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Out of the Kitchen, Onto the Couch

By MICHAEL POLLAN

1. JULIA'S CHILDREN

I was only 8 when “The French Chef” first appeared on American television in 1963, but it didn’t take long for me to realize that this [Julia Child](#) had improved the quality of life around our house. My mother began cooking dishes she’d watched Julia cook on TV: boeuf bourguignon (the subject of the show’s first episode), French onion soup gratinée, duck à l’orange, coq au vin, mousse au chocolat. Some of the more ambitious dishes, like the duck or the mousse, were pointed toward weekend company, but my mother would usually test these out on me and my sisters earlier in the week, and a few of the others — including the boeuf bourguignon, which I especially loved — actually made it into heavy weeknight rotation. So whenever people talk about how Julia Child upgraded the culture of food in America, I nod appreciatively. I owe her. Not that I didn’t also owe Swanson, because we also ate TV dinners, and those were pretty good, too.

Every so often I would watch “The French Chef” with my mother in the den. On WNET in New York, it came on late in the afternoon, after school, and because we had only one television back then, if Mom wanted to watch her program, you watched it, too. The show felt less like TV than like hanging around the kitchen, which is to say, not terribly exciting to a kid (except when Child dropped something on the floor, which my mother promised would happen if we stuck around long enough) but comforting in its familiarity: the clanking of pots and pans, the squeal of an oven door in need of WD-40, all the kitchen-chemistry-set spectacles of transformation. The show was taped live and broadcast uncut and unedited, so it had a *vérité* feel completely unlike anything you might see today on the Food Network, with its A.D.H.D. editing and hyperkinetic soundtracks of rock music and clashing knives. While Julia waited for the butter foam to subside in the sauté pan, you waited, too, precisely as long, listening to Julia’s improvised patter over the hiss of her pan, as she filled the desultory minutes with kitchen tips and lore. It all felt more like life than TV, though Julia’s voice was like nothing I ever heard before or would hear again until Monty Python came to America: vaguely European, breathy and singsongy, and weirdly suggestive of a man doing a falsetto impression of a woman. The [BBC](#) supposedly took “The French Chef” off the air because viewers wrote in complaining that Julia Child seemed either drunk or demented.

[Meryl Streep](#), who brings Julia Child vividly back to the screen in [Nora Ephron](#)’s charming new comedy, “Julie & Julia,” has the voice down, and with the help of some clever set design and cinematography, she manages to evoke too Child’s big-girl ungainliness — the woman was 6 foot 2 and had arms like a longshoreman. Streep also captures the deep sensual delight that Julia Child took in food — not just the eating of it (her virgin bite of sole meunière at La Couronne in Rouen recalls [Meg Ryan](#)’s deli orgasm in “When Harry Met Sally”) but the fondling and affectionate slapping of ingredients in their raw state and the magic of their kitchen transformations.

But “Julie & Julia” is more than an exercise in nostalgia. As the title suggests, the film has a second, more contemporary heroine. The Julie character (played by [Amy Adams](#)) is based on Julie Powell, a 29-year-old aspiring writer living in Queens who, casting about for a blog conceit in 2002, hit on a cool one: she would cook her way through all 524 recipes in Child’s “Mastering the Art of French Cooking” in 365 days and blog about her adventures. The movie shuttles back and forth between Julie’s year of compulsive cooking and blogging in Queens in 2002 and Julia’s decade in Paris and Provence a half-century earlier, as recounted in “My Life in France,” the memoir published a few years after her death in 2004. Julia Child in 1949 was in some ways in the same boat in which Julie Powell found herself in 2002: happily married to a really nice guy but feeling, acutely, the lack of a life project. Living in Paris, where her husband, Paul Child, was posted in the diplomatic corps, Julia (who like Julie had worked as a secretary) was at a loss as to what to do with her life until she realized that what she liked to do best was eat. So she enrolled in Le Cordon Bleu and learned how to cook. As with Julia, so with Julie: cooking saved her life, giving her a project and, eventually, a path to literary success.

That learning to cook could lead an American woman to success of any kind would have seemed utterly implausible in 1949; that it is so thoroughly plausible 60 years later owes everything to Julia Child’s legacy. Julie Powell operates in a world that Julia Child helped to create, one where food is taken seriously, where chefs have been welcomed into the repertory company of American celebrity and where cooking has become a broadly appealing *mise-en-scène* in which success stories can plausibly be set and played out. How amazing is it that we live today in a culture that has not only something called the Food Network but now a hit show on that network called “The Next Food Network Star,” which thousands of 20- and 30-somethings compete eagerly to become? It would seem we have come a long way from Swanson TV dinners.

The Food Network can now be seen in nearly 100 million American homes and on most nights commands more viewers than any of the cable news channels. Millions of Americans, including my 16-year-old son, can tell you months after the finale which contestant emerged victorious in Season 5 of “Top Chef” (Hosea Rosenberg, followed by Stefan Richter, his favorite, and Carla Hall). The popularity of cooking shows — or perhaps I should say food shows — has spread beyond the precincts of public or cable television to the broadcast networks, where [Gordon Ramsay](#) terrorizes newbie chefs on “Hell’s Kitchen” on Fox and Jamie Oliver is preparing a reality show on ABC in which he takes aim at an American city with an obesity problem and tries to teach the population how to cook. It’s no wonder that a Hollywood studio would conclude that American audiences had an appetite for a movie in which the road to personal fulfillment and public success passes through the kitchen and turns, crucially, on a recipe for boeuf bourguignon. (The secret is to pat dry your beef before you brown it.)

But here’s what I don’t get: How is it that we are so eager to watch other people browning beef cubes on screen but so much less eager to brown them ourselves? For the rise of Julia Child as a figure of cultural consequence — along with [Alice Waters](#) and [Mario Batali](#) and [Martha Stewart](#) and [Emeril Lagasse](#) and whoever is crowned the next Food Network star — has, paradoxically, coincided with the rise of fast food, home-meal replacements and the decline and fall of everyday home cooking.

That decline has several causes: women working outside the home; food companies persuading Americans to let them do the cooking; and advances in technology that made it easier for them to do so. Cooking is no longer obligatory, and for many people, women especially, that has been a blessing. But perhaps a mixed

blessing, to judge by the culture's continuing, if not deepening, fascination with the subject. It has been easier for us to give up cooking than it has been to give up talking about it — and watching it.

Today the average American spends a mere 27 minutes a day on food preparation (another four minutes cleaning up); that's less than half the time that we spent cooking and cleaning up when Julia arrived on our television screens. It's also less than half the time it takes to watch a single episode of "Top Chef" or "Chopped" or "The Next Food Network Star." What this suggests is that a great many Americans are spending considerably more time watching images of cooking on television than they are cooking themselves — an increasingly archaic activity they will tell you they no longer have the time for.

What is wrong with this picture?

2. THE COURAGE TO FLIP

When I asked my mother recently what exactly endeared Julia Child to her, she explained that "for so many of us she took the fear out of cooking" and, to illustrate the point, brought up the famous potato show (or, as Julia pronounced it, "the poh-TAY-toh show!"), one of the episodes that Meryl Streep recreates brilliantly on screen. Millions of Americans of a certain age claim to remember Julia Child dropping a chicken or a goose on the floor, but the memory is apocryphal: what she dropped was a potato pancake, and it didn't quite make it to the floor. Still, this was a classic live-television moment, inconceivable on any modern cooking show: Martha Stewart would sooner commit seppuku than let such an outtake ever see the light of day.

The episode has Julia making a plate-size potato pancake, sautéing a big disc of mashed potato into which she has folded impressive quantities of cream and butter. Then the fateful moment arrives:

"When you flip anything, you just have to have the courage of your convictions," she declares, clearly a tad nervous at the prospect, and then gives the big pancake a flip. On the way down, half of it catches the lip of the pan and splats onto the stovetop. Undaunted, Julia scoops the thing up and roughly patches the pancake back together, explaining: "When I flipped it, I didn't have the courage to do it the way I should have. You can always pick it up." And then, looking right through the camera as if taking us into her confidence, she utters the line that did so much to lift the fear of failure from my mother and her contemporaries: "If you're alone in the kitchen, WHOOOO" — the pronoun is sung — "is going to see?" For a generation of women eager to transcend their mothers' recipe box (and perhaps, too, their mothers' social standing), Julia's little kitchen catastrophe was a liberation and a lesson: "The only way you learn to flip things is just to flip them!"

It was a kind of courage — not only to cook but to cook the world's most glamorous and intimidating cuisine — that Julia Child gave my mother and so many other women like her, and to watch her empower viewers in episode after episode is to appreciate just how much about cooking on television — not to mention cooking itself — has changed in the years since "The French Chef" was on the air.

There are still cooking programs that will teach you how to cook. Public television offers the eminently useful "America's Test Kitchen." The Food Network carries a whole slate of so-called dump-and-stir shows during the day, and the network's research suggests that at least some viewers are following along. But many of these programs — I'm thinking of Rachael Ray, Paula Deen, Sandra Lee — tend to be aimed at

stay-at-home moms who are in a hurry and eager to please. (“How good are you going to look when you serve this?” asks Paula Deen, a Southern gal of the old school.) These shows stress quick results, shortcuts and superconvenience but never the sort of pleasure — physical and mental — that Julia Child took in the work of cooking: the tomahawking of a fish skeleton or the chopping of an onion, the Roling of butter into the breast of a raw chicken or the vigorous whisking of heavy cream. By the end of the potato show, Julia was out of breath and had broken a sweat, which she mopped from her brow with a paper towel. (Have you ever seen Martha Stewart break a sweat? Pant? If so, you know her a lot better than the rest of us.) Child was less interested in making it fast or easy than making it right, because cooking for her was so much more than a means to a meal. It was a gratifying, even ennobling sort of work, engaging both the mind and the muscles. You didn’t do it to please a husband or impress guests; you did it to please yourself. No one cooking on television today gives the impression that they enjoy the actual work quite as much as Julia Child did. In this, she strikes me as a more liberated figure than many of the women who have followed her on television.

Curiously, the year Julia Child went on the air — 1963 — was the same year [Betty Friedan](#) published “The Feminine Mystique,” the book that taught millions of American women to regard housework, cooking included, as drudgery, indeed as a form of oppression. You may think of these two figures as antagonists, but that wouldn’t be quite right. They actually had a great deal in common, as Child’s biographer, Laura Shapiro, points out, and addressed the aspirations of many of the same women. Julia never referred to her viewers as “housewives” — a word she detested — and never condescended to them. She tried to show the sort of women who read “The Feminine Mystique” that, far from oppressing them, the work of cooking approached in the proper spirit offered a kind of fulfillment and deserved an intelligent woman’s attention. (A man’s too.) Second-wave feminists were often ambivalent on the gender politics of cooking. Simone de Beauvoir wrote in “The Second Sex” that though cooking could be oppressive, it could also be a form of “revelation and creation; and a woman can find special satisfaction in a successful cake or a flaky pastry, for not everyone can do it: one must have the gift.” This can be read either as a special Frenchie exemption for the culinary arts (*fémminisme, c’est bon*, but we must not jeopardize those flaky pastries!) or as a bit of wisdom that some American feminists thoughtlessly trampled in their rush to get women out of the kitchen.

3. TO THE KITCHEN STADIUM

Whichever, kitchen work itself has changed considerably since 1963, judging from its depiction on today’s how-to shows. Take the concept of cooking from scratch. Many of today’s cooking programs rely unapologetically on ingredients that themselves contain lots of ingredients: canned soups, jarred mayonnaise, frozen vegetables, powdered sauces, vanilla wafers, limeade concentrate, Marshmallow Fluff. This probably shouldn’t surprise us: processed foods have so thoroughly colonized the American kitchen and diet that they have redefined what passes today for cooking, not to mention food. Many of these convenience foods have been sold to women as tools of liberation; the rhetoric of kitchen oppression has been cleverly hijacked by food marketers and the cooking shows they sponsor to sell more stuff. So the shows encourage home cooks to take all manner of shortcuts, each of which involves buying another product, and all of which taken together have succeeded in redefining what is commonly meant by the verb “to cook.”

I spent an enlightening if somewhat depressing hour on the phone with a veteran food-marketing

researcher, Harry Balzer, who explained that “people call things ‘cooking’ today that would roll their grandmother in her grave — heating up a can of soup or microwaving a frozen pizza.” Balzer has been studying American eating habits since 1978; the NPD Group, the firm he works for, collects data from a pool of 2,000 food diaries to track American eating habits. Years ago Balzer noticed that the definition of cooking held by his respondents had grown so broad as to be meaningless, so the firm tightened up the meaning of “to cook” at least slightly to capture what was really going on in American kitchens. To cook from scratch, they decreed, means to prepare a main dish that requires some degree of “assembly of elements.” So microwaving a pizza doesn’t count as cooking, though washing a head of lettuce and pouring bottled dressing over it does. Under this dispensation, you’re also cooking when you spread mayonnaise on a slice of bread and pile on some cold cuts or a hamburger patty. (Currently the most popular meal in America, at both lunch and dinner, is a sandwich; the No. 1 accompanying beverage is a soda.) At least by Balzer’s none-too-exacting standard, Americans are still cooking up a storm — 58 percent of our evening meals qualify, though even that figure has been falling steadily since the 1980s.

Like most people who study consumer behavior, Balzer has developed a somewhat cynical view of human nature, which his research suggests is ever driven by the quest to save time or money or, optimally, both. I kept asking him what his research had to say about the prevalence of the activity I referred to as “real scratch cooking,” but he wouldn’t touch the term. Why? Apparently the activity has become so rarefied as to elude his tools of measurement.

“Here’s an analogy,” Balzer said. “A hundred years ago, chicken for dinner meant going out and catching, killing, plucking and gutting a chicken. Do you know anybody who still does that? It would be considered crazy! Well, that’s exactly how cooking will seem to your grandchildren: something people used to do when they had no other choice. Get over it.”

After my discouraging hour on the phone with Balzer, I settled in for a couple more with the Food Network, trying to square his dismal view of our interest in cooking with the hyperexuberant, even fetishized images of cooking that are presented on the screen. The Food Network undergoes a complete change of personality at night, when it trades the cozy precincts of the home kitchen and chirpy softball coaching of Rachael Ray or Sandra Lee for something markedly less feminine and less practical. Erica Gruen, the cable executive often credited with putting the Food Network on the map in the late ’90s, recognized early on that, as she told a journalist, “people don’t watch television to learn things.” So she shifted the network’s target audience from people who love to cook to people who love to eat, a considerably larger universe and one that — important for a cable network — happens to contain a great many more men.

In prime time, the Food Network’s *mise-en-scène* shifts to masculine arenas like the Kitchen Stadium on “Iron Chef,” where famous restaurant chefs wage gladiatorial combat to see who can, in 60 minutes, concoct the most spectacular meal from a secret ingredient ceremoniously unveiled just as the clock starts: an octopus or a bunch of bananas or a whole school of daurade. Whether in the Kitchen Stadium or on “Chopped” or “The Next Food Network Star” or, over on Bravo, “Top Chef,” cooking in prime time is a form of athletic competition, drawing its visual and even aural vocabulary from “Monday Night Football.” On “Iron Chef America,” one of the Food Network’s biggest hits, the cookingcaster Alton Brown delivers a breathless (though always gently tongue-in-cheek) play by play and color commentary, as the iron chefs and their team of iron sous-chefs race the clock to peel, chop, slice, dice, mince, Cuisinart, mandoline, boil,

double-boil, pan-sear, sauté, sous vide, deep-fry, pressure-cook, grill, deglaze, reduce and plate — this last a word I'm old enough to remember when it was a mere noun. A particularly dazzling display of chefly “knife skills” — a term bandied as freely on the Food Network as “passing game” or “slugging percentage” is on [ESPN](#) — will earn an instant replay: an onion minced in slo-mo. Can we get a camera on this, Alton Brown will ask in a hushed, this-must-be-golf tone of voice. It looks like Chef Flay's going to try for a last-minute garnish grab before the clock runs out! Will he make it? [The buzzer sounds.] Yes!

These shows move so fast, in such a blur of flashing knives, frantic pantry raids and more sheer fire than you would ever want to see in your own kitchen, that I honestly can't tell you whether that “last-minute garnish grab” happened on “Iron Chef America” or “Chopped” or “The Next Food Network Star” or whether it was Chef Flay or Chef Batali who snagged the sprig of foliage at the buzzer. But impressive it surely was, in the same way it's impressive to watch a handful of eager young chefs on “Chopped” figure out how to make a passable appetizer from chicken wings, celery, soba noodles and a package of string cheese in just 20 minutes, said starter to be judged by a panel of professional chefs on the basis of “taste, creativity and presentation.” (If you ask me, the key to victory on any of these shows comes down to one factor: bacon. Whichever contestant puts bacon in the dish invariably seems to win.)

But you do have to wonder how easily so specialized a set of skills might translate to the home kitchen — or anywhere else for that matter. For when in real life are even professional chefs required to conceive and execute dishes in 20 minutes from ingredients selected by a third party exhibiting obvious sadistic tendencies? (String cheese?) Never, is when. The skills celebrated on the Food Network in prime time are precisely the skills necessary to succeed on the Food Network in prime time. They will come in handy nowhere else on God's green earth.

We learn things watching these cooking competitions, but they're not things about how to cook. There are no recipes to follow; the contests fly by much too fast for viewers to take in any practical tips; and the kind of cooking practiced in prime time is far more spectacular than anything you would ever try at home. No, for anyone hoping to pick up a few dinnertime tips, the implicit message of today's prime-time cooking shows is, Don't try this at home. If you really want to eat this way, go to a restaurant. Or as a chef friend put it when I asked him if he thought I could learn anything about cooking by watching the Food Network, “How much do you learn about playing basketball by watching the [N.B.A.](#)?”

What we mainly learn about on the Food Network in prime time is culinary fashion, which is no small thing: if Julia took the fear out of cooking, these shows take the fear — the social anxiety — out of ordering in restaurants. (Hey, now I know what a shiso leaf is and what “crudo” means!) Then, at the judges' table, we learn how to taste and how to talk about food. For viewers, these shows have become less about the production of high-end food than about its consumption — including its conspicuous consumption. (I think I'll start with the sawfish crudo wrapped in shiso leaves. . . .)

Surely it's no accident that so many Food Network stars have themselves found a way to transcend barriers of social class in the kitchen — beginning with Emeril Lagasse, the working-class guy from Fall River, Mass., who, though he may not be able to sound the ‘r’ in “garlic,” can still cook like a dream. Once upon a time Julia made the same promise in reverse: she showed you how you, too, could cook like someone who could not only prepare but properly pronounce a béarnaise. So-called fancy food has always served as a form of

cultural capital, and cooking programs help you acquire it, now without so much as lifting a spatula. The glamour of food has made it something of a class leveler in America, a fact that many of these shows implicitly celebrate. Television likes nothing better than to serve up elitism to the masses, paradoxical as that might sound. How wonderful is it that something like arugula can at the same time be a mark of sophistication and be found in almost every salad bar in America? Everybody wins!

But the shift from producing food on television to consuming it strikes me as a far-less-salubrious development. Traditionally, the recipe for the typical dump-and-stir program comprises about 80 percent cooking followed by 20 percent eating, but in prime time you now find a raft of shows that flip that ratio on its head, like “The Best Thing I Ever Ate” and “Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives,” which are about nothing but eating. Sure, Guy Fieri, the tattooed and spiky-coiffed chowhound who hosts “Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives,” ducks into the kitchen whenever he visits one of these roadside joints to do a little speed-bonding with the startled short-order cooks in back, but most of the time he’s wrapping his mouth around their supersize creations: a 16-ounce Oh Gawd! burger (with the works); battered and deep-fried anything (clams, pickles, cinnamon buns, stuffed peppers, you name it); or a buttermilk burrito approximately the size of his head, stuffed with bacon, eggs and cheese. What Fieri’s critical vocabulary lacks in analytical rigor, it more than makes up for in tailgate enthusiasm: “Man, oh man, now this is what I’m talkin’ about!” What can possibly be the appeal of watching Guy Fieri bite, masticate and swallow all this chow?

The historical drift of cooking programs — from a genuine interest in producing food yourself to the spectacle of merely consuming it — surely owes a lot to the decline of cooking in our culture, but it also has something to do with the gravitational field that eventually overtakes anything in television’s orbit. It’s no accident that Julia Child appeared on public television — or educational television, as it used to be called. On a commercial network, a program that actually inspired viewers to get off the couch and spend an hour cooking a meal would be a commercial disaster, for it would mean they were turning off the television to do something else. The ads on the Food Network, at least in prime time, strongly suggest its viewers do no such thing: the food-related ads hardly ever hawk kitchen appliances or ingredients (unless you count A.1. steak sauce) but rather push the usual supermarket cart of edible foodlike substances, including Manwich sloppy joe in a can, Special K protein shakes and Ore-Ida frozen French fries, along with fast-casual eateries like Olive Garden and Red Lobster.

Buying, not making, is what cooking shows are mostly now about — that and, increasingly, cooking shows themselves: the whole self-perpetuating spectacle of competition, success and celebrity that, with “The Next Food Network Star,” appears to have entered its baroque phase. The Food Network has figured out that we care much less about what’s cooking than who’s cooking. A few years ago, Mario Batali neatly summed up the network’s formula to a reporter: “Look, it’s TV! Everyone has to fall into a niche. I’m the Italian guy. Emeril’s the exuberant New Orleans guy with the big eyebrows who yells a lot. Bobby’s the grilling guy. Rachael Ray is the cheerleader-type girl who makes things at home the way a regular person would. Giada’s the beautiful girl with the nice rack who does simple Italian food. As silly as the whole Food Network is, it gives us all a soapbox to talk about the things we care about.” Not to mention a platform from which to sell all their stuff.

The Food Network has helped to transform cooking from something you do into something you watch — into yet another confection of spectacle and celebrity that keeps us pinned to the couch. The formula is as

circular and self-reinforcing as a TV dinner: a simulacrum of home cooking that is sold on TV and designed to be eaten in front of the TV. True, in the case of the Swanson rendition, at least you get something that will fill you up; by comparison, the Food Network leaves you hungry, a condition its advertisers must love. But in neither case is there much risk that you will get off the couch and actually cook a meal. Both kinds of TV dinner plant us exactly where television always wants us: in front of the set, watching.

4. WATCHING WHAT WE EAT

To point out that television has succeeded in turning cooking into a spectator sport raises the question of why anyone would want to watch other people cook in the first place. There are plenty of things we've stopped doing for ourselves that we have no desire to watch other people do on TV: you don't see shows about changing the oil in your car or ironing shirts or reading newspapers. So what is it about cooking, specifically, that makes it such good television just now?

It's worth keeping in mind that watching other people cook is not exactly a new behavior for us humans. Even when "everyone" still cooked, there were plenty of us who mainly watched: men, for the most part, and children. Most of us have happy memories of watching our mothers in the kitchen, performing feats that sometimes looked very much like sorcery and typically resulted in something tasty to eat. Watching my mother transform the raw materials of nature — a handful of plants, an animal's flesh — into a favorite dinner was always a pretty good show, but on the afternoons when she tackled a complex marvel like chicken Kiev, I happily stopped whatever I was doing to watch. (I told you we had it pretty good, thanks partly to Julia.) My mother would hammer the boneless chicken breasts into flat pink slabs, roll them tightly around chunks of ice-cold herbed butter, glue the cylinders shut with egg, then fry the little logs until they turned golden brown, in what qualified as a minor miracle of transubstantiation. When the dish turned out right, knifing through the crust into the snowy white meat within would uncork a fragrant ooze of melted butter that seeped across the plate to merge with the Minute Rice. (If the instant rice sounds all wrong, remember that in the 1960s, Julia Child and modern food science were both tokens of sophistication.)

Yet even the most ordinary dish follows a similar arc of transformation, magically becoming something greater than the sum of its parts. Every dish contains not just culinary ingredients but also the ingredients of narrative: a beginning, a middle and an end. Bring in the element of fire — cooking's *deus ex machina* — and you've got a tasty little drama right there, the whole thing unfolding in a TV-friendly span of time: 30 minutes (at 350 degrees) will usually do it.

Cooking shows also benefit from the fact that food itself is — by definition — attractive to the humans who eat it, and that attraction can be enhanced by food styling, an art at which the Food Network so excels as to make Julia Child look like a piker. You'll be flipping aimlessly through the cable channels when a slow-motion cascade of glistening red cherries or a tongue of flame lapping at a slab of meat on the grill will catch your eye, and your reptilian brain will paralyze your thumb on the remote, forcing you to stop to see what's cooking. Food shows are the campfires in the deep cable forest, drawing us like hungry wanderers to their flames. (And on the Food Network there are plenty of flames to catch your eye, compensating, no doubt, for the unfortunate absence of aromas.)

No matter how well produced, a televised oil change and lube offers no such satisfactions.

I suspect we're drawn to the textures and rhythms of kitchen work, too, which seem so much more direct and satisfying than the more abstract and formless tasks most of us perform in our jobs nowadays. The chefs on TV get to put their hands on real stuff, not keyboards and screens but fundamental things like plants and animals and fungi; they get to work with fire and ice and perform feats of alchemy. By way of explaining why in the world she wants to cook her way through "Mastering the Art of French Cooking," all Julie Powell has to do in the film is show us her cubicle at the [Lower Manhattan Development Corporation](#), where she spends her days on the phone mollifying callers with problems that she lacks the power to fix.

"You know what I love about cooking?" Julie tells us in a voice-over as we watch her field yet another inconclusive call on her headset. "I love that after a day where nothing is sure — and when I say nothing, I mean nothing — you can come home and absolutely know that if you add egg yolks to chocolate and sugar and milk, it will get thick. It's such a comfort." How many of us still do work that engages us in a dialogue with the material world and ends — assuming the soufflé doesn't collapse — with such a gratifying and tasty sense of closure? Come to think of it, even the collapse of the soufflé is at least definitive, which is more than you can say about most of what you will do at work tomorrow.

5. THE END OF COOKING

If cooking really offers all these satisfactions, then why don't we do more of it? Well, ask Julie Powell: for most of us it doesn't pay the rent, and very often our work doesn't leave us the time; during the year of Julia, dinner at the Powell apartment seldom arrived at the table before 10 p.m. For many years now, Americans have been putting in longer hours at work and enjoying less time at home. Since 1967, we've added 167 hours — the equivalent of a month's full-time labor — to the total amount of time we spend at work each year, and in households where both parents work, the figure is more like 400 hours. Americans today spend more time working than people in any other industrialized nation — an extra two weeks or more a year. Not surprisingly, in those countries where people still take cooking seriously, they also have more time to devote to it.

It's generally assumed that the entrance of women into the work force is responsible for the collapse of home cooking, but that turns out to be only part of the story. Yes, women with jobs outside the home spend less time cooking — but so do women without jobs. The amount of time spent on food preparation in America has fallen at the same precipitous rate among women who don't work outside the home as it has among women who do: in both cases, a decline of about 40 percent since 1965. (Though for married women who don't have jobs, the amount of time spent cooking remains greater: 58 minutes a day, as compared with 36 for married women who do have jobs.) In general, spending on restaurants or takeout food rises with income. Women with jobs have more money to pay corporations to do their cooking, yet all American women now allow corporations to cook for them when they can.

Those corporations have been trying to persuade Americans to let them do the cooking since long before large numbers of women entered the work force. After World War II, the food industry labored mightily to sell American women on all the processed-food wonders it had invented to feed the troops: canned meals, freeze-dried foods, dehydrated potatoes, powdered orange juice and coffee, instant everything. As Laura Shapiro recounts in "Something From the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America," the food industry strived to "persuade millions of Americans to develop a lasting taste for meals that were a lot like field

rations.” The same process of peacetime conversion that industrialized our farming, giving us synthetic fertilizers made from munitions and new pesticides developed from nerve gas, also industrialized our eating.

Shapiro shows that the shift toward industrial cookery began not in response to a demand from women entering the work force but as a supply-driven phenomenon. In fact, for many years American women, whether they worked or not, resisted processed foods, regarding them as a dereliction of their “moral obligation to cook,” something they believed to be a parental responsibility on par with child care. It took years of clever, dedicated marketing to break down this resistance and persuade Americans that opening a can or cooking from a mix really was cooking. Honest. In the 1950s, just-add-water cake mixes languished in the supermarket until the marketers figured out that if you left at least something for the “baker” to do — specifically, crack open an egg — she could take ownership of the cake. Over the years, the food scientists have gotten better and better at simulating real food, keeping it looking attractive and seemingly fresh, and the rapid acceptance of microwave ovens — which went from being in only 8 percent of American households in 1978 to 90 percent today — opened up vast new horizons of home-meal replacement.

Harry Balzer’s research suggests that the corporate project of redefining what it means to cook and serve a meal has succeeded beyond the industry’s wildest expectations. People think nothing of buying frozen peanut butter-and-jelly sandwiches for their children’s lunchboxes. (Now how much of a timesaver can that be?) “We’ve had a hundred years of packaged foods,” Balzer told me, “and now we’re going to have a hundred years of packaged meals.” Already today, 80 percent of the cost of food eaten in the home goes to someone other than a farmer, which is to say to industrial cooking and packaging and marketing. Balzer is unsentimental about this development: “Do you miss sewing or darning socks? I don’t think so.”

So what are we doing with the time we save by outsourcing our food preparation to corporations and 16-year-old burger flippers? Working, commuting to work, surfing the Internet and, perhaps most curiously of all, watching other people cook on television.

But this may not be quite the paradox it seems. Maybe the reason we like to watch cooking on TV is that there are things about cooking we miss. We might not feel we have the time or the energy to do it ourselves every day, yet we’re not prepared to see it disappear from our lives entirely. Why? Perhaps because cooking — unlike sewing or darning socks — is an activity that strikes a deep emotional chord in us, one that might even go to the heart of our identity as human beings.

What?! You’re telling me [Bobby Flay](#) strikes deep emotional chords?

Bear with me. Consider for a moment the proposition that as a human activity, cooking is far more important — to our happiness and to our health — than its current role in our lives, not to mention its depiction on TV, might lead you to believe. Let’s see what happens when we take cooking seriously.

6. THE COOKING ANIMAL

The idea that cooking is a defining human activity is not a new one. In 1773, the Scottish writer James Boswell, noting that “no beast is a cook,” called *Homo sapiens* “the cooking animal,” though he might have reconsidered that definition had he been able to gaze upon the frozen-food cases at Wal-Mart. Fifty years

later, in “The Physiology of Taste,” the French gastronome Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin claimed that cooking made us who we are; by teaching men to use fire, it had “done the most to advance the cause of civilization.” More recently, the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, writing in 1964 in “The Raw and the Cooked,” found that many cultures entertained a similar view, regarding cooking as a symbolic way of distinguishing ourselves from the animals.

For Lévi-Strauss, cooking is a metaphor for the human transformation of nature into culture, but in the years since “The Raw and the Cooked,” other anthropologists have begun to take quite literally the idea that cooking is the key to our humanity. Earlier this year, Richard Wrangham, a [Harvard](#) anthropologist, published a fascinating book called “Catching Fire,” in which he argues that it was the discovery of cooking by our early ancestors — not tool-making or language or meat-eating — that made us human. By providing our primate forebears with a more energy-dense and easy-to-digest diet, cooked food altered the course of human evolution, allowing our brains to grow bigger (brains are notorious energy guzzlers) and our guts to shrink. It seems that raw food takes much more time and energy to chew and digest, which is why other primates of our size carry around substantially larger digestive tracts and spend many more of their waking hours chewing: up to six hours a day. (That’s nearly as much time as Guy Fieri devotes to the activity.) Also, since cooking detoxifies many foods, it cracked open a treasure trove of nutritious calories unavailable to other animals. Freed from the need to spend 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 was something new under the sun, for the forager of raw food would likely have fed himself on the go and alone, like the animals. (Or, come to think of it, like the industrial eaters we’ve become, grazing at gas stations and skipping meals.) But sitting down to common meals, making eye contact, sharing food, all served to civilize us; “around that fire,” Wrangham says, “we became tamer.”

If cooking is as central to human identity and culture as Wrangham believes, it stands to reason that the decline of cooking in our time would have a profound effect on modern life. At the very least, you would expect that its rapid disappearance from everyday life might leave us feeling nostalgic for the sights and smells and the sociality of the cook-fire. Bobby Flay and Rachael Ray may be pushing precisely that emotional button. Interestingly, the one kind of home cooking that is actually on the rise today (according to Harry Balzer) is outdoor grilling. Chunks of animal flesh seared over an open fire: grilling is cooking at its most fundamental and explicit, the transformation of the raw into the cooked right before our eyes. It makes a certain sense that the grill would be gaining adherents at the very moment when cooking meals and eating them together is fading from the culture. (While men have hardly become equal partners in the kitchen, they are cooking more today than ever before: about 13 percent of all meals, many of them on the grill.)

Yet we don’t crank up the barbecue every day; grilling for most people is more ceremony than routine. We seem to be well on our way to turning cooking into a form of weekend recreation, a backyard sport for which we outfit ourselves at Williams-Sonoma, or a televised spectator sport we watch from the couch. Cooking’s fate may be to join some of our other weekend exercises in recreational atavism: camping and gardening and hunting and riding on horseback. Something in us apparently likes to be reminded of our distant origins every now and then and to celebrate whatever rough skills for contending with the natural world

might survive in us, beneath the thin crust of 21st-century civilization.

To play at farming or foraging for food strikes us as harmless enough, perhaps because the delegating of those activities to other people in real life is something most of us are generally O.K. with. But to relegate the activity of cooking to a form of play, something that happens just on weekends or mostly on television, seems much more consequential. The fact is that not cooking may well be deleterious to our health, and there is reason to believe that the outsourcing of food preparation to corporations and 16-year-olds has already taken a toll on our physical and psychological well-being.

Consider some recent research on the links between cooking and dietary health. A 2003 study by a group of Harvard economists led by David Cutler found that the rise of food preparation outside the home could explain most of the increase in obesity in America. Mass production has driven down the cost of many foods, not only in terms of price but also in the amount of time required to obtain them. The French fry did not become the most popular “vegetable” in America until industry relieved us of the considerable effort needed to prepare French fries ourselves. Similarly, the mass production of cream-filled cakes, fried chicken wings and taquitos, exotically flavored chips or cheesy puffs of refined flour, has transformed all these hard-to-make-at-home foods into the sort of everyday fare you can pick up at the gas station on a whim and for less than a dollar. The fact that we no longer have to plan or even wait to enjoy these items, as we would if we were making them ourselves, makes us that much more likely to indulge impulsively.

Cutler and his colleagues demonstrate that as the “time cost” of food preparation has fallen, calorie consumption has gone up, particularly consumption of the sort of snack and convenience foods that are typically cooked outside the home. They found that when we don’t have to cook meals, we eat more of them: as the amount of time Americans spend cooking has dropped by about half, the number of meals Americans eat in a day has climbed; since 1977, we’ve added approximately half a meal to our daily intake.

Cutler and his colleagues also surveyed cooking patterns across several cultures and found that obesity rates are inversely correlated with the amount of time spent on food preparation. The more time a nation devotes to food preparation at home, the lower its rate of obesity. In fact, the amount of time spent cooking predicts obesity rates more reliably than female participation in the labor force or income. Other research supports the idea that cooking is a better predictor of a healthful diet than social class: a 1992 study in *The Journal of the American Dietetic Association* found that poor women who routinely cooked were more likely to eat a more healthful diet than well-to-do women who did not.

So cooking matters — a lot. Which when you think about it, should come as no surprise. When we let corporations do the cooking, they’re bound to go heavy on sugar, fat and salt; these are three tastes we’re hard-wired to like, which happen to be dirt cheap to add and do a good job masking the shortcomings of processed food. And if you make special-occasion foods cheap and easy enough to eat every day, we will eat them every day. The time and work involved in cooking, as well as the delay in gratification built into the process, served as an important check on our appetite. Now that check is gone, and we’re struggling to deal with the consequences.

The question is, Can we ever put the genie back into the bottle? Once it has been destroyed, can a culture of everyday cooking be rebuilt? One in which men share equally in the work? One in which the cooking shows

on television once again teach people how to cook from scratch and, as Julia Child once did, actually empower them to do it?

Let us hope so. Because it's hard to imagine ever reforming the American way of eating or, for that matter, the American food system unless millions of Americans — women and men — are willing to make cooking a part of daily life. The path to a diet of fresher, unprocessed food, not to mention to a revitalized local-food economy, passes straight through the home kitchen.

But if this is a dream you find appealing, you might not want to call Harry Balzer right away to discuss it.

“Not going to happen,” he told me. “Why? Because we're basically cheap and lazy. And besides, the skills are already lost. Who is going to teach the next generation to cook? I don't see it.

“We're all looking for someone else to cook for us. The next American cook is going to be the supermarket. Takeout from the supermarket, that's the future. All we need now is the drive-through supermarket.”

Crusty as a fresh baguette, Harry Balzer insists on dealing with the world, and human nature, as it really is, or at least as he finds it in the survey data he has spent the past three decades poring over. But for a brief moment, I was able to engage him in the project of imagining a slightly different reality. This took a little doing. Many of his clients — which include many of the big chain restaurants and food manufacturers — profit handsomely from the decline and fall of cooking in America; indeed, their marketing has contributed to it. Yet Balzer himself made it clear that he recognizes all that the decline of everyday cooking has cost us. So I asked him how, in an ideal world, Americans might begin to undo the damage that the modern diet of industrially prepared food has done to our health.

“Easy. You want Americans to eat less? I have the diet for you. It's short, and it's simple. Here's my diet plan: Cook it yourself. That's it. Eat anything you want — just as long as you're willing to cook it yourself.”

Michael Pollan, a contributing writer, is the Knight Professor of Journalism at the University of California, Berkeley. His most recent book is “In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto.”

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