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Cooking, Creativity, and Culture: An Analysis of the Meaning of Cooking

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Throughout my childhood, family dinners consisted of take-out or eating at a restaurant. Usually, we chose between Chinese or Mexican. On other days, my brothers and I helped ourselves to whatever was in the pantry. However, some of the best meals I ate were at my friends’ houses because their mothers would cook from scratch! At my neighbor’s house, the aroma of summer filled the backyard; brightly colored barbecue sides of coleslaw and baked beans garnished grilled hamburgers and hotdogs. My best friend’s table groaned under the weight of Sunday night pasta dinners and pot roasts smothered in cheesy marinara sauces. Many different types of food surrounded me, but none were truly my own. Eventually, I taught myself how to cook. I started by looking up different recipes online and shopping for the ingredients. My early experiments were only mediocre. One time, as I boiled spaghetti, flames burst out of the pot. With each failure, I got better at selecting ingredients and preparing the food. Soon, I was creating masterpieces. I learned that cooking is more than blindly following a recipe because it is a creative act that involves combining simple modifications, multicultural experiments, and individual preferences with knowledge and skill.

The history of cooking is mysterious, but there is one unquestionable fact: cooking requires heat. As we learned in history class, cavemen were hunter-gatherers, eating nuts, fruits, and occasionally meats. We also learned that cavemen, or more specifically the homo sapiens branch of our ancestral family, learned how to create and control fire. Although we do not know the exact origins of cooked foods, science writer Elizabeth Pennisi reports that researchers determined that “there seems to be a genuine energetic advantage in cooking food” (Pennisi). Diets that included cooked fruits, vegetables, and meats gave more nutrition and calories to our ancestors. By spending less time and energy searching for food, early humans started to consider how the food they ate affected them. Greater efficiency meant that food began to take on new significance as “eating ‘gradually became a key element of group structure, a mark of identity, and a symbolic means of expressing thought’” (Super 169). As cooking acquired meaning beyond nutrition, it became an important part of daily life and identity for all early cultures. Still, the importance of cooking is a mystery to many people.

Food is more than simply fuel. The choices that individuals make about food define their cultural identities; one thinks of pasta as Italian, curry as Indian, and croissants as French. Food anthropologist Sidney Mintz states that these cultural distinctions occurred because “like all culturally defined material substances used in the creation and maintenance of social relationships, food serves both to solidify group membership and to set groups apart” (109). Food choice is a shared characteristic among a group because it gives identity. Food and cooking are a mark of identification that both unifies and divides. Essentially, food defines one as a member of a particular cultural group through both the ingredients and methods of cooking. American cooking incorporates many traditional ingredients from other cultures. Cooking transformed America from English colonies into a melting pot of flavors from many cultures.

Every cook develops techniques and preferences based on their background and cultural influences. These preferences affect the decisions they make in the kitchen, defining the steps taken to prepare a
meal and the ingredients used to form a simple dish. For instance, Italian and Mexican restaurants feature different flavors and styles of cooking. Both are popular within the melting pot culture of America. In our country, different cultural foods often become popular because people want to expand their knowledge. According to the Journal of Consumer Science, modern cooking features “The dominance of Asian cuisines... including Asian meals in general, Chinese, Thai, Indian, curries and more (Worsley 258).” Using new cultural sources helps an American cook to push the limits of creativity. Incorporating foreign ideas is more than just a bridge between cultures because it introduces new ingredients, flavors, and methods. Once a new skill is mastered, cooks can combine them with traditional methods in new, creative ways.

Along with combining cultural sources, creativity involves introducing individual flare into a dish. First, a chef develops skills; without basic understanding of how to select, chop, and prepare ingredients, one cannot begin to create new styles. Mark Bittman believes “like any skill, cooking gets easier as you do it more; every time you cook, you advance your level of expertise. Someday you won’t even need recipes (53).” Once cooks develop skills through practice, they then have the ability to attempt to create a masterpiece dish. The chef relies on prior knowledge to reinvigorate old recipes with new combinations of ingredients. French chef Marie-Odile Monchicourt believes “culinary creativity is mainly concerned with achieving a harmonious relationship between [smell, taste, and texture]..., on the one hand, and the shape and color of the ingredients of a dish, on the other (DeBevoise 100).” The relationship between ingredients defines a dish as good or bad. When chefs experiment, they take great risks. Yet, with the combination of skill and knowledge, they achieve harmony with the ingredients. When designing unique and creative dishes, only knowledge and skill limit the chef.

Cooking, like photography, requires both technical skill and creativity to create a finished product. A good photographer first learns how to manipulate the aperture and focus on the camera. These technical elements of photographic composition are like knife skills or mixing in a kitchen: they form the basis of any photograph or recipe. To separate the work from others, a photographer takes this knowledge and fuses it with individual perspective to create new methods. In the same way, the creative cook combines knowledge and experimentation to improve a recipe. Creative French chef Marie-Odile Monchicourt says “the artisanal cook, or craftsman, stands in contrast to what might be called “inspired” cooks, whose ambition is to dream up dishes that don’t exist, to use ingredients to make works of art that will express a sentiment, arouse an emotion (Worsley 264).” Like the photographer, a cook becomes emotive and expressive. Once emotion enters the kitchen, the chef becomes a creator, not just an executor of a recipe. Creativity requires basic knowledge and skill to execute the recipe, but also requires the desire to experiment and a love of creation. Just like taking a picture, creating a meal requires different elements of skills and knowledge that can then be combined in new ways to produce original masterpieces.

Food scientists, however, often remove creative elements from cooking, thereby transforming the process into a mathematical puzzle. Baking certain delicate desserts requires high levels of precision. A chef must measure the ingredients and prepare the food exactly as prescribed to achieve the perfect outcome. Angel food cake, for instance, has a precise preparation. First, egg whites must be chilled and no yolk at all can be present in the egg mixture. No oils or fatty residues can be on the surface of bowls and beaters. Even the amount of time spent beating the mixture that includes a perfect measurement of cream of tartar and sugar cannot be modified. The texture of an angel food cake is wholly dependent on blindly following the recipe (Rombauer 626). However, the presentation of the finished cake leaves room for creativity. Perhaps one includes strawberry compote or fresh raspberries. The cake might be decorated with chocolate frosting or inscribed with “Happy Birthday!” Despite the necessity of adhering to this recipe, the chef’s individual preferences allow the final presentation of the dish to be creative. In the same way, many complicated baked goods such as souffle or meringue must be prepared precisely, and then creatively modified.
Critics might argue that too much of a good thing, or in this case a creative thing, becomes mundane. Famous chefs across the world strive to achieve Michelin star status; it takes every ounce of knowledge, skill, and especially creativity to earn this honor. Even more difficult is earning two or three stars from the Michelin critics. Therefore, once a chef achieves this exalted status, he might continue to reproduce his successful dishes over and over. The repetition leads to dating of the dish and a once creative entrée suddenly becomes commonplace. Thornton’s, a famous Dublin-based restaurant, earned two Michelin stars, but in 2006, the guide downgraded the restaurant to a single star (Humphreys). The Michelin judges are notoriously secretive, but made clear that Thornton’s lost the star because “Obviously the food is still good because it got one star, but it was not as good as before” (Humphreys). This alludes to the importance of creativity as an essential element in cooking. Had the chefs at Thornton’s continued to experiment and pioneer new recipes at the same high level, they might have maintained their star. Thus, creativity constantly shift and changes; failure to be fresh and new makes a cook commonplace.

My own kitchen was home to experimentation and creativity. The shift from charred cookie lumps on stained baking sheets to perfectly torched ramekins of crème brulée showcased my developing skills and exposed my love of creating a meal. For my family’s annual holiday party, I prepared an assortment of treats: German gingerbread with blue cheese, American Santa shaped sugar cookies laced with cinnamon, brittle English peppermint bark, and anise-flavored Italian pizzelles. Proud of my creations, I was now certain that the creation of any dish means far more than simply executing a recipe. In order to be creative, a chef relies on individualistic flare to combine common ingredients, international techniques, and scientific understanding of recipes. This creativity in cooking moves beyond the kitchen. For some, cooking in this way allows them to expand their knowledge through experimentation. For others, it allows them to simply become individuals, exploring the world through food much like a photographer does through image. For still others, the creativity might show one’s care or concern for a friend or family member, by incorporating a favorite staple into a newly designed dish. Pushing the limits of creativity showcases a chef’s abilities and individualism and allows a simple dish to become a masterpiece. Learning to experiment, and thus to create, transforms an average cook into a confident chef whose risks in the kitchen reflect life experiences.
Works Cited


Works Referenced
