

GENERAL PAPER

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Paper 2

25 August 2017

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READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS FIRST

This Insert contains the passage for Paper 2.

Michael Pollan laments the rise of cooking programmes and the decline of home cooking.

- 1 How amazing is it that today we live in a culture that not only has something called the Food Network but now has a hit show on that network called “The Next Food Network Star,” in which thousands of 20- and 30-somethings compete eagerly to become? 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”. 5
- 2 On prime time television, famous restaurant chefs wage culinary combat to see who can, in sixty minutes, concoct the most spectacular meal from a secret ingredient ceremoniously unveiled just as the clock starts – an octopus or a bunch of bananas. Cooking on television is a form of athletic competition. On “Iron Chef America,” a running commentary is given, as the iron chefs and their teams race the clock to peel, chop, slice, dice, mince, boil, double-boil, pan-sear, sauté, deep-fry, pressure-cook, grill, deglaze, reduce and plate – this last is a word I am old enough to remember when it was a mere noun. A particularly dazzling display of cheffy knife skills will earn an instant replay – an onion minced in slow motion. The commentator asks in a hushed tone, “Can we get a camera on this? 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!” 10 15
- 3 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 cannot 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 you do have to wonder how easily so specialised a set of skills might translate to the home kitchen, or anywhere else for that matter. When in real life are even professional chefs required to conceive and execute dishes in twenty minutes from ingredients selected by a third party exhibiting obvious sadistic tendencies? 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. 20 25
- 4 We learn things from watching these cooking competitions, but they are 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 on television is far more spectacular than anything you would ever try at home. 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 NBA?” 30
- 5 Yet, cooking shows captivate us because food is attractive to humans and that attraction can be enhanced by food styling. You may 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 catches your eye, and your brain paralyses your thumb on the remote, forcing you to stop to see what is cooking. Food shows are the campfires in the deep cable forest, drawing us like hungry wanderers to their flames. 35 40
- 6 We are 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 television get to put their hands on real things, not keyboards and screens but fundamental things like plants and animals, and they get to work with fire and ice and perform feats of alchemy. How many of us still do work that engages us in a dialogue with the material world and ends with such a gratifying and tasty sense of closure? 45

- 7 But here is what I do not understand. 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? The rise of celebrity chefs has, paradoxically, coincided with the rise of fast food, home-meal replacements and the decline of everyday home cooking. 50
- 8 For most of us, cooking at home does not pay the rent, and very often, our work does not leave us the time. For many years now, Americans have been putting in longer hours at work and enjoying less time at home. Since 1967, we have added 167 hours to the total amount of time we spend at work each year, and in households where both parents work, the figure is closer to 400 hours. Unsurprisingly, in those countries where people still take cooking seriously, they also have more time to devote to it. 55
- 9 The entrance of women into the work force is responsible for the collapse of home cooking, but that is only part of the story. 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 rapid rate among women who do not work outside the home, as it has among women who do. In general, rising income has also led to increased spending on restaurants or takeout food. While women with jobs have more money to pay corporations to do their cooking, all American women now have greater financial means to allow corporations to cook for them. 60
- 10 Furthermore, the food industry laboured mightily to sell American women on all the processed food wonders it had invented – canned meals, freeze-dried food, dehydrated potatoes, powdered orange juice and coffee, instant everything. Over the years, 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 per cent of American households in 1978 to 90 per cent today – opened up vast new horizons of home-meal replacement. 65
- 11 The decline of home cooking could explain most of the increase in obesity in America. Mass production has driven down the cost of many foods, both in terms of price and the amount of time required to obtain them. All these hard-to-make-at-home foods – cream-filled cakes, fried chicken wings, exotically flavoured chips or cheesy puffs of refined flour – have been transformed into everyday fare we can buy on a whim and for less than a dollar. When we do not have to cook meals, we eat more of them. 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. The time and work involved in home cooking, as well as the delay in gratification, served as an important check on our appetite. Now that check is gone, and we are struggling to deal with the consequences. The question is, can we ever put the genie back into the bottle? 75
- 12 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 shows 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, and yet we are 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. 85