

IF YOU CAN'T STAND THE HEAT...

Stay out of the kitchen! But a diet of only salad would be sad. So why does the application of fire to food make such a difference? GILL BARRON lifts the lid on cookery.

How long is lunchtime? That depends on the lunch. If you are following a raw Palaeolithic diet, you'll have a lot of chewing to do. On the other hand, if you just gulp down some sort of slush — soup or a smoothie, say — it's over in moments, leaving plenty of time for a snooze.

The ingredients of either lunch may be much the same, but the differences in how they are processed makes a world of difference to how we ingest them. Raw foods not only take far longer to consume, but also to digest. Digestion is itself hard work, and wastes calories that would otherwise go to nutrition. The Rawfoodist is therefore much more in need of the snooze than the Soupista, who gets the full whack of nutrition, with minimum taxation of calories to achieve it.

In Palaeo times, when procuring food through exhausting and uncertain hunting and gathering efforts used up a hefty fraction of the food-value obtained, cookery brought a tremendous boost, enabling far more calories to be liberated, and far easier and more complete digestion (more on this in a moment) of whatever basic foods had been captured.

How the discovery and domestication of fire came about is hotly disputed by anthropologists, and novelists have taken advantage of this to dream up some entertaining scenarios. For example, in *The Evolution Man* (later and rather tastelessly re-titled *How I Ate My Father*), Roy Lewis has a Young Conservative caveman, Ernest, struggling to rein in the reckless fire-making experiments of his Marxist dad, whose attempts to grill a simple antelope chop end up by burning down the whole Serengeti.

Such stories hinge on the drama between fire that is under control, and then suddenly not. The possession of fire implies not only the know-how to create it at will, by means of sparks or



The clinical soullessness of a space-age kitchen contrasts miserably with the jollity of a blazing range, as depicted above by George Cruikshank in the 1830s.

friction; to keep it going for as long as necessary, by feeding it, fanning it, and perhaps by transporting embers in a container; but most importantly, how to put it out when it turns feral.

Chew Chew Che-Boogie

Cookery books may be the most popular of all publishing genres: but do any of them ask that basic question: *why cook?* No. Unless you are a member of that shrinking tribe of Raw Food enthusiasts (literally shrinking: this diet causes acute weight loss), you probably haven't either. The benefits that come from applying fire to food are so many and various that we take the idea of cooking joyfully for granted. Yet we are the only species that cooks; this oddity has been described as our one distinctive difference from all other animals, the single characteristic that defines the human.

In *Catching Fire*, by the Harvard biological anthropology professor Richard Wrangham, this “cooking hypothesis” is presented as a driving force of evolution that Darwin (among others) overlooked.¹ Apes began to morph into humans, and the species *Homo erectus* emerged some two million years ago, Wrangham argues, for one fundamental reason: we learned to tame fire and heat our food.

Division of labour? Modern kitchens with their controllable piped fuel have made cookery an indoor, risk-free occupation, suited to the drudgery of providing essential meals, day after day. Meanwhile cooking on fire has become the macho, fun thing to do.



“Cooked food does many familiar things,” he observes. “It makes our food safer, creates rich and delicious tastes and reduces spoilage. Heating can allow us to open, cut or mash tough foods. But none of these advantages is as important as a little-appreciated aspect: cooking increases the amount of energy our bodies obtain from food.” He continues:

“The extra energy gave the first cooks biological advantages. They survived and reproduced better than before. Their genes spread. Their bodies responded by biologically adapting to cooked food, shaped by natural selection to take maximum advantage of the new diet. There were changes in anatomy, physiology, ecology, life history, psychology and society.”

So our teeth got smaller and our guts got shorter, and we lived longer and had more babies. Aside from those, the most intriguing claim for the cooking hypothesis is the social one: because we stopped snacking as we foraged and instead gathered around a common fire, we had to learn to socialise, and to share the day’s pickings fairly. He suggests that grumpy, impatient and greedy, snatchy people would have been banished, and so natural selection now favoured the calmer temperament. And the energy saved from laborious digestion would be diverted to that energy-hungry beast, the brain; so now, besides cookery, we have the rudiments of culture.

Killing Time

On one thing the various schools of anthropologists agree; a hunter-gatherer lifestyle provides a lot of leisure time. They don’t, however, pursue the question of what people did with it. There is a fundamental human urge to mess about with stuff, in idle moments; to fiddle with whatever’s lying around. In any environment, this includes bits of stick and tinder-ish materials — driftwood, bracket fungi, what-have-you. In the official account of the coming of fire to Northern latitudes, 600,000 very chilly years go by between the arrival of almost-humans from Africa, and the first hearths uncovered by archaeologists.² It is assumed that these Naked Apes sat around shivering helplessly for 4,000 generations. In other ways they were extremely skilled at survival under harsh



Rémi Vincent

The after-dinner camaraderie of the campfire creates an occasion for jokes, songs and stories — the origin of culture.

conditions — as proved by the fact that we, their descendants, are still around to wonder how they did it. I for one find it impossible to believe that fire, and the many ways of making it, would have been so elusive for so long.

Fire itself is a worldwide phenomenon. Lightning-strikes are entirely random, but with over a million such strikes a year some are bound to ignite something. And they do. Forest fires happen frequently, and leave a whole larderful of delicious roasted animals when they go out. Embers, in turn, ignite any other combustible material. These things just happen by themselves. Both derive from natural processes. Neither cooking, nor fire-making require cleverness, only observation. And observation is the bedrock of survival. Without that most basic ability to spot opportunities and follow through on them, there would be no dinner, and we wouldn’t be here today. To wander just once through the cinders of a burnt forest, nibbling on crisply roasted lizards, would be all the convincing of the joys of cookery that primitive humans would need.

Pottery is an art perhaps as old as cooking; its remnants survive to prove that you could also have had your lizard souped, stewed, sizzled or smoked. Gastronomy really takes off from here: and yet the eternal popularity of the barbeque goes to show that simplest is usually best. Food and flame are primeval enthusiasms, and bringing them together never fails to inspire a healthy appetite.

1. Wrangham, Richard. *Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human*. Profile Books, 2009.

2. Kaplan, Matt: Early Humans Unwarmed by Fire: *Nature News* 14.3.2011

Douglas P. Klassen



Social Justice Theory maintains that it’s taboo to question fatness, or to suggest that morbid obesity is anything but a blissfully happy and healthy condition. Perhaps so. However such extreme states of avoirdupois were impossible to achieve before cookery virtually eliminated chewing-time, and liberated all the calories in foods by making them hyper-digestible.