

Cooking Around the Globe: A Very Short History
Cooking Across Cultures: A Very Short History

Introduction

Patricia Seed 5 August 2004

We do not usually chew our lawns for dinner. After all we only have one stomach rather than the four separate ones needed to make grasses nourishing. But chomping on grasses is exactly what we are doing when eating corn, or rice, or wheat, or barley. Ever wonder how people figured out how to turn grasses into rice, wheat, or corn?

We could ask the same question about the roots we now eat, such as carrots and potatoes. Someone must have discovered how to transform buried, dirt-covered cones and balls into carrots or potatoes. How did they learn what to do? The answer is that humans had to grasp cooking. Thousands of years ago our ancestors had to figure out a way of heating, pounding, roasting, or boiling to turn grasses and roots into food. That is how we became not homo sapiens (“knowing man”) but homo sapiens coquinus, creatures who know how to cook. Preparing food—transforming plants and animals into comestibles—lies at the heart of human history, a task without which human beings could not cover the planet.

Other animals do not need to cook. Lionesses pounce upon their prey, and rip it apart for eating with their giant teeth. But humans also lack these giant teeth and powerful jaws that enable flesh-eating mammals to consume their prey.

Vegetarian animals eat no differently, except for their choice of dinner. Foraging mammals depend upon chance, on good weather, and a large supply of instantly edible food. Orangutans and other large vegetarians pick berries, and chew leaves torn directly from plants. Cows, goats, sheep, gazelles, and countless other mammals graze on grasses, which their stomachs transform into food. Humans, however, must pound, roast, or boil to extract nourishment from plants. To prepare the meat; we must marinate, stew, boil, roast, or dry the flesh in order for our weaker jaws to gnaw on the edible tissue. Had humans failed to find ways of wresting nutrition from plants and animals, the species may have survived, but we could never have come to cover the planet.

All over the globe we have survived by discovering how to turn very different wild roots and grasses into healthy foods. In China and Thailand humans discovered the tiny edible part of a wild grass that we now identify as the rice plant. In southern Chile, humans found a root we label the potato, in central Mexico other people discovered that we could eat the then miniature grass we now call corn. In Egypt our ancestors learned of a lacklustre grass grown in Mesopotamia called wheat and turned its seeds into bread.

Different grasses and roots, in diverse parts of the world, all became sustenance. Yet for each individual crop and for every area, one thing remained constant. Since the first food plant was found, those turning grasses and roots into food have almost always been women. In other words, Homo sapiens coquinus was almost always female.

In a small tent on the windswept plains of Mongolia, over an open fire on the vast Serengetti, or in a buried pit in Hawai'i women have made food since the dawn of human history. Women figured out how to successfully transform nature's harvest in order to sustain themselves, their children, and their relatives. Across cultures and across time, women have pounded, boiled, baked, and fried the roots, grains, and grasses that constitute the major source of calories in human diets. Nor have they lost that role today.

In millions of households across the globe, women prepare food every day. Women chop, pound, hammer, stir, sift, and crush grasses into foods. They peel, husk, crack, pound, grate, grind, soak, dice, and heat to turn roots into food. In some parts of the world that task takes hours of painstaking labor, in others it lasts only as long as the microwave hums.

Occasionally, the task of preparing food has fallen to men, most often in public rituals or similar situations. In Hindu regions of India today, for example, only men of the highest caste (Brahmins) cook in street stalls and fancy restaurants, because members of their caste alone can hand food over to anyone. In expensive restaurants, fast-food establishments and other similarly public U.S. places, men join the ranks of homo sapiens coquinos. But in Hindu India as in the multi-religious United States, women bake, boil, and fry the majority of the food consumed daily by nearly a billion people.

Today, as in Neolithic times, women prepare the bulk of the foods we eat. And to do so, they often spend many hours of their day engaging in the labor that produces food: pounding, grating, grinding the raw plants, stirring, turning, and basting the raw meats that are the indispensable sources of our daily nutrition.

To learn how women around the globe have spent part their days for centuries we cannot rely on the written record. At the dawn of human existence, we lacked a written language to record the many discoveries that allowed us to derive sustenance from plants and animals. Cooking women did not write out the extensive directions needed to create Polynesian poi or Yoruban yams out of the rock-like bulbs they had yanked from the earth. Nor did they note down the complex series of steps needed to transform a small purple or tan seed lodged in a much larger shell deep in the Mayan jungle, ferment and dry it until the seed became very drinkable chocolate. Like those around them, women initially learned these techniques by trial and error or perhaps even serendipity. Once discovered, however, women shared their knowledge with their sisters and mothers, spoke with their neighbors, or exchanged information with the women they met in food markets, and instructed younger women in their communities. As youths, girls learned by watching their mothers, sisters, or grandmothers. In short, women revealed new knowledge by talking, motioning, and imitating those motions; for tens of thousands of years women did not learn to cook by reading.

Because women failed to commit the knowledge they acquired to paper, sheepskin, or papyrus, clay tablets or stones, the written record cannot guide us into this world of women's work. And therein lies the reason that such knowledge has rested hidden from history.

The profession of history has long prized the written record, insisting that only writing establishes the standard for determining truth about the past. Knowledge that humans have communicated by signs and gestures, by speech and by action, and in oral tales has reaped historian's scorn for centuries, and still remains ascornd as uncertain, unreliable, and even as falsehoods. Dismissing matters not in a text as unreliable monopolizes the past for those who have dominated the learning and remembering of written signs, namely members of the elite, especially men.

Whether it was monks in the medieval West, mandarins in China, teachers in madrassas, or script-writers in ancient Mexico, men have dominated the composition of the written record. They have chosen to commit to writing have been matters of importance to them, and those which reflect best upon them. And the preparation of food does not fall within topics important to men or reflecting well upon them. Yet men, children, other women, and indeed our entire species benefited from that supposedly unreliable unwritten knowledge, and indeed we have survived because of it. Thus we

remain ignorant of a crucial part of our past, how women developed the basic processes for preparing food, procedures upon which the survival of our species has always depended.

Women's fundamental role in transforming grasses, roots, and animals into food, rarely even makes its way into writing about food. The most popular approach describes the presentation of food on tables of the very rich. With their giant arrays of foods, countless courses, elaborately crafted serving dishes, and rigorous etiquette for serving, these meals of kings, queens, and nobles make up the largest number of books on the history of food. While indulging our fascination with the way the very rich and powerful have lived, these tales of excessive consumption and extreme display badly skew our understanding of the past.

Most humans have never been very rich, nor titled. Most of us remain average in wealth and possessions; many of us stay desperately poor. Our tables are simple; our utensils ordinary, and our foods few. Elaborate etiquettes for serving today remain the province of the wealthy and titled. Turning to the written histories of food keeps us away from the working life and achievements of these women who have pounded, boiled, baked, and fried the roots, grains, and grasses that constitute the major source of calories in human diets.

With women's increasing access to writing during the nineteenth century, an outpouring of written records of recipes and cookbooks has provided a tremendous resource for understanding the shape of women's lives in the last two centuries. But this access has improved only in the industrializing nations, and not in the millions of households around the globe where the right to write remains an unfulfilled dream.

Perhaps surprisingly women remain absent from the histories of food that we can find today. Rarely do they touch upon the act of cooking, transforming roots, leaves, and grasses into that which we can eat. Instead the few large encyclopedias of food deal almost entirely with the processes of capture, not cooking. Lengthy descriptions of ensnaring of fish by nets, or large animals by spears, arrows, or guns fill the volumes called encyclopedias of food. Nor do these massive volumes deviate from this approach when dealing with the roots, leaves, and berries that constitute the bulk of calories in human diets. These encyclopedias describe the life cycles of the plants, and then their capture, by scraping, pulling, or cutting. But the process by which these plants and animals actually become food, the encyclopedias fall mute for the same reason that cooking itself rarely appears.

The encyclopedias of food focus on those aspects of preparing food that remain the province of both sexes. Men have long participated alongside women in snaring animals or cutting plants. But they have remained virtually absent from the process of turning these same plants and animals into food. Once the subject of cooking appears the histories of food—almost entirely written and edited by men—fall oddly silent.

Even teaching the course that became this book I encountered prejudice. Successive department chairs openly declared that they “did not approve of this course” and took steps to prevent it from being taught. They excluded it from the list of courses that counted as history, eliminated it from the classes that counted toward a major, and refused to find classrooms in which it could be taught. Teaching history through and about food preparation was an activity incompatible with the traditions of the discipline of history. It relied upon non-written knowledge, and above all, it was women's work.

Since neither traditional histories nor their sources can shed much light upon the process by which humans learned to turn plant and animal life into food, this book will look at the record written in long-dead fires, and trash heaps to see how our female

ancestors turned the natural world into food. And when this archeological record itself cannot explain how the process occurred, we will turn to the biological and chemical record to see what transformation occurred in the chemistry of the plants and animals that turned them into food. What our past written records cannot convey, our science can help us understand.

This book features the grains, roots, and vegetables that provide our species with the bulk of its daily calories. Grains and roots are not the usual subject of human history; but their history and that of the women who learned to transform them into food is the history without which we would not have survived as a species. The meat and fish that have always provided a smaller portion of those calories occupy a proportionately smaller part of this book.