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GENERATIONS THAT NEVER LEARNT TO COOK

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GENERATIONS THAT NEVER LEARNT TO COOK

By Birthe Linddal Hansen

Once upon a time, not many decades ago, making soup, baking bread, serving up a suitable cheeseboard and at least three types of biscuits was well within the capability of most housewives. Back then, there weren't many cookery books. Thickening, making white sauce, stewing, proofing dough, baking, preserving and other techniques were at the fingertips of every housewife, so there was no need to read up about them. Being able to bake and cook was just normal – everyone could do it, so it wasn't worth boasting about. Of course, some were better at it than others. But if you couldn't cook, well, that was a real stigma. Being a bad housewife/cook was about the worst name any woman could get for herself.

THE YOUNG LACK THE KNOWLEDGE OF COOKING

Some of these very capable housewives are still with us today. Generations of housewives who historically did not enjoy particularly glamorous lives. Self-effacing, self-sacrificing women who lived for other people and only attended school for a few years. But in fact those generations had valuable skills that have since gone by the board. Here and there in old people's homes and nursing homes are some of the last few members of the ranks of the last generation of housewives. A great deal of skill and knowledge is destined to pass away with them. This knowledge has been lost because many of their daughters have forgotten what they were taught and have therefore failed to pass on this knowledge to the men and women of the younger generations.

None of today's younger generations under 60 possess what could be described as basic cooking skills. The younger the generations, the less knowledge they have and the fewer there are who are able to cook. Able to cook, that is, at a level of skill approaching that of previous generations, or a level that can be described as being able to cook at all. Bear in mind that being able to blend powdered ingredients or heat up ready-made meals and sauces is not the same as being able to cook. Of course, there are always exceptions, and naturally you can still find a young woman or man who has mastered the original art of cooking. The point is quite simply that not many people can cook. In short: people today in the Western world cannot cook and most younger people under 40 basically do not have a clue about what to do in a kitchen. Very few are familiar with the most fundamental ground rules; they have very little knowledge of ingredients and do not really know how to assess quality. This is part of the reason why there are so many cookery school programmes on TV where people misread the recipe and sadly end up pouring a whole litre of stock into the stuffing instead of a decilitre like the recipe said – which anyone who knew the first thing about stuffing would realize is ridiculous. This is one reason why people who work with children report that very few children today know how to boil an egg, bake bread rolls or know which end of the rhubarb to use. This is partly why Northern Europeans are often content, and allow themselves to be content, with boring ready-made meals, chemical powder blends and ingredients that do not have the proper taste or texture.

This lack of knowledge is partly why people sometimes shop blindly and are not very discerning when it comes to value for money, whether the quality is right, or what they actually eat. This is partly why the food service sector is experiencing such a boom in growth right now. Last but not least, this is also partly why it has become popular all of a sudden to be a hobby gourmet and to be able to bake your own little cakes and pastries and to be able to go out into the countryside and find "original"



foods with provenance and echoes of a bygone era. A bygone era that often depicts the traditional cookery book, Grandma's chocolate cake, cow's milk fresh from the tank and roast pork for Sunday lunch. Many more people lived in the country back then; ingredients were ingredients, the taste was individual from one district to another and from one kitchen to another. Back then, cooking was an absolutely natural part of everyday culture, part of growing up, family life, the neighbors and life in general.

THE DREAM OF BEING ABLE TO COOK BEATS ACTUAL COOKING

There is nothing particularly difficult about cooking, and the numerous cookery books available today can definitely help you along if you are one of the few who wants to cook by the book. Selling cookery books is a successful business; increasing numbers of ever more attractive editions are constantly being published. But despite this success, most people would rather flick through beautifully illustrated cookery books and dream on, rather than go through all the "trouble" of actually preparing a meal. Today's cookery books are not necessarily only about cooking – they are every bit as much about dreaming of being able to cook! The dream of being the perfect housewife and mastering the art of cooking that many people remember from their grandmothers. It's about holding onto memories of a bygone era, when stress levels were altogether different and food was simply there, prepared with love using familiar ingredients.

People today are seeking to fill a void. That's why increasing numbers want to be able to cook, but it is difficult to make the dream come true, mainly because it takes time.

The fact that people today cannot cook does not appear to be a particularly remarkable problem of our age, and perhaps it is not. Of course, it is always sad to see a treasured culture die out, but on the other hand, as young women we are also grateful to have been released from the demands of perpetual food preparation. And after all, if you really wanted to learn to cook, how hard can that be? Anyone who can read should be able to learn to cook! Today, there is a plethora of cookery books and that's all there is to it. It's just a matter of getting down to it. The more recipes you try, the more knowledge you acquire and if you are lucky enough to find cookery books that teach the more fundamental principles and you learn those, after a couple of years of practice and a few hard lessons learnt, surely you should be able to learn to cook. You can start small with omelets, muffins or jam.

THE COOKING OF THE FUTURE: HOBBY CHEFS AND READY MADE MEALS

But often, the dream of cooking like a housewife remains just that – a dream – so in the future (towards the year 2017) people will be cooking less of their food than they do at present. Fewer people will be able to cook and fewer of those will make it a priority to take the time to cook. On the other hand, those who do take the trouble to cook will make more of it, so in the future, cooking may well come to be a hobby project on a par with golf, literature, home-making or gardening. Even if cooking becomes more of a hobby project than an everyday routine, there is no need to fear for the future of food heritage. Cooking will probably become one of the biggest hobbies across the western world, because everyone is interested in food. If cooking becomes a hobby instead of a dull chore, this will open up lots of new and profitable horizons. This is because hobbyists are willing to spend a lot of money on their hobby and they are willing to fight for the wellbeing of whatever they feel passionately about. Thus, in the future, we will see a lot of cookery schools, domestic science schools and courses on the art of cooking, where people can learn to cook.



Hobby cookery enthusiasts will demand good ingredients, good kitchen utensils and, importantly, good stories and anecdotes about cooking. Those who enjoy cooking will hone their skills, talk about it and discuss methods and ingredients. Even today, there are many shining examples of interest in and passion for cooking. For example, some workplaces have become the hub of syndicates buying good Hereford meat delivered from a farm tucked away in the countryside like a well-kept secret. Waiting lists for brewery visits. Demand for expensive kitchen aids (mixers costing in excess of 800 €), not to mention excursions to learn about ingredients. The quest for good ingredients is not an easy one because none of today's supermarkets have the best of everything at any given time. That is why the quest for the very best ingredients is something of a treasure hunt. Chasing around town in search of great taste, packed delicatessens and sublime products. Across Denmark, tracking down primary producers in order to source good Danish salami, cider and the best cauliflowers. Or perhaps a trip to Italy or Spain to fill your suitcases with food for your or your friends' taste buds.

However, not all consumers will turn into hobby chefs, so in future there will continue to be some consumers who either cannot cook or have no desire to cook, and the food industry can easily convert this into a positive advantage. This is because when people either do not want to cook or cannot cook, they usually prefer to buy something that someone else has prepared, either takeaways or ready-made meals. In the future, there will also be a large market for the sale of takeaways and ready-made meals, as well as increased sales throughout the catering sector as more and more of what people eat passes across to that sector. This anticipated growth in the catering sector could well prove to be a major challenge to retail chains, which will find that more people are doing without home-made evening meals, so in time they will not need to go to supermarkets.

It is certainly possible to work with this lack of knowledge of home cooking, and the food industry should therefore think more in terms of inspiring people to cook – or, better still, to become gourmets. The more gourmets there are, the more good and expensive ingredients will be bought across the counter, and the more opportunities there will be for additional sales and value optimization. Accordingly, food firms should start to teach consumers to cook. They should focus particularly on children, who always have a great sense of curiosity about cooking, and who have significant leverage on mum and dad. And, of course, one day they too will be adults with money in their pockets.

If consumers are able to bake pancakes that turn out not too bad, they will buy a lot more flour and eggs. Also, they will learn to appreciate the great taste of their home-made pancakes. The more people know about food, and the more good, tasty food they have sampled, the more critical they will become as consumers of food. If consumers are critical, they will also be more likely to prioritize quality and good taste in their future purchases, whether this is a matter of ingredients, ready-made meals or takeaways.

To sum up, many consumers now and in the future are not cooks, so this fact should be taken as the point of departure when it comes to selling food and understanding consumer culture to do with food preparation. If fewer people are able to cook, much more ready-made food will be sold. At the same time, in a situation where only the few are able to cook, greater status will be attached to the ability to cook, so a trend could emerge for a growing segment of hobby chefs who enjoy cooking.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Birthe Linddal Hansen is a senior consultant and futures analyst at Kairos Future Denmark. Her areas of expertise are sociology and change processes in general. More specifically she focuses on people and modern life and future consumers.

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