

Why thoughtless eating is the world's biggest problem



“Don't eat anything your great-grandmother wouldn't recognise as food.” A mantra for mindful eaters everywhere – and a famous quote of Michael Pollan, the insightful commentator on the politics of food who, in 2010, was named by Time Magazine as one of the most influential people in the world. Susan Low met him to find out why he believes the food we cook and eat has a profound effect on our future

Q In your latest book, *Cooked*, you admit discovering the joys of cooking late in life. Being an acclaimed food writer and campaigner, did your lack of kitchen prowess embarrass you?

A No. I mean, I wasn't a terrible cook – I was just thoughtless and impatient. I didn't think it was important, so I rushed. I rushed chopping onions, I rushed sautéing onions. Learning how to savour the process was one of the hardest things. At first, cooking strained my patience, but it doesn't any more. And when I started to learn how influential cooking was to both ends of the food chain I realised it deserved a closer look.

I'm interested in the politics of food. The cook can influence the food system with the choices they make – more so than the eater. The eater doesn't always have the information to make an educated decision. It's usually the cook who buys the food – the eater doesn't always see the ingredients labels or talk to the farmer at the farmers' market. Cooks have a lot more

power because they, theoretically, have more information.

Q Now you have made time for it, is cooking something you've come to enjoy?

A Yes. It's that time at the end of the day when I reconnect with my wife, reconnect with my senses and, if my son's home, reconnect with him as well. Cooking is a process with a beginning, a middle and an end – a final product. So many of us are engaged with work that doesn't have these satisfactions. We're cogs in elaborate machines. Cooking can give satisfaction every day, and the generosity of it is a big part of that.

Q Would you go so far as to say cooking is a political act?

A We don't ordinarily think of it that way but, yes, I would say so. Whether or not you cook is a political act. If you outsource your cooking to corporations, you're making a vote for a certain kind of agriculture, a certain kind of economy and a certain kind of

life. But within that, once you've decided to cook, you have an opportunity to support this kind of agriculture or that, organic or conventional, and it has a big bearing on how we're going to use our world.

Q Is it more important to get the good food message across to chefs or home cooks?

A Both. Chefs are important because they're influential figures and many play a role in campaigning for better food – think of Alice Waters in the US or Jamie Oliver in the UK. But the home cook can be just as effective. The important thing is you have a choice, so why not exercise it in a conscious way? Thoughtless eating is our biggest problem – eating without thinking about what it means for farmers, for farm workers, for our health. There's so much at stake and we're encouraged to be mindless about it. The industry wants us to treat food as entertainment or just fuel, but it's so much richer and more powerful than that.

PHOTOGRAPHS: LAURA EDWARDS

Q In *Cooked* you write about the 'cooking paradox'. What do you mean by it?

A The paradox is that while we're not cooking much any more – rates of home cooking have fallen consistently for about 40 years – we're obsessed with it. Lots of cookbooks are bought by people who never cook, and we watch lots of cooking on television. In the US we spend, on average, only 27 minutes a day cooking – so that tells you there are millions of us who spend more time watching other people cook than we do cooking ourselves.

What's curious is how we've outsourced so many things – making our clothing, fixing our cars – but cooking is different. One of the reasons is we have powerful memories of being cooked for as children, and what a wonderful experience that was because there was so much love attached to it (usually). Watching rather than making this magic happen is familiar to us.

But cooking is central to our identity. We are the only species who can cook, and that has so much to do with the success of the human race. That's why I'm hoping people will be reminded that cooking isn't just good for you – it's rewarding emotionally and intellectually, too.

Michael Pollan's books include *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, *In Defence of Food* and, most recently, *Cooked: A Natural History Of Transformation* (£20; Allen Lane)

“Once you've decided to cook, you can have a big bearing on how we're going to use our world”

It's not just about the world – it's about you

While the political impact of our cooking choices is crucial, so is its influence on our wellbeing. We asked Michael for his top three reasons to get into the kitchen...

HEALTH

People who cook have healthier diets without even thinking about their intake of nutrients, calories or fat. Corporations don't cook well. You'll end up eating way too much salt, fat and sugar if you rely on them to cook for you. You'll eat way too much special-occasion food such as french fries and sweets, and you'll end up eating all sorts of dubious chemicals that you really don't want inside your body. But people who cook gravitate towards the highest quality raw ingredients they can afford and cook them in a simple way.

FUN

The satisfaction of mastering these transformative processes is enormous. The more you know about cooking, the more

interesting it is. And the more you learn about the traditions, science and origins of what you're doing, the more fun it is. If you can acquire some basic skills and confidence, it's amazing what you can do without a recipe book.

FAMILY LIFE

Home cooking and family meals are entwined. If you go to the trouble of cooking, you make the effort to gather the family to sit down and eat it together. The opposite is true as well. If you eat processed foods, it tends to be single portions, which then discourages eating together. There's something about eating from the same pot – it puts people on the same psychological page. Sharing food creates powerful psychological binding. The family meal is where we civilise our children. We teach them how to share, converse, take turns and argue. All these things happen at the table, and if you're cooking that's much more likely to happen.

The delicious. challenge

Many people love nothing more than a creative session in the kitchen – hurrah for that! But we're a nation in which increasing numbers don't know how to cook and the dining table is at risk of becoming a museum piece. We decided to see whether it's possible to transform an ardent non-cook into an enthusiast in just one day.

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