

Should we return to cooking and ‘homemade’ food?

Anindita Dasgupta, Hayat Zirari, Nicolas Bricas,
Marie Walser and Audrey Soula

Home cooking has many cultural and health benefits. Nevertheless, it remains a relatively undervalued daily task that is largely shouldered by women. The commercialization of ‘homemade’ dishes presents interesting opportunities in this regard.

Around the world, the development of the agri-food industry and mass retailing has led to the growing use of processed products in everyday food practices. Despite the benefits of these products, which last longer and make cooking easier, some have been severely criticized, particularly for nutritional reasons. Processed foods often have higher sugar, fat and salt content and are lower in fibre and micronutrients. They may also contain various flavouring, colouring, preservative and texture additives that are suspected of being harmful to health. This is particularly the case with so-called ultra-processed foods – in other words, foods produced through a series of industrial processes (Monteiro et al., 2019; Chapters 6 and 7) – which are thought to contribute to the rise in obesity and non-communicable diseases such as type 2 diabetes or cardiovascular disease (Monteiro et al., 2010; Lawrence and Baker, 2019). The giant agri-food companies that distribute standardized industrial products worldwide (breakfast cereals, powdered milk, refined oils and sugar, biscuits, crisps, hamburgers, flavour cubes, sodas etc.) have been accused of homogenizing food (Ritzer’s ‘McDonaldization’, 1992) and threatening the diversity of artisanal or local products. The ‘artificial’ nature of processed foods in turn raises the question of the ‘naturalness’ of food items (Lepiller, 2012). The increasing use of food packaging and overwrap involves energy consumption and generates plastic pollution in particular (Ritchie and Roser, 2018). This critique is not limited to

academic circles. It has been widely conveyed by the media and taken up by local actors challenging the power and opacity of large agri-food companies more generally, including in countries where industrialization is still recent, such as Morocco (Zirari, 2020).

The return of homemade food?

In several parts of the world, this rejection of industrial food products has resulted in a new cooking craze driven by a desire to consume freshly prepared dishes made from raw or minimally processed foods. Domestic cooking (or ‘homemade’ food), which can be perceived very differently depending on the context (Mazzonetto et al., 2020), is embedded in a positive imaginary that holds it in particularly high regard (Daniels et al., 2012). First, homemade food is considered to be of better nutritional and taste quality than industrial preparations (Mathé and Hébel, 2015). Being able to control the nature and origin of ingredients, along with the naturalness associated with the preparation process, helps soothe the anxieties inherent in food intake (Fischler, 1990). Moreover, various studies in the field of nutrition suggest a positive influence of home cooking on health (Larson et al., 2006; Reicks et al., 2014; Mills et al., 2017; Wolfson et al., 2020).

Homemade food also serves a cultural function for eaters. Through culinary work, family or community traditions are passed on and reinvented. In Morocco, ‘handmade’ food made ‘at home’ immediately anchors eaters in their food and culinary tradition (Soula and Zirari, 2023). Similarly, in multi-ethnic societies such as Malaysia, homemade food gives expression to the traditional culinary repertoire and allows for regularly reaffirming one’s cultural roots in a rapidly urbanizing society. Taste plays a role in this process of identity, grounding eaters in a family, local or national culture. From a social point of view, cooking provides a way of connecting with others and showing them care (Mazzonetto et al., 2020). It is also a cement of family life in shared imaginaries (Plumauzille and Rossigneux-Méheust, 2019). In the United States, for example, homemade food is central to the idealized moment of sharing a family dinner (Bowen et al., 2019). For the cook, the work involved can be a source of satisfaction – the satisfaction of taking care of oneself, of others and of one’s health and well-being – and can give them the pleasure of ‘doing it yourself’. Finally, home cooking may be popular for economic reasons: it is common to hear that it is cheaper to cook at home than to buy pre-prepared food in shops or restaurants. This argument, which especially

held true in the past when families were often large, is still valid today and may particularly resonate with lower- or middle-class families.

Tedious work

There are therefore many benefits associated with home cooking, linked to the different dimensions of food. However, one question often remains unaddressed: How do we organize ourselves to cook? As a domestic task, cooking consists of a long series of more or less planned steps that are carried out almost daily: stocktaking, food shopping, meal planning, food preparation, serving meals, clearing up and doing the dishes. Cooking at home involves managing resources according to multiple and sometimes contradictory constraints such as the household budget, time availability, guests' preferences and available ingredients. Moreover, this work requires skills that confer social recognition. In Morocco, for example, the cook is valued for her manual dexterity, which endows her with recognized expertise. Likewise, in Malaysia, sourcing and cooking fresh local produce from the *pasar malam* (night market) or the *pasar tani* (farmers' market), avoiding waste and maintaining a certain frugality are qualities valued by the family.

Approaching home cooking through the prism of domestic work, however, reveals two things. First, the economic cost of home cooking is often overlooked. If homemade food were given a financial value, taking the cost of labour into account, it could become more beneficial to buy industrial products than to cook oneself (Tharrey et al., 2018). It is worth noting that on a global scale, the economic value of all domestic activities (including cooking) is estimated to reach 13 per cent of the planet's GDP (McKinsey Global Institute, 2015). Most importantly, this domestic work still largely falls on women. In patriarchal societies, the norm of a gendered division of roles continues to assign women a reproductive and nurturing role and makes them responsible for cooking-related tasks. In 2010 in France, 82 per cent of women reported cooking on a daily basis compared with 47 per cent of men (Ricroch, 2012). And in 2011 in Morocco, the national 'Time Use' survey revealed that cooking is an activity neglected by men: across all socio-professional categories, men in urban areas spend only five minutes a day on cooking (three minutes in rural areas), compared with two hours and twenty-six minutes for women (three hours and five minutes in rural areas) (Haut-Commissariat au Plan, 2019).

The kitchen as a prism through which to analyse gender relations

Domestic cooking is generally seen as an intergenerational female activity involving mothers, daughters and grandmothers, while the supply of ingredients can be carried out by men following the women's instructions. But the actual daily preparation of meals is managed by the women of the household, possibly with the help of other women (from their family network or neighbourhood or under their employ). In fact, socially, women used to be – and to some extent still are – judged on their cooking skills, with their ability to manage meals and please their husbands deemed to reflect their value as 'model women'. While men may also decide to cook on their own initiative, this is usually for exceptional occasions in collective and community life.

As the ones in charge of cooking, women shoulder a heavy mental load, which they often carry alone. Cooking is not just about what happens in the kitchen (Counihan, 1999; Dupuy, 2017; Haicault, 1984); it involves thinking, planning, managing the supply and stocks of food as well as cooking energy and utensils, setting the table, serving the food, clearing the table, cleaning up and managing waste. When repeated daily, these tasks can be experienced as a strain. Domestic cooking, which is centred on caring for others (mainly children, husbands and the elderly), forces women to make trade-offs between what they should do and what they aspire to be. They are torn between the responsibility of having to cook at home according to the preferences and needs of different family members, and the desire to relieve themselves of this routine duty. In Morocco, while men living alone learn to cook for themselves, once they are married, they often relegate this task to their wives, who tend to be perceived as the guardians of a culinary tradition to which they are attached. They thus sustain an idealized image of the cuisine of the past, home cooking and their mother's cooking (Zirari, 2020).

At present, women are seeking to highlight the mental load they carry. Some are also striving to free themselves from the nurturing role they have been assigned, while others are seeking greater equity through the reconfiguration of this role. The last few decades have witnessed significant changes in social structures, forms of family organization and the distribution of gendered attributes in many countries around the world. Urbanization in particular has increased women's access to paid work and has enabled them to gain economic and financial autonomy. Likewise, young girls are increasingly attending school. In urban households, women are therefore generally less available and willing to take on cooking activities in addition to the other domestic tasks for which

they are responsible. This is especially the case given that, while eating at home is often still the norm, the growing range of places where food is prepared and served in cities offers new options that families are integrating into their food practices. In order to alleviate the daily burden of managing the cooking, women are taking advantage of changing social norms to renegotiate responsibility for cooking in two ways.

The first is through the redistribution of cooking work: in the home, couples increasingly share this work (though not always equitably). While women are still responsible for cooking, men are more willing to help out, and some show a moderate but explicit interest in cooking – for the pleasure of it, to discover, create, innovate with or try out recipes (Zirari et al., forthcoming). It is also a way of gaining recognition, of presenting oneself as a ‘modern’ man in keeping with the times as cooking has come to be held in such high regard in the media.

Second, women are renegotiating responsibility for the management of meals by minimizing the amount of cooking work involved: in industrialized societies, cooking work can be reduced or even outsourced, particularly owing to the various opportunities afforded by urban life. This burden can be lightened by introducing changes in the management of meals – for instance, simplifying meals, freezing leftovers for later use or hiring help. It is important to note that delegating cooking to domestic workers or young girls from the countryside – who are housed and fed in the city in exchange for their domestic work – reflects a shift in inequalities. It is often still women, possibly from lower social classes, who remain in charge of cooking. This work can also be outsourced to canteens, street food vendors or restaurants. As the standard of living in cities has risen, a wide range of restaurants has developed, providing access to a variety of foods that cater to many diets, are often inexpensive and are perceived as quality foods. It should be noted that for women, eating at friends’ homes or with family – whether at restaurants or from street vendors – provides temporary or occasional respite from cooking duties.

While cooking practices and gender relations are evolving, these changes remain slow. The forced return to domestic cooking caused by the lockdowns and restaurant closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic does not seem to have led to a real redefinition of the gendered division of labour. In Morocco, although gender relations remained largely unchanged during the periods of lockdown, with the majority of women still forced to take care of all the food and meal preparation, new male practices surrounding cooking nevertheless emerged, particularly disseminated through social media (Zirari et al., 2022). Conversely, Malaysian women who had enjoyed a certain degree of freedom

from cooking activities were once again called upon to become the guardians of the domestic space (Dasgupta and Mognard, 2020). Homemade food remains highly valued in Malaysian society, even though, according to the Malaysian Food Barometer published in 2014, the country has perhaps one of the world's highest rates of food consumption outside the home, closely associated with urbanization (Poulain et al., 2015, 2020).

Turning cooking work into an activity with economic value

Strikingly, messages encouraging people to prioritize cooking over processed foods often implicitly refer to domestic cooking, in both senses of the term: as home cooking and as a form of non-market work. Certainly, some may see the entry of meal preparation into the market sphere as a victory for the commodification of the world. Catering has indeed become a new sector of interest to investors, particularly with the development of digital tools. As internet access and smartphones have become widespread, especially in cities, remote ordering has become easier. Delivery companies and some restaurant chains are now investing in activities limited to the preparation of dishes made to order, with micro-kitchens in containers or basements dedicated to the production of a single speciality, known as 'dark', 'virtual', 'cloud' or 'ghost' kitchens.

This commodification of cooking, however, also takes on other, less 'industrial' forms. Of interest here is the commodification of domestic cooking to change gender relations surrounding cooking activities. In some African cities, for example, practices involving the sale of additional servings prepared as part of family meals have existed for decades: women who cook at home sell portions of surplus food to 'subscribers' (single people, rural people who have come to the city for a few months etc.). People 'subscribe' for a fixed period of time to receive a 'family' dish every day. They can either collect and take away the dish, have it delivered by a child of the family or come and eat it on the spot, often with other subscribers. This practice enables families to reduce the cost of their food and gives consumers access to family-style cooking at a very reasonable price. This practice also exists in Brazil and is developing thanks to social media. The dishes offered by families are listed on websites where they can be ordered in advance for collection. The families buy the ingredients semi-wholesale and therefore at lower prices and save energy by cooking in relatively large quantities. Customers are freed from the mental burden of having to organize and cook meals, and they are able to access varied dishes, which can include regional culinary specialties

or cater to nutritional or environmental concerns (light, meat-free, organic etc.). The prices are also attractive, as the meals cost the same as self-prepared ones or are even cheaper.

In Asia, the sale of homemade food available for pre-order online is on the rise. This trend is driven not by a strategy of selling 'surplus' food but by home-based microenterprises that promote themselves on social media. However, in the absence of formal hygiene regulations and independent checks, these informal arrangements can be suspected of being unsafe – an argument often used by industrial companies and consumer groups. Confidence in the quality of the food in fact relies on interpersonal relationships and the reputation of the cooks, whether recommended by word of mouth or through satisfaction ratings on social media.

The women behind these microenterprises delegate the cooking to domestic workers whom they house and feed or pay, to friends or relatives who have spare time and whom they remunerate, or to reputable restaurants in the neighbourhood. Alternatively, they may also sell additional servings cooked as part of their family meals. In all cases, this indeed constitutes a commodification of domestic cooking. The recognition of the know-how, mental workload and labour involved is no longer merely social and symbolic; it becomes economic. As a result, it changes gender relations. First, it contributes to increasing women's economic and financial autonomy and, through the income generated, gives recognition to work that was previously invisible (Abarca, 2007). Second, as the activity becomes lucrative and moves beyond the purely domestic sphere, this commodification can potentially help redefine the gendered boundaries of economic spaces. Men are entering the catering business, just as they did with the mechanization and motorization of other household tasks traditionally performed by women, such as husking and grinding grains and pressing oils. Conversely, some women are becoming involved in cooking activities previously dominated by men, such as grilling meat (Boubakar-Akali, 2020). When commodified cooking moves out of the home to become a commercial activity, women's behaviour can resemble that previously 'symbolically' associated with men, to the point that these small traders are referred to as 'male women', as in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire (Egnankou, 2020).

Conclusion

By providing access to dishes that not only promote food cultures but also offer an alternative to industrial food, which is not always healthy, and to potentially expensive catered food, the commodification of domestic cooking produces

interesting effects. Furthermore, this commodification enables the women who engage in it to derive benefits from their cooking, especially financial ones. However, it is important to bear in mind that by remaining assigned to culinary work, women remain tied to functions that are given little value, taken for granted and still largely invisible. Therefore, beyond the opportunities offered by the commodification of domestic cooking, challenging this assignment of roles remains a priority.

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