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Back to the Kitchen: Escaping Processed Food

To escape the adverse effects of consuming industrial processed food, society must learn fundamental cooking skills once more.

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By Ken Albala



Processed food (as opposed to whole ingredients that must be cooked) accounts for 80 percent of food sold in the United States, in terms of profit. The USDA says we eat 31 percent more packaged food than fresh food, in terms of volume.

Photo by Fotolia/adisa

*Mixing food writing and history, adding a dash of cookbook, *Grow Food, Cook Food, Share Food* (<http://osupress.oregonstate.edu/book/grow-food-cook-food-share-food>) (Oregon State University Press, 2013) by Ken Albala, shares the story of what happened when he started taking food history seriously and embarked on a mission to grow, cook, and share food in the ways that people did in the past in a mission to escape industrial processed food. In Albala's compelling book, obscure seventeenth-century Italian farmer-nobles, Roman statesmen, and quirky cheesemakers from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries all offer lessons about our relationship with the food we eat. The following excerpt is from "Second Course, Cook Food."*

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Processed Food

The past two decades have witnessed a meteoric rise of interest in food and cooking in the popular media. This has been manifest in bestselling cookbooks, an ever-growing number of cooking shows on multiple television networks, and brisk sales of food magazines (despite the demise of *Gourmet*). This interest has spilled over into academia. Food has become a serious object of study across the disciplines and there are several major encyclopedias, food book series, journals, conferences, and classes throughout college curricula.

Ironically, at the same time, there has been a decrease in actual home cooking. Home-cooked meals prepared from scratch declined from 72 percent of all meals eaten in 1980 to 59 percent in 2010. With the exception of a few ardent souls who truly enjoy spending time in the kitchen, the majority of Americans consider cooking an odious chore, something to be finished as quickly and efficiently as possible so they can get back to doing other, more important, things. Thus people are perfectly satisfied

with having others cook for them. Drive through the center of any city or suburb and you will find not only fast food chains, but the same half-dozen or so casual dining franchises, where the food is made in a factory, arrives frozen, and is microwaved to order. The proliferation is actually staggering; my son and I recently counted nineteen separate Subway sandwich shops where we live, in Stockton, California, a city of about 300,000. Most of the units are located within a radius of just a couple of miles, in the north part of the city.

When not eating out, those who don't cook are happy buying convenience foods—prepared meals frozen, canned, freeze-dried, or processed to such an extent that little action is required beyond heating. Stroll down the center aisles of any supermarket to witness the proliferation of ready-made and convenience foods. Processed food (as opposed to whole ingredients that must be cooked) accounts for 80 percent of food sold in the United States, in terms of profit. The USDA says we eat 31 percent more packaged food than fresh food, in terms of volume.

Consumers trust the manufacturers of convenience food and are assured that what comes in the package will please their senses—and science guarantees that it will, not only with ample salt and sugar, but also with chemical flavors and fragrances that approximate the taste and aroma of real food. Consumers also trust that such prepared meals will sustain their bodies physiologically, socially, and perhaps even spiritually. By convenience food I mean anything ready to eat, or that only needs heating, so this includes much of the so-called health food, organic food, and nutraceutical fare among the fastest growing sectors of the food industry. Not only the latest açai berry bar and live lactobacillus acidophilus probiotic concoctions, but also organic Cheetos®. Add to that the many weight-loss programs that require purchasing frozen meals. Convenience foods are slowly insinuating themselves into every corner of the grocery: little plastic packages of cut-up apples (because children are apparently no longer aware of how to use their teeth) sprayed with chemicals, an entire aisle of breakfast cereals, another of crackers and cookies and snacks. But more notably, there are “complete,” ready-made meals showing up everywhere. In the ethnic foods aisle there are boxes of pad thai, Mexican taco kits, vindaloo in a bag—pretty much anything to prevent you from actually trying to cook these foods. Even the butcher pre-marinates, pre-stuffs, and precooks the pre-cut-up meat that is now processed elsewhere. Don't forget those things that give the illusion of cooking—cake mixes, cookie dough or biscuits in a tube, prebaked pizza dough. All these ultimately lure the consumer away from cooking foods from scratch, even though it is usually much less expensive and just as easy to do so.

Whether this was a kind of conspiracy on the part of the food industry to enslave the public is immaterial; the results are incontrovertible. To maximize profit margins (Tater Tots® cost much more than the same weight of potatoes), the proliferation of convenience foods has left nearly an entire hapless generation bereft of many of the most basic cooking skill sets. We have become de-skilled. Many cooking techniques have become almost entirely obsolete because they require time and patience. A 2010 Department of Labor survey says that the average American (as household head) spent thirty-two minutes each day preparing food and cleaning up. That is compared to two hours and forty-five minutes watching TV. It also seems ironic that the more obsessed Americans become with watching cooking on TV, the less they actually do it. A similar situation, one might argue, applies to sports and sex. Even more ironically, eating, moving our bodies physically, and reproducing are three of our species's most essential biological functions. We would not survive without these behaviors, and yet, we let professionals do it while we watch. Perhaps it is the perception that professionals do these so well that discourages us from even trying. In any case, the more we watch others cook, the less we do it ourselves, and perversely, the less we know how to do it.

But if we have become de-skilled, then our ancestors must have been proficient in the kitchen; if not our

parents' generation then maybe our grandparents' a century or more ago. The historian in me must ask, what kind of evidence can prove that? While numerous studies have shown our own lack of confidence in the kitchen in recent years, no studies exist showing that in the past, people routinely executed complicated culinary tasks. The fact that such procedures are amply described in cookbooks is certainly no evidence; perhaps just as today, people were armchair chefs, merely fantasizing about cooking grand recipes and throwing magnificent dinner parties. That is, cookbooks are never a good record of what people actually ate. They are more often aspirational; prescriptive rather than descriptive. Moreover, although we tend to think that the proliferation of fast food and casual dining spots is a modern phenomenon, there have always been, at least in cities, quick, inexpensive places to eat out, such as taverns, saloons, lunch counters, and cafeterias. It may come as a surprise that many apartments in the nineteenth century did not include cooking facilities, and many people lived in boarding houses where meals were provided. On the other hand, until the twentieth century, a much greater percentage of people lived outside cities, and someone, most likely the farmer's wife, did the cooking. Not that this cooking was necessarily complex, but it was cooking—transforming raw ingredients into palatable nourishment.

We do know that with the rise of industrial food processing in the late nineteenth century, many basic procedures became obsolete in home cooking. Many factors were involved, including transportation, refrigeration technology, increasing urbanization, and marketing and branding. All these were bound to make consumers less knowledgeable about the origins of ingredients and how to deal with such foodstuffs. Slaughtering animals could only legally be done by professionals with inspectors present, thanks to stringent health regulations—necessary when the scale and speed of slaughter made careful monitoring more difficult. While rural families might still have practiced home canning, most people purchased foods in tin cans, which was preferred for its scientific cleanliness, consistency, and reliability. Instead of curing meat at home, people relied on Armour®, Swift, or Oscar Mayer. When it came to cheese, local dairies gave way to Kraft, who could afford the new pasteurization equipment. All these procedures were deemed simply not possible to do at home. In the interest of scientifically controlled safety standards, factories took over these household tasks, manufacturing standardized, homogenous, and, one could argue, aesthetically inferior products. But they were considered safe and hygienic. No doubt there were accidental poisonings in the past. A whole family might get sick from eating something spoiled, though wide-scale outbreaks of *E. coli*, listeria, and other pathogens were simply not possible because food was not processed on the same scale or shipped as far. Without contemporary surveys, we have little knowledge of the scale of such activities before industrialization, but it is undeniable that the expertise in how to make such foods has progressively diminished, especially as agriculture itself was mechanized and fewer people lived on farms, as women entered the workplace in greater numbers, and as messy physical labor in the kitchen was increasingly seen as demeaning.

We lost not only these preservation techniques, but fundamental cooking skills, such as making stock from scratch rather than using a bouillon cube or can, shelling fresh peas rather than opening a frozen bag of Bird's Eye®, or even baking fresh bread using locally milled flour and wild starters. All these took time, and since time was to be spent either in productive, money-making work, or in leisurely escape, time spent in the kitchen when you could be elsewhere was simply time wasted.

This line of reasoning, I will argue, has left us profoundly disconnected from our food in ways that are dangerous socially, environmentally, culturally, and indeed aesthetically if we consider the quality of much industrial food. Now we have seen the rise of many artisanal products, excellent cheese, bread, local jams and such, and these are superb. But they are still by and large things we leave to others to make, and they are products that for the most part are expensive luxuries, not everyday items or household staples. They are not things most people routinely create.

So what I will propose is looking to the past, relearning those techniques which were once described in cookbooks, which practically no one does anymore, and which have almost completely vanished from the culinary literature. The question I hope will arise immediately is, Why? Why do something difficult and perhaps even dangerous, when you can let someone else do it? I contend that making your own food is not only inherently entertaining, but connects you to food in a direct and palpable way, such that it makes you a more social, responsible, and spiritually fulfilled individual.

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