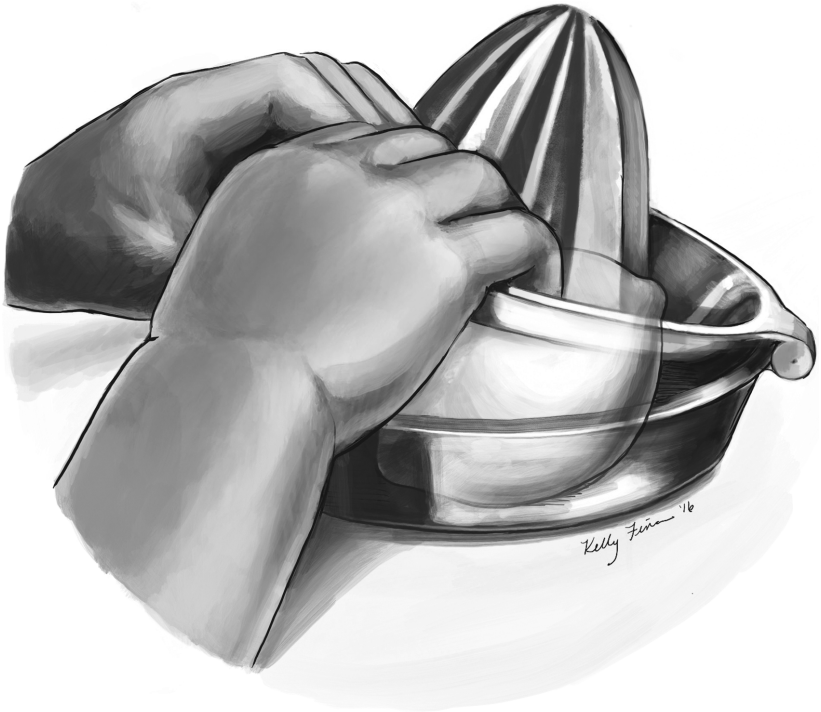
INTRODUCTION

# From Cook to Cooks



Claire, a middle-aged professional, is cooking dinner on a Friday night. She lives in an apartment near downtown Boston that has a large, recently renovated kitchen with loads of wood cabinets and long granite countertops. She is preparing, as she puts it, "just soup and salad." This is a soup she makes often—butternut squash and apple—and the salad—a mix of arugula, spin-

ach, and sliced endive—is also a mealtime regular. The recipe for the soup is written on an index card that has "From the Kitchen of" printed at the top and a drawing of a bright yellow teapot in the left-hand corner. To find it, she pulls out a manila recipe folder full of recipe cards, recipes cut from newspaper articles, and more torn from magazines; this collection, she says, has been "at least thirty years" in the making. She has all her ingredients set out on the kitchen table along with a cutting board and knife; the soup pot and sauté pan sit on top of the stove.

At first glance, this does not appear to be a remarkable scene. However, certain details about the recipe, the choice of ingredients, and the stories Claire tells to explain her meal selection make this seemingly typical American meal worth a closer look. The recipe for the butternut-apple soup comes not from her mother—"I would no sooner cook with my mother than jump off a bridge," she says—but from a friend, who first ate the soup at a popular café on Martha's Vineyard. Her friend was able to get the signature recipe, and she passed it on to Claire. To make the soup, she uses precut butternut squash: "I am cheating with the squash. . . . You see a lot of time-saving cut up fruits and vegetables, but I think a lot of nutritional value is lost." She pauses and then finally concludes, "It's better than nothing." Ensuring that the soup gets made at home also involves buying a carton of vegetable broth, since, as Claire points out, "You can get this kind of soup at Whole Foods now, so sometimes it does not seem worth it to cook it, but . . . there's something a little more satisfying about [making it at home]." Claire has only recently started cooking regularly at home again. She explains that she "didn't cook for years, literally years. I suppose I ate a few things that came out of my kitchen, . . . but I had an expense account, and I was on the road and eating in restaurants." At another point, she lived with someone who did all the cooking, so although she ate more at home during that period, she didn't cook on a regular basis.

All is not what it seems. Claire's reflections on this single dinner reveal that making a meal is no obvious endeavor, either in the moment or

when including the broader context. Considering it, the question arises: What exactly is cooking? This might seem easy to answer. To cook is to "prepare (food, a dish, a meal) by combining and heating the ingredients in various ways."[1] And the noun "cooking" is "the practice or skill of preparing food by combining, mixing, and heating ingredients."[2] If we look more deeply, however, it becomes apparent that it isn't a simple question. Walt Whitman declaims in *The Song of Myself*, "I am large, I contain multitudes," and perhaps the same is true of cooking. Everything Claire says inspires further queries. When considering her life as a cook, many questions emerge. Who do we think should teach us to prepare a meal, and why does Claire reject her mother's culinary knowledge but embrace that of an anonymous restaurant cook? What makes an ingredient a whole or healthy food? Is a practice the same as a skill? Where does cooking happen? When did restaurants become so central to cooking, providing us with meals and also inspiring us when we cook at home? Finally, how often does Claire have to cook to be considered a skillful cook? To cook food is to participate in a universal human act; there is always cooking happening sometime, somewhere. But the variations, the configurations, and the machinations are endless. Answers to these questions emerged though observing contemporary American cooks and investigating cooks of earlier eras. Cooking—in deeds and words—has changed.

In large, complex, and diverse societies, questions such as who does the cooking, what gets cooked, and where such practices happen must be seen as multifaceted and multiplex. Yet fairly narrow assumptions tend to dominate, the most notable of which being that women cook in home kitchens for their families. Cooking appears bound and constrained: domestic cooking is contained narrowly, nested in received categories and imperatives of the place of women in the private sphere, linked as much to biology as to culture. However, this ideal may now be disassociated from reality. Women's obligations in relation to home cooking have shifted. Thus, it is crucial to explore the many manners of making modern meals that involve home

cooks (both women and men) without relying too heavily on what we think or imagine is the case at hand. Instead, there need to be more forensic examinations that integrate what is known—presumptions and trends—with specific tellings and realities. This requires observing and documenting the actual lived experiences of home cooks.

To begin, we should acknowledge that over the arc of the past century, cooking has remained an everyday choice (a continuity), but it is no longer an everyday chore (a change). American home cooks are at the heart of this inquiry, but there are other types of cooks to consider too. Today, there is a wide array of food work being done by many people in many different types of kitchens. When it comes to making *modern* meals, American women no longer need to fulfill their duties and obligations in terms of nourishment by cooking three meals a day for themselves and for others. Rather, this is but one option among many. The expanding number of opportunities to obtain food cooked outside the home and the increased possibility of relying on others to cook is both a result of and a response to a long-term shift in the link between food, domestic life, and gender: although the model of the woman as the primary cook and baker of the household and of the home as the primary site for kitchen work remains associated with *ideals and values* of domesticity, it no longer dominates in *actual lived practice*. A woman's "domestic sphere" might contain more chargers for electronics than tools for decorating cakes; as food scholar Kyla Wazana Tompkins pithily points it, when discussing her research on the semiotic economy of household food labor, "So public, private—whatever, right?"[3] During the past century, women have been able to transcend the limits of the private sphere by fighting to liberate themselves from obligations such as making meals. However, these are small battles being waged inside homes rather than outside in the streets. This has meant that the granular elements of this fight—the switch to frozen vegetables, the phone call to the local Chinese restaurant to order takeout, the decision for the husband to do the weekday cooking and the

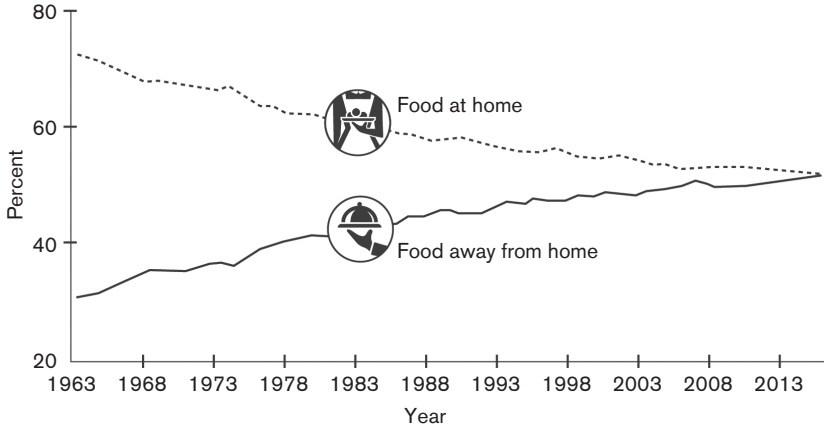



Figure 1. Shares of total food expenditures, food at home versus food away from home. *Source:* United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, "Data Products: Table 8—Food Expenditures by Families and Individuals as a Share of Disposable Personal Money Income."

wife to do the grocery shopping—these small, constant choices build to days, weeks, months, and years of choices that have gone unnoticed for too long.

All these small skirmishes signify important changes for American women and families and also for American cuisine and culture. Consider the following very different descriptions (spanning a century) of what is seemingly the same practice: that of transforming raw ingredients into cooked food. In the 1860s, the high goddesses of domestic duty, sisters Catherine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, the authors of *The American Woman's Home, or The Principles of Domestic Science,* bemoaned, "The modern girls, as they have been brought up, cannot perform the labor of their own families as in those simpler, old-fashioned days; and what is worse, they have not practical skill with which to instruct servants, who come to us, as a class, raw and untrained."[4] Two realities of making meals during the nineteenth century are revealed here: one, the obligations of domestic tasks were

increasingly under negotiation, and two, if a housewife had the economic means, she could pay someone else to perform those tasks. In the early twentieth century, the renowned chef Auguste Escoffier opined about cooking, saying, "Man is more thorough in his work, and thoroughness is at the root of all good, as of everything else. A man is more particular over the various little details which are necessary to make up a really perfect dish. . . . A woman, on the other hand, will manage with what she has handy."[5] Escoffier goes on to say, "This is very nice and obliging of her, no doubt, but it eventually spoils her cooking, and the dish is not a success."[6] During the transition to the twentieth century, cooking became more differentiated. The cook's abilities are not determined by biology (both men and women *can* cook); rather, they are shaped by gender (there is a cultural belief that men are artists and women are dutiful). The cook's identity becomes more variable, and so do the locations where he or she cooks. The hearth is not always in the home; cooking takes place in new environments. George Orwell provided a vivid account from his own experience working in a Parisian hotel during the 1920s: "The kitchen was like nothing I have ever seen or imagined—a stifling, low-ceilinged inferno of a cellar, red lit from the fires, and deafening with oaths and the clanging of pots and pans. . . . It was so hot that all the metal-work except for the stoves had to be covered with cloth. In the middle were furnaces, where twelve cooks skipped to and fro, their faces dripping sweat in spite of their white caps."[7] By the 1940s, the opportunity for a person to get a meal outside of the home, often cooked by a man, was well integrated into American life, especially when in an urban area or traveling by rail or car. And then, in the 1950s, almost a century after the Beecher sisters' lament, Peg Bracken published her manifesto, *The I Hate to Cook Book:* "Some women, it is said, like to cook. This book is not for them. This book is for those of us who hate to, who have learned through hard experience that some activities become no less powerful through repetition: childbearing, paying taxes, cooking."[8] Although making meals remained an essential eve-

ryday task, who cooked those meals, where they were cooked, and why they were cooked was no longer essentialized to any particular category of person or any particular place.

The complexity of cooking, thus, lies in its very fluidity; an accurate investigation requires engaging with it as a constantly morphing hybrid that involves both domestic duty and paid labor. In our modern culinary system, the many available choices allow individuals to constantly move between domestic and public domains. Many micro-moments—variously acts of compliance, complicity, exhaustion, and resistance—have created the perceptions and practices involved in making modern meals. Over the course of the twentieth century, there was an overall decline in the time spent making a typical meal. Meanwhile, paid cooking labor shifted out of the home kitchen and into commercial kitchens (there has been a decline in the employment of domestic servants and a concomitant increase in service workers). At the same time, procuring (and consuming) food cooked outside the home became a more common everyday option for all manner of people in varying circumstances—poor and rich, living in the countryside and residing in cities and towns.[9]

What happens to cooking when the location, the context, and the identity of the cook escape from certain confines, flowing over the usual channels and defying our assumptions? Anthropologists have long been interested in the complex and contradictory relationships between the actions of individuals or groups and the cultural categories of experience. Claire makes her soup and salad and serves it for dinner. Yet the meaning of her choices and the significance of the particular soup, the ingredients, and the recipe are not simply the result of a biological drive for sustenance or a defined division of labor. There are cultural processes at work shaping varied actions and their shared classifications. These categories are neither rigid nor necessarily permanent, but they define us as cooks and shape American cooking in the present. So although we might think that cooking can be easily defined, classified, and thereby understood, we might be wrong.

Classification and categorization are powerful analytic tools, but such modes of understanding can become ossified, ending up as relics of an earlier era or reliable but ultimately facile tropes. Anthropologist David Sutton, points out that the scholarship on women and domestic life has tended toward "lumping" rather than "splitting" domestic tasks, perhaps at the cost of understanding the nuances of various everyday practices, especially cooking. He argues that when feminist anthropologists brought women more to the front and center of anthropological inquiry, they often did so at the expense of analyzing daily domestic tasks, which they identified as generally the same across cultures and thus not necessarily useful for providing insight about social relations. Thus, there was an assumption that "it was only when women stepped into the so-called 'public sphere' that they became involved in socially valued activities" and that only these socially public activities would reveal the complexity of social relations in any given culture.[10] Sutton argues that cooking needs to be considered as a unique activity and also as a practice that is particularly important to any understanding of social relations. To make sense of cooking as above and beyond "mere" domestic tasks, Sutton concludes, it "needs to be studied as an activity *in the making*" (emphasis mine).[11] Although Sutton acknowledges that many people perceive cooking to be at times a chore, he argues that the practice cannot be contained solely by this category. Thus, although cooking a meal could seem unworthy of much attention and be dismissed as a daily nuisance, to do so is to miss out on grander cultural and culinary transformations. Cooking has slipped out of this classification and expanded beyond the categorical assumptions Americans have traditionally used to explain it.

In this case, the slippage involves both identity and action, for neither are fully contained in the domestic sphere, defined as a physical space where families are cooked for and fed each day. Values and practices, the stuff of everyday life, change, as revealed in varied patterns (e.g., commercial kitchen work now feeds families as much as small-scale domestic cookery)

and events (e.g., the now everyday and commonsense actions of purchasing a meal or components of a meal). In this sense, modern American cooking occurs within a set of social relations and responds to social environments. Modern culinary practice both reflects and shapes structural shifts in the organization of everyday life, such as the increased movement of people from rural to urban areas, the changing organization of work and leisure time, the industrialization of food production from farm to table, and the increased use of technology in all forms of kitchen work. In this context, the quotidian decisions about what to cook, how to cook, who to cook for, or whether to cook at all are powerfully influenced by how individuals intersect with larger social, political, and economic institutions. For example, to borrow a nutritional term, women still predominate as food "gatekeepers" in the domestic sphere, but not all women are food "producers," at least not all of the time.

Today, our relationship to cooking is less internal, less determined by our gender, and much more external, influenced by our engagement not just with those we know and trust but also with those understood as trustworthy due to their expertise. The knowledge we get does not come exclusively from other (female) home cooks (remember the recipe boxes of our mothers and grandmothers?) but from people with special understandings. Health experts extol, chefs cajole, and food activists protest. Culinary conversations are no longer primarily the domain of women swapping their favorite recipes and tips of the trade, part and parcel of the care work long considered axiomatic to their identity. Instead, much of the conversation now revolves around explanations: the right way to maintain a healthy diet; the best way to purchase safe and fair food; the correct way to make a dish.

The experts have turned their attention to the act of cooking itself—their knowledge now intersects with our practices. The liberation of women from cooking as a daily chore has not unchained them from the *consequences* of

their freedom. There is now a culinary discourse dominated by worry, concern, and well-meaning instruction. The experts (nutritionists, doctors, food advocates, celebrity chefs) are wringing their hands and sighing not only because American cooking practices have changed but also because, apparently, the new ways we do (or do not do) this work are fraught. Some experts worry that a serious decline in everyday cooking is underway and claim that the resulting loss of cooking skill and knowledge explains broader social concerns, such as lack of family cohesion. Another perceived problem of modern life is that fewer families are sharing meals and mealtimes, and this is blamed on the notion that there has been a nationwide decline in domestic cooking practices. Other experts in public health fields advocate for improvements in everyday cooking as a means of counteracting the obesity epidemic. These worries have been translated into numerous media articles, news stories, and op-ed pieces, creating a discourse of crisis. Recently, there was a spate of interviews and commentaries after Michael Pollan claimed in his book *Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation* (2013) that "the decline of home cooking closely tracks the rise in obesity and all the chronic diseases linked to diet," which he followed immediately with this commentary: "The rise of fast food and the decline in home cooking have also undermined the institution of the shared meal, by encouraging us to eat different things and to eat them on the run and often alone."[12] In the juxtaposition of these two statements, cooking simultaneously becomes the center of all problems *and* all solutions.

Such a singular claim of cause and effect is undoubtedly rhetorically powerful. Yet does it accurately reflect reality? Cooking happens. Every day. However, American *domestic* cooking is more episodic, is less clearly linked to gender, and differs from meal to meal. Meanwhile, the food being cooked is much more variable when it comes to ingredients, techniques, and methods than it was in the past. Does the emergence of new *styles* of domestic cooking reflect or signal decline? Or does the kaleidoscope of contexts for

present-day cooking practices make it more difficult to create a connection between practice and meaning, to analytically "capture" such a complex and diverse lived reality?[13]

Americans are still cooks, but the tether between women, domesticity, and cooking has been cut. This is not say there remain no ties that bind; we may not cook all our meals, but we always have to find nourishment. Decisions are made every day in families (still primarily by women) about upcoming meals. However, these decisions now *sometimes*, but not *always*, involve household members engaging in the productive labor of cooking. The United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (USAERS) reported an increase in the proportion of total food sales that come from food and beverage operations: Americans now spend 53.5 percent of their total food budget on foods eaten at home and a historical high of 46.5 percent on foods eaten outside of the home.[14] These transactions were taking place at eating and drinking establishments; full-service restaurants, hotels, and motels; retail stores and direct selling; recreational places; schools and colleges; and other locales. In 2005, it was estimated that the average American ate eighty meals at restaurants and purchased fifty-seven restaurant meals to take home and twenty-seven meals to take to work.[15] In the same year, it was reported that Americans ate a cooked meal at home five times a week and that four out of ten dinners were prepared in thirty minutes or less.[16]

Equally crucial to the story is the relationship *between* our choices—the ratio of our values. This is clearly delineated in a graphic produced by the USAERS as part of a 2016 report on household food expenditure and American reliance on convenience foods that shows the types of foods that are available and the overall proportion of sales in each category.[17] If we compile multiple national polls and surveys, Americans spend, on average, 23 percent of their household food expenditures on "complex and basic ingredients." A person (or some machine) then transforms those raw ingredients by cooking them.

Figure 2. "Class in cooking," 1904. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division, New York Public Library Digital Collections.

Small gestures, like Claire searching for her recipe, and grand claims, like the current national average of our food purchases for meals at home and away, when integrated, reveal intersubjective and intersectional elements of everyday action that create our "lifeworld" (or *Lebenswelt*).[18] The culinary world we inhabit is built up of the decisions that create ratios such as spending sixty or twenty minutes making dinner, buying Hamburger Helper or ordering Chinese take-out, and growing tomatoes or purchasing the canned tomato paste. Our decisions are also made *in response* to our culinary world, in which the boundaries between the domestic and commercial spheres of making meals are increasingly porous.[19]

## INVESTIGATING COMPLEXITY

The fluidity of contemporary cooking means that simple causality—between cooking and domesticity, between cooking and identity, between cooking and everyday labor, between cooking and individual health and well-being—is difficult to identify. Looking beyond the domestic kitchen to make sense of how we cook requires a consideration of the new categories that shape cooking: as practice, as an ideal, and as an imperative. Perhaps cooking's increased complexity is best served by acknowledging its breadth while simultaneously accounting for all the ways we seek to contain it. Or as Roland Barthes, a scholar who wrote eloquently on both the structure and meaning of modern life, put it, "[the] essential object is the taxonomy or distributive model which every human creation, . . . inevitably establishes, since there can be no culture without classification."[20] And there are many ways to categorize and classify. When we survey our expenditures on food and our choices for procuring food, we now classify all aspects of meal preparation into a number of categories, depending on place, person, desire, and context. We experience cooking across a number of categories as well; a woman might feel like a drudge in the kitchen some days but like a domestic diva other days. And then there are days someone else, in the house or at the restaurant, might cook instead. Acknowledging such fluidity and complexity can help explain our culinary selves as we are instead of condemning ourselves for what we are not.

In this schematic, the required knowledge is not universal but rather very specific to time and place. The ingredients vary. The tools and techniques shift. The tastes change. The expectations of the cook are not consistent. But each day, somehow, somewhere, individuals make a series of decisions so that meals get served and eaten. Somehow, somewhere, someone takes some set of ingredients and transforms them into an edible dish. Meanwhile, just as every new member of a generation must learn the

language of his or her family or culture, so each one must learn how to cook, or figure out how to have someone else cook instead.

Spanning the course of a century and the continent, this book paints the broad strokes of our transformed culinary landscape. In this sense, the argument and evidence fall into the lumper rather than the splitter school of empirical research. Charles Darwin, in the early days of his formulation of the theory of evolution, commented on the tendency of botanists and others to either "lump" plants and animals into larger systematic categories or "split" them into smaller variegated classifications.[21] There are pitfalls to either approach. Lumpers can miss small telling details or the nuanced variations between times, places, and identities. Splitters can have trouble seeing beyond their horizon; they circle around specifics and struggle to connect the dots. My aim with this book is to reorient our gaze toward categories that might more accurately reflect our present condition. Once we've accomplished this, there is more to do if students of cuisine and culture want to move beyond (in the spirit of Darwin) family to genus and species.

In order to capture both grand claims and small gestures, I used varied research methods, including ethnographic interviewing and videography, surveys, participant observation, and analysis of contemporary and historical documents, datasets, and cookbooks. The geographic site for the investigations of home cooks and their lived experiences took place in parts of the Northeast (rural, semi-urban, and urban locales). This decision, based on feasibility, means that variations in meal preparation that might track closely to regional traditions were not able to be fully considered. This research cut a wide swath across race and class, and so the participants reflected the overall demographics of this region; they were primarily white but also black and Asian and included individuals of low-, middle-, and high-income status. The classifications that emerged

through this research reflect realities of cooking that are culturally shared (if not by every individual in the same manner), guiding a contemporary understanding of our choices when trying to put dinner on the table. However, as a society ever more characterized by economic and racial inequality, more detailed analysis of the lived experiences of our contemporary cooking categories beyond geographic locales, perhaps focusing on other demographic variables (e.g., shared race and shared socioeconomic status) or identities (e.g., marital status, sexual orientation, political and religious beliefs), is a necessary next step.[22] Hopefully, this investigation will provide a relevant and revelatory framework for further inquiries, more public attention, and more dialogue about cooking, culture, and modern everyday life.

It would be convenient (and potentially flattering) to say that the research for this book was from the beginning designed to account for all the iterations of modern meal preparation. But this was not the case. There was no grand design but rather a series of intuitive leaps followed by more organized investigations. The research (and the researchers) followed cooks as they cooked.

The research to make sense of people's cooking knowledge and practice began with a project to carry out ethnographic interviews and videotapes of people making dinner in their homes. The goal was to examine cooking as an everyday skill and as knowledge while taking into consideration ideas about individual health. I worked with a group of graduate students over a five-year period on this project. First, three students and I fanned out to a number of locations and households, attempting to choose participants that reflected the overall demographics of the Northeast.[23] The decision to videotape people in situ and in action turned out to be remarkably useful because it allowed us to witness culinary practice in a way that other methods (e.g., talking, reading, counting) would not have permitted us to do as thoroughly or

completely.[24] (For a detailed explanation of the research methods, see the appendix.)

We focused on dinner. We talked about breakfast and lunch, but these meals (except, perhaps, on the weekends) tend to be much less elaborate and more often rely on a certain version of cooking—assembling—rather than the broadest possible version, which requires some planning, an array of ingredients, the application of techniques, and the use of heat to transform foods from raw to cooked. This allowed us to capture our participants' largest set of perceptions and practices in relation to making a meal. Breakfast and lunch are also more frequently purchased outside the home, a reflection of the structural changes in modern life that have liberated us from some tasks but introduced others, such as commuting and longer workdays.[25]

Every participant (for the first study, there were twenty-five in total, thirteen of whom were videotaped twice) was a unique cook, which was due partly to our research design but also to the diverse possibilities of cooking practices. Filming people as they cook is a wonderful way to enter their everyday lives and acknowledge human diversity in the best tradition of ethnographic research. These were "real life" observations; mistakes happened with the recipes and equipment, certain ingredients were forgotten or misplaced, and children interfered. One of the unintended consequences, though, of having a permanent record of these meals was the ability to repeatedly witness them being made. Over the years, we continued to view the meals—both together and separately—always identifying new insights, commonalities, and distinctions. The videos allowed us to observe the behaviors of our participants long after the meals were made and listen to the things they said, which at times informed and at times contradicted their actions. We analyzed and reanalyzed the words and images numerous times, identifying a number of emergent themes that became the foundation for this larger inquiry into modern cooking.

Other people began to view the videotapes too; three more graduate students and several academic colleagues watched and responded. We discussed our individual reactions to the many and varied cooks, creating a larger community of observations through our dialogues. There were trained chefs concerned about one participant's awkward and hesitant knife skills and another's seemingly disorganized kitchen setup. There was a future registered dietitian who spent some time analyzing the nutrient composition of various meals. There were future nutrition and food scientists who were at times dismayed by the subjects' cleaning habits. With every viewing came new realizations—about American cooks, cooking in modern kitchens, and the values and ideas we all bring to this necessary part of our lives. Each video became a multilayered window into the many ways people cook, allowing for observations and realizations that went much deeper than if our research had relied solely on simple written records and interviews, which would have required us to recall events rather than witness them over and over again. As the surveys, interviews, and videotapes accumulated, and we began to look closely at our participants' practices and listen carefully to what they said, we were surprised by what we were documenting. By the time we concluded the multiple phases of research, thirty home cooks had participated, generating thirty interviews and over fifty hours of ethnographic video footage of home meals being prepared. We realized that there was a much larger project that needed to be done to look more expansively at contemporary American cooks and cooking practices. Contrary to our original assumption that we would find an overall decline in culinary knowledge and skill, we concluded that Americans have a decent basic level of cooking ability and understanding but simply do not use it all the time. We began the study as a response to the emerging cultural angst about culinary decline but then shifted our interpretation, and so our inquiry expanded. Although we were not working in a fieldwork setting in the most traditional sense, we adopted the iterative strategy of anthropological research. We realized that

decline was not our main finding and so looked elsewhere to understand American cooks and cooking.

Once we acknowledged the wide horizon of places and people involved in making meals, a new difficulty arose. Witnessing so many diverse practices challenged typical research strategies such as interviewing people, looking for written records, and identifying some sort of bounded group (e.g., only home cooks, only one location, only a certain age group). But staying within a narrow frame, even for the sake of elegant research design or to complete a research project in a timely fashion, would perforce neglect taking account of what most needed to be understood. If the knowing and the doing that explain our actions deserved to be made sense of in all their messiness, then new research methods and design were required.

The landscape of cooking is varied, and people's relationships to that landscape are rich and diverse. Thus, in order to document the dynamic reality of Americans making meals, we decided to use a wider aperture. Mapping an entire landscape rather than a more defined region expands what we understand about the relationship of identity to cooking skill and knowledge. Also, actions rather than assumptions serve as the primary compass to orient our analysis because it is in small acts and daily decisions that the larger edifice of meaning is built.

The initial framing of the research used an idea based on the prevailing cultural common sense that cooking skill and knowledge are in decline. But when we began to listen carefully to what people said and look closely at their practices, another situation emerged. We found that our informants actually had culinary skills and knowledge but either did not access them all the time or ran into difficulties with issues outside of heating the pan and sautéing the chicken: How to shop? What to cook? When to shop and cook? Why make one choice over another? They talked about cooking in ways that

were much more complex than we anticipated. For everyone in the study, cooking was often a chore, but it was also much, much more. Depending on the person, the place, and the context, cooking might be a creative act, a craft, a way to a healthy body and society, something other people did, or a pleasure. People's practices and perceptions moved between these categories on any given day. Understanding the reality of these categories, how and when they emerged historically, and why such classifications resonate culturally ultimately became the goal of our research. The emphasis on the central function of embodied knowledge overlaps with contemporary social theory; however, not all perceptions were determined by social status and social capital. The lived experiences of our participants revealed much more intentionality and internal conflict and many more contingencies of action and struggles that intersected with numerous constraints that were not only economic and social but also psychological and biological.

A close examination of actual cooking labor that accepts a fluidity shaped by the varying pressures and aspirations of the cooks reveals that cooking remains a rich and dynamic human activity. If the story of modern American cooks is not sufficiently contained in a narrative of decline or an argument about social status, what other voices can create the complex topography? Our engagement with cooks at home also led us to investigate the historical trends of the type and number of people paid to cook; every domestic act was seen to have an equal public reaction. This involved looking at historical statistics, focusing on categorizations of labor occupations in the United States since 1860. I decided to expand the research agenda to also include archival and textual research on two iconic cookbooks of the twentieth century, *The Joy of Cooking* and *Mastering the Art of French Cooking;* the authors of these cookbooks have become trustworthy companions for countless home cooks over the years. These now iconic works, along with pamphlets, books, and other primary sources concerning how

Americans cook (and bake) and ways to learn to do such work reflect transformations in everyday decisions around cooking. At the same time, changes in their form and content reveal a new landscape of choices in regard to all aspects of making a meal, from shopping for ingredients to sitting down to eat.

Also, if everyday cooking was taking place as much outside of the home as inside of it, why not also observe cooking practices in commercial venues? Since purchasing baked goods, especially bread, is now a cultural commonplace, looking at baking as a form of commercial craftwork became part of the overall investigation. This led to more ethnographic inquiry, involving interviews and participant observations of two home bakers. I also did participant observation in three artisan bakeries, located in Vermont and California. The question of cooking as an occupation also emerged as an important issue, and so I reviewed historical and contemporary materials on domestic servants, commercial cooks, artisan bakers, and other culinary trades. Slowly, a fuller account of the modern culinary landscape was constructed—a complex portrait of what we know and what we do when it comes to cooking.

Over the past three years, we returned to talking to home cooks as part of an multidisciplinary project that looked at how and why individuals become "empowered to act" to meet their everyday need to obtain sustenance, since Americans can choose not to cook and still be fed. We ran classes based on a pedagogy promoting such agency, held multiple focus groups to build the definition of agency, carried out participant observation and semistructured interviews of people taking a cooking course in two locales, and developed a scale to help measure agency in cooking and food preparation.[26] The voices, concerns, and perceptions of these cooks also informed the final portrait of the American culinary landscape.

## LEARNING TO COOK

Observing cooking, therefore, required us to come up with innovative methodologies, because an accurate investigation involved pondering Americans and their meal preparation in light of both the grand trends and the tiny moments. The small gestures we captured—a young man forgetting to close the freezer door and moving on to measure water for rice, a woman walking out into her garden to collect herbs while onions were sautéing on the stove, a recent immigrant's admiration for a celebrity chef—told us not just about that person but also about their culinary lifeworld. As such, no single strand of this multifaceted research is singular; rather they are all part of a large tapestry replete with small and large threads. At its base, cooking requires knowledge and is an everyday practice. And although we all may intuitively understand that the ability to cook is not innate, much like a myriad of other human practices (e.g., playing music, hunting animals, building houses), surprisingly little sustained scholarship has looked closely at cooking skill: the acts, knacks, and tips that make a person a cook.

First, we all figure out how to eat dinner, but the process of making it—the transformation of ingredients to dishes—is now episodic rather than intrinsic to daily life. With the "essential" requirement removed, domestic cooking can best be understood as operating within a "taskscape." Second, after we observed and talked to home cooks, we concluded that no cook, at home or away, male or female, rich or poor, works alone. Important realizations—possibly obvious but nonetheless significant—emerged from these insights: Acting on what you know to engage in everyday meal preparation is a learned practice, and much like riding a bicycle or playing an instrument, you can stop and start again. But you cannot start if you were never taught in the first place. Above all, in order to cook, we must *learn;* ability is always linked to social environments, experience, and access to knowledge.

Take this example from our research: Isabel, a young girl, the oldest of four children, is in the kitchen with her parents as they make an evening meal. She really wants to help, perhaps because she knows that we are videotaping the preparation of this particular meal, but perhaps also because she wants to learn. Of all the children, she is the most engaged in the process. Her parents are talking about their everyday cooking practices while they move around the kitchen, preparing dinner. Isabel keeps interrupting, "Daddy, Daddy, can I help?" After several minutes, her father acquiesces. He gets her to stand on a chair and instructs, "You can juice the lemon." He sets on the counter the following items: a lemon, a juicer made of metal, and a cutting board. In the pantheon of possible tools to extract juice from a citrus fruit, this juicer is fairly simple. The bottom half is a simple metal bowl; on the top half, a rounded, molded piece of metal with numerous ridges protrudes from the center, which is connected to a flat area and pierced so that the juice can drip into the bowl. The two halves are attached with a hinge. Isabel picks up the whole lemon, lifts the top part of the juicer, puts the lemon in the bottom bowl, and presses down on the lemon with the top half. Nothing happens. The lemon stays exactly the same, and there is definitely no juice. Quickly realizing there is something wrong with her method, she calls out to her father: "Daddy, can you cut this open?" Isabel then carefully places the lemon on the cutting board. She notices that the sell-by sticker is still on the fruit and peels it off. Her father comes over and explains the process: "When you're juicing something, cut it in half. You take it and smash it as hard as you can." Isabel takes half of the lemon and slams it onto the ridged metal. "No, no, put it on there, sorry. And then you turn it back and forth while you are pushing down. You can do it." And then she does. The juice is extracted from the lemon.

Whatever our cultural assumptions about who cooks, when, and why and whether these notions reflect our realities or our ideals, there remains a constant: we still *learn* how to cook. Making a meal involves knowing how

to put it together, somehow. This young girl is instructed by her father. Her context involves a large family and a small kitchen space. The anthropologist Tim Ingold has long argued for an integration of knowledge and practice, one that brings together "the whole person, indissolubly body and mind, in a richly structured environment."[27] These are environments shaped by social interactions and informed by social expectations. The skilled practice of cooking rarely occurs in isolation. Even when a cook prepares food for herself, she uses a specific repertoire of skills that comes from somewhere and is informed by other cooks. And with the transmission of knowledge, "skills are not transmitted from generation to generation but are regrown in each, incorporated into the *modus operandi* of the developing human organism through training and experience in the performance of particular tasks."[28] This book looks very closely at cooking as an embodied activity and at the process of meal preparation as a locus of multiple meanings and values. To paraphrase David Sutton, this approach reveals that "each time a moussaka is made, a category is put at risk *in practice*" (emphasis mine); there are constant negotiations, transformations, and realizations of much more than the dish.[29] As each and every dish is made, multiple stories can be told, and varied meanings can be interpreted.

## FORM AND CONTENT

In this book, individual people's actions—the cooking talk and cooking practices—introduce the small gestures, the knowledge, and the skill found in *their* hands, inspiring and then authenticating our culinary classifications. These details lead to a deeper consideration of the categories that frame our culinary labors.

Chapter 1, "Cooking Is a Chore," looks at continuities and changes in managing the daily *obligation* to prepare dinner (and sometime breakfast and lunch). A number of ethnographic interviews are interspersed with a close examination of the importance of the seminal American cookbook, *The Joy of*

*Cooking,* as continuities and changes in the seven editions of what is the most popular cookbook in the nation's history can be seen as a bellwether for the state of domestic cooking. Chapter 2, "Cooking Is an Occupation," focuses on labor statistics and primary source documents to demonstrate the continuous involvement of paid laborers to do cooking work over the course of the past century. Different perspectives on the affective dimensions of home cooking are explored using vignettes from domestic cooks and their employers. Chapter 3, "Cooking Is an Art," examines the intersection of an aesthetic standard and creative desires for both home cooks and professional cooks and chefs. The power of expertise, the ability to improvise as a means of elevating cooking that goes "above" or "beyond" the everyday, and the variable identities around cooking that emerge in the modern period are also considered. Pulling apart these strands opens up a larger discussion about how cooking intersects with philosophies of aesthetics, values toward creativity, and social expectations about artful cooking. Chapter 4, "Cooking Is a Craft," considers craft as form of virtuosity, exploring the crucial aspect of learning through intention and repetition. The focus is on what emerges from the mastery of certain culinary skills, but in the contemporary American context, craftwork is also identified as a type of *intervention* into a universe of food products and practices based on industrial methods for making dishes and meals. Chapter 5, "Cooking Is for Health," focuses on the cultural preoccupation with serving healthy meals. In the American context, the definition of a healthy meal is quite elastic; this is seen in the shifting perceptions of Americans when it comes to how their food has been processed and sourced and why processed foods are now categorized as more harmful than helpful. The conclusion considers a number of possible futures for the knowledge and practices related to making American meals. Here, one final category, cooking as a pleasure, is discussed in light of another broad ideal: the quest to cook and eat together as a form of both individual sensory pleasure *and* shared social pleasure.

In the prologue to his eloquent book *The Craftsman*, Richard Sennett muses on the neglected power of technique in the modern age, arguing that we cannot fall into a psychic despair at the seemingly endless list of possible catastrophes facing the human species. Instead, he writes that he has "become hopeful about the human animal at work," explaining that "we can achieve a more human life if only we better understand the making of things."[30] Thinking about making meals as a necessary and instrumental element of the human experience, casting cooking as elemental human labor writ large, expands our analytic horizons. The labor of cooking, a labor born of both necessity and desire, needs to be central to our understanding of American cuisine, American domestic life, and American values and ideals. To generalize, often shrilly, that no one cooks at home and then to concentrate on how this "lost" labor both produces and reflects larger social concerns is to miss out on so much human ingenuity and possibility.

In fact, contemporary cooking serves as a perfect practice to do a "thick description" about our everyday lives, for as Sennett argues, "thinking and feeling are contained within the process of making.[31] The facts—that we eat food prepared outside of the home as much as food prepared inside the home; that women are no longer solely responsible for transforming food from raw ingredients into cooked meals; that our reasons and rationales for cooking can change from meal to meal, week to week, and year to year; that we cook with ingredients that come from the ground, from boxes, from warehouses, or from farmers markets—reveal our thoughts, our feelings, and our labors.

We cook *because* it is a chore, and we cook *as if* it were a chore. But we also cook because we *want to be* creative, we want to be culinary artists, and we cook to *create artful food*. Certain connections and obligations between the laborer and the fruits of such labor have changed over the past century. But change does not necessarily mean decline. I am hopeful about cooking, and my hopefulness comes from broad explorations and then careful close readings of cooking talk and cooking practices. In doing so, I have come to

see that our gestures reveal what we know and what we do. A humble ingredient like a carrot can be made into sticks and coins, cake, and flower garnishes. Making dinner can involve a package of rice pilaf, a free-range organic chicken breast, and a bottle of teriyaki sauce. Eating lunch can involve going to a cafeteria at the hospital and making a choice between chicken soup made by a cook in the commissary kitchen and Domino's pizza in cardboard boxes. All this just on any given day.[32]