Chicago could convincingly claim to be hog butcher to the world.

Which brings us back to Mr. Hoover and the First World War. In 1920 scientists in England discovered that lowering the oxygen in the atmosphere while raising the carbon dioxide slowed down ripening so that apples could be kept for a year. It came to be known as “controlled atmosphere storage,” and it was the beginning of the end of seasonal eating. Apples and other produce could now be picked one fall and served the next. Farmers were deeply grateful, but they were even more jubilant when ethylene gas was discovered a few years later. Now fruit did not need to ripen at all; picked early, it could be gassed to make it look ripe before consumption. If these adolescent fruits did not taste quite as good as the mature kind, if they lacked some of the nutritional advantages of those allowed to linger on the tree, it was a small price to pay for year-round availability.

In the years just after World War I these new technologies, along with

5. Pamela Goyan Kittler and Kathryn P. Sucher, *Food and Culture in America: A Nutrition Handbook* (Belmont, Calif.: West Publishing, 1995), 340.

the new government policies, started to change the way America farmed. The transformation began in California and developed so rapidly in that benign climate that by the 1930s what came to be known as “industrial farming” reigned in that state. As Stephen Stoll notes, this involved “the almost complete separation between farm production and consumption, and the dedication of soil in a vast region to consumers far away.”⁶ Those refrigerated railroad cars were put to good use, and the pattern of meat production was now applied to produce. It was just the beginning; in the next few decades much of American agriculture would follow this pattern, and before long there was nothing on the American table that needed to be locally grown or raised.

Meanwhile, industrialists were forging ahead with their own innovations. Spurred by the need to transform war industries into peacetime enterprises after World War II, manufacturers began making new home appliances. One major result, given advances in freezing technology during the forties, was the introduction of the nearly ubiquitous home freezer. This, in turn, led to frozen peas, concentrated orange juice, and, of course, TV dinners.

These innovations made cooking much less of a chore than it once had been, and after thousands of years of stirring their pots, women eagerly embraced these new laborsaving products with cries of joy. Or did they? When Gallup Polls and marketing surveys first studied America’s reaction to these new products, they heard a different story. Offered the chance to spend less time in the kitchen, women were not thrilled, claiming to anyone who would listen that they really loved to cook. This perturbed the marketing folks not at all: their job, as they saw it, was to teach the American woman that she was wrong. As Laura Shapiro illustrates in *Something from the Oven*, they bombarded the housewife with newspaper articles and advertising campaigns aimed at showing her that the can opener was her friend and that if she would only invite the brave new foods into her kitchen, she would be a much happier person.⁷

The results of this were—well, you know what they were—Spam casseroles and pork cooked in Coke and catsup meringues that even the Heinz Company could not quite figure out a use for. They were sad substitutes for what had once been known as dinner; no wonder America’s families

6. Stoll, *The Fruits of Natural Advantage* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 181.

7. Shapiro, *Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America* (New York: Viking, 2004).

were so eager to escape into the new fast food chains. But hamburgers and French fries, it turns out, were also about to fall victim to the machine age. Street food had long been a fixture of early American life: Benjamin Franklin talked of strolling through Philadelphia eating as he walked.⁸ But it took car culture to give the movable feast its unique Yankee character. As Americans took to the road in the forties, food purveyors discovered that drivers were eager to have their meals served right on the dashboard. Given the connection, it was almost inevitable that someone would apply the principle of the assembly line to restaurants.

Cue the McDonald brothers. Restaurants are traditionally the most labor-intensive businesses on earth, but these men had a plan. Their Speedee Service System proudly employed “no car hops, no waitresses, no dishwashers and no busboys.”⁹ And it just as proudly offered up the Model T of meals—no choice. This new kind of restaurant was so successful—and so inexpensive—that it ushered in a whole new era of eating.

Applying efficiencies to the workplace is one thing; streamlining nature is quite another. The factory model prizes sameness over serendipity, and when it went out into the fields it meant that every apple, peach, and tomato needed to look and taste exactly the same as every other. If this meant breeding formerly soft fruits and vegetables so that they were hard enough to be peeled and sliced by machines, that was certainly possible. Tomatoes were now picked green, tossed into trucks with thirty thousand pounds of other tomatoes, flushed out with high-pressure hoses, bathed in chlorine, and dumped onto conveyor belts to be waxed, gassed, and boxed before being sent on their way. Each tomato looked and tasted just like every other one, and if none of them was quite as delicious as the soft, bumpy produce of the past, well, the new, improved flavor industry was there to help.

The flavor industry, created to give nature a boost, had been around for a couple hundred years, but it did not come into its own until the midfifties; last year it took in more than seventeen billion dollars in its attempt to make our food taste tangier.¹⁰ But what happens when the taste of almost everything you eat is artificially enhanced? The very notion of reality becomes distorted, every bite is required to deliver a powerhouse punch, and what is true and subtle in nature is devalued and finally forgotten.

8. Charles C. Mann quoted in Menzel and D’Alusio, *Hungry Planet*, 128.

9. Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 20.

10. Online information from Leffingwell and Associates, Flavor and Fragrance Company, <http://www.leffingwell.com>.

The success of the factory model meant that before long it moved from the fields to the barns. And there it invented new ways of dealing with animals on an ever more organized schedule. Giant cows milked by gleaming machines produced oceans of liquid. Eggs dropped out of the hens right onto conveyor belts where they were efficiently hustled into cartons. Meat was raised indoors, on a schedule calibrated to quickly turn animals into the most meat while requiring the least amount of feed. You have to honor this as an amazing accomplishment. For most of human history, most people have spent the bulk of their time finding, growing, cooking, and storing enough food to stay alive. In 1919 the average American had to work 158 minutes to buy a three-pound chicken; today, it takes 15. Put another way, as recently as a hundred years ago the average American spent half his income on food. Today, Americans spend less than 6 percent of their after-tax income on groceries.¹¹ These are stunning statistics.

Still, we need to ask ourselves if it has been worth it. What we now eat is manipulated in ways that would have been unimaginable in even the recent past. Modern breeding, growing, and manufacturing have had a palpable influence on almost everything we put into our mouths. If these changes had done nothing more than alter the flavor of our food, they would be worthy of our attention. But the impact of industrialized food has gone far beyond the table, and it is being felt in every aspect of our lives: it affects the environment, the economy, our health, our politics, and our communities. Most troubling of all, however, may be the impact it is having on our ethics.

It is easy for urban dwellers to ignore the environmental effects of these changes. Even the nearby countryside we travel through seems sweetly unaltered, a place where farmers in plaid shirts drive pickup trucks and stop in at the feed store for a chat. Most of us know at least one old-fashioned farmer growing a variety of crops and rotating them to preserve his land. He has a cow or two, a couple of pigs, and a few hens clucking in the yard. He works ridiculously hard, feeds his family from what he raises, saves his seeds to plant next year, composts discarded vegetables, and uses his animals' waste to fertilize the fields. He is a rare breed. And, given the increasing pressures of residential development and the rising value of his land, he is getting rarer every moment.

Head into the real rural America, and you soon find the modern farm that is dedicated to just a couple of crops. Here, sweat has been replaced by fuel, and the tedious work of sowing and reaping is done primarily by

11. Akst, "Cheap Eats," 38.

machines. These monocrop farms, whose enormous productivity is primarily due to mechanization, technology, and commercial fertilizers, are yet another legacy of war. At the end of the Second World War the government found itself with an enormous amount of ammonium nitrate that was no longer needed to make explosives. After some deliberation it was decided that the munitions plants would be converted into manufacturers of agricultural fertilizer. It was a major turning point in agriculture, for this fertilizer turned out to be extraordinarily effective at making plants grow. In fact, it turned out to be too effective. When the excess nitrogen from midwestern farms runs off, it leaches into the local water table (improving neither its flavor nor its restorative qualities) and ultimately finds its way into the rivers. From there, it travels to the Gulf of Mexico where it continues to work, encouraging the algae to grow. The result? Massive algae blooms that suffocate plant and animal life in the water, creating vast dead zones that are growing larger every year.¹²

Meat farms are another ecological disaster. They are called “confinement animal feeding operations,” a euphemism that seems to underline the fact that if these facilities were called what they really are—animal factories—people would be as repulsed by them as they should be. These vast factories contain so many captive animals that their manure, a bonus in conventional farming, has become a major liability. One enormous pig farm in Utah now produces as much waste as the entire city of Los Angeles every year.¹³ But even small operations create huge lagoons of manure that pollute the ground and the air, turning once lovely landscapes into nightmare country. In August the walls of a manure lagoon from a dairy in upstate New York burst, releasing three million gallons. That killed all the fish in the Black River and closed down recreation on the river. At this moment, the spill is slowly making its way toward Lake Ontario, where it is not likely to make the fish very happy.

Our fish factories have been equally disruptive. Some seafood—oysters, clams, and mussels—actually cleans the water in which it lives, but most does not. Last summer the Bush administration started pushing more ocean farming, to the horror of fishermen who worry that many of the existing salmon farms are so sloppily monitored that they are creating an environmental problem. The fish are so overcrowded in their pens that it takes vast amounts of antibiotics to keep them healthy. They also create an atmosphere of uneaten food, rotten manure, and decomposing corpses

12. Brian Halweil, *Eat Here* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 72.

13. “How to Poison a River,” *New York Times*, August 19, 2005, A18.

that drift down to the ocean floor, making life impossible underneath the pens. Ecologists worry that escaped fish will weaken the wild populations. On top of that, carnivorous fish like salmon require enormous amounts of smaller fry as food. It takes up to three pounds of small fish to make one pound of salmon, and so dredges go scuttling across the ocean floor, scooping up everything in their path.

Meanwhile, up on the surface, ships equipped with sonar devices and global positioning systems (another legacy of the military) trawl the waters looking for big fish. These modern boats are so effective that they make Ahab's chase seem positively prehistoric. Ninety percent of the big fish that once inhabited the oceans have been hunted down, and a recent report suggests that, in the words of one scientist, "the oceans are being drained of species."¹⁴

Many of these effects can be seen with the naked eye, but the hidden ecological impact is equally profound. In the 1950s most of the fruits and vegetables eaten in American cities were still grown by nearby farmers. As that statistic changed, the amount of energy used to transport fruits and vegetables went up stratospherically. Look down at your dinner plate tonight, at the fish from Japan, the cheese from France, the tomatoes from Mexico, and the strawberries from Chile, and calculate how many miles your food flew before it reached you. And then calculate how much gasoline was required. Nutritionist Joan Gussow calls this "burning lots of petroleum to ship cold water around."¹⁵ Add the amount of fuel we use transporting our food to the amount that we use in producing it (17 percent of all fossil fuel used in the United States goes toward food production), and the total becomes terrifying. If, as many think, the new ferocity of hurricanes is due to the effects of global warming, it is a devastating reminder of the environmental toll of burning petroleum. And it is especially ironic that the area of the economy most impacted by global warming is . . . farming.

The damage we are doing to the environment simply mirrors the damage we are doing to ourselves. The changes in the agricultural system have imposed enormous strains on the social fabric. The United States was once such a nation of farmers that Thomas Jefferson was moved to say, "Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial

14. Cornelia Dean, "Scientists Warn Fewer Kinds of Fish Are Swimming the Oceans," *New York Times*, July 29, 2005, A6.

15. Halweil, *Eat Here*, 7, 37.

and genuine virtue.” Yet the number of people employed in agriculture has diminished until our country has more full-time prisoners than farmers.¹⁶ And we are not alone.

Two million farmers in China will very likely leave the land in each of the next five years. Farmers in Africa and India are losing their livelihoods. Many are not going quietly into the urban night. Suicide rates for farmers are surging everywhere, and population experts consider farmer dislocation in third world countries a major security threat in the coming decade.

In this country we are already experiencing the effects of this dislocation. Journalist Joel Dyer makes an excellent argument that the violent militia movement of the radical Right grew out of the farm crisis. When a farmer is forced from his land, he says, he leaves behind more than just a patch of dirt. “You don’t just lose a farm. You lose your identity, your history and in many ways your life. It’s as if all the family members who had worked that soil before them and all the children and grandchildren who should one day inherit that opportunity had suddenly been murdered by an unseen assailant.” A recent article in the *New York Times* suggests that the assailant is not always unseen: the war in Iraq is taking a disproportionate number of rural lives. “Iraq,” the writers pointed out, “is rural America’s war. It reflects sparse opportunities for young people in those places.”¹⁷ Timothy McVeigh built a bomb (primarily with fertilizer and petroleum products), and who knows when the next angry farmer will copy his example?

Okay—I hear you saying it—this is a Luddite position. In the wake of the scientific advances of the past century it would be ridiculous for farmers to plow their fields by hand. Indeed, many of these changes were not only inevitable but also extremely positive—just look at the vast quantities of food we are now able to produce! This is, I think, the moment to ask the big question: how is it possible that in this world of extraordinary plenty, nearly a billion people go hungry every day?

Man’s story has been a desperate scramble to find an adequate supply of food. Now, for the first time in human history, there is finally enough for everyone to eat. Every sensible person agrees that hunger has become a political problem rather than an agricultural one. As Amartya Sen points

16. Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1998), 166.

17. Dyer, *Harvest of Rage* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 3; Robert Cushing and Bill Bishop, *New York Times*, op-ed, July 20, 2005.

out, in the history of the world no famine has ever taken place in a functioning democracy.¹⁸ Yet somehow we have turned this extraordinary new plenty into a liability. While half the world goes hungry, the other half is killing itself with calories.

The dangers of obesity have been getting a lot of press, but they are not the only danger posed by overeating. One in three children born in the United States in the year 2000 will have diabetes at some point in his or her life.¹⁹ Type 2 diabetes, which is preventable, is weight and exercise related. Two hundred thousand Americans die of it every year. It costs us \$132 billion annually.²⁰

Nobody talks about the economic consequences of food poisoning, but that might be an even more costly crisis. Last year one-quarter of the American population ate something that made them sick. A thousand people are hospitalized with food poisoning every day, and every day fourteen people die from it. It does not have to be that way: much food-borne illness is the result of the way we feed, raise, and slaughter the animals that we eat. But when seven hundred people fell ill after eating meat contaminated with E. coli, a government spokesman said that although it was regrettable, “the presence of E coli was not cause for condemnation of the product.”²¹

That was twenty years ago, but things have not changed very much. Today, it is perfectly legal to knowingly sell meat contaminated with salmonella, and faced with the presence of a frighteningly lethal pathogen—bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), or mad cow disease—the people in charge of our food supply keep insisting that the problem is not serious. When one Kansas beef-processing company wanted to test its entire herd of cattle for BSE, it could not. Why? Because the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the only legal supplier of the test, refused to sell it to them.²² Allowing one company to test its cattle might imply that there was actually a need to do so and reflect badly on those who do not. There is a kind of Alice in Wonderland irrationality about this. As one food execu-

18. Sen, “Democracy as a Universal Value,” *Journal of Democracy* 10, no. 3 (1999): 3–17.

19. Centers for Disease Control estimate, <http://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/pubs/estimates05.htm#deaths>.

20. Menzel and D’Alusio, *Hungry Planet*, 242.

21. Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*, 207.

22. George Pyle, *Raising Less Corn, More Hell: The Case for the Independent Farm and against Industrial Food* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005), 64.

tive admitted, "If you don't know about a problem, then you don't have to deal with it."²³

It is convenient to condemn the industry, but that is not entirely fair. The truth is that *we* would rather not know either. And that, ultimately, is the crisis that we face.

Thomas Keller is generally considered the best chef in the United States. He is the owner of the French Laundry and Per Se. When he was twenty-five years old and still learning his craft, he determined that the time had come for him to slaughter the animals that he cooked. He had never killed before, but he did not think it could be very difficult. He decided to start with the rabbits.

Alone in the back of his restaurant he struggled to grab the first of the dozen furry creatures his purveyor had brought him. They fought him off, but he finally managed to grab one by the leg. "Rabbits scream," he recalled later, "and this one screamed really loud."²⁴ The rabbit tried to wriggle away, and as Keller gripped harder, the leg snapped in his hand. Both man and animal were terrified now, the animal in great pain, but Keller succeeded, finally, in getting the job done. And then he grabbed the next rabbit.

It was a horrible experience. It humbled him. That night as he stood at the stove he was determined that these were going to be the best rabbits ever cooked, that people who had never appreciated rabbit were going to be seduced into eating every bite. The lesson for him, in the brutal blood-bath he had produced, was to respect all food and avoid its waste. Back there, behind the restaurant, he had finally learned that food is life itself.

That understanding is what we lose in the mass industrialization of food. It vanishes as we willingly allow ourselves to treat living creatures as if they had no feelings, feel no pain. Confinement animal feeding operations are places where piglets are wrenched from their mothers at ten days to be fattened as quickly as possible in the least amount of space and at the smallest possible expense. In all their miserable days they never see the sky or the sun, and they spend their entire time on earth standing on metal slats over manure pits. Pig's tails are chopped off without anesthesia and chicken's beaks lopped off in the same manner. Milk cows are bred to have udders so large they cannot stand up on their own four feet.

23. Eric Schlosser, "Order the Fish," *Vanity Fair*, November 2004, 244.

24. Michael Ruhlman, "Natural Born Keller," *Gourmet*, October 1999, 123.

A group of English volunteers who tried to live like factory chickens for a week lasted eighteen hours before they ran screaming from their cages, driven almost to madness by the crowding, the noise, the dirt, the discomfort.²⁵ What can it mean for a society to simply pretend that this is not happening?

“Formerly,” says the historian William Cronon,

a person could not easily have forgotten that pork and beef were the creation of an intricate, symbiotic partnership of animals and human beings. One was not likely to forget that pigs and cattle had died so that people might eat, for one saw them grazing in familiar pastures, and regularly visited the barnyards and butcher shops where they gave up their lives in the service of one’s daily meal. As time went on fewer of those who ate meat could say that they had ever seen the living creature whose flesh they were chewing; fewer still could say that they had actually killed the animal themselves. It was easy not to remember that eating was a moral act inextricably bound to killing.... Meat was a neatly wrapped package one bought at the market.²⁶

But the fact that we have never seen the way these animals live and die is not the only thing that allows us to easily walk into a supermarket and disregard the fact that those neatly wrapped packages marked “sirloin steak” or “chicken wings” or “bacon” were once part of living creatures. We have also blunted our senses and muted our responsibility by dividing our world into friend and food. On one side is what we eat, on the other what we protect. Some of our best friends are animals.

It is surely no accident that the growth of the pet industry parallels the growth of factory farming. These are heads and tails of the same coin. The more we distance ourselves from food animals, the more we sentimentalize our pets. While millions of beasts are locked down in factory farms, our cats, dogs, and horses are driven off for appointments with psychiatrists, oncologists, and acupuncturists. These days the food animals are not even considered suitable fare for the friend animals: the fastest-growing segment of the twelve-billion-dollar pet-food industry is organic food for man’s best friend.²⁷ And surely it cannot be a coincidence that the great age of public aquariums began at the very moment entire species of fish

25. Geoffrey Beattie, “Men as Chickens,” *Granta* 52, 1995, 210.

26. 26. Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (1991), quoted in Harold McGee, *On Food and Cooking* (New York: Scribner, 2004), 127.

27. Pet Food Institute, <http://www.petfoodinstitute.org>.

were being hunted to extinction; in the past twenty years the number of aquariums in the United States has more than doubled.²⁸ As we gobble up the fish we ensure that one or two of their number will survive, even if only in captivity.

In his 1977 essay “Why Look at Animals?” John Berger notes, “Zoos, realistic animal toys and the widespread commercial diffusion of animal imagery all began as animals started to be withdrawn from daily life. One could suppose that such innovations were compensatory. Yet in reality the innovations themselves belonged to the same remorseless movement as was dispersing the animals. The zoos . . . were in fact demonstrations of how animals had been rendered absolutely marginal.”²⁹ Surely, the same argument could be made today for aquariums.

It is tempting to focus on animals because they make such a perfect case for what is happening to our food. Indeed, an increasing number of people are choosing the vegetarian option. But it is important to recognize that the way we treat animals is merely a symptom of a much larger problem. The refusal to consume flesh is a simplistic, feel-good response to a complicated issue. We are carnivores; killing animals to eat them is not the moral dilemma. It is the way that we do it, and the way that we allow it to be done, that presents an ethical difficulty. Today, this argument is just starting to surface in the public sphere. In the past few years confinement animal feeding operations have ceased to be completely hidden, and as these horrors surface the movement to treat food animals humanely has begun to grow.

Should we, in fact, stop allowing ourselves permission to treat animals as if they were things instead of living beings, we will have taken a huge leap forward. Not because we owe it to the animals, but because we owe it to ourselves, to our sense of decency. But it is just one step down a very long path.

We live with nature in much the same way that we live with animals. Aren't our national parks and wilderness areas the pampered pets of the plant world, a way for us to convince ourselves, despite all evidence to the contrary, that we are good custodians of nature? Aren't they, like zoos and aquariums, demonstrations of how marginal nature has become to our lives? *Natural* has become a catchword for everything that is good. If the city is a dirty, overcrowded creation of man, the wilderness is its opposite.

28. Ginger Strand, “Why Look at Fish?” *Believer*, February 2005.

29. Berger, “Why Look at Animals?” in *About Looking* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 26.

We have romanticized nature as something that is pure, clean, and somehow better than the place in which we live.

This view of nature—as something out there, apart from us—not only turns nature into a commodity but also allows us to abnegate responsibility. As William Cronon says, “By imagining the wilderness as our true home we forgive ourselves the homes we actually inhabit.”³⁰

Replace the word *wilderness* with *farm*, and the issue for eaters becomes quite clear. In our hearts many of us still inhabit the farm where we live with the seasons and eat locally, seasonally. Unfortunately, we are as alienated from the farm as we are from the wilderness, and by imagining this perfect world we set an impossible goal. Unless he is willing to dedicate his life entirely to the act of feeding his family, no urban person with the desire to eat like a farmer can possibly live up to his own standards. We need a way to integrate our understanding of the problems of industrialized food with the realities of the urban life that most of us live.

Much of this is undoubtedly not new to you. But I have undertaken this abbreviated history of industrialized food in order to make two points. The first is that what we eat has an impact on our lives that extends far beyond the table, and the second is that the revolution in the way our food is produced and consumed has changed our communities and our consciousness, the way we relate to our world and the way we relate to each other. I wanted to illuminate the vastness of the problem because I believe that we can take some comfort from the sheer awfulness of the place in which we find ourselves. Attention, finally, is being paid.

Things *are* starting to change, as this formerly hidden issue becomes part of our national conversation. As I was writing this paper new facts about food were reported in the newspapers on a daily basis. One day there was news that pigs have become so profitable—thirty-eight billion dollars annually in the United States—that Monsanto is trying to patent pig breeding, the next a dire front-page story detailing the devastation of the oceans. News about farming is in the business pages almost every day. And the genetic modification of food is now such a widespread and contentious issue that it is almost impossible to avoid.

It is hard to find reason to be hopeful, but I take heart from the fact that all this is starting to be out in the open. At this moment those of us who care about food have a unique opportunity. But with that comes a responsibility, and we need to be clear about what that is.

30. Cronon, *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 81.

Fifteen years ago, after a fairly long tenure as a restaurant critic, I was suddenly offered the chance to become the editor of the largest newspaper food section in the country. I had no experience either as an editor or as a home economist, but I had spent years complaining to my bosses about the embarrassingly old-fashioned nature of the paper's food section, which was basically a compilation of recipes. I felt we owed our readers more. I kept arguing that in a world where most people feel powerless, food was a place where they could actually make an impact. I pointed out that every time people go to the grocery store they are voting with their dollars. Looking back I think my editor's strategy was to give me a job that I could not handle and embarrass me into shutting up. But I was young and passionate, this was my big chance to prove my most deeply held belief, and I threw myself into the work.

I wanted to approach the subject from every possible angle. I believed that there were writers, both on the paper and off, who would gladly tackle the subject of food if offered the opportunity. I asked everyone from famous novelists to investigative reporters and cartoonists to contribute stories to the section.

In the first few months we did everything from profiles of food people to tales from the fields. We spent time with the people who ran ethnic groceries in Little Tokyo and the Salvadoran district. One reporter followed a welfare mother for a month, learning how she managed to feed four children on her food-stamp allotment. We interviewed old people who struggled with dietary restrictions and chefs who were intent on inventing new ways to eat.

It was an enormous change in the way the newspaper covered food, and the supermarkets, which considered the food section their own private fiefdom, were furious. They wanted less verbiage and more Ham-with-Coca-Cola recipes. Faced with unhappy advertisers, the paper decided to hold focus groups and find out what the readers thought.

I was not thrilled with the way they went about it. The study targeted coupon clippers, which struck me as stacking the deck. When my editor invited me to watch one of the groups through a two-way mirror, I was pretty sure I was about to lose my job. I stood, hidden, just as the leader was attempting to escort her little group into a discussion of methods of storing coupons. One woman—gray-haired, a bit overweight, and wearing a housedress—raised her hand. “Yes?” said the leader perkily, and I groaned inwardly. The woman stood up, smoothed her dress with some embarrassment, and began hesitantly:

I clip my coupons and store them in a little box meant to hold index cards? But I don't really want to talk about that. What I want to say is that there's a Malaysian family that's been living next door to us for six years, and we never talked, not once, until that story came out in the paper about Malaysian food. I suddenly felt as if I knew a little bit about the way they live, and when I ran into my neighbor in the supermarket, she asked if I wanted to come over and try some of the food I'd read about. And well, what I want to say is that I'm glad to know about the farmers and the grocers, and especially my neighbors. It makes me feel as if I'm part of a community.

My editor turned to me, threw up his hands, and said, "You win."

For a long time I thought about that woman's words, thought of her smoothing her dress and saying, "part of a community." I had not thought about it in quite those terms, had not realized the importance of putting a human face on food. But today, more than ever, that strikes me as something that we desperately need to do. As we begin to have a national conversation about what we eat, we must be careful that it does not become mired in abstraction. Now is the time for the storytellers.

Nobody understood the significance of stories better than Claude Lévi-Strauss, who has spent much of his life dissecting the language of cooking. He ended the third volume of his *Mythologiques* with a plea that seems far more poignant today than it was when he first wrote it in 1966. Through deconstructing the myths of North American Indians he came to the conclusion that "mythology conceals an ethical system, but one which, unfortunately, is far more remote from our ethic than its logic is from our logic." He pointed out that the myths he had been studying all taught deference toward the world and the need to respect its obligations. And he concluded:

Savage peoples give us a lesson in humility which, it is to be hoped, we may still be capable of understanding. In the present century, when man is actively destroying countless living forms, after wiping out so many societies whose wealth and diversity has, from time immemorial, constituted the better part of his inheritance, it has probably never been more necessary to proclaim, as do the myths, that sound humanism does not begin with oneself, but puts the world before life, life before man and respect for others before self-interest: and that no species, not even our own, can take the fact of having been on this earth

for one or two million years . . . as an excuse for appropriating the world as if it were a thing and behaving on it with neither decency or discretion.³¹

He wrote those lines in a time when it would have been impossible to envision the havoc our way of raising food would wreak upon the world. Nor could he have foreseen that the relationship we once had with what we eat would be so deeply obscured.

But I believe that if we look back at the beginning—back at the first protoman who picked up a stick, built a fire, and imagined the dinner he would cook over the blazing flames—it is possible to have hope. That was an act of imagination, and imagination is what is most needed now. It is time for us to create some modern myths of our own.

THE SUBTEXT OF THE TABLE: STORIES WE TELL ABOUT FOOD

This story begins like this:

My mother was the world's worst cook.

In my earliest food memory I am sitting in my high chair in the kitchen watching her prepare dinner. She is wearing a red dress, and she leans into the refrigerator murmuring softly over what she finds inside. One by one she extracts containers, jars, and covered bowls, lining them up on the counter. Each time she opens one, pulling off the lid, she jumps back a bit, as if the contents might be dangerous. When no explosions occur, Mom bends down to take a look.

She stands for a moment, arms akimbo, humming as she surveys what is before her. Then, like an artist reaching for a paintbrush, she picks up a spoon and begins to scrape some substance off the surface of each container. As she dumps it into the garbage I can see, even from where I am sitting, that it is blue. This makes me curious; blue food has never before come my way, and I wriggle in the high chair, trying to climb out to take a closer look.

Sensing some activity, my mother whirls around and pushes me snugly back into my chair. "Don't fall out!" she says, showing me what is on the spoon. "See, it's just a little bit of mold. And a little mold never hurt

31. Lévi-Strauss, *The Origin of Table Manners* (1966; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 507.

anyone.” And then, still humming, she mixes the contents of the bowls with the things in the jars, covers her creation with something shaken from a shiny green container, and shoves the whole thing into the oven.

“Is it good?” she asks later as she feeds me the first bite. My teeth close over the spoon, and my mouth fills with a new taste, a flavor unlike anything I have experienced before. It is a fuzzy gray monster in my mouth, a furious invasion, and it captures every one of my senses. It is definitely not good. I struggle to swallow, obedient little girl that I am, but my entire body protests and I shudder and choke, unable to get it down.

My mother is exasperated. “Oh, really,” she says, as I spit it out, “what’s wrong with you? Watch me—I’m going to take a bite.” She scoops up a heaping spoonful and plunks it into her own mouth. I wait, fascinated, eager to see how she will react to the noxious concoction she has just consumed. To my amazement she swallows calmly, smiles broadly, and says, “Delicious!” And then she shovels up another spoonful and holds it imperatively out to me.

My mother was not a bad cook in any of the conventional ways. She did not boil, bake, or roast things to death, and she never bored us by serving the same old dishes again and again. And considering both time and place—fifties America in all its glory—a truly astonishing collection of comestibles went parading through our kitchen. Mom’s curiosity was insatiable, and whenever she happened upon some unfamiliar food she pounced upon it and carried it triumphantly home. The grocery bags she set on our kitchen counter might contain anything at all: sea urchins she had discovered at the fish market, their bristles still sharp and dangerous, or a smooth cactus flower unearthed in Little Italy, the bland green exterior offering no hint of the pink riot that was going on inside. There might be slick perfumed lychee nuts from Chinatown or a smooth and fabulously aromatic cheese.

The fact that Mom had absolutely no idea what to do with these novelties held no terrors for her. She served them raw, she served them cooked, she coated them with peanut butter. Her creativity was endless: once she managed to combine canned asparagus with mayonnaise, Marshmallow Fluff, and some leftover herring. She happily ate her own cooking and, no matter how dreadful the concoction, invariably pronounced it “Delicious!” This was completely sincere; everything my mother tried tasted fine to her, for she was, in the most literal sense, taste blind.

This meant that she was utterly incapable of understanding why I routinely refused to eat the things that she had cooked. To her, mildew casse-

role was as appetizing as the finest filet mignon. She was genuinely puzzled when I turned up my nose at her more ambitious efforts, and when I insisted that the butter she had left uncovered in the refrigerator for a week was disgusting, she tasted it and tasted it again, attempting to understand why I was being so difficult.

Mom also possessed an iron stomach; she was apparently impervious to the kind of food-borne illnesses that felled weaker mortals. Nothing she ate, anywhere in the world, ever made her sick. My mother munched her way through third world marketplaces. She drank the water everywhere. And she saw no reason why week-old ground beef, bought on sale at the supermarket, would not make perfectly fine steak tartare. She could not understand why any normal person would consider a container of cottage cheese that had disappeared into the depths of the refrigerator for six or seven months a candidate for the garbage. "Why waste perfectly good food?" she would declare. Dented cans were her absolute passion. "Such a bargain!" she would enthuse as the can opener bit into the metal.

Growing up in my mother's house focused my attention firmly on food. That first experience with mildew casserole was a milestone for me. It taught me to chew slowly, concentrate on every mouthful, taste with great care before committing to the swallow. This was nothing more than self-defense. If you were not careful, you could, like the twenty-six people who once joined us for one of Mom's more creative dinner parties, end up in the hospital having your stomach pumped.

When I was very young my caution was only for myself, but as I grew older I began to sense a larger mission in life. Having ensured my own survival I came to feel that it was my duty to keep my mother from killing anybody else. And so I began to watch people as they ate, trying to discern their preferences and learn their patterns, preparing to leap in before they took the fatal bite.

I was seven the first time I took action. Some friends had unexpectedly dropped by, and Mom invited them to stay for lunch. "I'll make a lovely *salade nicoise*!" she said. "I've got a lot of leftovers I need to use up." Uh-oh, I thought, trailing her into the kitchen.

The lettuce, anchovies, and capers were fine. But when she excavated a can of tuna fish and sniffed it dubiously, the back of my neck started to tingle. It had been months since the can opener had first sliced into that particular metal.

I considered the people on the guest list and decided that none of them deserved an untimely death. Waiting until my mother's back was

turned, I very deliberately slid my stuffed Koala bear into her path. Mom was furious when she tripped and sent the salad tumbling to the ground, but the company got grilled cheese and I got the thrill of knowing that I had protected the guests.

Why have I told you this story? Because there is a subtext in every tale we tell about food, and lately it has occurred to me that the baby in the high chair, spoon hovering above her, is a perfect metaphor for this moment in our food history. Here we are, trustingly strapped into our seats, obediently opening up our mouths, ready to gobble up whatever mysterious concoctions are on offer. The wielder of the spoon is taste blind and careless, blithely indifferent to the dangers it contains. The spoon approaches, coming closer and closer. What are we going to do?

It is the moment of truth, the time when we need to decide whether we will swallow what we are being fed. Eric Schlosser, author of *Fast Food Nation*, has characterized our government's policies as turning "American consumers into the subjects of a vast medical experiment."¹ And what else is that baby in the high chair but a little guinea pig? We can accept what is on the modern menu, but if we do that we are doomed to more of the same, an endless diet of increasingly vile dishes along with all the evils that come with them. Encouraged by our complaisance, those who hold the spoon will simply give us more.

Or we can reject the food, spit it out, demand a more wholesome diet. What my story is trying to tell you is that the choice is ours to make, and that it can be thrilling when we reject this diet.

That is certainly one way to interpret the tale. But it is not the only one. To make this interpretation fit you have to believe that we—the baby in the high chair—are utterly naive. And there is no reasonable way to make that case; our eyes may be tightly shut, but we know exactly what is on that spoon. This interpretation also requires us to accept that the wielder of the spoon is, like the mother in the story, innocent of malice and blind to the dangers it contains.

It may be more satisfying to see my story as being about the baby who grows into a child who protects the guests. In the beginning she protects only herself, but as she gets older she is faced with an ethical dilemma: should she step in when she sees tainted food being prepared for others? As time goes on she finds that she must intervene; she cannot allow others to consume food when she knows it to be dangerous. This interpretation

1. Schlosser, "Order the Fish," *Vanity Fair*, November 2004, 256.

is about taking responsibility for the way others eat, and it speaks to one of the major issues facing the American diner: while the rich can eat expensive, organically raised food, the less fortunate are stuck in a fast food nation. It becomes an allegory about the two-tiered food system that is developing in the United States, one that says it is up to the aware to protect the uninformed.

But there are other ways to interpret this tale. Look at it from my mother's point of view, and it becomes the poignant story of a curious, adventurous woman who was taste blind. What gives this version its punch is Mom's inability to taste what she cooked. From this perspective, the story is trying to tell us that in the end taste matters most. No matter how much thought, intelligence, and energy you invest in cooking, it is a wasted effort if the recipes don't work.

You can also read this as the tale of a little girl who learns to love to eat because she is being fed such terrible food. Had hers been an ordinary menu, she would never have paid it much mind. But in the face of the raw and the spoiled, she narrows her focus, pays attention to what is on the table, and grows up to be a food writer. This is an optimistic reading, one that says when food becomes so bad that it can no longer be ignored, it ultimately becomes a force for change.

Readers have found all of these meanings—and more—in my own story. I recently heard from someone who was writing a paper on the ways in which “the memory of taste figures in the issues of identity and the structuring of text” in my books. What interests me is not the accuracy (or lack of it) of these interpretations but the fact that so many people have gone exploring beneath the surface, searching for meaning in a simple story about a little girl and her food. And the fact that this is happening in the United States is particularly fascinating, because we have, for most of our history, been so indifferent to the subject that to consider food as anything more than sustenance has been almost unthinkable. We have had a national story about food—every culture does—but it is one about which we have remained remarkably oblivious. That, however, is beginning to change. After years of silence on the subject we are, finally, beginning to think about food in a new and thoughtful way.

To me this is the most encouraging thing that is happening in the world of food right now. I am thrilled by the growth of the organic movement, the interest in humanely raised animals, and the arguments about genetically engineered food. But what is even more exciting is that we are beginning to have a national conversation about eating, and that each day it grows louder.

We did not come to this place easily. The austerity of our Puritan ancestors set the tone for our country's relationship with what we eat. Most Americans, no matter what their background, are burdened with a load of Puritan shame that leaves us deeply suspicious of anything that smacks of carnal delight. Food is especially problematic; who among us does not possess an irritating inner voice constantly alert to the sin of gluttony?

I became aware of how pervasive these feelings were about thirty years ago at a dinner party. It was an elegant affair, and even the six-year-old son of the host was dressed up in a suit and tie. He was a very well-behaved little boy, and I was charmed when he dipped his spoon into his soup, looked up at his father, and sighed, "Oh, Daddy, this soup is so delicious."

The father, however, was not charmed. He pushed back his chair and stood up abruptly. Picking up his water glass he hurled the contents into the little boy's soup. "Son!" he thundered. "How dare you? You know that it is not polite to discuss food." And then, with the little boy in tears, he very calmly reseated himself.

I was horrified. I shouldn't have been. Most of us, after all, were raised on the words of Benjamin Franklin who famously (and piously) said, "Eat for necessity, not for pleasure."

We may have become a nation of food lovers, but that thought still lingers somewhere in our collective subconscious. We are so confused about food that even today when you ask an American writer why food is important you are likely to get a few famous lines from M. F. K. Fisher. It is a quote I have used endlessly myself.

People ask me: "Why do you write about food, and eating and drinking? Why don't you write about the struggle for power and security, and about love, the way others do?"

They ask it accusingly, as if I were somehow gross, unfaithful to the honor of my craft.

The easiest answer is to say that, like most other humans, I am hungry. But there is more than that. It seems to me that our three basic needs, for food and security and love, are so mixed and mingled and entwined that we cannot straightly think of one without the others. So it happens that when I write of hunger I am really writing about love and the hunger for it, and warmth and the love of it and the hunger for it . . . and then the warmth and richness and fine reality of hunger satisfied . . . and it is all one.

I tell about myself, and how I ate bread on a lasting hillside, or drank red wine in a room now blown to bits, and it happens without

my willing that I am telling too about the people with me then, and their other deeper needs for love and happiness.²

These are potent words and beautiful sentiments, but reading them now what I hear most is apology. Fisher couldn't help herself: she was a product of her time, and she was embarrassed by her passion for food. And so she tells her readers that food is not her true subject. "I am really," she promises, "writing about bigger things." She loves to eat, but deep in her heart she knows this is not quite proper, that food is not worthy of intellectual attention. And in reassuring her readers that it is okay for her to write about food—because after all, it is really about much more than that—she is letting them off the hook as well, absolving them from the sin of reading what she has written.

This is, I think, an accurate depiction of the way Americans felt about food in the forties. M. F. K. Fisher may have been our greatest food writer, but when she started telling tales of the table she was discomfited by her work.

Things changed in the fifties—but not for the better. Stories about food and cooking became respectable, but most of the people telling them had an agenda. The perfect example of what that agenda was can be found in a delectable little film called *Design for Dreaming*, made by General Motors in 1956. It is an extraordinary document that reveals the mind-set of the time.

The movie, a Cinderella story done entirely in song and dance, opens on an invitation whirling through the night sky right into the bedroom of a bright young thing, a Keely Smith look-alike, whose pink pajamas magically morph into an evening gown. Invitation in hand, she leaps from her window to fly into the starry night. Her ride ends at the Waldorf-Astoria where Prince Charming, in the guise of a mysteriously masked man, whisks her into the show and introduces her to the latest cars. "I want a Corvette!" she cries, but then she spies the Buick, the Cadillac, the Firebird. . . . Dancing from one automobile to the next she is like a child in a candy shop—she wants them all. But then—what's this?—suddenly her lovely pink dress turns into a white apron with black stripes. Cinderella swoons, Cinderella falls into the arms of the masked man, and the next thing you know Cinderella is all alone standing in front of a stove.

From the car to the kitchen in one easy leap. Distraught, our heroine throws up her arms and sings, "Just like a man—you give him a break, and

2. Fisher, *The Art of Eating* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 353.

you wind up in the kitchen baking a cake.” But wait! When she inspects the stove she realizes that this is no ordinary kitchen. She has arrived in the Kitchen of the Future! No KP for her. No need to cook at all. She slips a card into the oven, pushes a button, and presto! Her work is done.

Now she dances out the door, exchanging her apron for a tennis outfit, which is soon followed by a dizzying array of leisure costumes. Golf clothes! Bathing suits! “You don’t have to be chained to the stove all day,” sings Cinderella as she models the clothing. “Just set the timer, and you’re on your way.”

Returning to the kitchen she discovers that during her absence the cake has obligingly baked itself in the magic oven, which provided candles as well. It has even lit them. When Cinderella blows them out the apron vanishes, the evening gown reappears, and she is transported in a poof of smoke back to the Motorama.

Cinderella has wished herself right out of the kitchen. This is incredibly corny, but the imagery is both powerful and persuasive. When the striped apron appears, the woman is carried off to the prison of the kitchen, locked in solitary confinement, and doomed to a life of hard labor and drudgery. Rescue arrives in the form of technology, which allows Cinderella to consume cars, clothes, and appliances. Tellingly, she does not consume a single morsel of food.

We should not be surprised. In the sequel, *A Touch of Magic*, made a few years later, the machines have taken on one more dreary chore: they not only do the cooking but now also eat the food. Although there are no diners, we watch a meal disappear, bite by bite, as the camera gobbles it up.

What did the makers of these movies mean to tell us? Were they really trying to say that cooking was drudgery, and that even eating was best left to machines? Yes, it seems, they were. In the fifties, as American food became increasingly industrialized and our food supply underwent a radical transformation, Madison Avenue became increasingly aware of the subtext of the table. The food industry was beginning to understand that the stories we tell can be very powerful tools, and they started to use them in increasingly sophisticated ways.

One early indication of the industry’s interest was a study done by a marketing concern in 1950. Intent upon finding out how consumers really felt about their products, the marketers came up with the notion of inventing shopping lists and asking subjects to tell them what they thought of the people who had assembled them.

The results are a stunning revelation of how ready consumers were to accept food products as a determinant of character. Simply by looking at the brand names of foods that they had chosen, subjects confidently described the lives of total strangers. On the basis of their purchases women were described as “lazy,” “warmhearted,” or “disorganized.” By deconstructing shopping lists, respondents described how one woman put on her makeup and what kind of restaurants another preferred; they even felt certain that they knew what time people they had never met got out of bed. Describing a woman who bought Nescafé, one respondent said, “Apparently she likes to sleep late in the morning. She must appear rather sloppy, taking little time to makeup in the morning. She is also used to eating supper out too. Perhaps alone, rather than with an escort. An old maid, probably.”³

The message is very clear: your food choices tell the world exactly who you are. Buyer, shop carefully. “What is food?” asked Roland Barthes in his seminal work in the field, *Food and Culture*. “It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations and behavior.”⁴

In the sixties and seventies, as the food industry matured, this view of food as sign and symbol became very popular with marketers and scientists, professors, philosophers, and anthropologists. Serious studies of eating habits were undertaken in the name of sociology, and advertising agencies were very busy figuring out how to ascribe character to food, eager to offer us the opportunity to tell the world who we were. Trying to improve the stories and give them some humanity, they invented women to sell us their canned, packaged, and frozen food, bland, fictitious people with names like Ann Page and Betty Crocker. But Americans were ready for a real human story. And fortunately for us, she appeared in the guise of Julia Child.

Child’s story is the exact opposite of that told by the Motorama Cinderella of the fifties. Born into a life of leisure, Child spent her young womanhood at loose ends. For the first part of her life, she was a very proper American, and as a proper American she was not much interested in food. Then she fell in love with a sophisticated man with continental appetites

3. Laura Shapiro, *Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America* (New York: Viking, 2004), 54.

4. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, *Food and Culture: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 21.

who taught her to eat. It was primarily to please him that she learned to cook. And it was in the kitchen that Child found both her life's work and her liberty.

Julia Child is generally credited with bringing food back to the American table. But she was hardly alone. When Julia's television shows first aired, others had been treading the same waters. James Beard had been teaching cooking—on television and off—for years. So had Dionne Lucas. Helen Evans Brown had written wonderful and personal cookbooks. Poppy Canon and a dozen other people had done the same. Many people were eager to lead Americans into the kitchen, and into the world of food. But they were not successful. What made Julia different—and so important—was the subtext of her story.

Julia Child did not just teach America to cook. She was the refutation of the message that American women had been getting for years, the one that told them that they hated to cook, that the kitchen was a prison, and that liberty lay in finding a way out of domestic servitude. Julia was living proof to American housewives that you could find happiness in the kitchen. The Motorama Cinderella held out the promise that freedom from the kitchen meant having fun all day. Julia Child replied that this was wrong: the fun, she said, was in the kitchen. Anybody who did not believe this had only to look at her. Too tall, too old, with that strange voice, here was a woman who had found not only true love but also fame and fortune in the kitchen. And wasn't she just having a grand old time banging on those pots and pans?

But Julia did not just love to cook—she loved to eat as well. You could not watch her without realizing how much pleasure her own cooking gave her. There on the screen was a wonderfully robust woman who obviously was not worrying about her weight, leaning in to savor each dish. Each time she took a bite you yearned to taste it too. Watching her made you get hungry and stay hungry.

Hers was the right voice at the right time, for despite her patrician background, Julia was us. Listen to her telling a friend, in a letter, about an evening out. "At the party," she wrote, "was a dogmatic meatball who considers himself a gourmet but is just a big bag of wind. They were talking about *beurre blanc* and how it was a mystery, and only a few people could do it, and how it could only be made with white shallots from Lorraine and over a wood fire. Phoo."⁵

5. Shapiro, *Something from the Oven*, 209.

This is the voice we love—the great American leveler, taking aim at pretension and promising that the art of eating is available to us all. She loved to laugh at the latest food snobbery. When the fad for exotic salts began Julia went around insisting that salt was salt, and as far as she was concerned nobody need travel to exotic lands to procure the perfect crystal—certainly not for her. Hardworking, exuberant, and American to the core, she was the mistress of make-do; gourmet cooking, she assured us, was within our grasp, and everything we needed was right there in the supermarket. It was Julia's contention that anyone could walk into an ordinary grocery store and walk out with the makings of a fabulous feast. Is it any wonder that we love her?

But as Julia's audience became more sophisticated about food, we outgrew her story. We began to understand that there is a difference between a shallot harvested by a farmer in Lorraine—or Louisiana for that matter—and one grown on a factory farm. We learned that a chicken that spends his life scratching in the dirt does not taste the same as one who has never seen the light of day. As the subject of food became an important part of popular culture we needed a new story. And that paved the way for the return of M. F. K. Fisher.

Fisher began writing in the thirties, and although she had her fifteen minutes of fame in the forties, there was a long period when her writing was not appreciated. When *Ms. Magazine* first asked me to profile Fisher in 1978 the editor asked, "Do you know who she is?" It is not a question that anyone could ask a food writer today. It would be unthinkable for a working restaurant critic not to know *The Art of Eating*. Back then, however, Fisher had been on the back burner for such a long time that when I arrived at her house for the interview, armed with the kind of questions she would later answer a dozen times a week, she was startled.

Fisher and Child were about the same age, and they came from similar backgrounds. But they were very different people. Mary Frances was gorgeous, sexy, acerbic, and intellectual. She could cook, but she was not a cook; she was an avid eater, a translator. Reading M. F. K. Fisher made you feel that if you did not like to eat, not only were you missing out on a great pleasure, but you were also a less developed person who was lacking an important tool for living. She could write about eating a single section of tangerine until you felt as if you were right there with her and so hungry that you had no choice but to run out, buy a tangerine, and devour it on the spot. There could not have been a more perfect antidote to the food story that Madison Avenue was trying to sell us.

Fisher was a romantic, and she gave us a love story about eating. Yet, reading closely, you could not help hearing that little hesitation, that slightly guilty, old-fashioned idea that food was not a worthy subject and that in tackling it she was, as a writer, “being unfaithful to her art.”

It was very much the ethos of the time. When Jacques Pepin was at Columbia studying for a Ph.D. in philosophy and literature in the seventies, he proposed writing a doctoral thesis on the history of French food presented in the context of French literature. He planned to start with Ronsard’s “Apology to a Field Salad,” go on to the wedding feast in *Madame Bovary*, and, of course, deal with the famous madeleine. His adviser turned him down flat. “Cuisine,” he pontificated, “is not a serious art form. It’s far too trivial for academic study. Not intellectual enough to form the basis of a Ph.D. thesis.”⁶

Consider how much has changed in the thirty years that have passed since then. Today, candidates are writing Ph.D. theses on food topics in almost every discipline, and food studies is one of academe’s fastest-growing fields. How did this happen?

Blame it on my generation. We grew up with the most convoluted relationship to food of any group in human history. In our time few children witnessed their mothers cooking with pleasure. A confluence of events, including the march of women into the workplace, the women’s liberation movement, the increasing industrialization of our food supply, and the globalization of markets, changed the way we sat down to dinner. It was an eat-it-and-beat-it time, when *The I Hate to Cook Book* was on the kitchen shelf, fast food was on the table, and both cooking and eating were something to be done with speed and efficiency. We compensated by filling the void with stories.

Sometimes, when I am writing these stories about my childhood, I find myself questioning if they are even true. I do not know if the tastes I remember are real. I am not sure my mother was really as bad a cook as I have made her out to be. Did the spectacularly flavorful steaks I remember my father cooking really taste that rich and strong? But as I fret over the veracity of it all, I wonder if it even matters. These memories are like a dream you tell someone after waking, struggling to remember exactly what took place. As you talk, you know that you are making some of it up as you go along. But you keep on speaking, because asleep or awake, it is still your dream.

6. Pepin, *The Apprentice* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 212.

What my generation has done is to spin many dreams about food. We felt the need to find a connection, a way to bring ourselves back to the table. We have been busily creating an entire literature of food to remind ourselves that we are, in the end, cooking animals.

The current literature of the table started as a stealth movement, fueled by the cookbook revolution. Hungry for something that was not available in real life, people began carrying cookbooks to bed. They did not have the slightest intention of actually using the recipes; they simply wanted to read the details and fill their dreams with dishes they would never taste. It was fast food by day and feasts in the night.

Then, bit by bit, food began to creep into other books. Entire genres that had never paid the slightest mind to meals suddenly began to focus on them. Suddenly, we had novels with recipes, sleuths who were food critics, romances about chefs, biographies based on a single meal. We had children's books about food and sports legends writing about food. It led, inexorably I think, to the food memoir.

When I wrote my first book I frankly modeled it on M. F. K. Fisher's *Gastronomical Me*. But when Judith Jones, who had been Fisher's longtime editor, read the manuscript she said to me, "You are another generation. And this book reflects that. Where Mary Frances toyed with her readers, you're very frank." That is true. But there was a more important difference that neither Judith nor I saw at the beginning, and it marks the major change that took place between Mary Frances's generation and mine: faced with the near loss of cooking and the vast transformation in the way that we eat, my goal was to celebrate food—and to do it frankly, openly, with no embarrassment, no apology, and no hidden agenda. Writers like me had a mission, and that was to lead a hungry nation back to the pleasures of the table. Not to make people cook—just to make them eat.

I did not know it at the time. Nobody else did either. In fact, the first agent I spoke to about my first book said, "You're going to write stories about the great cooks you have known? About the food of your childhood? Who cares?" She tried very hard to steer me away from this project. She thought I should write a nice practical little book about mail-order food.

"But that's not the book I want to write!" I cried. She pulled a long face and asked why. I could not quite tell her. I just knew that this book about learning to eat, about growing up at the table, was there, waiting for me. She bid me good-bye. "Nobody," she said, "is going to buy that book."

The truth is that when *Tender at the Bone* came out, the bookstores had no idea what to do with it. They stuck it in with the cookbooks—after all, it had a couple of recipes—but it was an awkward fit. Only a few stores could bring themselves to shelve the book in Biography. As one clerk said, with some contempt, “Biography? This is about food!”

But no matter where it was, people found it. And they began telling their own stories. Writers all over the country began to dream about food, and to spin those dreams in a variety of ways. Before long there were so many food memoirs that they filled their own special section in the bookstores.

Biographies of eaters were not new, even in the United States. In the twenties Joseph Liebling was writing wonderful tales of the table, and in the thirties M. F. K. Fisher followed in his footsteps. Angelo Pellegrini’s seminal book about the joys of growing, cooking, and eating came out in the forties, and Joseph Wechsberg’s books were published in the fifties. The great writer Joseph Mitchell spent much of his time writing about people who sold food, cooked food, or ate food. But although each of these writers was very successful, the literature of food did not become mainstream. Until now.

The timing is not an accident. At the very moment when our food supply has become too problematic to ignore we find ourselves listening for tales of the table. This is because our relationship with food is so fundamentally necessary to us, to our notion of ourselves as human beings. As this relationship has become increasingly fractured in the real world we have gone looking for new ways to embrace it, to draw it close. The less we cook, the more we write about food, read about food, watch films about food. The more distant we become from what we eat, the harder we try to recapture the connection.

Most recent memoirs have been reports from alien territory. They have been about eating in exotic lands, about the immigrant experience, about the terrors of adolescence, or about growing up in that equally exotic country, the taste-blind America of the past.

But these tales are about to change. Any day now—maybe not this year, and maybe not next, but very soon—we will begin to read a kind of revisionist history of American food. People who grew up in Berkeley, in New Jersey, in Portland—the children of the first wave of food activists—will write about their childhood food as if America had been the south of France. This will be a *cri de coeur*, an attempt to return to a bucolic America that may or may not have actually existed.

Those who tell us this story will have begun the act of making it real. The combination of writing and cooking—two of the most natural ways in which we communicate with one another—is extremely strong. I believe that it will allow us to reimagine our relationship with food, to create a new ethic of eating and a new definition of what it means to eat in the modern world. Beyond that, I believe it will help us understand what this modern world really is.

What we need is a very large vision. Today, most of us are becoming aware of the enormous cultural power that our food stories wield, making some foods taboo while endowing others with glamour. This power is now being harnessed as never before by an advertising industry intent upon getting a message across to an increasingly young and vulnerable audience. Children sit in front of television sets from the moment they are born, absorbing the messages that the food industry beams at them. *McDonald's* is the third word of many American children—right behind *Mama* and *Papa*. On the other side of the fence Starbucks now assures us that drinking its coffee is a way to help control climate change.⁷ Grocery stores have gotten into the act too, understanding that the story is as important as the product. Walk into one of the fancy new Whole Foods emporiums, and what you will find is a story of happy animals and wholesome produce, laid out before you, offering the subliminal message that if you eat this food you too will be happier, healthier, and somehow more virtuous.

Meanwhile, other messages go unheard. In a recent article about the waves of marine species that are becoming extinct, one professor studying the phenomenon put the problem very succinctly. What has happened to the oceans, he said, has been a slow-motion disaster. “It is silent and invisible. People don’t imagine this. It hasn’t captured our imagination.”⁸

Capturing our imagination: there it is. As food, in all its many aspects, begins to capture our imaginations, we need to be cognizant of exactly what stories we are telling about food. And we need to think big.

The potential power of food stories was demonstrated in a recent paper published by the National Academy of Sciences. In an experiment researchers were able to change the way people ate merely by telling them stories. During what they called “The False Food Memory Diet,” researchers told their subjects invented tales about food experiences that they had supposedly had when they were children. In one story subjects were convinced

7. “Green Looks Good on You,” Starbucks ads in national newspapers.

8. Juliet Eilperin, “Waves of Marine Species Extinctions Feared,” *Washington Post*, August 24, 2005, A1.

that strawberry ice cream had, long ago, made them sick. Although this was a complete fabrication, almost half of the subjects believed these false memories and subsequently refused to eat strawberry ice cream. In other words, they swallowed a lie, and it changed their tastes.⁹

As a writer, a teller of tales, I find this almost indescribably delicious. And as a person who is concerned with the future of food, I find it extremely hopeful. Because if lies can make people change the way they eat, just think how powerful the truth might be.

Americans have never before been as interested in stories about food as we are right now. As we begin to explore this connection to the foods that we eat we will invariably discover much more. If we are willing to really open our eyes, if we are prepared to be honest about food, this can lead us to experience everything that is valuable about our relationship with ourselves, with each other, and with our world.

When you eat with all your senses you open yourself to the glorious pleasures of taste and touch and smell as they go rushing through your body. That is no small thing. But when you eat with all your mind you discover everything that is good—and bad—about the way we live on this earth.

The great philosopher of the table Anthelme Brillat-Savarin famously said, “Tell me what you eat and I will tell you who you are.” But he also said, less famously, “The fate of nations hangs upon their choice of food.” I think he had it right, and that the more we, as a nation, pay attention to what we eat, the better off we will be. More than that, I am convinced that the stories we tell about food, in all their wonderful complexity, are capable of revealing as much about our place in the world as any other subject of human discourse.

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