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Cooked a natural history of transformation

The fact that modern science has dismissed the classical elements, reducing them to still more elemental substances and forces—water to molecules of hydrogen and oxygen; fire to a process of rapid oxidation, etc.—hasn’t really changed our lived experience of nature or the way we imagine it. Yet, beginning with fire, I found that the older, prescientific elements figure largely—hugely, in fact—in apprehending the main transformations that comprise cooking, each in its own way. Industrial cooking has taken a substantial toll on our health and well-being. It leaves plenty of mental space for daydreaming and reflection. Well, in a world where so few of us are obliged to cook at all anymore, to choose to do so is to lodge a protest against specialization—against the total rationalization of life. In the calculus of economics, doing so may not always be the most efficient use of an amateur cook’s time, but in the calculus of human emotion, it is beautiful even so. Science may have replaced the big four with a periodic table of 118 elements, and then reduced each of those to ever-tinier particles, but our senses and our dreams have yet to get the news.To learn to cook is to put yourself on intimate terms with the laws of physics and chemistry, as well as the facts of biology and microbiology. (As it turned out, this involved not only ordinary cooking but also the specialized form of it known as brewing.) Other questions were slightly more political in nature. The good news is that this is still within our reach, no matter how limited our skills in the kitchen. If cooking is, as the anthropologists tell us, a defining human activity—the act with which culture begins, according to Claude Lévi-Strauss—then maybe we shouldn’t be surprised that watching its processes unfold would strike deep emotional chords.The idea that cooking is a defining human activity is not a new one. It has headed off many of the conflicts and domestic arguments that such a large shift in gender roles and family dynamics was bound to spark. Nowadays, only a small handful of cooking’s technologies seem within the reach of competence. Even as it vanishes from our daily lives, we’re aware to the rhythms and textures of the work cooks do, which seems so much more fireside and satisfying than the more abstract and formless tasks most of us perform in our jobs these days. This cast of characters turns out to be a lot more masculine than I would have expected, and a reader might conclude that I have indulged in some unfortunate typecasting. The outsourcing of much of the work of cooking to corporations has relieved women of what has traditionally been their exclusive responsibility for feeding the family, making it easier for them to work outside the home and have careers. But to the middle links of the food chain, where the stuff of nature gets transformed into the things we eat and drink, I hadn’t really given much thought.Until, that is, I began trying to unpack a curious paradox I had noticed while watching television, which was simply this: How is it that at the precise historical moment when Americans were abandoning the kitchen, handing over the preparation of most of our meals to the food industry, we began spending so much of our time thinking about food and watching other people cook it on television? My own backyard barbecuing has been informed and improved by my hours hanging around the barbecue pit. And each of these natural forces, Pollan writes, signifies one of the “great transformations of nature into culture we call cooking.” The author’s project is, in fact, nearly as all encompassing and essential as the elements themselves, ranging across several disciplines, embracing perspectives both stringently objective and deeply personal, and introducing us to a novel’s worth of colorful characters whom he enlists to teach him the cooking method at hand. It begins to matter more than we ever imagined. For what is the environmental crisis if not a crisis of the way we live? The story of Western civilization is pretty much the story of bread, which is arguably the first important “food processing” technology. To cook for the pleasure of it, to devote a portion of our leisure to it, is to declare our independence from the corporations seeking to organize our every waking moment into yet another occasion for consumption. In my hands its flesh feels a little less like the product of industry than of nature; indeed, less like a product at all. (The recipes are spelled out more concisely in the appendix, in case you do want to try any of them.) Though all the cooking I describe can be done in a home kitchen, only a portion of the book deals directly with the kind of work most people regard as “home cooking.” Several of the recipes here are for things most readers will probably never make themselves—beer, for example, or yeast, or even bread. Though I hope that they will. Befitting its subject, this section takes the shape of a single long recipe, unfolding step by step the age-old techniques that grandmothers developed for teasing delicious food from the most ordinary of ingredients: some aromatic plants, a little fat, a few scraps of meat, a long afternoon around the house. He began cooking. And then what would be a good way to better connect to my teenage son? This last option invites availing ourselves of the various and very useful shortcuts that an industrial food economy offers: the package of spinach in the freezer, the can of wild salmon in the pantry, the box of store-bought ravioli from down the street or halfway around the world. Engaging and enlightening reading.” —Publishers Weekly (starred review)New York Times best-selling author Pollan (The Botany of Desire; The Omnivore’s Dilemma) delivers a thoughtful meditation on cooking that is both difficult to categorize and uniquely, imitably his. Because I discovered there was much to learn from attempting, even if only just once, these more ambitious and time-consuming forms of cookery, knowledge that might not at first seem terribly useful but in fact changes everything about one’s relationship to food and what is possible in the kitchen. (I recently heard about an agency that will dispatch a sympathetic someone to visit your elderly parents if you can’t spare the time to do it yourself.) It seems as though we can no longer imagine anyone but a professional or an institution or a product supplying our daily needs or solving our problems. Certainly they still loom large in our imagination. If this is not “making a living,” I don’t know what is. To butcher a pork shoulder is to be forcibly reminded that this is the shoulder of a large mammal, made up of distinct groups of muscles with a purpose quite apart from feeding me. How many of us still do the kind of work that engages us in a dialogue with the material world that concludes—assuming the chicken Kiev doesn’t prematurely leak or the soufflé doesn’t collapse—with such a gratifying and delicious sense of pride?So maybe the reason we like to watch cooking on television and read about cooking in books is that there are things about cooking we really miss. I counted myself lucky to have paid my mother—who loves to cook and almost every night made us a delicious meal. This represents not only a loss of knowledge, but a loss of a kind of power, too. And in fact it was after a long bout of watching cooking programs on television that I began to wonder if this activity I had always taken for granted might be worth taking a little more seriously.I developed a few theories to explain what I came to think of as the Cooking Paradox. Along the way, a succession of “fermentos” tutored me in the techniques of artfully managing rot, the folly of the modern war against bacteria, the erotics of disgust, and the somewhat upside-down notion that, while we were fermenting alcohol, alcohol has been fermenting us.I have been fortunate in both the talent and the generosity of the teachers who agreed to take me in—the cooks, bakers, brewers, picklers, and cheese makers who shared their time and techniques and recipes. Let me try to explain.At bottom cooking is not a single process but, rather, comprises a small set of technologies, some of the most important humans have yet devised. Cooked is a potentially seductive invitation to discover—or rediscover—our most primal connection to the natural world, and it will likely induce more than a few readers to dust off their little-used pots and pans and to brush up on some essential knife skills. What constitutes “cooking” takes place along a spectrum, as indeed it has for at least a century, when packaged foods first entered the kitchen and the definition of “scratch cooking” began to drift. After you’ve tried your hand at brewing or pickling or slow roasting a whole hog, everyday home cooking becomes much less daunting, and in certain ways easier. Specialization is undeniably a powerful social and economic force. Not just our money but our power flows toward them whenever we cannot supply any of our everyday needs and desires ourselves. What feels like all of it. Same for a wedge of cheese or bottle of beer: What had always been just products, good or bad, now reveal themselves as so much more than that—as achievements, as expressions, as relationships. This book serves as his exploration of four classical cooking elements: fire, water, air, and earth. For is there any prize less selfish, any labor less alienated, any time less wasted, than preparing something delicious and nourishing for people you love?So let’s begin. At the beginning, with fire. Not at all. It seems that raw food takes much more time and energy to chew and digest, which is why other primates our size carry around substantially larger digestive tracts and spend many more of their waking hours chewing—as much as six hours a day.Cooking, in effect, took part of the work of chewing and digestion and performed it for us outside of the body, using outside sources of energy. The cook stands squarely between nature and culture, conducting a process of translation and negotiation. Freed from the necessity of spending our days gathering large quantities of raw food and then chewing (and chewing it), humans could now devote their time, and their metabolic resources, to other purposes, like creating a culture.Cooking gave us not just the meal but also the occasion: the practice of eating together at an appointed time and place. This has been an early lesson of the rising movement to rebuild local food economies, a movement that ultimately depends for its success on our willingness to put more thought and effort into feeding ourselves. The only worthy arenas for consequential action were the workplace and the public square. “Around that fire,” Wrangham writes, “we became tamer.”Cooking thus transformed us, and not only by making us more sociable and civil. But cooking somehow feels different. Flammang, a feminist scholar and political scientist who has argued eloquently for the social and political importance of “food work,” suggests the problem may have something to do with food itself, which by its very nature falls on the wrong side—the feminine side—of the mind-body dualism in Western culture. “Food is apprehended through the senses of touch, smell, and taste,” she points out, “which rank lower on the hierarchy of senses than sight and hearing, which are typically thought to give rise to knowledge. The Big Problem is nothing more or less than this point of countless little everyday choices, most of them made by us (consumer spending represents nearly three-quarters of the U.S. economy) and the rest of them made by others in the name of our needs and desires. To do so is to take back a measure of responsibility, too, to become, at the very least, a little less glib in one’s pronouncements.Especially one’s pronouncements about “the environment,” which suddenly begins to seem a little less “out there” and a lot closer to home. What Winston Churchill once said of architecture—“First we shape our buildings, and then they shape us”—might also be said of cooking. The only problem with Cooked is that, at a lengthy—albeit entrancing—450-some pages, it’ll be quite a while before you get back into the kitchen. To bring some sense of order to this vast subject, he resurrects classical categories of fire, water, air, and earth. The first and most obvious is that watching other people cook is not exactly a new behavior for us humans. It doesn’t hurt that he also happens to be very funny.” —Boston Globe “Because of the power of his prose and his reasoning, Cooked may prove to be just as influential as Pollan’s seminal book, The Omnivore’s Dilemma . The work itself gives me a keener interest in the story of the hog: where it came from and how it found its way to my kitchen. It breeds helplessness, dependence, and ignorance and, eventually, it undermines any sense of responsibility.Our society assigns us a tiny number of roles: We’re producers of one thing at work, consumers of a great many other things all the rest of the time, and then, once a year or so, we take on the temporary role of citizen and cast a vote. Historically, cooking with water comes after cooking with fire, since it awaited the invention of pots to cook in, an artifact of human culture only about ten thousand years old. Most of us occupy a place somewhere between those bright poles, a spot that is constantly shifting with the day of the week, the occasion, and our mood. Yet even to cook a few more nights a week than you already do, or to devote a Sunday to making a few meals for the week, or perhaps to try every now and again to make something you only ever expected to buy—even these modest acts will constitute a kind of a vote. I’ve also written a fair amount about the opposite end of the food chain—the eating end, I mean, and the implications of our eating for our health. Now cooking moves indoors, into the domestic realm, and in this chapter I delve into everyday home cookery, its techniques and satisfactions as well as its discontents. But that’s not at all what I have in mind. Food becomes just another commodity, an abstraction. In Cooked, Pollan discovers the empowering power of the four classical elements—fire, water, air, and earth—to infuse the stuff of nature into delicious things to eat and drink. I’ve to come to think cooking is too important to be left to any one gender or member of the family; men and children both need to be in the kitchen, and not just for reasons of fairness or equity but because they have so much to gain by being there. In fact, one of the biggest reasons corporations were able to insinuate themselves into this part of our lives is because home cooking had for so long been denigrated as “women’s work” and therefore not important enough for men and boys to learn to do.Though it’s hard to say which came first: Was home cooking denigrated because the work was mostly done by women, or did women get stuck doing most of the cooking because our culture denigrated the work? In learning to cook traditional pot dishes, I chose to work with a female chef, and if by doing so I underscored the cliché that home cooking is woman’s work, that was sort of the idea: I wanted to delve into that very question. In this way, receiving a Goodreads Choice nomination is truly an honor that comes straight from the readers. I don’t need to point out that the food you watch being cooked on television is not food you get to eat.This is peculiar. . The less cooking we were doing in our own lives, it seemed, the more that food and its vicarious preparation fascinated us.Our culture seems to be of at least two minds on this subject. And yet it is also debilitating. Each of these, I was surprised and pleased to discover, corresponds to, and depends upon, one of the classical elements: Fire, Water, Air, and Earth.Why this should be so I am not entirely sure. A longtime contributor to The New York Times Magazine, Pollan teaches writing at Harvard University and the University of California, Berkeley. In our yards and kitchens and minds.As soon as you start down this path of thinking, the quotidian space of the kitchen appears in a startling new light. In a recent book called The Taste for Civilization, Janet A. Even the most ordinary dish follows a satisfying arc of transformation, magically becoming more than the sum of its ordinary parts. We’ll have to change the way we live, too. In 2010, Time magazine named him one of the one hundred most influential people in the world. It has relieved all sorts of other pressures in the household, including longer workdays and overscheduled children, and saved us time that we can now invest in other pursuits. 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