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Cooking in Modern Times

Food holds different meanings and values for different people. For most people, meals represent fond, warm, happy memories with family and friends. However, the process of making food has changed over the years. In 2009, Michael Pollan tackled this idea in his article *Out of the Kitchen, Onto the Couch*. Pollan's article tells the story of Julia Child, better known as *The French Chef*. By telling Julia's story, Pollan demonstrates a shift from cooking in the kitchen with family to watching cooking shows on tv while ordering out. These days, cooking is different for different people. Some families sit down to a home cooked meal every night, bonding over their days; while other families order out for food or go out to dinner and let someone else deal with the prep and the mess. Cooking in American homes is not what it was in the days of Julia Child, but that does not mean it is any less significant to them.

Pollan begins his critique by explaining how Julia Child changed his life. When *The French Chef* premiered, Pollan was a child, experiencing the shift in the cooking landscape firsthand. "My mother began cooking dishes she'd watched Julia cook on tv..." (Pollan, 2009). This was the fashion in that time. People would tune in every week to join Julia in cooking food for their families. This kind of activity is practically unheard of these days. When has anyone decided they were going to cook along with the likes of Martha Stewart and Paula Dean, at least

before the days when one could pause live television to give themselves time to catch up to the flawlessly edited hosts. Cooking was seen differently back in 1963, Julia Child's heyday. Pollan continues into the third section of his article, *To the Kitchen Stadium*, talking about how cooking shows have shifted over the years. Back in the 1960s when *The French Chef* premiered, it was focused around teaching people how to cook, easy French cuisine for American households. These days, however, the cooking shows focus more on flash and fighting. "...cooking in prime time is a form of athletic competition", Pollan writes, describing cooking shows in the modern age such as *The Next Food Network Star* and *Top Chef* (Pollan, 2009). In modern days, shows about cooking are not about teaching people, it is more about the flash and fight and flames of a commercial kitchen, making cooking as dramatic as it can be. This type of show has created a more fantastical culture around cooking, making it seem almost unattainable to the average American.

Back in Julia Child's day, cooking from scratch meant making everything yourself, down to the last drop of food. However, what passes for "cooking from scratch" these days would make most grandmothers, mothers and chefs roll over in their graves. Pollan writes, "Many of today's cooking programs rely unapologetically on ingredients that themselves contain lots of ingredients", referencing canned, jarred and frozen foods used for many recipes nowadays (Pollan, 2009). Sarah Smith represents this well in her favorite meal essay *Enchilota of Memories*. Smith's favorite meal is enchiladas, prepared by her father. They use the Old El Paso brand Enchilada Dinner kit. Just because they use a kit to create this meal, does not make it any less special to them. Sarah writes in her essay, "... the important part is not that the meal reached completion but rather how the meal was made and who contributed to it" (Smith, 2019). Sarah and her father may not make everything they eat from scratch, but this does not mean that the

meal holds any less value. Does not making a meal from scratch make it any less delicious? If not, then why would it change the memories associated with the food itself? Even the simplest of ingredients can be combined and substituted. In Wyatt Blackstone's *Favorite Meal Essay*, he writes about the Montréal Steak Tips that his family makes. In the recipe, they season it with Montréal Steak seasoning, a combination of many different seasonings and spices to give the steak its flavoring. Combining the ingredients to a meal might make cooking simpler, but it does not change the feelings and emotions around that particular meal. They might not have used all the seasonings individually, but that does not mean that it means any less to them.

Advancements in cooking have come rapidly in the past decades, from canned soups and ingredient mixes to automated mixers and ovens with rapid cook times. Cooking technology, like all modern technology, has made lives easier since its invention. Changes such as this are inevitable in a modern society. For example, since the invention of FaceTime and Skype, it is easier than ever to see the face of a loved one as you reconnect from across the country or even the world. Does this mean, because it is through a screen, that the interactions had with the person on the other end are less meaningful? Of course it does not, because it's still a conversation with a loved one. This advancement in the way people keep in touch with each other was inevitable in modern society. This is comparable to the advancements in cooking technology, making it easier to bring families together at the end of the day over a meal.

Technology makes it easier for these special meals to be created. Katie Gordon, a member of an English Composition class from Fall 2018, states this specifically in her *Favorite Meal Essay*. Gordon writes, "The KitchenAid in the sink..." referring to the KitchenAid electric mixer that her mother would use to make her favorite food, pumpkin whoopie pies (Gordon, 2018). Gordon goes on to add how her, her mother and her brother would go to the store and

pick up the ingredients for the whoopie pies, which includes pumpkin puree. Her mother did not make this pumpkin puree from scratch, but she did put as much love and care into the whoopie pies that she made as she would have if she had made the puree herself. Gordon's mother states "pumpkin whoopie pies just make everyone happy, you just can't help but smile when you have one". After stating that her mother planned her whole week around making the whoopie pies, it's hard to think that her mother didn't love cooking these treats for her kids, even though she didn't make them completely from scratch.

Just because cooking has become easier over the years, does not mean that it has any less meaning to Americans. For his article, Pollan interviewed Harry Blazer, a food-marketing researcher, and he said, "a hundred years ago, chicken for dinner meant going out and catching, killing, plucking and gutting a chicken." (Pollan, 2009). Food, cooking and the culture around it has changed over the year, and people just do what they can to fit their meals into their busy work and school schedules. College students order more take out pizza than anyone else because it fits into their schedules. As a college student myself, the dining hall and take out food are almost my only options. Between my busy class schedule, homework and extracurricular activities, it is nearly impossible to cook my own food. On top of the time constraints of cooking my own food, I am, to put it nicely, financially insecure. Many college students, and young people in general, do not make the money that they need to be able to afford to buy the ingredients to make their own food. When college students order food out, it is usually for special occasions, or they pool their money together and split a pizza. College food culture is very different from the "outside world", which is not a bad thing. Food culture changes as time progresses, both in individuals lives and in the world in general; and this is not a bad thing.

In *Out of the Kitchen, Onto the Couch*, Michael Pollan describes the state of cooking in modern culture as decrepit and falling to pieces in the wake of modern technology and cooking shows. The way Pollan writes about how modern cooking shows and how they've taken the meaning out of cooking for people just does not track with the rest of society. Pollan takes a very bleak stance on the future of cooking, but when asked, most Americans can easily name a dish that means something special to them and they enjoy making. Just because cooking has become easier over the years, that does not mean that all the value and meaning has been taken out of it. If anything, modern cooking in America has become more special, because now families have more time to do the things they enjoy with their families, whether it be sitting down over a home cooked meal and reminiscing about their day, or sitting in front of the television watching competitive cooking shows with each other.

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